

Victory at Ostagar

Arsinoe de Blassenville

<http://storymaster.the-code-monkey.com/> (2015)

Tags: StoryMaster, FanFiction.Net

When Bryce Cousland's little spitfire scaled the Tower of Ishal and lit the beacon at the critical moment, King Cailan won a mighty victory against the darkspawn. The Blight, however was far from over. All other origins included, plus Hawke and his companions. Cousland/Loghain, Morrigan/Anders, Surana/Zevran, Fergus/Anora, and more. Half a million hits and still going.

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**by
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Produced By: <http://storymaster.the-code-monkey.com>

On: 6/10/2015

Retrieved For: thisseaticold@gmail.com

Story URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/5825274/>

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1. The Lightning Struck Tower

Yes, it's all Bioware's. And I don't think I need to say it again.

Chapter 1: The Lightning-Struck Tower

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

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

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

"Ouch! Maker's Breath!" the young king nearby protested.
"Loghain! This healer will be the death of me!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He knew he had failed with Cailan. Maric and Rowan had failed with Cailan. Cailan, upon whom they had pinned all their hopes, lived in a fantasy world of myths and legends, and clearly believed that the universe would always make exceptions just for him. Cailan's recklessness would kill him

eventually, and Loghain had resigned himself to it since they came south on this mad campaign.

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

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

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

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

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

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

That was a thought to give one pause. Loghain had little use for the Grey Wardens, but the deliberate targeting of them could be ominous. If this *was* a Blight—which he did not believe for a moment—but if it *was*, then some unknown power had taken preemptive steps to eliminate the darkspawn's ancient adversaries.

"My lord!"

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

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

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

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

"Climbed the Tower?" Cailan wondered, eyes already agleam

with the joy he felt at tales of derring-do. "That's—*heroic!*"

Loghain considered the Tower, a pale spectre in the filtered, smoky moonlight. The flying buttresses...the ledges...yes, he could see that someone very brave and very resourceful might manage that. He might have managed it himself, long ago, before he took to wearing heavy plate. That was clever of the girl, he granted. Clever to think of a way to get the job done, instead of slogging up hopelessly through the darkspawn, only to be too late.

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

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

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

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

So she had led Alistair into the large and opulent tent of the Teyrn of Highever, which was to her like a homecoming. Fergus had brought it with him, along with most of the

Highever men and their baggage train. Her brother's traveling chests were here, comforting assurances that she still had a family. That her father's personal belongings were *not* here — and now never would be — was something she would avoid thinking about as long as possible.

The startled tent guard was even a man she knew by name — Siward, from a freehold not far from Highever Castle itself. He had shouted a welcome when he saw her, and soon the word of her safe arrival had spread through the remains of her father's...no...her *brother's* soldiers and servants.

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

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

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

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

"Do it yourself, then," she said, chucking the shirt at him. "I'm not up to playing nursemaid." She sank onto the chair, her aching head in her hands. She was so *cold*. If she ever had the strength to remove her armor, she would have to see if

Fergus had brought anything that might fit her. She had fled Highever without even a change of linen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mages were certainly wonderful creatures, Bronwyn thought

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

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

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

"Cheese..." Alistair murmured dreamily.

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

"That is very kind, my lady," Wynne agreed, covering the dozing Alistair with another blanket. A teyrn's wine was something to savor. It might even be Antivan. She took a moment to assess the other Grey Warden.

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

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

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

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

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

Bronwyn sat quietly, enjoying being looked after. Scout rested his muzzle on her knee and generously allowed her to scratch his ears. Gradually, she began putting behind her the terrors and urgencies of the battle: the roar of thunder, the screams of the dying, the feel of rain-slick stone under her boots as she scrambled up the side of the Tower. The bone weariness of her shoulder and arm as she threw the bloody rope with the makeshift grappling hook again. And again. And again.

She was no hero: she knew that now. Lightning had struck nearby when she was two-thirds up the side of the Tower, almost paralyzing her with fear. She had stupidly looked down, and had remembered the time she dropped a jar of strawberry preserves on the stone floor of her bedchamber. Would she have looked like that jar, had she fallen? She could

see it before her now: splintered fragments, seeping a thick crimson into the remorseless earth below; an object so completely altered as to be unrecognizable...

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There can be little doubt of it."

Scout gave a low, mournful whine.

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

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

"But the King is all right?"

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

"That's something, at least."

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

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

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

He stirred, and forced himself up to a sitting position. Wynne passed him a goblet and held the tray of food for him. Bronwyn noted that he chose the Rainesfere Blue and the smoked Amaranthine first. A man of taste, it seemed...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

be present, if their wounds permit."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"To the victorious dead!"

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

"—Poor bastards. Better them than us!"

2. As the Sun Rises

Victory at Ostagar

Thanks to Sarah 1281, Mussimm, SSJ Girl, and Bioncafemme for their reviews. Your support means a lot to me.

Chapter 2: As the Sun Rises

The Archdemon's bellowed challenge awakened Bronwyn from her restless sleep.

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

Where am I?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alistair must know more. Alistair...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

luxuries that only great nobles possessed.

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

No. She was not going to think about Rory Gilmore or about any of the dreadful things that must have happened to him. This was Alistair, and he was her comrade in arms after last night.

"Alistair!"

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

She leaned closer. "Alistair!"

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

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

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

"Hunnh?"

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

"It really happened," he said, voice flat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bronwyn turned to look at him. He was miserable. They must have been close, she realized. She had grown fond of Duncan herself. How much dearer must he have been to someone who had known him longer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"—and the King," Alistair added.

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

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

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

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

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

She hoped so. She owned no clothing but her small clothes and a shirt— no — *two* shirts. She had to wear her armor constantly because she had nothing else. She needed socks and a warm cloak and a pair of breeches— and — well, so many things! Furiously, she ransacked Fergus' belongings for a comb. It would be weary work, untangling her hair, but by the Maker, she was a *Cousland*! She would not go before the descendant of that jumped-up Calenhad looking like a beggarmaid.

After a tactical retreat behind her curtain, she was clothed in fresh, soft linen; and after much cursing and muttering, she managed to tame her snarled brown hair. She braided it and

wrestled it into a knot, and let the curling tendrils in front follow their own sweet will.

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

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

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

"Come in."

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

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

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

"Not yet, but soon."

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

"My lady..." the elf ventured. "There is a terrible rumor— we have heard that Highever Castle was attacked— that the

Teyrn is dead. Is this true?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bronwyn stood up straight, and spoke clearly.

"You all know me. I arrived two days ago with the Grey

Warden Duncan. He was visiting Highever Castle on the day my brother Fergus departed for the war. My father and Arl Rendon Howe planned to follow together, since the Arl claimed there had been some delay in mustering the men of Amaranthine.

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

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

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

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

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

She stopped, seeing the desperate questions on every face.

"I did not see any dead elves, " she told them, "though I am sure they were also targets. Our own plan was to escape through the servant's door in the larder. When we found my father there, the door was ajar, and so I would guess that many had already made their escape. I pray so. At least,

when I went through the kitchen I did not see your sister, Dariel, and she was not in the servant's quarters. My mother and I fought our way through a great deal of the castle, looking for my father and gathering other survivors. I saw Mintha and Delvina in the servants quarters, and they were running toward the kitchen. I don't know what happened in the stables, Trinian. I am sorry. There was fire and confusion everywhere. "

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

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

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

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

She knew the captain who hurried to meet her: Fannon, a

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The roar of approval echoed through the valley of Ostagar.

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

Another great shout rent the morning.

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

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

"Hail!" the soldiers roared.

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

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

Please review! It's my only reward for writing, and I often get some very good ideas that way!

3. Warlords of Ferelden

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 3: Warlords of Ferelden

"That," Alistair told her as they left the Highever camp, "was impressive. You're quite the little rabble-rouser, aren't you?"

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

"Ummm...breakfast..."

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

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

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

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

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

Alistair mumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

"Uhh...right. Nightmares."

"No surprise. "

"Already?"

"Afraid so."

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

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

"Hmm... We kill darkspawn."

"That part I got."

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

"Evidently."

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

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

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

"Why, exactly?" Bronwyn pressed.

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

"Let's not tell anyone we don't know that. We can look wise and say it's a secret. And it wouldn't be a lie. Duncan told me

that the Grey Warden headquarters is in the Anderfels. A place called Weisshaupt. Have you ever been there?"

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

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

"Well, no. There's a suite of apartments in the west wing of the main courtyard. Those are set aside for us. We have a dormitory and a refectory and a training room and some—yes—some storage. We have our own kitchen and laundry and a few servants. It's nice. We have our own entrance and everything, because the connection to the rest of the Palace has been sealed."

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

"All right. What else?"

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

"Why is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No! I mean...I don't know exactly. I haven't met many female Grey Wardens, and I obviously never discussed—*that*—with them. All I know is that Duncan told me once that it's almost impossible for two Grey Wardens to have children."

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

"I suppose they could marry. Yes. Duncan told me about that

couple in Orlais. Not often, though. It's all duty to the order and kill darkspawn and whatnot. I haven't heard of any Grey Wardens having children."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe *Grey Wardens* born in Orlais are all right," Bronwyn said grudgingly, her voice dark with suspicion, "but Orlesians are always up to something. My father said so, and Teyrn Loghain clearly agrees. I think he's right to be careful."

Meanwhile, we need more Wardens. We should get busy and recruit some. What did Duncan look for when he was out and about? Skill at arms, I suppose, but what else?"

"We can't recruit."

"And why not?"

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

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

"Well, I don't!"

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

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

"A very good thing, too! Come on, we need to get to the meeting. Wipe your face—there—got it!"

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

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

"Perhaps I should have a look?" Wynne suggested mildly.

"Well...all right...but I then I must dash off to see the King and Teyrn Loghain!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bronwyn backed away minutely, and felt herself turning red. "I

merely climbed a rope, Your Majesty."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Highever."

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

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

Loghain shook his head. "None. I sent two more scouting parties out this morning, but so far there has been no sign of him or his men. It is... possible... that he encountered the main body of the horde as he was going east."

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

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

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

Loghain watched, deep in thought, as the King repeated his

plans for the grand Grey Warden immolation to his unacknowledged bastard half-brother. That Alistair was Maric's son was a secret known to very few. Cailan himself had not known he had a brother until he was nearly fifteen.

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

He wondered if the girl knew who Alistair was. She was watching the two brothers, a minute furrow between the straight dark brows. No fool she. It would not be long before she saw it for herself. The physical resemblance was strong: both of Maric's sons looked like their father. There was even a certain resemblance in voice, in manner...

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

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

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

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

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

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

Howe had once referred to her disparagingly as "Bryce Cousland's little spitfire." Some men, when they knew

themselves too old to attract the notice of a beautiful young girl, grew spiteful. And yes—Howe had been disappointed in his hopes of arranging a marriage between the girl and his son. Perhaps that might be a factor in Howe's sudden treachery...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cailan burst out, "You really think there is an Archdemon?" He looked — almost radiant. It irritated Bronwyn beyond words. Loghain, on the other hand, was clearly not happy with her.

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

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

Bronwyn, more and more bewildered, shot back, "What do mean I can't tell them? You can't withhold tactical information

from the army's commander!"

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

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

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

"You just can't!" he repeated, pleading with her.

"Well," she bit off, "it's a *stupid* secret, but if I cannot speak of it openly, I can say this: there *is* an Archdemon marshaling the darkspawn. I know it. How I know I am not permitted to say, but I swear to you that it is not just because someone else told me about it. It comes from personal knowledge."

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

His voice was chilly. "And what else *can* you share with us?"

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

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

"How can you know this?" Loghain growled.

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

"Well—!" Cailan began pacing back and forth, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "A true Blight! An Archdemon! I cannot wait to face it!"

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

duty, but she wondered if she had done more harm than good.

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

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

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

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

And Cailan's bastard brother was backing her. He looked unwilling and unhappy, but not because he was disagreeing with her about the substance of her claims. Could this be another Grey Warden plot? He would have thought the two of them too young and inexperienced to devise anything so quickly. The girl had spent quite a bit of time with Duncan, traveling south from Highever...

He walked over to Alistair and stared him down. The boy was fidgeting and red-faced, but this was not the face of an

accomplished liar. Perhaps the girl had influenced him into believing her story? She was so much stronger... He turned his attention to her.

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

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

"*Which* allies?"

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

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

Loghain was silent for two heartbeats, while he took in this news. It caused him to rearrange his ideas about the two

young people in front of him immediately. The dwarves! They had been good allies in the past...

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

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

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

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

"But he left them with you."

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

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

returned to his mistress.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alistair scowled at what sounded like a reflection on Duncan, but Bronwyn said, "Of course he would have considered the possible repercussions in ordinary times, but this is a *Blight*.

The Grey Wardens must do what is necessary in order to fight it. I am certain that Duncan would have supported my plan, given our circumstances."

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

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

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

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

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

Dalish."

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

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

"Y—es, Your Majesty," Alistair answered slowly. "It sounds like a plan to me. " His eyes sought Bronwyn's, and she flashed him a quick smile.

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

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

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

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

"Warden, you should meet the mage Uldred before you leave —"

The guard peered into the tent.

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

"Which Warden?"

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

"May I, Your Majesty?"

"Certainly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not sure I understand—"

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

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

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

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

Loghain frowned. This would prevent the girl from leaving for a few days at the very least. That could be unfortunate, but Fergus Cousland's survival would resolve the succession problem at Highever. If the girl had been the only heir, it was possible that Cailan would have wanted to set a bad precedent by letting a Grey Warden hold the teyrnir. And of course the girl was happy at the prospect of seeing her brother. It had been hard for her, losing her parents so violently. He certainly knew that kind of pain...

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

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

Bronwyn saw him coming, and introduced them.

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

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

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

Loghain was amused by the girl's utter lack of swooniness in Cailan's presence. It was too bad that more women did not dismiss him thus. Unfortunately, her cool detachment seemed only to rouse the stupid boy's interest. He glanced again at Alistair, who was openly scowling. At least the bastard had the sense to see that this girl was trouble. Attractive trouble, but trouble and no mistake. The sooner she was out of their camp and the King's presence, the better. It was time to cut

this encounter short.

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

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

Note: Despite the developers' notes that the proper honorific for a Teyrn or Teyrna is "Your Grace" (like an English non-royal duke), no one seems to use it in-game. The only person ever addressed as "Your Grace" is Arl Eamon, and that is clearly an error. I've decided to go with "my lord," since the use of "Your Grace" for a non-royal duke began around the 16th century in England, and thus is not like the England: 1200 model used by the developers for Ferelden.

Thanks to my reviewers: bioncafemme, SSJ Girl, mille libri, Sarah1281, phoenixandashes, Snafu1000, Judy, Donroth, and Cobar713. I appreciate your input!

Please review. It really helps.

4. The Wardens' Pyre

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 4: The Wardens' Pyre

Quickly — though not as quickly as Bronwyn would have liked — the retrieval party made its way through the Wilds. A dozen soldiers from Maric's Shield flanked the wagon on either side as it trundled behind the Wardens. Morrigan took the lead, aloof as always, though she deigned to speak with Bronwyn about the Wilds and the traces of darkspawn she had come across on her way to the camp at Ostagar. She seemed calm and unafraid, leading them with perfect confidence back to the little hut of her mother, the legendary Flemeth.

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

Bronwyn was anxious to see Fergus, but ambivalent about returning to the site of her first adventure in the south. When she last visited this place, Daveth and Ser Jory were still alive. It chilled her, remembering how Flemeth had dismissed Jory's cleverness as "irrelevant." How much did the old woman know

of the future? Or was she simply a remarkably gifted judge of character?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humble as the hut was, there were things of real value there, including a tall bookcase filled with impressive looking tomes — and some rare and precious items, she guessed.

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

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

"Very funny."

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

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

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

"Yes. I am fond of him. I love him. He is my brother, but he has always been my best friend and companion as well."

"Interesting. He seems a very ordinary sort of bluff young warrior to me, while you...you are not so ordinary. It matters

not. He is of value to you, and I am pleased to return him."

Bronwyn did not bother to reply to this rather insulting remark. They would be leaving, and she would never see this unpleasant old woman again. She opened the door and summoned the waiting soldiers.

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

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

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

There were some fearful glances at the objects in the witches' hut. Morrigan lounged against the wall, in an elaborate show of boredom. Flemeth's mouth was quirked in a smug, inscrutable smile.

The litter was made for a shorter man, and Fergus' feet dangled off the end. The gate in the back of the wagon was let down, and very cautiously, the unconscious man was eased in. Bronwyn supervised it all, forcing herself not to wring her hands like a silly girl. She arranged pillows around Fergus to cushion him against any jolts, taking special care around his bandaged head. His salvaged belongings were

stowed away, and Bronwyn felt she could not be gone from here too soon.

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

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

"As you wish."

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

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

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

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

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

"My, my!" laughed Flemeth. "Such passion! Save it for your quest, young Warden! You will not always feel as you do now. Life changes, in its inevitable march to death. In a practical sense, you can regard that as good thing. It is always sad to outgrow love, of course, but very convenient, as I've always said."

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

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

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

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

"What does Morrigan say to this?"

"Let us ask her."

The young woman was summoned and informed of Flemeth's

decision. She was not pleased with it.

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

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

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

But Flemeth was saying, "Besides, you have been itching to escape from the Wilds. Here is your opportunity. You will never have a better one, nor such a chance to keep noble company." The old woman's laugh was harsh and contemptuous.

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

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

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

will be valued and honored as my companion."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alistair put up his hands in defeat. "Right. She comes with us. I just don't think she can be trusted. Don't say I didn't warn you."

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

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

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

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

"Right you are, my lady— er— Warden."

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

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

"Of course. I'd rather be there than in the Grey Warden tent alone. I can bring my things and put my cot some place out of the way..."

"This sounds horrible, I know, but could you have two more

cots brought over? Fergus will need the only cot in the tent."

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

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

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

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

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

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

They wound up the trail that joined the Imperial Highway. Bronwyn felt gratitude to Teyrn Loghain for their escort, for left to themselves she and Alistair would have found it impossible to maneuver the cart up the connecting ramp and over the mud holes. Once back on the ancient Tevinter road of finely-fitted stone, the going was smoother. The Tower of Ishal rose up in the distance, beckoning them home.

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

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

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

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

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

Wynne was waiting for them at the Highever tent, her

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

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

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

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

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

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

depart for the Circle, Morrigan will accompany us."

Wynne took in the strange garb, with its cynical indifference to modesty, and then the wooden staff. The yellow eyes looked into hers, and Wynne remembered some ancient and obscure texts: texts which mentioned the possibility of changing one's shape into that of beasts, but surely that was not—

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just so."

Bronwyn sighed to herself. "Our servants will see that you have all you require, Wynne, and I shall help you myself, in any way that I can. Alistair will be staying here too, and is fetching some cots. Morrigan, I do not wish to be discourteous, but the Wardens are being immolated at twilight, and I have much to do in preparation for the funeral. Let me introduce you to our servants, who can see to your comfort. As to the rest, you can explore the camp or rest, just as you like. We shall talk more tomorrow of our journey."

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

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

"What's all this?" Bronwyn wondered.

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

"That was very thoughtful of you, Alistair," Bronwyn said,

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

While this was done, she looked curiously at the other things Alistair had brought.

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

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

"Oh, yes!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That was very decent of him," Bronwyn agreed. Very proper, too. This Belarion must of have been one of what Mother called "nature's nobility." One should always be kind to

servants, Mother had taught her. It was a sign of bad breeding to be exacting and rude. And cruelty to a servant was an admission of cowardice, since servants had no recourse. It was good to learn something of the Wardens she would never know.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good work," Bronwyn praised them. "Do arrange another pile just like it in the opposite corner for Warden Alistair to light. It seems wise with such a large pyre."

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

"Yes...very nice, indeed."

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

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

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

"You are too kind to remember."

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

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

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

She asked, "And what way is that?"

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

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

"You misunderstand me," he protested. "It would be unnoticeable. You would not be speaking unnaturally loudly."

Simply give the address in clear, audible tones, and I can guarantee that it will be heard and understood by all your listeners, no matter how far away."

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

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

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

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

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

"He is right, certainly." Bronwyn was deeply impressed by the good Wynne had done—and would do. "Your gifts are an

immense help. I only wish there were more of you!"

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

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

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

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

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

It was much worse than Bronwyn had anticipated. She had first seen death in battle on the night of the Highever massacre, and she had killed her share of men herself; but

she had been so wild with rage and grief that she had scarcely looked at the men she slashed apart. They had been objects—dangers—in her way, and not real men to her. Even the bodies of men she knew had barely registered on her. Oriana and Oren were all she could see, drained and bloodless, their eyes half open.

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

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

Alistair choked at that, and Bronwyn frowned at the elf.

"Thank you. We wish to view them in private now."

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

"—That's Dulin," Alistair said, "he was from Val Tourein. He never lost at cards. And that's Hayward from Igglesbourne in the Free Marches. He wasn't much older than us—"

He broke down completely when they came to Duncan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What were they wearing? Winged helmets? That was rather—well—they were picturesque, anyway. And Grey Warden

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

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

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

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

"Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter.

Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just."

Appropriate enough words, but she was not done.

***"Though all before me is shadow,
Yet shall the Maker be my guide.***

I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.

***For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."***

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

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

"Your Majesty. My lords and ladies. Revered Mother. Soldiers of Ferelden. My countrymen."

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

"Long ago, before our fathers' fathers came down from the mountains, all Thedas stood on the verge of annihilation. A horror had fallen upon our world: a horror we now know as the First Blight. A Corrupted Old God had risen, and with him a horde of monsters—the darkspawn, ravaging the land, slaughtering the people, bent on destroying everything and everyone in their path.

"Veterans of battles with the darkspawn came together, and the best among them pledged to do whatever was

necessary to stem the tide of evil that swept across the land. They recruited those who possessed the skill and strength to raise their banner from all over Thedas, making no distinction between elven slave or human nobleman, between swordsman or archer or accomplished mage. Thus, the Grey Wardens were born."

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

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

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

"Together they pooled their knowledge of the enemy and formed a united front to put a stop to the Archdemon Dumat's rampage. When the Grey Wardens raised their arms in victory, suddenly there was hope where before no hope remained."

The army was listening with rapt attention, Loghain noted. No

jostling and muttering. Cailan would be pleased at their respect for the occasion, at least. More respect than Arl Urien was showing, asking urgent questions about the girl, and if she had any sisters.

"For twelve ages of men, the Grey Wardens have come forward when called to serve; and then, their duty done, have slipped back into the shadows. Once a Blight is over, we are called irrelevant and unnecessary: a burden from the dead past. "

Ouch, thought Loghain. "Irrelevant." My words must have stung more than I intended, when first we met before the battle. I take it that this rebuttal is meant for me...

"And yet, the past is always with us. It lives yet beneath our feet. In the dark places of the earth, there is an ancient malice that does not sleep. We forget it at our peril, for it has *not* forgotten us."

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

"And whenever and wherever it bursts forth upon the kingdoms under the sun, the Grey Wardens stand ready to do their duty, for the Grey Wardens' great allegiance is to life itself; to preserve all things untainted by the darkness. To that end, these words are carved into the soul of every Grey Warden:

"In peace, vigilance: in war, victory; in death, sacrifice."
Tonight we, the living, bear witness to those who died by those words."

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

"-Thorn of Oswin, whose arrows never missed; Gregor of the Anderfels, who could wield a greatsword like a feather and drink any twelve men under the table; Tallefer of Ayesleigh, silent in speech, but bold in battle; Belarion, an elf born in the alienage of Val Royaux, famed both for his courage and his courtesy; Stargen of Waking Sea, who once slew a bereskarn with only a dagger; the twin brothers Hintor and Hastor, who served twenty years as Wardens and who in death were not divided—"

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

"And last, I cannot forget their leader, Duncan, for he personally saved my life, just as in his last and greatest battle he saved the life of our King. Mighty warrior though he was, he was more: a wise counselor, a loyal friend, a master of lore, and a kind and caring mentor to all his Wardens. I know that these words of the Prophet

were always in his heart:

"Let the blade pass through the flesh,

Let my blood touch the ground,

Let my cries touch their hearts.

Let mine be the last sacrifice."

Fare you well, Duncan, Warden Commander in Ferelden.

"

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

"Alistair and I are proud to have been called to join the Grey Wardens. My brothers, your sacrifice will not be forgotten, and one day, when Alistair and I join you, may you find us worthy of your example."

The girl lifted the torch and cried out,

"Duncan — and the Grey Wardens!"

There was a cheer—from the Highever men first, Loghain

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

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

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

"Two queens in one hive,

And only one shall thrive."

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

Such a pyre would certainly burn all night. The hideous smell of burned meat filled the valley: a smell familiar to all Fereldans, accustomed as they were to cremation. The

priests wafted their censers industriously, but their perfumes could not begin to cover the smell of twenty-four men being reduced to ash and bone. At least the height and large size of the pyre spared the onlookers the usual unsettling sights of hair catching flame, of naked blackened bodies revealed as the shrouds were consumed, of skulls exploding in the intense heat.

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

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

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

much of one's earthly remains to be returned to the earth.

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

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

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

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

"My dear Bronwyn!" Her cousin, Arl Leonas Bryland, came forward to take a goblet from her, his face full of compassion. "It is always a joy to see you, though I confess I wish we could have had this reunion under happier circumstances. So? My cousin's child is a Grey Warden? Duncan obviously thought only the best would do. I wanted to tell you that you spoke extremely well."

"Sent him off in style," agreed Arl Wulffe, rather gruffly. "Hope my boys do as much for me when my time comes. I must say

I wouldn't want to engage you in debate at the Landsmeet. You'd lay me low with a well-turned phrase!"

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

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

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

"Your brother is well?" Cailan asked.

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

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

"No," she said gravely, "I must know that my brother is out of danger. And then I must tell him the dreadful news. I cannot leave until that is done. On that head, Your Majesty," she said, turning to the King, "I must hold you to your word on the matter of Arl Howe. He must be called to account, and sooner rather than later. I claim the Right of Blood, at any rate. When

the time comes, I wish to meet him myself."

More murmurs of approval and support.

"Very proper, too," muttered Arl Urien.

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

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

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

Bronwyn gave them a tight smile, thinking that the men would not have spoken so without quite so much wine to drink.

"Thank you, but there are things one must do for oneself. At any rate, we cannot know how it will fall out. I am concerned for the people in my brother's teyrnir. I do not know what caused Rendon Howe to throw away all our families' years of friendship, but he has done so — and done it so completely that I cannot guess what crime he will commit next. "

Before her imagination, wreathed in the flames of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In groups, in quietly talking pairs, and one by one, the nobles

drifted away. Alistair stood watching the pyre slowly collapse. Beside him was the King, in silent sympathy, and Loghain, restless and bored.

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

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

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

Loghain snorted, and glanced under his brows at the pyre.

That's the last of you, Duncan. And good riddance.

He left the two brothers to their vigil.

Thank you to my reviewers: phoenixandashes, Shining Girl, Cobar713, Donroth, Judy, Phoenix Fire Lady, dyslecksec, Joe, byLanternLight, and Sarah1281. You give me real encouragement.

Please review! It makes my day.

5. King Cailan Holds High Revel

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 5: King Cailan Holds High Revel

Bronwyn already knew that Alistair and Morrigan had somehow taken against each other. Breakfast confirmed it.

"*You* would find the moss upon a stone interesting."

"You know what's more interesting than that?" Alistair shot back at Morrigan. "Apostates. Mages outside the Tower. That's illegal, you know."

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

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

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

Bronwyn knew that she would have to speak to them, separately and in private, about all these little digs and barbed words. They would poison the atmosphere and make their quest just that much harder to achieve.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And if she uses Blood Magic?" asked Wynne.

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

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

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

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

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

"Think yourself too good for an honest soldier, do you?" a man's voice demanded. "I offered her nine silvers— fair and square— the going price for a Wilder girl— and she turns up

her nose. I ask you: is that right?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Morrigan dawdled over to Bronwyn, smirking.

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

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

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

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

"*That* is true enough," sniffed Morrigan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Morrigan assured her, "I can fly was long as you can ride!"

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

This certainly simplified matters, though Bronwyn thought she

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

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

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

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

"My lord?"

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

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

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

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

He scowled and stalked back to his tent.

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

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

And not before looking through everything to see what could be of use to the two remaining members of the order in Ferelden. Armor and weapons were laid on the cots and on

the ground. The chests were lined up and would be gone through methodically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In the chest are one...two...three pairs of thick woolen socks. Spare small clothes. Spare shirt of linen. Leather bag with comb and razor. A wet and dirty towel. Pouch with coins totaling...some of these are Orlesian...oh...this is interesting.

This is an old square *solidus* from Tevinter. Do you know what that's worth? Because I don't..."

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

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

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

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

"How much do we have?"

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

"And a copy of Cassander's *Secret History of the Orlesian Empresses*. Hey! I heard that was really lurid."

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

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

"Oooh! I want to read it. I've never seen an improper book before, but Aldous told me about them. I call dibs!" She grabbed it away, and put it on the ground underneath her folding stool.

"I picked it up first!"

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

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

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

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

His black thighboots fit Bronwyn quite well, as long as she

laced them tightly and wore thick socks. In the chest were some leather hair ties, a small flask of lavender oil, a little box of soap (also scented with lavender), an emerald ring set in fine gold, a small but elegant silver goblet and a silver spoon, a compact folding chess set with playing pieces of quartz and malachite, a volume of Orlesian poetry, and a much-loved biography of the Warden Garahel. In a rack of tiny crystal vials, there were a variety of poisons: some of which she knew, and some of which she did not. Belarion had been a person of very refined tastes— more so than most noblemen she knew.

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

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

She and Fergus had once sneaked into the forbidden Alienage, thinking themselves very daring. It had been— not exactly frightening— but very unpleasant. It was dirty and smelly and sordid. The elves had not known they were the Teyrn's children, but saw that they were rich "shems," and had crowded close, begging for coin. Bronwyn had felt

enormously tall and awkward among them, and she and Fergus had hurried away, not telling anyone of their adventure.

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

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

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

"Teagan! It's been too long!"

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

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

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

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

"Maybe."

He was serious, so she became serious as well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Er...uh..."

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

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

Looking at him again, she understood it all, she thought. The old king's bastard, given to a trusted adviser to raise. She was only surprised that Teyrn Loghain had not taken charge of him. Hmmm. Perhaps that would have been too obvious, if the king wished to keep it quiet. The mother must have been very common indeed for the king to wish to keep it secret so long after the death of Queen Rowan. Or maybe King Maric wanted Cailan to have no rivals.

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

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

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

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

And he had seen to it that Alistair and Teagan sat together. They knew each other, after all, and it would be nice for them to renew their acquaintance. Alistair was a fine fellow, and a Warden. It had been wonderful, having a chance to talk with him, just the two of them alone, last night at the Warden's vigil. He must try to find time to get know his brother better.

Maker! Who was *that*?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It was—horrible," Alistair agreed. "My friends... I helped gather their ashes at sundown today. Duncan—you must have

met him—he was a mentor to me, and the best of men. Bronwyn thinks that's one of the signs that this really is a Blight. Only an Archdemon would be cunning enough to pick them off like that."

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

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

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

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

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

She sipped her wine, slipping him a mischievous smile. The gown and the underdress of delicate white linen, the embroidered sleeve garters, the double belt of dyed and studded leather—all of it had been expensive, but Morrigan

had been pleased by the final result. At that, Bronwyn had had to promise that Morrigan could dress as she liked when on their travels.

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

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

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

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

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

"Really?" Bronwyn asked in concern. "You don't think—" But she followed Loghain's lead, and saw where the King was looking. A great many men were looking in that direction as

well. Morrigan really was very beautiful. Bronwyn sighed, feeling ill-groomed, ill-clad, and only half-washed.

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

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

"A sound scheme," he grunted.

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

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

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

"— and in recognition of your deeds—"

Her reward was a dragonbone dagger of dwarven make,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was appalling. Bronwyn left off even trying to eat, and stroked the lovely dagger in her lap.

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

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

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

She nodded again, resigned. "I know."

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

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

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

Loghain was whispering in a woman's ear.

Was Loghain *flirting*? The sly old hound!

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

Wait until Anora heard about this!

Thank you to my reviewers: Sanityfaerie, Amatyultare, White Ivy, Cobar713, Judy, Phoenix Fire Lady, deloris, Angry Girl, mille libri, bioncafemme, phoenixandashes, Donroth, and ByLanternLight. You make my day, and make me write!

6. Brother and Sister

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 6: Brother and Sister

"Warden, your brother is awake."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Father?" he whispered.

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

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

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

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

"They were killing everyone—even the poor servants—even

Nan! The Grey Warden Duncan found me, and Mother and Father had him carry me away, just so someone would live to tell the truth of what Howe had done."

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

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

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

Arl Eamon had fallen sick.

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

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

"Does anyone know what the problem is?"

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

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

Alistair waited, feeling rather miserable. He had looked forward to making things up with the Arl, but they had had little time to speak at the feast. At least Teagan proved himself a true friend, as he always had. It would be horrible, if the Arl were to—well, *die*—and Alistair had not thanked him for the things he had done for him.

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

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

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

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

They walked through the camp in silence. The uninhabited tent

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

Teagan looked around briefly, and seated himself on a folding stool. "I suspect Warden Bronwyn has been here. I recall visiting the tent of the Grey Wardens on another occasion, and it was—how shall I put it?— not quite so pristine. The Teyrn of Highever is a lucky man, to have a sister's care."

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

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

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

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

tower in time, and who knows what might have happened?"

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

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

"Alistair—"

"If people wanted me to be a leader," Alistair declared, his mouth stubborn, "they shouldn't have drummed into me early on that I was nothing and nobody and mustn't put myself forward. I've learned that lesson very well, thank you, and I've also learned to live with the consequences. I may not be a leader, but I'm a very *good* follower. I don't *want* to be Warden Commander--or Emperor of Orlais, either, for that matter."

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

Not that Teagan approved of Cailan's diplomatic courtship of Empress Celene. Cailan was putting himself in a position that might explode in his face. The language that Cailan employed in writing to the Empress was informal, gallant—it could possibly even be construed as the language of courtship.

What if the Empress believed Cailan to be offering something warmer than a mere political alliance? Her taste for handsome young men was legend.

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

It was technically possible—if scandalous-- to obtain an annulment from the Chantry if one's partner was found to be unable to bear children--or father them, if the applicant was a woman. However, Anora had been crowned Queen Consort of Ferelden. How could one un-crown a Queen? There was no legal precedent for such an action.

And what if the infertile party was not Anora, but Cailan? The Chantry would demand evidence, and it could all become a gigantic embarrassment for everyone concerned.

And who did Eamon think would be suitable to replace her? That was a question indeed! There was something of a shortage of attractive candidates among the nobility. All the really desirable young noblewomen were members of families not allied with Redcliffe: Habren Bryland was a good-looking, rather spirited girl; Bann Alfstanna was a handsome woman,

though so close to thirty that her fertility might be called into question; Delilah Howe was said to be pretty and gentle; and after seeing her for himself, he knew that the prize of them all would have been Lady Bronwyn Cousland, the daughter of the only other teyrn in the kingdom.

There had been unpleasant gossip about her absence from Court, but Teagan had already picked up enough of the rumors here at Ostagar to have discovered that the young lady had been in love with someone unsuitable—someone at Court, presumably, since her parents had taken pains to keep her away. A younger son? A mere knight?

Had she fallen in love with Cailan? He was a terrible flirt, and very handsome. Of course her parents would want to protect her from the utter disaster of an affair with a married king. It was all moot, now, for Lady Bronwyn was now Warden Bronwyn, and the traditions of the Grey Wardens themselves forbade a Grey Warden holding any title—and how much more so that of queen!

However, amongst all of these concerns was the fact that Cailan seemed to love Anora, and she him. Whether it was the romantic love of equal partners, or a carryover from their childhood brother/sister affection, the love was there, and visible. Not that it prevented Cailan straying on his "adventures." Anora, on the other hand, was admirably faithful to her vows.

But Cailan's secret correspondence with Orlais, combined with Eamon's not-so-secret dislike of the Mac Tir marriage,

combined with Eamon's own marriage to an Orlesian—well. Teagan sighed. If anyone looked at all of this together, they might well get the impression that Cailan was planning to marry the Empress himself, and reunite the two countries. There would be war, for most of the people of Ferelden would rather sow the soil with salt than be part of the Empire ever again. And Loghain Mac Tir, Hero of River Dane, would be leading them.

Was this ill-considered campaign part of a secret strategy? Men died in battle all the time. Even a warrior like Loghain could be taken unawares. A battle was an ideal place to stage an assassination that would not appear to be one. Teagan's soul sickened at the idea. He did not want to imagine that Cailan and Eamon would do such a thing. If they had, they had not confided in him, thank the Maker!

Is it the Blight itself? he wondered. Is there something in the very air that makes men turn against all they've loved? Look at Rendon Howe, who killed his best friend and his entire family. Is the world mad?

"—anyway," Alistair was saying. "We'll be heading up to the Circle first. The army only has a grand total of seven mages here at Ostagar, and that's just ridiculous. Duncan thought so, and Loghain thinks so, and Bronwyn agrees. She'll use the Right of Conscription if she has to, but she'll enforce the treaty first. I've heard of mages being Grey Wardens. It seems odd to me, of course, but it could be useful."

Teagan had no trouble catching the thread of the

conversation. "So the two of you will rebuild the Wardens."

"As far as possible. We'll need some veterans from elsewhere. Wardens who know the lore and history and all that. Since Loghain hates Orlais, perhaps they could be sent from the Free Marches. The Free Marches are so much like Ferelden that nobody would complain. Or from the Anderfels or from—well—anywhere but Orlais."

"It sounds like you've got some good plans," Teagan approved. "Don't let Warden Bronwyn make all the decisions, Alistair. At the very least, give her the best advice you possibly can."

"I suppose I could do that," Alistair allowed. "Talk is cheap. Which puts it well within my budget."

The weather had warmed enough that the tent flap was staked open, letting a light breeze filter through the big front room. Bronwyn was working at the broad trestle table, studying her map and making notes of distances and needed supplies. A flash of green wool made her look up.

It was Morrigan, admiring herself in Teyrn Fergus' small mirror.

"That's lovely," Bronwyn remarked, noticing the heavy gold necklace around Morrigan's throat. "I hadn't seen it before."

"Perhaps because I did not possess it before," Morrigan

answered. "'Tis a gift from the King."

"The King!" Bronwyn was concerned. "He sent it to you?"

"'Twas handed to me at dinner by his camp seneschal, in a very pretty little box of amber, with a note of thanks—from the seneschal!-- for my 'services to the realm,'" Morrigan answered drolly, with a faint sneer. "It made me sound like a cast-off mistress."

"Be careful of the king," Bronwyn said, her voice low. "He might be the sort of man who thinks that giving you gifts means he has certain rights. Teyrn Loghain told me he admires you."

"I care neither for Loghain's opinion nor for any king," Morrigan declared, "but the necklace is a fine gift, indeed!"

Bronwyn would not treat it as a joke. "Bold words, but do not let him get you alone. I certainly would never want to be alone with him. It's very tricky, defending one's honor from a king. One can't simply punch his head—or turn him into a frog."

Morrigan cocked her head, "Really? I think I could manage it quite easily."

"Just don't," Bronwyn sighed. "It would make my life very difficult."

She unbuckled her weapons from their harness and passed them to the bemused Morrigan. "I have sent word to the King

and the Teyrn that my brother is able to speak to them. They will be coming shortly. Would you be so good as to take my sword to the Highever armorer, and ask him to set the edges razor sharp? My spare dagger, too. You cannot miss his tent, as his sharpening wheel is nearby. It should not take long, so perhaps you could wait while he works, and bring them to me afterward? I should count it a kindness on your part."

"And thus the King will be denied the chance to ogle me!" Morrigan shrugged. "Very well, I shall go. He is a fool, anyway, and I do not need any more of Loghain's glares."

"Thank you, Morrigan. I do this for your safety as well as my own honor. I will not let the King think he can do as he likes with my friends."

Morrigan rolled her eyes, and sauntered out of the tent. Bronwyn watched her go, and then noticed that the girl had quickly changed directions. Sure enough, she had just managed to miss the king, who was striding eagerly in the direction of the Teyrn of Highever's tent. Beside him was Teyrn Loghain, looking grave, as usual. Bronwyn felt herself flush and smoothed her hair, knowing she was being silly.

"Ho there, Bronwyn!"

Cailan saw her sitting at her work. Bronwyn set her father's bronze inkstand over her papers, and rose to greet the men and lead them to Fergus.

"Your Majesty, I have not yet told my brother about joining the

Grey Wardens. Perhaps that could be a conversation for another time—"

"Really?" Cailan was astonished. "You've haven't told him about it? Surely you've told him about your part in the victory!"

Loghain was looking at her with interest. Bronwyn blushed furiously, and shook her head.

"No, Your Majesty. I had to tell him about our family, and that was all I thought he could bear at the moment—"

"He should be proud of you!"

Bronwyn wished she could hit the King on the nose. Nothing less seemed likely to make an impression. She could not, so she resorted to a soothing tone.

"I'm sure he shall be, Majesty, but it's too much to take in all at once."

"Hmph!" Cailan scowled, and then stepped through to see the wounded new Teyrn of Highever.

The King, Bronwyn thought, was a little too loud in expressing his sympathy for Fergus' loss. His victory was too great and glorious to allow him to alter his tone appropriately. Teyrn Loghain, by saying less, said it better, and then changed the subject to what Fergus had seen in the Wilds.

"—and darkspawn really do seem to come straight up from the earth," Fergus was telling them. "They swarmed over us

so fast. Do the Grey Wardens have any explanation for how they do it?"

"Most of the Grey Wardens were killed," Loghain said quietly. "The horde appeared to be targeting them."

"Gallant deaths, each one," Cailan added, his voice thick with emotion. "I know she asked me not to, but I have to tell you that it was such a relief that your sister was spared to us. With her and our friend Alistair, at least there are two Grey Wardens left in Ferelden!"

"My sister?" Fergus asked faintly.

"Yes! And she played a great part in our victory. Scaling the Tower of Ishal when it was overrun with darkspawn—lighting the signal beacon for Loghain's charge—slaying an ogre single-handed—your sister is an inspiration to us all!"

Bronwyn shot Loghain an anguished, beseeching glance. Couldn't *he* shut the King up?

He could not. He frowned, and simply said, "Your sister did her duty and she did it well."

"A Grey Warden?" Fergus was too weak to give full voice to his dismay. His pitying look slid to Bronwyn. "Oh, Pup—"

"I told you Duncan saved me," she told him hurriedly. "His price was to exact a promise from Father that I would join the Wardens."

"Oh, Pup—" he reached out feebly for her hand, and glanced at Loghain. "I know it's not what you wanted..."

Bronwyn was determined not to look at Loghain, or at the King, or anywhere else but at her kind and sympathetic brother. Her eyes were burning. "It's all right, really! I'm all right!"

"But Pup—"

"Fergus, it's *done*. It cannot be undone. I am a Warden, and it's hardly an ignoble way to serve Ferelden, after all."

"No, indeed!" agreed Cailan. "I envy her, being a Grey Warden! Glorious!"

Loghain was sorry for the girl. So that bastard Duncan had as good as conscripted Bryce's daughter. No, worse: he had extorted a promise from a dying man as payment for what anyone else would have done as a matter of course. Perhaps it was for the best, though, since the girl was infatuated with the King. She would be leaving soon, and her new duties would keep her away for some time. A pity that such a ridiculous attachment had blighted her marriage prospects and spoiled her life.

Of course Cailan was handsome and charming and all that, and Anora was fond of him. Most women would not care that he was all kinds of fool. But he was a married man, and should not engage in a flirtation or worse with the Cousland girl—or with that witch who had insinuated herself into the

girl's company.

If only the girl were not so transparent! She blushed whenever she was in the King's presence, and no doubt he was flattered by that. An innocent still, probably, though that wouldn't last long with the Wardens.

She had looked a bit—angry—at Cailan betraying her secret. Possibly spending a few days with the *reality* of Cailan, rather than simply mooning over the *idea* of a young king—yes, that might have gone far to cure her of her infatuation. She was bright enough to see Cailan for what he was, surely.

He watched the rest of the conversation in silence, getting ready to haul the King away when Fergus grew too tired. The King was promising retribution against Howe, of course, though the Maker only knew when they would be able to turn their attention there.

Cailan moved from the treachery of Howe to the current Cousland household, "And where is your charming friend from the Wilds today?"

Bronwyn smiled blandly. "Oh—Morrigan?" she answered in a casual way. "I believe she's out and about, running errands. So kind of her. "

Cailan was briefly dashed, and then looked like he might settle in to wait. Loghain was not about to tolerate that.

"I believe Arl Urien wishes an audience about the decision to

raise his troop levy."

"True. You'd think Denerim could send more soldiers than the rest of Ferelden combined! Perhaps we should insist that his son lead the reinforcements. " He was moving at last, with a wish for Fergus' continued recovery, and an "Always a pleasure, Warden," for Bronwyn.

Loghain merely nodded. "Teyrn Fergus. Warden Bronwyn."

Bronwyn felt herself blushing again, and hated herself for it. She saw the visitors off, and then went back into the tent to face Fergus.

Alistair did quite a bit to save the situation. He was funny and likable, and knew how to talk to an invalid. Maybe it was something they taught in the Chantry.

Now that the truth was out, Bronwyn brought him in, and introduced him, and told Fergus a calm, unvarnished account of the events of the past few weeks. Fergus did not seem pleased with Duncan's insistence that she join the Wardens, but there was no doubt that Duncan had been within his rights. Or that Bronwyn was a proper Grey Warden.

"I told you, didn't I?—that if I were a Grey Warden recruiter, you'd be the one I'd want!"

"Yes, you did. You were right. Don't expect me to say those words ever again."

"Bronwyn's really taken charge of the situation," Alistair told Fergus. "I don't think Teyrn Loghain is the Wardens' greatest admirer, but he was pleased when Bronwyn told him about our treaties. He thought we were going to demand that the Orlesians come in force."

Fergus snorted in disbelief. "The Orlesians! I can just see a Cousland urging that! So tell me more about these treaties."

Bronwyn patted his hand. "We're going to the Circle of Magi, to Orzammar, and eventually to the Dalish elves. The treaties are ancient, older than Ferelden by far. I don't expect any trouble. Well, maybe at the Circle. The Templars won't want to let the mages out of their sight, but I'm prepared to be pretty firm with them. Even the seven mages here have made an enormous difference. Wynne is a brilliant healer, and Ilon fought with Alistair at the Tower of Ishal. I've heard that Senior Enchanter Uldred was awesome in the battle."

Fergus frowned. "That's lot of traveling, little sister. What kind of force are you taking with you?"

Alistair looked rueful. Bronwyn managed to smile. "Alistair and I are the last Wardens in Ferelden, Fergus. It's pretty much all down to us. We will be taking Morrigan with us—she is the daughter of the woman who saved you, Fergus." She lowered her voice. "She is a mage, and has some remarkable skills."

"An apostate," Alistair told Fergus. Fergus grimaced, not caring so much about this Morrigan being an apostate, as he did about her being totally a stranger to him.

"I'd like to meet her," he only said. "That's it? The three of you?"

"Well—Scout of course," Bronwyn laughed, pointing to the mabari who stood up at the foot of the cot and grinned at Fergus. "He's our heavy infantry!"

"All right." Fergus managed a slight smile. "The four of you. That's still a pretty small party with the country so unsettled."

"It won't be so small for long," Bronwyn told him cheerfully. "Alistair and I will be recruiting like you never saw. There were twenty-six Wardens in Ferelden only days ago. It will take some time to build back up to that, but we won't waste any time making a start."

Now that word was out that the Teyrn of Highever was awake and talking, it seemed everyone wanted to talk to him.

He had a meal and a long nap, both of which did him good. Then, with care, he and his cot were moved out to the big front room of the tent, where visitors could pay their respects more comfortably. In between visitors, Alistair kept Fergus supplied with cider and pleasant gossip. Bronwyn gave thanks that her only surviving brother in the Wardens was someone so companionable and well-mannered. Fergus clearly liked him and enjoyed his company. As sad as Fergus was, Alistair had also borne a grievous, recent loss, and the two seemed to understand one another.

"Hmm," she considered, watching the two of them. "Since you, Fergus, are my brother, and you, Alistair, are now my brother according to the Wardens, what does that make the two of you?"

"Brothers-in-law?" Fergus hazarded. "Always wanted one of those."

Alistair flushed red, and then laughed. "Maybe half-brothers. Or lighter-shade-of-Grey-brothers."

"Or step-brothers. I get to be the wicked one, though—like in the story of the Cinderlad."

Bronwyn remembered her mother saying, *"Honestly, it's like dealing with two small boys!"* She turned away and poured herself some cider to hide the sudden tears.

Wynne had gone to the infirmary, but now returned to have another look at her most distinguished patient.

"I believe your healing will progress very quickly now, my lord. You may feel well enough to sit at the table this evening, if your supper is a quiet one. You may even be up to a short walk tomorrow."

"My thanks!" Fergus said, his hand on the older woman's arm. "You've given me a second chance at life, perhaps. I won't waste it, I promise!"

"Then my efforts were not wasted, either," she said with a

kind smile.

After she had gone, Fergus said, "You know, the mages I've met here have been very decent people. I know the Chantry is always giving us dire warnings about magic, but times have changed since Andraste's day, surely. That Wynne now—she's a very good person. You can just see it."

"Wait until you meet Morrigan," Alistair snarked. "Then you'll understand all the warnings."

"Warnings about me, Alistair?" Morrigan asked, coming into the tent. "You think me that dangerous? Perhaps you are not entirely without sense."

"Morrigan!" called Bronwyn. "Fergus is much better now. Allow me to present you properly. Teyrn Fergus of Highever," she said, leading Morrigan forward, "this is my friend Morrigan. She and her mother found you in the Wilds and saved your life."

Fergus blinked at the beautiful, finely dressed woman, and then said, "My sincere thanks, my lady, both to you and your mother. I confess myself surprised—"

Morrigan's brows lifted suspiciously. "Surprised we would save you?"

"Surprised that a lady like yourself would even *be* in the Wilds to save a poor soldier," he laughed, a little weakly.

"I have always lived in the Wilds," Morrigan replied, "but I take the compliment in the spirit it was intended. You are—welcome, my lord."

"And I heard you are to be traveling with my sister. Difficult and dangerous work, most likely—and that's just bearing with Bronwyn's company!"

"Oh, yes, thank you so much, Fergus!" Bronwyn smiled, glad that Fergus' spirit was still strong enough to make silly jokes.

Another visitor was coming. "My lord of Highever!" called Cousin Leonas.

Relief over Fergus' recovery, condolences, family chat, war news, praise of Bronwyn. Fergus was told about the Wardens' pyre and Bronwyn's excellent funeral oration. Bronwyn caught Fergus' curious glance her way, and knew she would have to speak to him privately, and soon.

"—and I almost wish Habren were here in the army! I don't know what to do with the girl sometimes. She's up in Denerim now, and spending coin like I owned the King's Mint. Puppies are her latest fancy: she buys a new one every week. No idea what she does with the creatures..."

That earned Bronwyn another of Fergus' quick, shrewd looks. He would remember the fight she and Habren had had years ago—the summer Habren had visited Highever-- when Bronwyn had found Habren torturing a kitten. Bronwyn looked back at Fergus, and shook her head very slightly. Their cousin

would find out the truth of it all eventually, and Bronwyn suspected that it would be thoroughly unpleasant.

Arl Urien arrived, puffing, fresh from his disappointing conference with the King and Teyrn Loghain. After the usual condolences and best wishes, he mentioned his son, Bann Vaughan, left behind in Denerim to rule in his father's absence. Bronwyn could gather from the tone of his voice that Arl Urien was not happy with his only heir. Rumors were rife that the young man was a dreadful bully and was constantly getting into scrapes about the city. Now, news had come from Denerim that he had been wounded in an altercation with an elf girl. The elf had been executed, of course, but it was hinted that Vaughan was at least partly to blame.

"What the boy needs is a lady wife to settle him down," Urien declared, with a quick, almost reproachful glance at Bronwyn.

Leonas pricked up his ears. "I don't know if he has seen much of my daughter Habren, but..."

Bronwyn smiled sweetly, made a pot of honeygrass tea, and shut her ears to the negotiations.

N. A. --Thanks to all who have favorited or alerted. And thanks to my kind reviewers: black mage wannabe, Laura Proudmore, Zute, Piceron, Angervddel, Amatyultare, Cobar713, squeeze-the-fish, Jeanny, Angry Girl, ByLanternLight, phoenixandashes, FlowerFace, White Ivy, and mille libri.

Yes, I agree that Bronwyn breaks the news to Fergus too abruptly. I decided she would do that because she's very young, still grieving, and hasn't had enough experience to know how to do it better. And she's been dying to talk about it to someone who understands. And also, if she didn't tell him, someone else in that crowded camp would--or he'd hear about it through the thin canvas of the tent, and that would be worse.

7. Farewell to Ostagar

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 7: Farewell to Ostagar

Fergus was well enough to sit at the table and sup with them that evening. The servants had arranged it for four: The Teyrn, his sister, Alistair, and Morrigan. Wynne would have a few hours rest, and see that the Teyrn was well before he retired for the night. What Dariel served them showed due concern for the Teyrn's need for wholesome, digestible food, but it was tasty and plentiful for all that.

It was a quiet meal: Bronwyn gave Alistair a hard look when he attempted to bandy words with Morrigan, and a frown for the young witch herself. They subsided, seeing that she was serious. Morrigan still found plenty to say about the stupidity of the world outside their tent. Some of it was funny, and all, alas, was too, too, true. Bronwyn had little to say, herself, for her head was still spinning with the afternoon's conversations.

If only Father were here! He would know how to manage all these people, and he would understand and explain all the little undercurrents in their conversations. She had learned much from him, but not all she needed.

After Cousin Leonas and Arl Urien, there had been Arl Wulffe, and a host of banns and knights and captains—most especially their own knights and captains of Highever, none of whom Fergus could bear to refuse to see.

There had been others, too. She had now met the brother of Alistair's former guardian.

Bann Teagan seemed a very pleasant and sensible man, and was certainly a handsome one, and he had given her his condolences very kindly. Had he been something other than a younger son, with only a small bannorn of his own, she thought her parents might have considered him as a match for her. But he *was* a younger son, and no doubt had not been considered exalted enough for the daughter of the premier noble of Ferelden. Ironic, really, for now it was Bronwyn who had been removed from the marriage market as ineligible. Sometimes it was hard not to wish that Thomas Howe were something other than a drunken sot. Perhaps if she had married him, his father would never betrayed them.

Or maybe Howe would have still betrayed them, and claimed the teyrnir for his son in Bronwyn's name, and she would have been bound, for the rest of her life, to the family of her parents' murderer. That was an idea that she tasted briefly and resolved never to taste again.

Why hadn't Arl Howe made Nathaniel his heir, rather than Thomas? *That* was a mystery. Father and Mother had been shocked and disappointed. Their families had been so close, and Amaranthine was next door to Highever. Mother always

said there was no point in having grandchildren unless she could see them. But no one had seen Nathaniel in years. The last the Couslands had heard, he was visiting family in the Free Marches. Of course, Nathaniel was too strong and assertive to accept his father's actions without any questions. If Nathaniel had known what his father planned, there would have been trouble, Bronwyn was certain. And that, perhaps, was the answer. Arl Howe must have been deep in his treachery for some time, and had sent Nathaniel away until the deed was done.

Bann Teagan was not there to court her, of course, but to pay his respects to her brother. They chatted, and she could see that Fergus liked him, and that Alistair was very fond of him. Bann Teagan was worried about his own brother, the Arl of Redcliffe. Bronwyn did not know the Arl well, since he and her father had never been political allies and Redcliffe was so far away from Highever. The Arl had joined with Teyrn Loghain in opposing her father's election as King five years ago. Theirs was certainly an alliance of convenience, since Teyrn Loghain could not have approved of Arlessa Isolde, who was an Orlesian, and said to be very haughty and exacting. Nonetheless, the Arl was sick, and little hope was held out for his recovery.

Of course, of greatest interest to her among all the people she had seen today were Teyrn Loghain and King Cailan. Despite the fact that the Teyrn was the King's father-in-law and the great friend of King Maric, it seemed to Bronwyn that the two men did not actually like one another. She understood

enough about families to know that it was not always necessary for family members to like one another: in a crisis they would stand together against the world. Still, she had a constant feeling that there was another conversation going on underneath the one that was spoken aloud--a tacit, ongoing struggle for power and control. Cailan clearly thought himself the equal of his commander in military wisdom. More than equal, in fact: his superior, both in birth and in natural gifts.

As for Loghain: he may have loved King Maric as a brother, but the son was clearly no King Maric. And perhaps that disappointment was at the root of the problem.

Cailan clearly expected to have a special relationship with the Grey Wardens of Ferelden. With Alistair, there were sound reasons, she granted. She granted none for herself. From what Alistair told her, the king had been close to the Wardens: visiting them, drinking with them, sharing stories. She knew she was a poor substitute for someone like Duncan, but she could not bring herself to care. She had never wanted to be a Warden anyway, but she would do her duty.

And her duty was to fight the darkspawn. It was not to play the courtier. With only two Grey Wardens left, there was too much to do. The scouting parties reported seeing only darkspawn stragglers. For the most part the darkspawn had retreated. But there was a *presence*, pressing on the edges of her thoughts, walking her dreams, that warned her that this was only a brief respite. She and Alistair need to be on their way, as soon as possible.

And that is what she finally said.

"Fergus—I wish I could stay longer, but I'm going to have to leave. The day after tomorrow, I think."

"So soon?" Fergus was disappointed. "I'd hoped you could stay until I was a bit more myself."

"I wish I could. The darkspawn won't wait, though. I have this terrible feeling that I need to get on with my mission as soon as possible. Alistair—Morrigan—do you think you could be ready by then?"

Morrigan shrugged. "'Tis all one to me."

That was not entirely true. She had liked this glimpse of luxury and privilege. Being a lady was not so insipid a thing as her mother had led her to believe. It was pleasant to have others perform the drudgery, to be served and not to serve, to dress elegantly and to be given fine gifts. A great nobleman treated her as an honored guest. His sister treated her as a friend. People looked at her with respect, and did her bidding without delay. All very agreeable. She would take her green gown with her. One never knew when the opportunity to wear it again might present itself.

"I think you're right, Bronwyn," Alistair considered, spearing another slice of mutton. "I know what you mean about this—foreboding—or whatever it is." He grinned disarmingly at Fergus. "Creepy Grey Warden sort of thing, sensing danger. Bronwyn picked up on it right away—or maybe she's just

naturally paranoid. That works, too."

Fergus chuckled. "You'll want some horses. Pick any three you want, and then I'll give you one of those big Nevarran brutes. It will do well for a pack animal, and you'll be able to move faster than with a baggage wagon."

"We really only need three horses in all—" Bronwyn protested.

"Take the Nevarran," Fergus insisted. "I *know* you'll need it." He pressed a finger to his brow. "Yes—I can see it—you will meet an Orlesian silk merchant on your journey, buy a whole new wardrobe, and only the largest horse in Thedas could bear the weight!"

"Stop! You'll have them thinking I'm as extravagant as Habren Bryland!" She looked at her empty plate with a touch of disappointment. "Of course, *one* gown might not be a bad idea. What do female Grey Wardens wear when they're not fighting, Alistair?"

"Don't know." Alistair shook his head, palming the last wedge of cheese. "they're *a/ways* fighting."

Fergus snorted. "Well, if you've a mind to go, you'd better do it. Get your allies sorted out, and then hie yourself back here—or wherever the army is. If we can finish off these darkspawn, we can move on. Maybe go north." He fell silent, and brooded over his wine goblet.

A brief pause. Bronwyn said, "Please don't think me rude, but Fergus and I really must speak privately for a moment. Could you excuse us?"

Since Fergus was not fit to go much of anywhere, it was obvious that she meant Alistair and Morrigan to leave the tent. Which they did, without comment.

Their absence made the tent larger and curiously empty. Bronwyn waited for Fergus to speak. He did, his voice grim.

"None of us saw any of this coming. How could we have missed it? Father was a *clever* man."

"Who could predict such malice? Howe dissembled like an Orlesian bard. And ultimately it was stupid," Bronwyn said softly. "He won't get away with it. If he had attacked last summer, when we were all at home, it might have worked. He might have blamed mercenaries, or bandits. Maybe he's gone mad—cunning in the details, but blind to the larger consequences. The last time—" she paused, her eyes widening with realization. "The last time I spoke to Delilah, she said something about her father being different. 'Not himself,' were her words. Maybe it's a kind of Blight sickness. Or madness. But Father didn't see it coming, because it was a self-destructive thing for Howe to do. Howe should have called off the plan when he met Duncan. He was so startled to see a Grey Warden in the castle. He remarked at the time on 'being at a loss.' If he'd been in his right mind, he would have called it all off right then."

"Maybe he couldn't," Fergus considered, grimacing. "Maybe there was no way to contact his men once he was in the castle."

"All the more reason to consider him an idiot." Bronwyn slapped the table lightly. "Father always said anyone could be assassinated, if the assassin cared nothing for his own life. This is sort of the same thing. Howe's plan was flawed, and he will be destroyed by it in the end. "

"I just wish he had been destroyed by it *first*." Fergus shook his head. "And he may take what he can of his fortune and flee to the Free Marches. I really, really need to kill him. Then we'll have to consider what to do about the rest of the Howes. We'd be justified in asking for attainder and dispossession for all his heirs. When I think of Oren—and Oriana—"

"I know," Bronwyn agreed quietly. "If Delilah or Thomas knew, nothing would be too bad for them. If they didn't—well—maybe with time—I don't know..."

The silence closed in again.

"I don't either," groaned Fergus, wiping furiously at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I don't want to be some kind of monster. I don't want to hurt innocent people, but I do want revenge. I want Howe dead. I want him terrified, and remorseful, and then dead."

"We may have to settle for just dead."

"And now you're a Grey Warden." His voice drifted off into weariness. "You made the best of it before the King, but I know that it must be a bitter disappointment. You've been so good and so patient, and for it all to come to nothing must be very hard. I'm sorry, Pup."

"So am I, but who can say what would have happened? Father agreed to open negotiations once I was of age--and if I still felt the same--but the answer might well have been 'no.'"

"*Do* you still feel the same, seeing him again after so long? He seems to think well of you."

"He thinks well of me as a Grey Warden. And it's pointless to dwell on 'might-have-beens.'"

"He's much too old for you anyway. That's what Mother always said."

"What Mother *said*," Bronwyn corrected, "was that marriage to Loghain Mac Tir would be 'challenging' in ways I was too young to understand."

"It comes to the same thing. Time is bound to catch up even with him eventually, and then where would you have been?"

"Or I might have been dead in childbirth within the year, like Jennet Kendall. Or in a hunting accident. Or by falling in the bath. Or he could have been killed in battle. Or we might all be dead in the Blight. You can't live your life waiting for the worst to happen years down the road. But we've had this

argument before, and Father gave in, in the end. Much good has it done me. Let's not talk about it anymore. It's time to turn the page."

"I suppose it's better for you to get away for a while. Though—I was wondering about your fellow Warden... Hasn't Alistair been a Grey Warden longer than you? And you gave the funeral address, which makes you appear to be the acting Warden-Commander. Are you just being your usual intolerably bossy self, or are you actually the one in command?"

"Alistair doesn't seem to want to lead. Things need to be done—*now*—and I can't wait for other people to pull themselves together. He *wanted* me to give the address. He spent time in the Chantry—he was trained as a templar, in fact—and you know how peculiar that can make people. He's a bit—I don't know—unwilling to put himself forward. So yes, I am in command, since there isn't anyone else. And there is another thing that I think you need to know." She lowered her voice. "I believe Alistair is King Maric's bastard son."

Fergus stared, and then sputtered out, "You think—well—really? I mean—*really*? Somebody kept that awfully quiet."

"Yes," she agreed, leaning closer. "He told me he was a bastard, and that the Arl of Redcliffe raised him, but that the Arl was not his father. When I asked who was, he became terribly embarrassed, and wouldn't answer. But look at him and then look at the King, and then look at them when they're together. The King is very interested in Alistair's well-being, and they resemble each other a great deal."

"I'll look. It's not unheard of, after all, but really!" He grinned. "King Maric was an odd sort. Likeable, great man and all that, Father always said, but *odd*. It was as if he didn't really want to be king, and was looking for ways to get out of it. He certainly dumped the worst of the burdens on Loghain. Have you divined who the mother might have been, O Sagacious One?"

"No, but she must not have been very well-born, since he was kept such a secret. One would think King Maric was ashamed of him. But Alistair is a very nice person, and a fine warrior. He's just been taught to be—self-effacing. Yes, that's the word exactly. Teyrn Loghain tends to pay him little notice, as if he doesn't approve of him. That was another clue."

"So a highborn lady turned Grey Warden and a clandestine prince join forces to save Ferelden from the darkspawn?" Fergus shook his head, torn between amusement and concern. "It sounds like a very far-fetched Orlesian-style romance. With a beautiful apostate mage for drama and conflict and a loveable mabari hound thrown in for local color!"

"I suppose it does. My experiences as a Grey Warden have not been very romantic so far. I'm glad you're being practical about it. I appreciate the horses, though I ought to pay you for them. The Grey Wardens are not penniless."

"No." Fergus was not smiling. "No. They are my gift to you. And I'm paying for your gear and supplies as well. It's little enough. Do you know what kind of dowry Father would have had to pay out on your marriage? To anybody? What he

would have spent on your wedding clothes and jewels—on a proper celebration alone? When you became a Grey Warden, the Couslands got off *cheap*. And I can't say I'm pleased about it."

And just before dawn of the following day, Arl Eamon of Redcliffe was dead.

Astonishment gave way to mourning. The Arl had been a popular man: much respected by his peers and much revered by his inferiors.

Alistair was given the news at breakfast and was overcome. He stood up and walked out of the tent with a muttered comment about errands and horses. Bronwyn would have chased him down, had Fergus not caught at her hand and shook his head.

"Give him time, Pup."

"He wanted so much to talk to the Arl, Fergus. I gather that there was some sort of disagreement when Alistair was sent off to the Chantry. Apparently it happened around the time the Arl married that Orlesian woman, and Alistair was very young."

"Maybe the Arlessa thought he was the Arl's. Hard on the boy, nonetheless. Maybe Eamon didn't trust her with the secret. If your theory is correct, who do you suppose knows?"

"Obviously the Arl and his brother Teagan. The King--and Teyrn Loghain, surely. Perhaps no one else knew. No--wait." She considered. "Duncan knew. He must have known. He was friends with both the kings, and he was willing to challenge the Grand Cleric herself for Alistair. Maybe she knew, too."

"Maybe the plan was for Alistair to be a Templar, so he would never have children." Fergus nodded to himself, thinking it over. "So there wouldn't be a illegitimate line of Theirins."

"I daresay. It seems very hard and cruel to me, especially since I gather from the way he talks that Alistair hated the Chantry, and found it--unsuited to his personality."

"Well, then, Duncan rescued him. Good for him. Alistair seems happy to be a Grey Warden."

Bronwyn grimaced, "That's nice for him."

"Nice for whom?" Morrigan asked, as she emerged from their little sleeping cubicle. As always, she looked very beautiful.

"My lord," she said, acknowledging Fergus.

"My lady Morrigan," Fergus answered, his voice softening.

"We were speaking of Alistair. His former guardian, the Arl of Redcliffe, died in the night. He is understandably grieved."

Bronwyn said, "I mentioned that Alistair much prefers being a Grey Warden to his life as a Templar."

"And who would not?" Morrigan wondered. "So--no doubt

there is to be a notable funeral. If you do not object, I shall gather some herbs this morning. 'Tis unfortunate but certain that we will want healing poultices on our travels."

Cailan could hardly believe that his uncle was gone, and sat by the bier dry-eyed but silent. The pyre was being assembled for the cremation.

"Tragic," summarized Arl Urien. "Simply tragic. Eamon was a fine man."

"Indeed," Loghain agreed. "The King will feel his loss keenly."

"There's a boy, isn't there?" wondered Leonas Bryland. "He's never been brought to a Landsmeet, but I think his name is Connor. He'll have to come now, poor lad, to be confirmed. He's young to come into his title."

"He'll have Teagan to help him," Urien considered. "Good man, Teagan."

Arl Wulffe muttered, "Wouldn't want to be Teagan when he presents Arlessa Isolde with an urn instead of Eamon. That woman has a tongue!"

Loghain pleaded the excuse of his duties, and walked away, grimacing at the thought of Eamon's Orlesian wife. Despite all the gossip about Isolde and Teagan, he saw no way that they would be able to work together effectively enough to exercise the kind of political influence that Eamon had. Eamon had

indulged his wife, but was master in his own house. Teagan would have to resort to cajolery and compromise to manage the Orlesian woman's unreasonable demands—if she permitted him any role at all. Redcliffe would no longer be a center of political dissent, and Eamon would no longer urge Cailan to renounce Anora.

Back in the privacy of his tent, he opened his box of correspondence, considering its secrets. It was only a matter of time, of course, before the boy's condition was discovered and he was sent to the Circle of Magi for training. At that point, Loghain supposed that Teagan would be given Redcliffe, but Teagan was a very different man than his older brother—less traditional, less interfering. Arl Teagan of Redcliffe would not be a problem. A sensible man, and a decent warrior.

The mage had done his duty. An ugly, shabby business, but a necessity. Loghain would find some way to reward him, when the fellow turned up. Rather than returning to the Circle, the mage might consider service in the army, elsewhere, under a new name...

Meanwhile there were the Wardens to consider. Or at least the one who mattered. She was brought to mind when his guard poked his head in to say, with an odd smile, "You have a visitor, my lord."

Loghain, mystified, got up from his camp desk and looked out to see the girl's black mabari politely sitting outside his tent, clearly waiting for him.

"Well—good day to you. Scout, I believe?"

A very civil bark.

The guard couldn't hide his grin. "He walked right up, my lord, and sat down there!"

It was fairly amusing. Loghain asked the dog, "Were you patrolling the camp, or was there something you wanted?"

Scout barked, got up to leave, and looked over his shoulder at Loghain.

"You want me to come with you. All right, why not?"

It was not far to the Highever tent. Scout, satisfied that the alpha was not a complete imbecile, panted approvingly, and led the way back to his mistress and her littermate.

Loghain could see the girl at work, and her brother resting on his cot. They looked up as he approached.

"Loghain!" Fergus called out. "A sad business! How is the King?"

"Still rather in shock. It's a blow to him, naturally. Do you suppose you'll be fit for the funeral tonight?"

"I'll be there," Fergus assured him. "Even if I have to hobble along, leaning on my stalwart sister!"

The girl smiled at her brother and got up to ruffle his hair. An

everyday moment of affection, but Loghain was touched by it. The girl, her long hair loose, was looking rather charming, too, dressed in black leather doublet and breeches. Men's clothes, but he supposed that she felt that wearing a woman's gown might undermine her standing as a Grey Warden. Of course, though she might be dressed in men's clothing, the clothing fit her figure well, and no one could mistake her for a man.

The witch and the bastard were nowhere in sight. Loghain allowed the girl to show him to a seat and serve him some sort of Highever-type tea. Warming and quite pleasant, really. The dog lolled at their feet, looking smug.

"What brings you here, my lord?" Bronwyn asked.

"Your dog, actually," Loghain replied, with a half-smile. "Came to my tent, and requested my company!"

"Scout!" the girl laughed, rubbing the hound's ears. "What impertinence! " She flushed becomingly and smiled up at Loghain. "He must have heard me mention you. I said something about needing to speak to you before I left." Her smile faded. "I am sorry to leave Fergus, and I will stay for the funeral tonight, of course, but I've decided that I must be on my way tomorrow."

Fergus pretended to be interested in his tea. "Strange, though. Mabaris may be smart enough, but they usually don't pick up on human names, other than those of their owners' close relations."

Bronwyn tried to look unconcerned. "Well, Scout is smarter than the ordinary hound, and he knows *everybody*. Don't you, my clever boy?"

The dog barked his agreement. Loghain chuckled. "I had a mabari myself once. Her name was Adalla...well, never mind that. I am here, and what was it you wanted?"

"I thought if you had any letters for the Circle, I could take them, since I'm headed that way. Unless you already sent a courier?"

"I did, but I meant to give you a letter from the King in support of your recruitment efforts. I'll have it drawn up right away. It might help a bit. And since you are leaving so soon, I'll have the clerk copy some maps of mine for you. I've a good one of the Lothering bannorn, where you're headed first."

"Maps!" Bronwyn's eyes lit at the prospect. "How very kind of you! I love maps anyway, and I always feel more confident with one in hand."

"As do I. That reminds me. Bann Ceorlic is in the north right now, but he gave permission to make use of his manor. You can take a letter of introduction from me to the seneschal, and stay there when you pass through."

"Lovely! Thank you, my lord! Much nicer than a tent. Nicer for the horses, too, of course."

"That's all settled, then, I take it?"

Fergus nodded, "I'm giving Bronwyn four horses: one of them is a big Nevarran brute to serve as pack animal. Alistair's off getting all the tack arranged."

Loghain nodded, sipping his tea.

"—and better for her to have them now. Good horses aren't that easy to come by in this country anyway, and they're bloody expensive. I'm thinking about doing some horse breeding up in Highever, when all this is over."

"Not a bad idea. The army could certainly use a more reliable source than thieving Orlesian horse traders."

Bronwyn smirked as the two men shared tales of the depravity of such filthy foreign cheats. All the stories ended in victory for Ferelden, of course. Fergus saw her smirking, and laughed.

"Look at her," he gestured. "She doesn't believe a word we're saying."

It was hard not to laugh out loud. "I do. I really do. At least I'm working very hard at it. Perhaps by tomorrow, I'll be convinced."

They were nice young people, Loghain thought, feeling more relaxed than usual. *At least as ambitious, contentious Fereldan nobles go.*

Fergus would be a good if not brilliant Teyrn, Loghain

considered. He would have to marry again, of course, and his choice of bride would be politically significant. His dead wife had been Antivan, and some relation to the royal family. A lovely young woman. Well, perhaps Fergus would console himself eventually with a proper Fereldan bride. All the noble girls---and their mothers!---would be after him like a pack of she-wolves.

Then there was the sister: the *Girl* Warden. She had remarkable potential, he thought. Brave, skilled, and clever. She was just the sort of junior officer that he liked to discover and develop. But no—as the daughter of a teyrn she could never have been a *junior* officer, and certainly never *his* junior officer. Had she not been a Grey Warden, she would have begun her military career as an aide to her father or brother. Her birth would have put her in command early on, had she gone for a soldier at all. Bryce had no doubt prepared her for that.

Well, she was in command now—of the only other Grey Warden in Ferelden. He suspected there would be more before long.

Teagan spoke the funeral address for his brother. It was quite a good speech, and more truthful than most of that sort. Loghain listened with approval, agreeing with most of the praise, and pleased to be finally done with this dangerous rival.

A goodly number of mourners were gathered, though nothing

like the entire army. Loghain cynically wondered if Cailan had desisted from giving the speech himself for fear of unfavorable comparison with Bronwyn Cousland's barn-burning performance. Teagan, of course, had missed that.

Fergus Cousland, true to his word, was present, looking pale but determined. With Alistair on one side and Bronwyn on the other, he bid fair to make it through the evening without falling on his face. The speech was over soon enough, the pyre lit by Teagan and Cailan, and Eamon's earthly remains brightened the valley with a cheerful glow.

"I *told* you," Cailan hissed to his seneschal, "to bring a folding stool for the Teyrn of Highever, and blast your protocol!"

The stool was hurriedly provided, and Fergus persuaded--and then commanded--to sit.

"No--I won't hear of it!" Cailan insisted. "I'm glad of your company, and I don't want anything to happen to *you!*"

As exasperating as she sometimes found him, Bronwyn admitted to herself that it was very kindly thought of. The King might be daft on the subject of the Grey Wardens, but his heart was in the right place when consideration and generosity were needed.

"My lady--"

Brownyn turned from her brother to see Bann Teagan approaching.

"If it seems to you not too great an imposition," he said, with a gentle smile, "would you consent to be our cup-bearer for the vigil? I fear we are all rather short of female relations to perform the duty."

"I should be honored, Bann Teagan," Bronwyn answered at once.

Again she found herself standing as hostess to a funeral. As she poured wine and handed it to the King and his nobles, it seemed that she was repeating the night of the Wardens' vigil. So many words were said again, in the same tones, by the same men. Subtle differences confused her, and she concentrated on the great difference--her brother sitting on a folding camp stool in the midst of it all--to keep her oriented as to time and place.

"--and it's too bad the tutor up and left, only the day before our departure," Teagan told an interested Loghain. "Isolde had really come to depend on the fellow, it seems. He claimed some sort of family emergency--but perhaps he was simply tired of the position's demands..."

"--and Bronwyn's leaving tomorrow," Fergus sighed to Cousin Leonas. "I'll miss her, but she's really got the bit between her teeth..."

"--and the Wardens must be rebuilt!" Cailan held forth to a quartet of admiring banns. "We've struck a strong blow, but much remains to be done..."

Alistair was standing silently by. Bronwyn brought him a cup of wine, and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Thanks, " he murmured. "It's odd, isn't it? There's Arl Eamon burning, and everyone is talking about their plans and their future. Are they even thinking about him?"

"It's just life moving on, Alistair. As it should. After all, we'll be moving on tomorrow ourselves, and our lives will never be the same."

He tasted the wine, and nodded. He took a deeper draught. It was very good wine, after all. "I suppose," he agreed. He managed a brief smile. "Maybe they'll be better. You never know."

She had to leave him then, and Alistair watched her walk away, his smile lingering.

Not far away, Loghain scowled. He had seen the girl put her hand on Alistair's shoulder, and remembered perfectly well what a dangerous journey undertaken by a young man and a young woman might lead to. He noticed that Fergus Cousland also had seen the girl's gesture, and had beckoned the young bastard over. He shifted his position, wanting to hear the exchange.

Alistair leaned over the Teyrn and reddened at the man's next words.

"Touch my sister," Fergus whispered, smiling kindly, *"and*

you're a dead man!"

Early morning departures sometimes gave Bronwyn that almost-sick feeling. This departure was perhaps the worst of all.

Hungry as Bronwyn was, the odors of campfires and dirty wash water, of chamberpots and oat porridge and just-about-rancid butter, of unwashed dogs and unwashed people nearly put her off her breakfast. And then there was the very idea of traveling on her own through a country at war, with no Father or Mother or Duncan.

No. The adults she had depended upon were gone. She would have to be the grown-up now, whether she was ready or not.

Alistair was a good friend, but he was no older than she. Or if he was, he was older only in body. He looked to her as their leader. So did Morrigan, for all her independent airs.

And whining about it wouldn't help anyone, including herself. She made herself eat, and smile, and chat easily about their packs and the temper of the big Nevarran horse Alistair had discovered was named Trampler.

"What have you done with your hair?" Fergus asked, frowning. "It makes you look like Mother."

"It fits under my helmet better this way," Bronwyn told him. "It was this or cut it all off."

"Don't cut it off!" The exclamation was fervent, and simultaneously Fergus' and Alistair's. Alistair blushed. Fergus sat back and eyed Alistair narrowly until the young Warden hurried from the table.

Bronwyn felt her arrangements were as thorough as she could make them. The moneybelt was already wrapped around her waist underneath the chain mail. Eight-two sovereigns gave her an extra layer of armor. A modest sum was easily accessible in a small leather bag. A cut-purse would not dangerously deplete Grey Wardens funds.

The precious treaties were in a pocket sewn into her shirt. She could not risk losing them by leaving them in a saddlebag. Her maps and other essential papers were close at hand. Stuffed into another bag were the letters she was carrying for the army's mages back to their friends in the Circle. Bronwyn thought that Wynne must have written to every single inhabitant of Kinloch Hold.

Morrigan was looking a little wistful, she thought. They had obtained an extra pack for Morrigan's new finery, and it was piled with the rest of the luggage, ready to be tied securely to Trampler's broad back.

"Surely you won't miss camp life!" Bronwyn remarked.

"I shall miss having others do the cooking!" Morrigan shot back, a little tartly. "And having others build the fires, heat the water, and fetch the kindling!"

"Perhaps your destiny is to be a great lady," Fergus suggested. "I don't much like cooking myself."

"Fergus is an appalling cook," Bronwyn told Morrigan. "He can burn water!"

Morrigan gave Fergus a considering look. "I hardly think that that would disqualify him as Teyrn of Highever! He is good at other--more important--things, is he not?"

"I do try," Fergus agreed gravely.

The packs were arranged, the horses saddled, the travelers equipped. Morrigan and Bronwyn had agreed between them that Morrigan would transform in the privacy of the tent, and then be carried out, to avoid too much talk and conjecture.

But there *was* talk. Fergus raised his brows, when Bronwyn emerged from the tent with the yellow-eyed sparrowhawk on her shoulder.

He came closer, and whispered, "My lady Morrigan?"

The bird cocked its head and preened its feathers dismissively. Bronwyn tried not to burst out laughing.

"That's absolutely the most astonishing thing I've ever seen," Fergus said. "I'm very glad, sister, that you have made such a powerful and resourceful friend." He added, "And you, my lady, are just as beautiful a bird as you are a woman!"

Bronwyn had not known it was possible for a hawk to look

smug. Others came by to farewell them, and to admire Warden Bronwyn's new pet. Luckily, most of the visitors knew better than to try lay hands on a bird of prey. A few--like Arl Urien-- received warning nips from a powerful beak. Scout regarded their strangely altered pack member with mild curiosity, and then diverted some of the public attention to himself. Leonas Bryland gave Bronwyn a silver flask of Tevinter brandy. At the moment, she felt she could happily down the entire contents.

Wynne arrived to say goodbye, and eyed the hawk disapprovingly. Ignoring Morrigan, she put a gentle hand on Bronwyn's. "Be safe, my dear child. Be bold, but not *too* bold."

"Just as in the old story!" Bronwyn laughed, and leaned in to press a kiss to the mage's cheek. The hawk fluttered her wings in protest.

Fergus wagged his brows dramatically, and growled, "*Lest your heart's blood should run cold...*"

"I don't know that one," Alistair said, adjusting his stirrups. "I promise to pester you until you tell it to me."

More soldiers were arriving to bid them goodbye.

"That's her! That's the Girl Warden!"

Sergeant Darrow arrived with some of Maric's Shield in tow, and passed her a parcel.

"It's a cake, Warden! Tanna here makes 'em. Figure it'll go down well when you're on the road to those foreign places!"

"It's got plums in it, Warden," Tanna said with brusque shyness. "My father taught me how."

"Plumcake?" Bronwyn grinned at the young woman. "If you can make cake in a campfire, I might just have to invoke the Right of Conscription!"

A great commotion bustled their way, and above it all was the familiar, excited voice of the king.

"They've leaving! Look! Loghain! They're leaving!"

Everyone moved aside to make way for King Cailan, who was positively bounding with eagerness. Bronwyn, then Alistair, dropped to one knee in respect. The hawk flapped up lazily to perch on Trampler's back.

"Now there! None of that! Wardens kneel to no one!" Cailan hauled Bronwyn up and squeezed her arm. He shook hands with Alistair very kindly, and slapped a hand on the armored shoulder.

"Maker keep you, brother," he whispered, catching Alistair's eye. He turned to Bronwyn again, speaking for everyone's ears. "You carry our hopes with you, Warden, and I have complete confidence in your success!"

"I thank your Majesty," Bronwyn said, a little dazed at all the

ardent good spirits. Her gaze traveled up, irresistably, to the fierce and wintry eyes of Teyrn Loghain, standing silent before her.

She could think of a thousand things she wished to say, none of which were possible.

Loghain said abruptly, "Luck in battle, Warden."

"My lord," she replied. She was in a fire, burning. Somehow she managed to don her helmet and vault into the saddle. Fergus-- pale, dear Fergus--reached up for her hand, and she grasped it, sensing him through the thick leather gauntlet. She leaned out of the saddle to kiss him, hearing the murmurs of sentiment and affirmation around her like the surf against the Cliffs of Conobar.

Then she blew out a deep breath, releasing everything that bound her to this place and her old life. She kicked her horse into motion, and the Wardens were on their way. Morrigan rose up in a flutter of white and brown, flying effortlessly in the morning sun.

Loghain watched them go, wishing the girl well. She was young for such a burden, but no younger than he when he and Maric and Rowan set out to defy an empire.

"But--I thought--!" Cailan was looking about in puzzlement. "What about that other girl? I thought she was going with them!"

"Morrigan? She is, Your Majesty," Fergus told him quietly.
"She is."

"But--really?" With a sudden realization, Cailan's eyes grew wide, and his smile broadened. "Really? You know, Fergus, real life is often very much like books..."

Loghain rolled his eyes, and with a quick nod to the two young men, strode away to the next unavoidable task.

The crowd dispersed. Already far away, the hoofbeats faded into the ancient stones of the Imperial Highway, echoed by a hawk's plangent cry of farewell.

Thanks to my reviewers: Beriwathwen, Cobar713, kiwibliss, Night Hunter MGS, ByLanternLight, Laura Proudmoore, Amatyultare, Angry Girl, and mille libri. I really love reviews. Please--more!

And now, Bronwyn is off on her adventures. The shape of the quests is profoundly altered. She will not be seeking out the Arl of Redcliffe, as he is dead. There will be a Redcliffe adventure, but it will not be hers. I think the readers will be amused to discover who is called upon to sort out the catastrophe there.

I have had a number of questions about Arl Eamon's death, and perhaps I should go ahead and address them. There are subtle differences in this AU, because canon timeframes are often vague and contradictory. There is about a week's lapse

between Ostagar and the Warden's awakening. In this story, my Warden has no such lost time. There was no panicky news of the disaster of Ostagar, which I believe is what caused Jowan's carelessness and his discovery as a poisoner. No one found out that Eamon was being poisoned, and thus no one was sent out looking for the Urn. Jowan realized he was in danger of being uncovered at Loghain's agent. He gave Eamon a final dose and fled the castle. This last dose took some time to work, so Eamon was not unconscious and lying at the point of death at home. That is the scenario that caused Connor's despair and the deal with the demon. Instead, Eamon felt unwell, but still forced himself to ride to Ostagar, where the poison finished him off. Since no one realized what was wrong, they did not succeed in even maintaining him in a coma. Connor does not yet know that his father is dead. That shock will cause trouble, too, though trouble of a somewhat different kind.

Mainly, though, I killed him off because I really, really dislike him. Check out my story [The Keening Blade](#) for my take on Eamon. And this is AU, and I want to see how it plays out without Eamon as a player.

I don't know if the developers knew they were setting up the game for those like me, who are really invested in the whole "Final Girl Theory." Nonetheless, I find using the Final Girl trope handy in determining the shape of the story. (In brief, in horror/fantasy film, the final girl is the one who confronts the monster at the climax of the film--the one whose POV the

audience gradually adopts, even if the viewer is male. Ellen Ripley is a final girl, for example. Buffy Summers seems to be one, but there is debate about that, since some feel that Willow comes closer to the usual attributes. Interesting subject.)

8. Lothering: Pretty as a Painting

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 8--Lothering: Pretty as a Painting

Whatever else one might think of the ancient magisters of the Tevinter Empire, they knew how to build a road. League after league fell behind, as Bronwyn and her companions cantered north.

The sun shone brightly, the sky blazed blue, and their journey up to that point had been surprisingly uneventful. Smoke rose ominously from distant fires, but the road itself was clear. Bandits undoubtedly did not wish to tangle with the army, and even less with the darkspawn.

What about the darkspawn? Alistair had said that Wardens could sense them. Bronwyn had not noticed anything of the sort herself. They stopped every hour to rest the horses—and Scout—though Bronwyn knew not to wound his feelings by saying so. The air seemed a little too still, the birds a little too quiet, but Alistair had not indicated that he felt anything more unusual than that.

Bronwyn glanced behind her to see how Scout was holding up. He was running along, perfectly happy and fit, but

something else caught Bronwyn's eye.

"Morrigan! I thought you were going to fly as far as I could ride," she laughed.

The hawk was perched, mightily at her ease, on the broad back of the big pack horse, Trampler. She shrugged her feathers eloquently.

"That's right!" Bronwyn teased. "You said you *could*. You didn't promise you *would*!"

"No surprises there," Alistair muttered.

"We all need a rest," Bronwyn told him. "Up ahead is the Fairebourne. It's no more than a brook here, but it's water. The Teyrn's map shows a feeder spring not far from the highway. We'll make Lothing long before sundown."

Morrigan flew off to reconnoiter. Just before the bridge that spanned the stream, they found a worn track leading down to the water, and to fresh sweet grass for the horses. Bronwyn jumped down from her tall bay gelding, and unwrapped the package of waybread and dried apples. Morrigan changed from feathered predator to leather-clad woman, and joined Bronwyn in the shade of a willow; while Alistair secured the horses before coming for his share of the meal.

It seemed an idyllic place. Water trickled sweetly down the stones of the spring, flowing into the Fairebourne on its journey to the Drakon River. Bronwyn ate hungrily, trying to

make the food last as long as possible, savoring the apples' smoky sweetness and the bread's yeasty crunch. Scout lapped at the stream, and then came to sprawl at her side, powerful jaws crushing the mealbar she tossed him. The horses cropped the grass, hungry as Wardens.

"It's hard to believe we're at war," Alistair murmured into the pleasant stillness. Morrigan sniffed, picking through her bag of herbs. Bronwyn leaned back against the smooth bark of the willow, shutting her eyes, enjoying the tickling breeze on her face. They were lucky in their weather...

Scout growled low and warningly. Instantly alert, Bronwyn opened her eyes, and was on her feet. Morrigan and Alistair had heard Scout, too, and were getting up, looking about warily.

"What it is, boy?" Bronwyn asked softly. "Wolves?"

He did not respond, and kept up his low rumbling growl. "Bandits? Show me."

The dog was glaring at a clump of bushes on the other side of the stream, his muzzle thrust forward aggressively. Bronwyn eased her sword from its sheath.

"Whoever you are," she called, "Come out now with your hands empty and where I can see them!"

A smothered squeak, and the bushes shook violently. Light footsteps ran away into the undergrowth.

"Scout!" Bronwyn shouted. "Go!"

He burst away, a blur of speed, splashing through the stream and tearing a path through the leaves. Bronwyn followed him, but was only on the far bank of the stream when she heard the thin, high shriek.

"It's a child!" Alistair cried, plunging after her.

Up the shallow slope, fighting past vicious brambles, they were on Scout and his prey almost too quickly to avoid trampling them. Scout had knocked the child down, and being too well-trained to hurt a small human, was simply holding him?---her? to the ground with his solid mass.

The child kicked out, screaming, "No! No! Mother! No! Help!"

"Let go, Scout," Bronwyn ordered, reaching for a skinny arm. Pulling the child up, she found that Scout had caught a boy of perhaps eight or nine, dressed in the rough clothes of a peasant. He shrank away from the imposing sight of Alistair and his sword and shield, and looked up timidly at Bronwyn, not even trying to free himself.

"You shouldn't sneak up on a warriors' camp, boy," Bronwyn told him quietly. "They're likely to think you're an enemy. What are you doing out here all alone?"

He gaped at her. She gave the thin arm an impatient shake.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Help," he squeaked, fidgeting desperately. "We need help. Father didn't come home. Mother won't leave without him and something happened over at Old Mackey's holding. I can't find Father."

"They should have gone north weeks ago!" Alistair said, shaking his head.

Bronwyn could only agree. She asked the boy, "How long has your father been gone?"

"Four nights now. Mother doesn't know what to do."

"She needs to go to Lothing," Bronwyn said crisply. "How far is your holding?"

"Not far—over that ridge," the boy whimpered. "I thought maybe you'd help us. You didn't look mean, but I was scared to show myself. There are bad men out here sometimes."

"I daresay there are. Come along. We'll go speak to your mother. And you didn't tell me your name."

His name, it transpired, was Conn, and he had never been on the back of a horse before. Morrigan rolled her eyes, but did not even attempt to object to his presence or their detour. She discreetly slipped away to change form. Bronwyn put the boy on the crupper of her horse and told him to hold tight to her.

"But Tarron won't like it if I up and go without telling him! What

if he comes back and doesn't know where we are?"

Bronwyn silently thanked her parents for making her come along on those boring visits to their tenants. She knew how to talk to this woman. Mertha, her name was: wife of Tarron Gale.

The house was small and tidy: a kitchen and sitting room combined, a door to a little bedroom, a door to the larder, and a ladder up to a loft where the older children slept. Four children in all. Conn was the eldest, and then there were three girls like stair steps. The smallest could barely walk, and beamed at Scout, putting out chubby arms to him.

Bronwyn said calmly, "You will leave him a note, telling him that you have gone to Lothing. You will pack the cart, hitch your oxen, and come along *now*."

The pale and pregnant woman looked at her, lip trembling. "Tarron doesn't like it when I do things without telling him. He doesn't like it when I get ideas in my head."

There was no time for this rubbish. "You can tell him you were commanded by the Grey Wardens to evacuate to Lothing. That is perfectly true. And this is Ferelden. A woman and the mother of a family has every right to 'get ideas in her head,' especially when her children's safety is in question!"

"Yes, my lady!"

Bronwyn fixed the woman with her sternest glare. "Alistair and

I will hitch the oxen for you. Take all the food in the house."

"Ser--my lady," Mertha hesitated. "Are you *sure* there are darkspawn? Tarron says it's just a story Bann Ceorlic put about to get his hands on the south holdings."

"*Pretty* sure," Alistair managed.

Morrigan strolled into the little house, looking about in disdain. "Why are we wasting our time here? Let her find out for herself!"

The woman gaped at Morrigan.

Bronwyn hastily told her, "This lady is with us. Yes, there are darkspawn. I fought them only days ago. The King's army just won a great battle against them, but there are always stragglers. You are too close to the remains of the horde, and too isolated for safety. I want to hear no more about it. Dress your children warmly."

There was no parchment in the house for a note. Bronwyn dug some out of a saddlebag, and wrote "**GONE TO LOTHERING**" in her largest, clearest hand. She felt a bit of satisfaction in nailing it to the table. Tarron might not be as bad a fellow as she imagined, but she had heard much more about him than she cared for.

And the boy and the eldest girl were more useful than their mother, who dithered over her belongings. The girl shooed their chickens into a little cage to be put in the cart, and let the

sheep out into the pasture, so they would not starve. The boy was eager to be gone, and showed Bronwyn a column of smoke rising above the trees.

"That's Mackey's place. It's been burning all night."

Morrigan jeered, "Are we going to rescue him, too? Are we going to go from hut to hut to wretched hut, continually saving people who had not the sense to save themselves?"

Imagining the fates of the people in the little valley of the Fairbourne made Bronwyn ill, but she knew that Morrigan was right.

"No," she sighed. "We're not. This is already going to cost us a day. We cannot save them all." She thought Morrigan looked a bit too smug at her answer, and glowered. "But I *shall* save these people."

She was losing time. She was losing time. It gnawed at her, as she packed candles and candlesticks, knowing that her mission should take precedence over one farm family. To walk away, however, was almost certain to sentence them to death.

Alistair had hitched the oxen to the cart, and was uncomplainingly loading the little vehicle with crates and blankets, with a churn and a featherbed and two smoked hams. Morrigan amused herself by sneering at the children and gathering the dried herbs and flowers hanging from the ceiling.

"Boilwort," she murmured. "I know just what to do with *that!*"

The boy was leading out the family's milk cow, and tying her to the back of the cart. Their speed would be halved, at the best. They would almost certainly have to camp tonight. Bronwyn rubbed the back of her neck irritably, the blood in her veins pounding with frustration. Scout stared out at the forest, ears alert. The wind was in the wrong direction for him to pick up any scents: blowing away from them toward the impenetrable dark green.

The smallest girl was a particularly pretty child. She toddled to Bronwyn, huge blue eyes hopeful.

"Up!"

Mertha, fussing with her pots, called, "Annis, don't bother the Warden!"

"I don't mind," Bronwyn smiled, lifting the little one into her arms. The child nestled there, a warm bundle of life, her white-blond hair silken and sweet. Bronwyn thought with a pang of Alistair's remarks about the scarcity of Grey Warden children. The idea that she might never have a child of her own made her temples ache with the pressure of *I want* countered by *I cannot*. She had always wanted two, herself, and she would name them--

Scout growled.

"Bronwyn."

Alistair was looking at her, tense and wide-eyed.

He was reaching for his sword...

A dark cloud of earth spewed up, just to her right. Before she could turn to see, the genlock was rushing at her, gibbering, needle-like teeth bared in the mad grin of the darkspawn.

Her first impulse was to clutch the child to her, but that was wrong--all wrong--and at once her training came to her. Gritting her teeth, she tossed the wailing little girl aside, heedless of small hands scraping raw on her chainmail, and leaped at the monster, drawing sword and dagger with a smooth metallic whisper. Her blades scissored, nearly severing the genlock's head.

A clang. Alistair, his shield propped against the wagon, had slammed a stewpot instead against the hurlock attacking him, knocking it to the ground. Scout rushed in, and bones snapped as the dog ripped away the creature's face.

Bronwyn could see the pregnant woman framed in the doorway, hands over her mouth in horror, eyes wide and white with fear. The oxen lowed and stamped; the horses whinnied, shying away from the foul stench. Wild, high shrieks filled the air, as the children darted in every direction, distracting the darkspawn from the armed warriors. Trampler squealed in rage, and lashed out with iron-shod hooves, scattering an attacker's head into scarlet splinters.

A backhand and a squelching stab. Another genlock grimaced

in agony and fell back, twitching. An arrow thudded into the wagon, and Bronwyn saw the leering archer, not ten yards away...

"Morrigan!" she shouted.

"I am here!"

A blast of cold frosted the creature, slowing it, and Alistair was hacking at it before it could nock another arrow. Another archer was roaring wordlessly, a little further on. Sparks suddenly leaped around it, stunning it, and Bronwyn was on it, cutting its throat in a veil of blood. But there was another one, half-hidden by the encroaching forest--

A green mist enveloped her, and she nearly vomited. Staggering forward, she glared at the chuckling emissary, its staff raised high for another spell.

"Less fighting, more *dying!*" yelled Alistair. His longsword flashed in a steel arc, and quite suddenly the darkspawn mage was headless, blood pumping from its thick neck. It fell forward, spraying Bronwyn.

"Ugh!" She groaned in disgust, and shook off the last of the spell. Behind her, the mother was screaming, a horrible hoarse sound. Bronwyn wiped foul blood from her eyes. The last of the hurlocks had made a grab for Annis, sitting sobbing in the bloody ground. Morrigan cursed the creature, weakening it. Bronwyn vaulted a low wall while Scout charged, bowling the darkspawn over. The dog gnawed at the

creature's wrist, forcing it to drop its crude axe. Bronwyn stabbed down, nailing the monster to the earth. It thrashed wildly, gobbling and choking. Bronwyn twisted her blade, and the creature jerked and was still.

"Darkspawn!" Conn remarked, unnecessarily, crawling out from under the cart. He poked at a dead hurlock with a bare foot.

"Don't touch it!" Bronwyn ordered. "If you have any blood on you, wash it off immediately! Mertha! Do you hear me? Make sure the children haven't any darkspawn blood on them!"

She crouched down by little Annis, to see if she were badly hurt. The child stared at Bronwyn with her huge blue eyes, and uttered a high, piercing shriek. Her mother rushed up to gather her in her arms, and the other children emerged from their hiding places to huddle all together.

"Come children!" the woman choked, "Let's have a look at you!" She dabbed at them, now and then glancing up at the Wardens a little fearfully.

Morrigan cast a look over the carnage. "Perhaps we ought not to linger?" she suggested.

Alistair came over to admire Bronwyn's handiwork. "I think we work well together," he quipped. He grinned at Bronwyn. "You've done something new with your hair. I *like* you as a redhead!"

Bronwyn tried to laugh, and failed miserably. "I must look like a monster. Could you finish loading that blasted cart so we can get *out* of here?" She stumbled over to the well, and hauled up a bucket. "Here." She shoved the bucket at Morrigan, and leaned over. "Pour it over my head before it congeals."

"Oh, very well. You do look a sight."

It took two buckets before she was clean of the worst of it. "When we get to Lothing," Bronwyn declared, "I swear by the Maker I am washing my hair properly!"

Mertha and the girls were too stunned and terrified to do much more than they were told. Conn was almost too busy--panicky and wild-eyed. No one wanted to stay. The darkspawn lay where they fell, and Mertha only begged to be allowed to lock the door of the house.

Morrigan actually laughed aloud. "She's locking the darkspawn out?"

Bronwyn frowned and hushed her, and then asked softly, "Are you sure you don't want to ride, Morrigan?" It might not be a good idea for Morrigan to shape-change in front of witnesses.

The young witch, however, had already decided what to do. "I shall walk," she declared haughtily. "I enjoy walking."

And so she walked, to the right of Bronwyn's horse, putting the maximum distance between herself and the children and

their mother.

The animals were restless and jittery, but calmed down as they put distance between themselves and the farmhold. Bronwyn hoped that no other darkspawn were near. With the noise the chickens alone made, they were a target for any predator in the neighborhood. The children insisted on riding in the cart, and had to be ordered out when they needed to make the climb up to the Highway.

Once there, however, things improved. The younger children had never seen the great stone wonder, stretching out to the horizon. There was enough novelty here to take their minds from their recent danger.

"That was stupid of me," Bronwyn muttered bitterly.

"What?" protested Alistair. "You did great! We are an awesome, awesome team of mighty darkspawn slayers."

"I was distracted by that child--playing nursemaid when I should have been alert."

"Yes, you were stupid,' Morrigan agreed tartly. "Mooning over peasant children! Let it be a lesson to you about the dangers of sentimentality. And yes, Alistair, I agree that we are, in fact, rather awesome."

"Whoa!" Alistair laughed. "We agree about something!"

"Don't expect it to happen again."

Bronwyn was still stirred up. "And that sensing darkspawn thing, Alistair... I thought you meant I would feel something and think, 'Aha! Darkspawn! I just felt irritable and tense and ready to lash out when they attacked.'"

"That's it," Alistair informed her. "That's how it feels. Next time you feel that way, you *can* say, 'Aha! Darkspawn!'"

Bronwyn blew out an annoyed breath.

They said little after that, and concentrated on getting as far as they could before the sun was low in the sky. The children napped, and then had to be given some bread to eat. And then they needed to stop and go--very cautiously--into the bushes with their tired Mother. Bronwyn would have liked to offer to drive the cart for her, but she must stay exactly where she was. They would just have to stop and camp when Mertha was too exhausted to hold the lines anymore. And Bronwyn knew she must not offer to let any of the children ride with her. As the day wore on, Conn got out and walked, and Drisa walked with him a good part of the way. The children might be wary of the human warriors, but gravitated to Scout's vicinity. He was happy enough for the company, and did not object to a small hand scratching his ears now and then.

So they camped early, by a nameless little stream with good water for their animals. They was much work to be done: unsaddling the horses, unloading the packs, watering and feeding the livestock, keeping track of the children. Conn gathered wood for a fire, and Morrigan started it with a casual

wave of her staff. She then withdrew to allow Mertha to cook for them.

Bronwyn was passing by the campfire, when Mertha called to her, very low.

"My lady!"

"Yes? What I can do for you?"

"That woman--" Mertha nodded in Morrigan's direction. "Is she a *mage*?"

Half-truths and obfuscation would work. "She is indeed. There is nothing for you to fear. There are a number of mages in the King's army--all approved by the Chantry and supervised by the Templars. Alistair himself trained as Templar before he became a Grey Warden. We are very fortunate to have Morrigan with us, don't you think? She did wonders to protect the children."

"I suppose so," the woman answered reluctantly. "But a *mage*... What if she does something to us?"

"She has no reason to do anything except to continue to serve bravely. I give you my word that she is a friend and quite safe."

"If you say so."

The woman went back to her cooking, only half convinced. Bronwyn sighed, and walked away to help Alistair and Conn

with the animals. Alistair was currying Trampler.

"You're quite good at that," she observed after a moment.

"I should be," he grinned. "Raised in a stable. By dogs mostly, but by horses too."

"What do you mean, 'raised in a stable?' I thought Arl Eamon was your guardian!"

"He was, but I slept in the stable," he answered, as if that were perfectly normal. Seeing Bronwyn's expression, he shrugged, "It wasn't so bad. It was warm there at least, and I had a roof over my head. If guess the Arl thought that if I was pampered, people would think I was his."

Bronwyn tried to temper her outrage, since the man was dead, but she could not help saying, "It is not 'pampering' to give a child a proper bed when one has the means to do so! How many beds are there in Castle Redcliffe, anyway?"

"I certainly have no idea," Alistair replied calmly.

Mertha made them a good and plentiful supper--almost plentiful enough for Bronwyn and Alistair. The thick porridge-like stew of barley and carrots and smoked mutton filled all the voids left by the exertions of the day. There was pure spring water to drink and apples to munch afterward. Morrigan decided to take the first watch--Bronwyn suspected to avoid the pandemonium of the children's bedtime. The three oldest children had got over the worst of their fright, and sat

close to the Wardens, whispering about darkspawn.

All but Annis. The little girl would not come near Bronwyn. The little girl, in fact, would turn her head away from her, mouth distorting into whimpers of fear. Bronwyn swallowed a lump of misery and dug into her bags for something to lift morale.

"Cake!" she announced. "We'll all feel better for a piece of plumcake."

"Great idea!" Alistair seconded.

The precious cake, which Bronwyn had intended for a later date when luxuries would be harder to come by, was unwrapped and cut into generous wedges. She set one aside for Morrigan, on guard just beyond the trees.

"Oh, my lady!" Mertha reached out uncertainly for the proffered treat. "Thank you kindly! Here, Drisa, give Elwyn this piece."

"Do you know any stories?" Conn asked.

"A few," Bronwyn admitted.

"What about that *'Be bold, but not too bold story?'*" Alistair suggested.

"Not tonight," Bronwyn said easily. To him, she mouthed the words, *"Too scary."* She considered a moment.

"Long ago," she began, *"before our fathers' fathers came*

down from the mountains, a war hound was born to the eldest bitch of a tribal chief. They named him Hahaku, and they gave him everything..."

She told it just as dear old Nan had always told it to her--even on the last day of her life: the great and selfish warhound, puffed up with pride, using its favored position and its strength only to bully others; the chief, at last aware of Hahaku's flaws, rejecting him and matching his son with a more reliable, if weaker dog. The rage of Hahaku, the attack on the chief, and the dog's death by stoning.

"--And what is the moral of this story?" she asked the children.

"Don't bite important people?" Drisa ventured.

Alistair choked on his cake. Bronwyn glared at him.

"Don't be a bully?" This from Conn.

"That's right!" Bronwyn answered, giving the helpless Alistair another look. "You should never abuse your power. The strong must not take advantage of the weak."

"And if the strong are mean, the weak people remember it," Elwyn said solemnly. She elbowed Conn.

"You are very clever children," Bronwyn told them. "And Drisa, you are right. Biting important people is a very bad idea. I'm sure Scout would agree with that."

Scout gave a considering rumble, cocking his head. Bronwyn laughed. "You certainly wouldn't bite Teyrn Loghain, would you?"

Alistair smirked. "Only if he bit you first."

Scout barked happily, in complete agreement.

"My lady," Mertha asked shyly, "have you seen Teyrn Loghain with your own eyes?"

Bronwyn was glad to answer in the affirmative, wondering why Alistair was making such faces, as Bronwyn confirmed such details as the Teyrn's tall stature and powerful build, his straight and thick black hair falling nearly to his shoulders, his piercing, icy blue eyes, his noble profile, and his shining silverite plate armor.

Mertha told Bronwyn earnestly, "I've raised my children to honor Teyrn Loghain as the hero who freed us from the filthy Orlesians! And to worship the Maker and his Prophet, of course," she added.

The older girl, Drisa, wanted to hear about the King.

"He's young and handsome," Bronwyn told her, smiling. "He has golden hair and wears golden armor, and he's very brave and kind."

"Did you see the Queen, too?" asked Drisa.

Bronwyn shook her head, "The Queen is at the palace in

Denerim right now. I haven't seen her in years. Alistair, you must have seen her more recently than I."

Alistair gave a nod, stretching his back a bit. "The Queen. Well--Queen Anora is very pretty. She's tall and blonde and looks like a Queen ought to look."

"Is she nice?" wondered Elwyn.

Bronwyn considered. "She has good manners, and is very clever," she allowed.

"Such a lot of places the two of you must have seen!" Mertha marveled. "You've both been to Denerim? Really?" At their amused nods, she asked, "Is that where you're from? I heard it's bigger than Lothering. There are hundreds of houses and thousands of people there! It's hard to believe."

"It's true that there are thousands of people in Denerim," Bronwyn assured her, "but Alistair is originally from Redcliffe, and I am from Highever."

"Highever!" Mertha gasped, as astonished as she would have been by the name of some fabled city--Minrathous or ancient Arlathan. "That's all the way to The Waking Sea!"

"Have you seen the sea, then?" Conn wanted to know.

With a rush, Bronwyn pictured a summer's day on the Cliffs of Conobar, the grey vastness of The Waking Sea glittering below, the stiff salt breeze, the scent of fish and the cries of

the seabirds, the sun hot on her face, the prickleweed and madcap trailing over the stony verge, the feeling that she and Fergus stood alone at the edge of the world...

"Yes." She summoned a smile. "I have seen the sea. But enough talk! I think it's time for little Wardens to get some sleep!"

The children laughed. All but Annis, who still would not look at her.

It took forever to get started in the morning. In the end, an irritated Morrigan deposited the two younger children into the wagon half-dressed, while Mertha obsessively scrubbed at her pans and spoons. At least they had had a good breakfast: a fry-up of eggs and potatoes and wild greens. Mertha was a fine cook, if a slow one. The Gale family seemed better for a night's sleep.

"Let's wear our Warden gear into the town," Bronwyn said to Alistair. "We might get a bit more cooperation that way."

"Fine with me." Alistair liked wearing his Warden tunic. And the children seemed impressed by the helmet. The wings really were--*neat*.

"We're going to Lothinging!" Drisa cried to her sisters. "We're going to see the town!"

The children besieged their mother with questions. They had

never seen such a thing as a town, but their mother had visited Lothing not once but three times, and felt herself wise enough in city ways to prepare them for their adventure.

Their party grew as they met other wayfarers along the road. The first additions were a pair of frightened Chantry brothers, hoping to be invisible in their hooded cloaks, clinging to the low stone walls along the road for cover, greeting the Wardens on horseback like heroes of legend.

A family of city elves was swept up in their wake: husband, wife, and pretty little daughter, carrying their worldly goods on their backs. Mertha and her children gaped at them, and Drisa ran up to touch the little elven girl. Then she ran back to the shelter of the creaking wagon, pleased at her own daring.

"My lady," the elven father asked Bronwyn, civil and humble. "Would you permit us to travel under your protection? We will give you no trouble."

"Of course you may." Bronwyn wondered how alienage elves had wandered so far south. Perhaps they had been working for the army at Ostagar. It was a serious undertaking, to bring a little child to an army camp--especially an elven child...

Perhaps that's why they're not there anymore.

She caught the relieved look the parents shared. They each gave a hand to their little girl, and followed at the back of the party.

Behind her, Mertha hissed at Conn. "Keep an eye on those knife-ears. They're like to steal the cow when we're not looking!"

An elderly couple with a handcart was overtaken, not two miles from the town ahead, as the road began its slow descent into the valley of the Drakon River.

"There are bandits on the road, ser," the old man warned Alistair. "Neighbor of mine was robbed by 'em on his way to town! And beaten, too!"

"But you're *on* the road to Lothing," Alistair pointed out mildly.

"No help for it, ser! No help for it. We can't stay, and that's the Maker's truth! We've got a bit put by, and we thought it might be enough for 'em to let us through. But with you and your noble lady..."

"Right. Two more for Lothing!"

"Where did your neighbor encounter the bandits?" asked Bronwyn.

"Not a mile from the town, on this side of the river. Reckon we'll see 'em soon enough, if they haven't left for greener pastures."

Another good thing about horses. One could see farther. Bronwyn and Alistair scanned the road ahead for possible

threats. It was not long before they spotted one.

"There they are," Alistair pointed.

Bronwyn saw the men lounging in the distance. Four--no-- five fit and well-armed men, who by rights should be in the army. They had blockaded the road with overturned wagons and scattered crates and barrels.

"Stay together and keep up," she told their charges. "These men are nothing to be feared."

"They are fools to get in our way," Morrigan agreed.

Considering that there were four horses and fifteen people, she half expected the waiting men to melt into the trees and wait for weaker prey. But past success must have given them confidence. Their leader looked up at their approach, and came forward, a handsome young man with a cocky grin.

"Wake up, gentlemen!" he called, "More travelers approaching! And I'd say the pretty one is the leader!"

The leader's biggest stooge gaped at the approaching party, and rumbled, "Uh, dey don't look like dose odders. And dey've got a big dog. And *horses*."

"Right, *horses*." Alistair smiled. "You should have seen what Trampler there did to a hurlock's skull yesterday." He mimed an explosion. "Boosh! What a mess."

The bandits edged away nervously.

Bronwyn said. "Lucky for us you're here. This road is a disgrace. It's a wonder anyone can get through to Lothering."

"Well, we let a few through, now and then," the leader smirked. "If the price is right."

"Oh? And what are you? Road guards?"

"Yes!" The leader grinned in delight, white teeth flashing.

"That's it exactly! We're road guards! We tax the odd passing traveler to cover our expenses."

"Well, we're Grey Wardens, and we don't pay *taxes*."

"Grey Warden?" The stooge blurted out, "Dat's her! Dat's da Girl Warden! She's da one dat killed an ogre! Dey was talkin' about her at da tavern!"

The bandits backed away a little further. The leader's smile grew forced. Bronwyn's smile was forced, too. That bloody awful nickname had preceded her. Some idiot courier had blabbed it out, and even these scum had heard it. The leader was looking at her with wary respect.

"The Girl Warden, eh? The Hero of Ostagar, I hear. Well, let's forget about the tax. We'll stand aside and let you get on with your darkpawn-fighting and ogre-killing ways."

"As soon as you clear the road," Bronwyn told him, perfectly seriously. Using the stupid nickname called for some degree of punishment.

"Ah--that's not really how it works..."

"Yes. That's exactly how it works. I am *shocked* at the condition of the road you've been guarding. How are the army couriers to get through? How is the King to get through? Whoever made this mess must be a traitor to Ferelden. I think it would be an act of patriotism to clean it all up." She drew her dagger and tested its edge. "I'm waiting."

It was astonishing how fast the rubbish went over the sides of the road. The bandits all but polished the stones. Their leader grinned gamely, making her a sweeping bow. Bronwyn waved the rest of the party on and stayed to speak to the man.

"You know," she said, her voice light and conversational, "I've met many old soldiers. I've met many *rich* old soldiers. I've even met a number of rich old mercenaries." She leaned down and smiled grimly. "But I've never met an old bandit. *Ever*. I suggest you rethink your career plans. There are opportunities in the south for able men. If I were to find you collecting taxes here again, I might misunderstand the situation and--lose my temper."

"Right," the man said slowly. "No old bandits."

"Not even middle-aged. Think on it." She turned her horse's head and kicked it into a gallop.

The stooge called out after her. "Did you really kill dat ogre? Dat's pretty neat!"

"There it is. Lothering: pretty as a painting," said Alistair, with a wave at the sight unfolding.

Bronwyn agreed that it was quite a pretty place indeed. Close to the ramp leading off the Imperial Highway was a green meadow, where a few tents were pitched. Beyond was a Chantry of very respectable size, a little stone bridge over a stream that flowed into the Drakon further down, some wattle-and daub houses, and all the usual appurtenances of a country village. Further out, a mill loomed high above the rest on a rocky hill. And further yet, up a gentle rise, was a largish wood and stone edifice, surrounded by outbuildings, that must be Bann Ceorlic's manor.

She turned in the saddle to their new acquaintances. "You all should be safe enough now. Maker watch over you."

But she and Alistair could not just ride away. Everyone came to thank the Wardens, and Conn wanted to shake their hands, and the two older girls wanted to hug Scout and kiss their protectors--Bronwyn and Alistair, at least, as Morrigan refused in disgust--and the elves bowed nearly to the ground. The old couple waved their farewell cheerily, and the brothers quoted a blessing, then hurried off to the secure stone bulk of the Chantry.

"You could have been one of them," Bronwyn pointed out primly to Alistair. "Don't you feel you've made a terrible mistake?"

"I do not," he answered with careless swagger. "I get to wear a helmet with wings and ride a horse. And besides, I never would have been a brother. They would have trained me as a Templar, and I would have had the spiffiest armor in Ferelden. No dull robes for me, thank you!"

"No," drawled Morrigan. "'Tis only your wits that are dull!"

"Oh, yes. Thank you so much for that insight, Morrigan."

There was a defensive wall, Bronwyn noted, but it was really no more than a fence. There were a pair of wooden watchtowers, currently unoccupied. She frowned, as they guided their horses down the ramp. There were no guards, and the flimsy gate was open.

The number of campers in the commons and the number of wagons must be unusual. People came to see the warriors and their horses, a fairly notable sight in these parts. There was gossip, and pointing fingers, and to Bronwyn's furious annoyance, a very distinct call of--

"That's the Girl Warden. You can tell by the wings."

Alistair burst out laughing. "I'd be more impressed if *you* had wings."

"Funny. It might be convenient, though. We could all fly along with Morrigan. Let's find the tavern and hear the news before we go on up to the manor."

Almost immediately, it became clear that at Dane's Refuge, they would never have to pay for their own drinks. Even after the welcomes and the cheers, and even after Bronwyn's polite greeting, people kept staring and smiling at them in a very unsettling way, apparently expecting them to do something prodigiously heroic at any moment.

"You know," Alistair considered. "If we drink everything that people want to buy for us, we probably won't be able to get back on our horses ever again."

"Probably not, so don't," Bronwyn agreed. The ale at Dane's Refuge was very good, all the same. Music thrummed pleasantly from the minstrel's gallery above.

Morrigan raised her brows with haughty languor, and sipped daintily at a cup of pear wine from a goggling admirer.

Even Scout was growing tired of the adulation, and hid under their table.

"Get off my foot, filthy mongrel!" Morrigan scolded.

Only Danal the barkeep appeared to be sane. He kept pouring drinks, muttering to the other patrons to leave the little party at the back table *alone*.

Out of the blue, Alistair remarked, "Duncan could hold his liquor--he really could-- but a lot the other Wardens were pretty much drunk a *lot* of the time."

Morrigan sneered. Another cup of pear wine appeared before her.

"It's a hard life," Bronwyn replied, more to her own thoughts than anything else. "Excuse me," she said, and walked over to the bar.

"I was hoping to hear the news," she said to Danal. "Have you heard any rumors?"

"Let's see..." The barkeep considered. "Do you want to hear the rumors about the Girl Warden who won the Battle of Ostagar single-handed?" He gave her a wink.

"I--don't think so."

"How about the rumors that she and Teyrn Loghain are going to beat back the darkspawn before Satinalia? Hand in glove, they are."

"Hmmm." She smiled in spite of herself, but shook her head.

The barkeep pursed his mouth, and continued, more seriously. "Well, I heard that Arlessa Isolde, the young Orlesian wife of Arl Eamon, was cheating on her husband with his brother Bann Teagan, and that she poisoned the Arl so that she and the brother could marry each other!"

Bronwyn was sober quite suddenly. "You don't say?"

Of course, that could be just as ridiculous as the rumors about me.

"And folks up north say that Rendon Howe, the Arl of Amaranthine, has gone clean mad. Murdered the Teyrn of Highever and his wife! Hard to believe."

"Believe it," Bronwyn said shortly.

"And there's always the nasty rumor that the Queen is barren. It's the Maker's Curse, they say, for putting a commoner on the throne."

"That's very unkind," Bronwyn replied at once. "And I'm sure it's not true."

"And then what about people just vanishing from their farmholds?" Danal offered. "Just up and disappearing, no one knows where!"

I know where.

"Thank you for the drinks, but we must be going!" Bronwyn turned and saw a pretty young Chantry sister headed her way. From her earnest, hopeful expression, Bronwyn could tell she wanted something.

"We must be *going!*" Bronwyn repeated, more loudly for Alistair's benefit. Scout was instantly at her heels. Morrigan quickly downed her wine and rose lithely from the little table. Alistair gave her a wry grin, but moved to the door nearly as fast.

"You know," he muttered as they mounted their horses. "I smelled mutton roasting. If we'd stayed, we probably could have had a free meal!"

"And so we shall--at the manor," Bronwyn said. "Perhaps people there won't gawk at us so!"

Note: Thanks to my reviewers mille libri, Sarah1281, Piceron, Crazy, lemon, jen4306, DutchNight, Laura Proudmore, SSJ Girl, moemie, Shining Girl, Phoenix Fire lady, Angry Girl, Beriathwen, ByLanternLight, Cobar713, luk3us, Zyanic, sleepyowlet, Eva Galana, and khaos974.

9. To the Manor Born

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 9: To the Manor Born

Bann Ceorlic's manor looked like many another of those belonging to Ferelden's lesser nobility. A good looking house, with well-kept-up outbuildings. Not a castle, certainly, but a typical fortified manor house.

Not as fortified as most, however. What had once been a deep defensive ditch backed by a low stone palisade had been softened by time and flowering vines. The "fortifications" would now serve to keep the sheep out of the front garden, but were now otherwise simply decorative landscaping. Bronwyn was somewhat scandalized that the bann had not spent the sums necessary to maintain his defenses. Of course, this was south-central Ferelden, and far from any of the usual foreign threats...

She dismounted in the handsome stone courtyard, and a stable boy came out to see to the horses. Emerging from the carved front doors was a portly man who was obviously Ceorlic's seneschal.

"I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn Cousland," Bronwyn

introduced herself crisply to the man. Grey Wardens were supposed to have no family names, but Bronwyn's was too powerful a tool to cast aside. "I have here a letter of introduction from Teyrn Loghain, permitting me the use of this manor. This is Warden Alistair, and this is Lady Morrigan. We shall only be troubling you for a day or two before we travel north."

The seneschal goggled. "A Cousland! What an honor, my lady! I am Rurik—Seneschal of Lothering Manor. We haven't had a *Cousland* visit us in—well, years! Teyrn Bryce is your father, then?"

"My father died recently. My brother, Fergus, is now teyrn." Well, it was not official until he was confirmed at the next Landsmeet, but there was no use in puzzling the man with legalities.

"I am sorry to hear of your loss, my lady. Your father was a great man, and once did me the honor to shake my hand."

"I thank you for your courtesy." It never hurt to be polite to staff. This man's goodwill might make the difference between mediocre food and service, and a pleasant stay indeed. "Our horses have had a hard journey."

"They shall have the best of care, my lady," the seneschal replied, with a stern nod to the boy, and another man standing in the stable door. "We have accommodations for your fine hound in our kennels—"

Scout's growl was barely audible.

"I would prefer to keep my mabari with me," Bronwyn said pleasantly.

"As you wish, my lady." The seneschal was unsurprised. Many nobles did, though Lady Rosalyn was not fond of animals in the house. She was not here, however, and this was a *Cousland*. "If it please you, come to the Hall, and I shall show you to your rooms and have a dinner served to you directly." He leaned closer and whispered discreetly, as they walked up a flagged path lined with flowering shrubs. "Do your companions require separate rooms?"

Bronwyn nearly laughed aloud at the thought of Morrigan and Alistair being taken for a married couple. "Yes, separate, if you please, Rurik. And we would be so very grateful if baths could be arranged tonight."

"Of course! Our bathing facilities are of the most modern contriving. Bann Ceorlic is a stickler for cleanliness and proper comfort!"

"I am glad to hear it."

She only needed to step inside the Great Hall of the manor to see where Bann Ceorlic had spent the money that should have gone to his defenses. Lothering Manor was a little jewelbox—every wooden pillar was elaborately carved with dogs and deer, with garlands of flowers twisting up their length, and riots of oak leaves at the top. The table was

polished like armor, and even the benches were padded. There were fine tapestries on the walls, and silken banners hanging from the ceiling. A large portrait of the bann himself, full length and clad in the height of fashion, dominated the wall opposite his high seat at the end of the Hall nearest the fire.

Scout, unimpressed by the grandeur, sat down to scratch his ear while the humans gazed about them.

They were led upstairs—the stairs also polished and with carved banisters. The seneschal opened a door with a flourish and there was a pause, as three jaws dropped. Bronwyn's and Morrigan's hastily snapped theirs shut, out of pride, but Alistair's remaining hanging.

"Maker's *Breath!*" he gasped.

"This is your room, Warden Alistair," the seneschal smugly declared. He did so like it when visitors admired his master's domain. Bann Ceorlic's taste was unequalled, even by those of greater wealth and station. "The bathing room is that door down the hall."

After her initial shock, Bronwyn carefully schooled her face to show polite appreciation. This guest room was nicer than her own bedchamber at home! Far nicer, and far more luxurious. Morrigan's room was equally handsome, and she wondered how many gorgeous bedchambers the manor boasted. Morrigan's face was absolutely blank as she walked into the room assigned and shut the door behind her.

"And this is yours, my lady. I hope it meets with your approval."

"Very nice indeed. A paradise of comfort after the camp at Ostagar, I assure you."

"I shall have the servants retrieve your luggage and lay out your gown for dinner."

"Actually, I'm traveling light at the moment, and shall simply wear the breeches and jerkin I brought."

"If you prefer, my lady, Lady Rosalyn left behind a number of her gowns on her departure for the townhouse in Denerim. They are last year's fashion, but perhaps something would suit."

Well, why not?

"What a pleasant idea. Do so, by all means. My thanks."

"There is a small parlor across the hall. My lord prefers it for its privacy. You may find it a comfortable place to sit with your friends. I shall have a fire lit for you, my lady."

He left, and Bronwyn could explore her new chamber without let or hindrance. *Andraste's Nightgown!* Mother would have been appalled by the extravagance displayed. Of course, not all of it was new: the current bann's father had been a notorious Orlesian collaborator, and had clearly done well by it. King Maric had shown the son great mercy in allowing him

to inherit the bannorn.

The room was fully paneled with varnished walnut, rich and dark. The bed was wide, long, and high, and the carved posts were thick as tree trunks. The bedcovers and window hangings were of mossy green velvet, and the coverlet and pillows stuffed with down. The little table by the bed was carved in the form of a flower, and supported a silver double candlestick and wax candles—not tallow tapers. There was a corner fireplace with a cushioned chair and footstool set demurely before it.

She was provided with a polished vanity and bench, and the mirror of the vanity was Tevinter silver-backed glass, and not polished metal. The armoire was a splendid piece of Nevarran silkwood, fragrant and capacious. There was a little traveling desk on the vanity, filled with parchment and ink and quills and sealing wax, and every possible little luxury. The mullioned windows opened out over the garden, and a rich scent of musk roses and gillyflowers rose up to greet her. Scout trotted over to pick up the smells, whuffed dismissively, and then found a comfortable corner for sprawling.

Bronwyn was filthy from travel, and decided to find the bathroom at once, if only to clean her hands and face before dinner.

"Stay here, Scout. I'll be back in a minute."

Not a sound emerged from her companion's rooms, as Bronwyn sought the designated door. She opened it, and her

jaw dropped once more. Gingerly, she reached out to touch items that her father had told her of when he returned from Orlais: a wash basin of painted porcelain, with taps that would allow water—either cold or hot—to pour in with a mere touch. There was a commode, also of porcelain, of the design that allowed one to pull a chain to dispose of the waste down a copper pipe. The bath was a lovely thing of tin, extravagantly enameled in malachite green and deep lapis blue, also with taps for hot and cold water. There were soft and thick towels on a shelf, and all manner of soaps and oils in easy reach. There was a sheepskin rug on the floor, warm and soft.

She had never seen such a bathroom, herself, and was shocked to imagine what it had cost to buy the items and install the pipes and boiler to run it. That did not prevent her from washing her face and hands with a lavish amount of the scented soap provided. There was a little mirror above the basin, and after getting a look at herself she washed her face again, rather embarrassed at the amount of grime that was flowing down the drain. Another scrub, and she got at the bit of dried blood that was crusted in her ear. Why had Morrigan not told her she was walking about with darkspawn blood on her?

There was noise through the wall, and when Bronwyn stepped out, she saw servants busily at work in the room next to the bath, feeding a fire under a huge water boiler. As Bronwyn had guessed, the water for the boiler was piped from above—probably a cistern on the roof to catch the rain. The servants bowed to her, and one assured her that "there will be plenty

of hot water by this evening, my lady!"

She could not resist having a look into Bann Ceorlic's private parlor, and it was even more than she expected. The floor was not stone, but polished, inlaid wood, covered with silken rugs. It was stuffed to excess with upholstered, cushioned furniture in the Orlesian style. It was quite impossible to conceive of sitting on any of it in her dirty chainmail. She stepped hastily away, and found that other servants were arriving with their gear. One carried a large cushion and a folded sheepskin.

"For your hound, my lady," the servant explained. Bronwyn bit back an incredulous laugh. Scout had a blanket of his own at home, but a *cushion*?

Taking a moment to direct them to the right rooms, she knocked at Morrigan's door, and almost jumped when Morrigan opened it instantly. The young witch was attempting to be inscrutable, but failing. The silken beauty of her surroundings had clearly made an impression. A servant brought in her packs, bowed, and left.

Bronwyn smiled. "You must see the bathroom. It's all fitted up in the latest Orlesian fashion, and it's amazing. The seneschal is sending up a servant with some of Lady Rosalyn's gowns. I'm to pick one to wear to dinner. Why don't you join me? It would keep your own gown clean for a later occasion."

Morrigan was silent a moment more, and then shrugged. "Amusing, I suppose. Let us see this 'bathroom,' first, then."

Dinner was sumptuous, and the three of them, splendid in borrowed and somewhat ill-fitting finery, sat long over it. Scout played with a meaty bone in front of the fire: he had already raided the larder, Bronwyn was told. The seneschal apologized for the simplicity of the meal: the bann's Orlesian head cook had traveled north with his master. Only a small staff was left at the manor to maintain it against the bann's return, and to serve the guests who came their way.

After they retired to the privacy of the little parlor, Alistair remarked, "A man who knows what he likes."

Morrigan smoothed the red velvet of her gown, studying the play of light on the folds of the skirt. "And who has the coin required. 'Tis all the better for us, at any rate."

"You would hardly know we're at war," Bronwyn agreed. "There are almost no guards here: only servants. Rurik told me that the bann and his lady took a strong party of his men to Denerim with them. The rest were sent south to the army with a captain. His sons are in the Free Marches—" she smirked at her companions "—for their *education*. The usual excuse when someone wants either to hide their children's disgrace or protect them from danger. Not particularly admirable."

"You can't say he's not contributing the war effort!" Alistair grinned. "He's providing us with previously unknown luxury. Unknown to me, at least! I imagine Highever Castle is much grander."

"Ha!" Bronwyn shook her head. "My father has expenses other than his own pleasures. We'd have to drill tunnels through stone walls ten feet thick to put in water pipes like Bann Ceorlic's. Let's enjoy it while we can. I, for one, can't wait to wash my hair!"

A soapy scrub for a bemused Scout, leaving him smelling like a field of meadowsweet. Then for her a hot bath; essence of apple-blossom in her freshly washed hair; a dressing gown of silk brocade; a servant girl to comb out the tangles in front of a crackling fire; her ragged nails trimmed; a clean nightgown of the finest linen laid out on the bed for her: Bronwyn had never felt so pampered, even when she was a child. It was pleasant, but it also made her feel a little guilty. How could she be enjoying herself, when the soldiers at Ostagar were living on porridge and stale bread? When Duncan was dead and ashes? When her parents were gone and their murderer unpunished?

She sighed, and dismissed the servant. Sitting at the vanity, she took out some parchment from the lap desk, and began a letter to Fergus.

"My lord brother—or silly old Fergus, as you prefer—"

She had decided that he would know everything: so she filled the letter with the events of the past two days. The letter would not be sent until she left the Circle, and had real news, but it would calm her own mind to think through her adventures on a daily basis.

"I can see why Father used to roll his eyes at the mention of Bann Ceorlic. Such a sybarite the man is! My bedchamber boasts lavish and entirely undeserved comfort, but it all pales in comparison to the bathroom—"

Detailing its wonders kept her up until her hair was nearly dry, and she could braid it neatly for the night. It was dark: even the moon had set, and the flickering light of the candles swam before her tired eyes. Scout was already curled up and dreaming on his ridiculous cushion. Slipping into the wide bed, she found it just as soft as she had hoped...

This is the Fade. She has been here before, and will no doubt be here again.

Darkspawn grunt and squeal and shit, crouching by huge fires. Bronwyn is dressed in her delicate white nightgown, walking barefoot amongst them, but they take no notice. She is one of them, and they are one with her. The foul reek permeates into her very flesh and flows through her veins. At a crude forge, a bent figure is hammering out blades. It is a human—or was: his eyes dull, his face blotched with taint, his craftsmanship listless and slovenly. He is becoming useless for work, and will soon be good only for meat. He will not care. The caring bit left his mind long ago.

Heads on poles line the tunnel—heads of humans and heads of dwarves. They are half-flayed and eyeless. Bronwyn is deep in the Dead Trenches. The words mean nothing and

everything to her. She has never heard of them before and she has always known them. This is home: this is her destiny.

Far away sounds a voice of infinite beauty: a wise voice and a terrible. It is the Old God Urthemiel, now perverted and incarnate as the Archdemon. The God of Beauty is their God now: its voice sweeter than any before it, fairer even the mighty First, the God Dumat. Their God will lead them up into the sunlit lands, to kill and eat, to take what is theirs back into the dark places. The exquisite voice sings out its commands, and far away a woman's voice screams in counterpoint. They are doing what must be done, what they have always done, and it is good...

The Dead Trenches recede, and Bronwyn is in a room she knows well. This is a real dream, a recurring dream, and not a bloodtaint vision, then. Her body relaxes, sinking into the familiar.

She is sitting on an embroidered footstool by the fire, brushing out her hair, waiting for him. Rain is falling, water sheeting the mullioned windows. A sweet sound: a sound that the warmth of the fire transforms into the music of safety and comfort.

He enters, fierce and shining as a falling star. His eyes seek out Bronwyn, sitting by the fire, and she waits for his gaze to soften, as it does only for her.

Instead, he strides forward and grasps her wrist, caring nothing for her pain. He drags her to the wide writing table, and he slaps down the papers in front of her. His eyes are icy shards of anger and suspicion. His mouth is moving, calling her spy and traitor...

And the hurlock gibbers, its face inches from hers...

"Ugh!" Bronwyn woke, staring up at the dim velvet canopy above. "Dream," she mumbled, and turned over, instantly forgetting it all. "Bad dream..."

When her eyes opened again, the canopy was green as young leaves. She winced at the brightness and lay back on the down pillows.

She was in a real bed, in a real bedchamber, and pale yellow sunshine was streaming through real windows. In fact, she was in a *fabulous* bed, in a *gorgeous* bedchamber. There was no reason for her to rise early, and no one was currently threatening to kill her. She could laze here, and if she were very, very bad, she could summon a servant and have her breakfast brought to her on a tray, like horrible old Aunt Luvinia.

"I'm not that far gone," she groaned.

Scout whined and came over to press his nose against her arm.

Time for you to get up and for me to go out.

"Yes, I know. I'm up. See me getting up." They would move on today, but there was no reason to leave until they were well rested. A good breakfast for humans and beasts, and then back to the Imperial Highway.

A soft knock at the door.

"Who is it?" she called blearily.

"It's Kara, my lady. The seneschal sent me to tell you breakfast would be ready soon, and to help you dress."

"Come in, then."

It was the same servant who had seen to her last night. Nice little thing. At Highever, Bronwyn was expected to be able to dress herself. Kara came in, a bundle of linen in her arm. Scout dodged past her, paws pattering down the stairs, eager to mark out the garden as his own.

"I have your laundry done, my lady."

"Oh. Good." That was right. The girl had taken her shirts and small clothes with her last night. She must have washed them and let them dry overnight. A hint of lavender drifted through the room.

And then she rose early to iron it all. I must thank her with silver before I go.

She stumbled to the bathroom, and returned to find Kara ready with her best shirt and her Warden's tunic.

"What's that noise below?" she asked. "Is it Market Day here?"

"No, my lady," the girl told her, wide-eyed. "Some freeholders have come to seek audience with you. The seneschal bade them wait until you had your breakfast."

"Very well," Bronwyn sighed. It was now most unlikely she would be leaving Lothing that day. She had better have something to eat, because dealing with the freeholders might take some time.

Alistair, she discovered, was already downstairs and eating his way through the feast provided. Morrigan had breakfasted early, and was reading in the library. Bronwyn decided that she wanted to make a good impression, and put on her armor and her tunic over it. Then she went down for a quick meal. Her hair, wavy from last night's braiding, she would wear down, for there was no time to arrange it.

"Your adoring public awaits," Alistair smirked at her, filling the last empty places with a snack of dried cherries. "They began arriving just after dawn, I'm told."

"Get your armor on," she warned him. "We need to make a decent appearance."

A bowl of porridge later, she told the seneschal to move the

table and benches out of the way, and show their visitors in. Scout loped back to her, all the better for a visit outside. Morrigan, grand once again in red velvet (Bronwyn suspected she would wear it until they were actually leaving), strolled in to see the show.

"Both of you should enter with me, and stand by the High Seat," Bronwyn said to her companions. An audience was nothing new. Father had made her sit by him on his regular First Day and Twelfth Day appearances since she was old enough to understand what was going on. He was Lord of High, Middle, and Low Justice in Highever, and hearing lawsuits and criminal cases had taken much of his time. When he was away, Mother had undertaken the duty, and it had been interesting to see how differently she judged. Lothering was an unknown place, of course, and no doubt would have its share of surprises.

The four of them waited at the top of the stairs, until the Seneschal's voice rang out.

"People of Lothering: Lady Bronwyn Cousland, Grey Warden of Ferelden!"

Alistair snorted a laugh at the pomp of it all, and Bronwyn elbowed him.

"Do try to make a stab at dignity, Alistair," Morrigan said, her voice acid with reproof. "No matter how it pains you."

Bronwyn thought that their entrance was effective. The Hall

was filled to bursting with farm folk, with villagers, with a pair of well-dressed surface dwarves who must surely be traders, with some ragged refugees. The Chantry was represented as well, with three Templars and a clutch of priests, including the young redheaded sister from the tavern.

Bronwyn was ready with some words of thanks for their kind welcome, but never said them, for even before she could take the High Seat, pandemonium broke out.

"—Are the darkspawn coming?"

"—Is it true all the other Wardens were killed?"

"—Are the Orlesians invading?"

"—What about my crops, then?"

"—You're the Girl Warden, aren't you?"

Father would never have permitted an audience to get so out of control. Bronwyn raised her hand and shouted, "Silence!" Alistair unslung his shield, and banged the hilt of his sword against it until the noise subsided.

"*Now,*" Bronwyn said calmly into the uneasy quiet. "I am here, and I will answer your questions as best I may. Yes, I am indeed the Grey Warden Bronwyn. I was at Ostagar for the battle, as was Warden Alistair here. By the Maker's favor, by the valor of our King Cailan, and by the wisdom of Teyrn Loghain it was a great victory for Ferelden. Sadly, yes—the

other Wardens were killed. Our victory has stemmed the darkspawn movement north, but we must all be vigilant."

An anxious man—a farmer from the dirt on his boots—called out, "I heard the King sent for the Orlesians. Are they coming back to take over?"

The noise in the hall threatened to burst forth again. Bronwyn raised her voice.

"The Orlesians are *not* coming in force. Some Orlesian *Grey Wardens* may eventually join in our struggle against the Blight, but that is because Grey Wardens fight darkspawn wherever they are. The Empress has indeed offered the services of her chevaliers, but Teyrn Loghain does not deem that necessary or advisable at this time."

"I'll just wager he don't!" one village woman shouted, and laughter rippled through the room.

Bronwyn raised her hand again, and smiled tolerantly.

"What about the bandits, now?" another man complained. "Why don't the Templars do something about them—and the wolves and spiders, too?"

A tall, dark-skinned Templar looked harassed. "Hunting beasts and bandits is not the mission of the Chantry—"

"Why not?" shrilled a woman. "You've got swords and that fancy armor! Seems like you do nought but stand around all

day, safe in the Chantry! I heard that Girl Warden there-" she pointed at Bronwyn in a very impertinent way "-wasn't here an hour before *she* chased a gang of the rascals away. Why can't the Templars do the like?"

The Chantry contingent bristled, and Bronwyn asked, "Do you not have a village militia to deal with these things? Who is your mayor?"

The seneschal intervened, somewhat embarrassed. "There is no mayor of Lothing. Bann Ceorlic prefers to manage these affairs directly."

"Well," Bronwyn asked, "who was delegated to lead in his absence?"

That raised more noise. The upshot was that the bann had departed, leaving no instructions for the defense of his bannorn whatever, other than guards to protect his personal manor. Bronwyn fought to keep her face impassive, but was shocked at such indifference to the safety of his own people. If her cousin Arl Bryland were told of this, he might be able to sway a number of the freeholders to his own vassalage. She knew that South Reach was not so carelessly looked after.

She silenced the noise once more. "It's clear that you must have a militia, and that you need someone to lead it—"

"Could you not stay, my lady?" an old man pleaded. "I'm sure we'd all be honored to have you lead us."

Another outburst of anxious, eager voices.

"I cannot." Bronwyn shook her head. "I am on my way north on a vital mission. However—" she shouted, to quell the disappointment. "I can stay long enough to help you organize yourselves for your own defense. We are Fereldans!" she urged, seeing the doubting faces about her. "We're not cowed Orlesian serfs, waiting for our masters to decide what's best for us. Teyrn Loghain didn't chase the chevaliers out of our country by staying on his farm, waiting for someone else to do the job! He saw what needed to be done, and he did it!"

"Well—"muttered one man. "he *is* a Hero, after all."

Bronwyn interrupted him ruthlessly. "—And he didn't do it alone! He had people just like you and me who stood with him. And we won. Now I want to see every fit man and woman at noon in the field across from the Chantry. That means everyone who isn't pregnant or doesn't have children who can't be looked after by someone else for a few hours a day. We'll muster for a weapon-showing and you can choose a leader: a strong and fair man or woman you trust. It doesn't have to be the best warrior, but he or she should have good sense. And some of you older folk might have served in the last war. We could use your advice. You're more than welcome to join us."

"My lady—" a dark-haired young woman asked, biting her lip. "Some of us aren't trained to arms like you. What can we do?"

"Can you ring a bell?" Bronwyn asked her.

"I—I—well—"

"If you can ring a bell, you can take a turn at watch in one of the towers or up in the mill. You should have people there all the time, and then your militia can deal with trouble before it's on you. The river is a natural barrier and that should protect you as far as the bridge—"

"There's spiders down by the river," a man objected. "Spiders and bears and more of them bandits."

"And wolves!" added another voice from the back.

"What a pack of children!" sneered Morrigan, softly in Bronwyn's ear. "Explain to me why you are trying so desperately to pretend they are not?"

"Children grow up," Bronwyn whispered back. "And these had better grow up soon, or they'll die." Aloud she shouted, "Very well! I and my companions will have a look at these spiders and bears and- *whatever*. And we'll kill them, and at noon I want to see all of you so I can tell you about it!"

"What if we don't have a weapon?" whined another man. He was one of those idiots Bronwyn had seen gossiping outside the tavern.

"I see a thumping great knife right there on your belt! If you have a knife, you have a pike. You must have a carpenter in

this town. I want him to bring some poles to the muster, and someone else should bring rope or leather cording. They'll be paid, never fear. Now I'm off to do battle. Someone point us at these blasted bandits, for Maker's sake!"

They could not leave instantly. Morrigan had to change from red velvet to black leather, Alistair fetched their helmets and bows, and Bronwyn remained to talk with the persistent questioners. Scout, of course, was perfect just as he was.

The dark-skinned Templar introduced himself as Ser Bryant, Knight-Commander of the Lothing Chantry. He seemed a pleasant and cooperative enough man, and he hoped that Bronwyn would be paying a visit to the Revered Mother before her departure.

"Of course I shall, Ser Bryant. I should be most grateful for her blessing on our enterprise. I hope to be there before the weapon-showing, or certainly after. Do you have any information about these local nuisances before I go out in pursuit?"

Not really, it appeared. Privately, Bronwyn sympathized with the villagers. The Templars were one of the best-armed forces in all Ferelden, and they had done exactly nothing to assist their country in its time of greatest danger. No: that was not true—they had sent two Templars to stand guard over seven mages at Ostagar, but she had not heard that they engaged in the battle personally. Their task, she gathered, was to kill those mages if they showed any signs of

demonic possession or blood magic.

It was all very well to fight mages-turned-abominations, but those cases were few and far between, and Bronwyn was not convinced that all mages that refused to be caged in the Circle were mortal dangers. Their numbers were too small, and they did not rampage about the country, *eating* people. Morrigan had proved herself a friend, and even Flemeth was not dangerous in the way a single hurlock could be.

However, there was nothing to be gained by antagonizing this man, who seemed well-disposed enough toward her.

She headed to the door, trying to get past all the well-wishers, when she found the red-headed sister standing in front of her, blue eyes wide, words tumbling from her in a torrent.

"I was so glad when I heard the Grey Wardens were here in Lothering! You are sworn to fight the darkspawn, yes? I know that after what happened at Ostagar you'll need all the help you can get! That's why I'm coming along."

"Ah." Bronwyn raised her brows, and noticed a pair of older sisters rolling their eyes at each other. Was there something wrong with this young woman? Other than her speech, which was odd...

She asked, "Why are you so eager to come with me?"

Quite seriously, the sister answered, "The Maker told me to."

One of the older sisters broke in, and tried to pull the young woman away. "Come, Sister Leliana. Excuse her, Warden, she is a little..." there was a quick, explicit gesture to her head.

Sister Leliana jerked her arm free, and pleaded with Bronwyn. "I know that sounds insane, but what you do—what you are *meant* to do, is the Maker's work. Let me help."

Bronwyn shot the smirking older women a cool look. This girl was the first person she had met since she left Ostagar who had actually offered to help, rather than demand something for herself. She did not deserve mockery.

"I very much appreciate your offer. Never doubt that. I hope that you will remember me in your prayers. There is so much you can do for the people here. I can only offer you danger and hardship, and in fact I must be off now to fight."

Alistair arrived, and they slapped on their helmets and took bows with them as well as their swords. Alistair had confessed that he was no sort of archer at all—"not something we're trained for in the Templars"—but Bronwyn had insisted he take the crossbow that had belonged to Hayward of Ayesleigh, in order to have a ranged weapon. Morrigan stalked proudly down the stairs in her revealing Wilder garments, ignoring the whispers of admiration or disapproval.

Bronwyn nodded to her companions. "Let's go," and glanced at the red-headed girl, who was arguing with her fellow sisters

in angry whispers.

As Bronwyn stepped outside, the girl broke away, trying to follow, calling out, "But I can fight! I can do more than fight! I put all that behind me when I came here, but if it is the Maker's will, I will take it up again, gladly. Let me help you!"

The girl's speech...the accent... Bronwyn scowled. An Orlesian! Here in Lothering!

"It cannot be," Bronwyn said firmly. "I will say no more."

It seemed half the village was following them—not to help, of course, but to gawk. Well, if they wanted a show, they'd get one. They had been eager enough to give directions to the camp of the local bandits.

It was all too scandalously easy. The bandits were few, and no match for heavily armed warriors accompanied by a mage and a mabari. Morrigan froze them, Alistair smashed them down with his shield, Bronwyn slashed their throats, and Scout shredded them. A few more appeared out of the trees, and two of those ran away, escaping north on the Highway. The others foolishly tried to support their fellows. One had a huge maul that would have flattened Bronwyn, had she obligingly stood still.

She did not. She danced in, too close for the maul to be of use, and the man slumped backwards, spurting blood. His friend rushed forward to avenge him, and Bronwyn thrust low, arm extended, and ran him through. He must be the last, for

from the safety of the mill, there were shouts and applause, celebrating the Wardens' victory. Alistair grimaced at her.

"They could have done this for themselves, you know."

"Oooh!" cried Morrigan in mock horror. "But that would have been *dangerous!*"

The only person within fifty yards was the crazy Orlesian Chantry sister, who was marching in their direction, pretty face set in determined lines. She was wearing a big dagger in a harness over her right shoulder. It looked very odd, contrasting with the soft colors of her demure long robes.

"Stop!" Bronwyn called to her. "You'll get hurt!"

Morrigan shrugged. "What harm can she do? Perhaps she will be useful as bait for the bears."

"Now that's just mean," Alistair said.

They set off along the river, looking for the lair they had been told of. Behind them, Sister Leliana was rummaging through the corpses of the bandits, apparently with some success. She now had a longbow and a quiver added to her weaponry. Bronwyn shook her head, and decided to let the poor girl be.

Bows were a good starting point with the bears. Bronwyn wished she had a boar spear with her, but with Morrigan's help they were dispatched fairly quickly. A few arrows that were not their own found the bears' vulnerable spots.

Bronwyn looked behind and gave the Chantry sister a nod. Sister Leliana was a good shot.

"Now the spiders," Bronwyn said grimly. "They're south of here. A hole in one of those hills, they said."

"Isn't it lunchtime yet?" Alistair complained. "Haven't we already slain our share this morning? Don't we get a break for tea?"

"Very funny. Spiders first. Then tea."

"How many do you suppose there are—oh—that's *wonderful!*"

"Those are—really big spiders," Bronwyn agreed.

They might have had some trouble without Morrigan's ability to slow the creatures. They were each as long as Bronwyn was tall, and they were aggressive and vicious. Sister Leliana kept up a steady rain of arrows from her position behind them. Bronwyn pulled her sword from one of the distended abdomens, and was suddenly knocked down from behind.

She kicked out, scrambling around onto her back, dodging the pincers. Her sword was too long, but she stabbed upward with her dagger, wincing at the shrill, alien shriek. It was hairy and heavy and it stank, and she could hear Alistair shouting as he tried to hack it apart without killing Bronwyn in the process.

Another shriek, and the spider shivered violently and was still.

"Get this bastard off me, Alistair," Bronwyn snarled. The filthy creature was pushed away, and she looked up to see Leliana standing nearby, wiping her blade.

"I can fight," she repeated simply.

"So it would seem," Bronwyn agreed. "Where does a sister learn to fight that like that?"

A dimpling smile. "I wasn't born in the Chantry, you know."

Bronwyn studied her a moment, then asked abruptly. "When did you come from Orlais?"

"Oh!" Leliana looked at her uneasily. "I am a native of Ferelden. At least my mother was. I wanted to return to my homeland, and I have been at Lothering Chantry for the past two years."

"Two years?" Bronwyn would check that out. It seemed very odd—very *peculiar*—that the first person to offer to help them was so obviously Orlesian.

The girl pleaded, "I loved my quiet life in the Chantry, but what you are doing is so much more important. So-will you let me help you?"

Morrigan, busily at work removing the spiders' poison sacs with a sharp knife, looked at Bronwyn and shrugged.

Kindhearted Alistair put in a word. "She does have skill, even if she seems a little—strange. I vote to let her come along."

"Alistair," Bronwyn whispered in his ear. "She's one Archdemon short of a Blight."

"Yes," he agreed, "But she's more 'Ooh! Pretty colors!' than 'Muahaha! I am Princess Stabbity-Stab. Kill! Kill!'"

Bronwyn stared at him. "Ye-es," she said. "I suppose you have a point. Well—Sister Leliana—"

"Just Leliana—I have not taken my vows. I am only Affirmed as a lay sister."

"All right, then. Leliana. Welcome to our company. Tell me, are you asking to become a Grey Warden, or are you just asking to help us?"

"Oh!" The pretty face puzzled over that. "I think just to help you. But if I need to be a Grey Warden to do that, I would not refuse."

"You don't—yet. I was just wondering. And another thing: you can't go about with us in your Chantry robes, you know."

"Oh, I have some—things—I have kept from my life before the Chantry. When we get back to the village I will get them from my chest and put them on again. It has been a long time, but I am ready."

Note: There aren't as many bandits in the area in my story as there are in-game. The large number of canon bandits are

probably mostly soldiers fleeing the disaster at Ostagar, who have turned bandit to survive. Since in my story Ostagar was a victory, there haven't been as many deserters.

Thank you, Bioware, for your wonderful dialogue.

Thanks to my reviewers: bioncafemme, Shining Girl, Deviate Fish, Zyanic, Angry Girl, Sarah1281, mille libri, phoenixandashes, piceron, Amhran Comhrac, Eva Galana, khaos974, ByLanternLight, sleepyowlet, zabiGG, kitzu, Shakespeira, almostinsane, Cobar713, Carnie Heart, and sadness. You are all very kind and helpful.

10. The Muster of Lothing

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 10: The Muster of Lothing

Yes, there was a wolf pack. No, it was no trouble at all. It was too early to tell how Sister Le—no, *Leliana*—would fit into their little company. Mediating the personality clash between Morrigan and Alistair was already stressful. But Leliana was an excellent archer, and capable with a blade. That would have to do, for now. Bronwyn thrust down into the heart of a snapping grey wolf, and the beast went limp.

Scout trotted up, licking his chops, ready to be praised and petted.

Some of the gawkers were already coming closer to shout their praise and thanks. Bronwyn kept a polite smile on her face for them, trying not to despise them too much. Much of their passive uselessness might be Bann Ceorlic's fault. He had obviously meant to suppress independence and initiative in his little realm, and had succeeded all too well.

There was a gibbet cage hanging outside the low stone wall that she had not noticed before, and it was occupied. She looked again, and then walked toward it, full of curiosity. That

surely could not be—but it was!

"A qunari!" she breathed. She had never seen one of the huge, fierce warriors from the tropical lands to the north. This man could be nothing else. Over seven feet tall, he could barely stand upright in the big iron cage. He was dark-skinned, with crystal-white hair in cornrow braids. Coming closer, she could hear him calmly praying in his outlandish tongue. The qunari were named for their strange heathen religion—the "Qun" or something such- which they spread with their conquests, and inspired them to feats of great courage in battle.

Morrigan had recognized him for what he was, and pointed at him, full of indignation.

"This is a proud and powerful creature, trapped as prey for cowards and vermin. If you cannot find a use for him, I suggest releasing him for mercy's sake alone-"

"Mercy?" Alistair scoffed. "That doesn't sound much like you, Morrigan."

The witch continued, without missing a beat, "—and I would also suggest that Alistair be put in his place."

"Right," he drawled. "Now *that* sounds more like you."

The qunari opened his eyes, and Bronwyn blinked. Pale lavender, almost glowing like jewels. Quite fascinating, really. Bronwyn had always longed to travel and see the world like

Father. Her one visit to the court of their cousin the Teyrn of Ostwick in the Free Marches was too sheltered and too much like home to be called *traveling*.

Today, however, the outside world had paid a visit and was staring back at her.

"You are not one of my captors," the qunari rumbled. "I will not amuse you any more than I have the others. Leave me in peace."

"You're a captive?" Bronwyn wondered. Then she almost blushed. Of course he was.

With sarcastic patience, the qunari answered. "I'm in a *cage*, am I not?" With dignity, he introduced himself. "I am Sten of the Beresaad—the vanguard—of the qunari people."

With reflexive courtesy, Bronwyn replied, "I am Bronwyn of the Grey Wardens. Pleased to meet you."

"You mock me," the qunari said, frowning slightly. "Or—you show manners I have not come to expect in your land. Though it matters little. I will die soon enough."

Leliana came forward to explain. "The Revered Mother ordered this punishment. He murdered the people of a farmhold."

"It is as she says," the qunari confessed. "Eight humans, in addition to the children."

A pause. Bronwyn ventured, "It must have been difficult capturing you."

"There is no difficulty in capturing prey that surrenders. I waited for several days until the knights arrived. Death will be my atonement."

Morrigan nudged her, and dipped her head at the huge warrior. "A penitent man left to die a slow death. A fine example of the Chantry's mercy, is it not?"

Bronwyn bit her lip. It did seem like a gift of the Maker, but...

She made her decision, and hoped it was the right one. "There are other ways to redeem yourself."

The qunari studied her impassively with his disconcerting lavender eyes. "Perhaps. What does your wisdom say is equal to my crime?"

"You could help me defend the land against the Blight."

"The Blight—" Sten considered. "You are a Grey Warden, truly? Strange... My people have heard legends of the Grey Wardens' strength and skill, though I suppose not every legend is true."

Bronwyn refused to take offense. The qunari was no doubt baiting her.

Alistair muffled a snort. "You really want to do this?"

"Yes." Bronwyn cocked her head and nodded. "I think I do." She asked the qunari, "Can you ride a horse?"

He grunted. "I can. But not the dogs you people call horses. Only a *Fereldan*," he said scornfully, "would ride a dog to war."

Scout growled his indignation. Bronwyn rubbed his ears, pleased at her new plans.

"Well, Sten of the Beresaad," she said, "I think I have a *horse* for you." More briskly, she told him. "The Revered Mother will doubtless release you into my custody. I shall be back in an hour or two, or perhaps sooner."

"I have little choice but to await your return."

The people of Lothering were out in force, already eavesdropping breathlessly on her conversations. Bronwyn smiled tightly as they divided to let her pass.

"Lunch," Alistair muttered.

"Right," she agreed.

Dane's Refuge was only steps away. The heroes (now including Leliana) were loudly welcomed, shown to "their" table, and foaming mugs of ale were placed before each of them in a trice. Except for Morrigan, who was given yet another goblet of pear wine.

"Your usual, my lady," simpered the waitress.

Bronwyn caught Morrigan's eye. The witch sneered, but drank the wine readily enough. Bronwyn was glad of her own tankard. Killing bandits-bears-spiders-wolves was thirsty work.

Without even having to ask for it, a hearty meal was brought to their table, bowls of a meaty lamb stew and plenty of bread. Scout had a bowl of his own, for this was Ferelden, after all.

The stew had mushrooms in it. That was reason enough to celebrate. The Wardens ate heartily, making no bones about asking for more. Their two companions were daintier, but in the end both Leliana and Morrigan surrendered to the custard-and-honey tarts the cook brought to the table.

Bronwyn insisted on leaving a gold sovereign to buy good will and drinks for the house. Then it was noon, and time to face anyone in the village of Lothering who was not already crowding into the tavern to stare at her.

Outside were a pair of Templars, who bowed respectfully.

"Grey Wardens, the Revered Mother wishes to bless the muster of Lothering."

"Splendid idea," agreed Bronwyn, feeling better for the food and drink. She followed the Templars all the way to the Chantry, where the Revered Mother and her priests awaited them on the porch.

Obviously, the Revered Mother understood the value of a good show, too. Bronwyn led her party to the steps and she dropped to one knee with conscious grace, while the villagers watched in awe. The blessing itself was the usual formula, but Bronwyn kept her head bowed respectfully. They rose to listen to the Revered Mother's next remarks.

"—And I wish to add my personal thanks to these brave people. Sister Leliana, I see you among our defenders. Do you wish to leave us then, and serve the Grey Wardens?"

"I do, Your Reverence. I will never forget how happy I have been here, but I must do what I can to defend this country."

There was a murmur of satisfaction at Leliana's kind words, and much appreciation of her sentiments, though no one else seemed inclined to risk his or her life unnecessarily.

The Revered Mother smiled benignly on Bronwyn. "And what can the Lothering Chantry do to help you in your struggle against the common enemies of mankind?"

What an opportunity! Bronwyn smiled back. "I wish to take with me the qunari you imprisoned."

Her Reverence was somewhat taken aback at actually being asked for something. "If I release him, then his next victims might count you and me among their murderers."

"I understand your concerns." Bronwyn raised her voice to be perfectly understood. "Therefore, I invoke the Right of

Conscription. Sten of the Beresaad will serve as a Grey Warden. By slaying darkspawn, he will atone for his crimes."

A rumble of excitement at the drama unfolding. The villagers watched the dialogue like children at a puppet show, forgetting that they themselves had the power to shape events.

Another blessing, more gracious words. Leliana was sent off to collect her belongings and to dress more appropriately. Bronwyn was given the key to Sten's cage. The crowd moved into the field, and the muster of Lothering began in earnest.

A decent number of decent bowmen. Some big farmers with big axes. A smith with a maul. An old man who knew how to use a pike, and could teach others. And Elder Miriam's sensible son, Tobery, who, had he been born in a different place to a different set of parents, would have had the makings of quite the swordsman.

Bronwyn wondered why he hadn't gone for a soldier, but then saw the pretty wife and the mob of children. Tobery had never felt the lure of adventure. He had everything he ever wanted, right here in Lothering. Bronwyn hoped those things would give him the incentive to do what he must to protect them. The consensus of the villagers supported him as leader. She would make it official.

"Hear me, people of Lothering," she declared. "I appoint this man Captain of the Lothering Militia for the duration of the Blight. Obey him as you would me."

There were others present: people willing to take a turn at watch, people who lurked on the fringes, unsure of themselves, but almost ready to become a part of something important.

Leliana returned, clad in boots and studded leathers, carrying her bow and armed with a pair of daggers. She took some of the more lightly armed people aside and showed them some basic knife moves. When working like this, she did not drift into religious musings, and looked pleasantly serious and not at all crazy. She was good with those daggers, too, and everyone seemed to appreciate her efforts.

Tobery was listening to Bronwyn, trying to remember all she had to say. His friend Sam, shorter and broader, was standing behind him, his lips moving as he followed Bronwyn's words.

"You need to make the archers practice nearly every day. Find every bow you can. The older boys and girls should be learning."

"Bann Ceorlic doesn't care for archery, my lady," Tobery told her. "If he sees a man with a bow on his back, he's like to have him brought before him as a poacher. Bann Ceorlic hates poachers, he does."

"Well, of course he does," Bronwyn said soothingly, consciously keeping her speech from being too flowery. "But these are strange times. The darkspawn are down south, only two days journey away. People are worried, and there are

more bandits on the roads than usual. And Bann Ceorlic is up in Denerim and not likely to come back until the darkspawn are gone for good. That might not be for some time. You'll want your families here in Lothering to be safe. It's up to you, it seems. If you keep someone on watch, you should be able to call out the militia before any danger reaches the gates of the town. If you have a good lot of archers, you can deal with the danger before it's close enough to do you harm."

She pointed out the access points to him. "You really need to keep an eye on the ramps to the Imperial Highway: there—and there. Also—make sure that nothing swims across the river or sneaks across the Highway. You might consider extending the palisade and building a barred gate at the mill end of the village. Use some of the stone blocks fallen from the highway to patch weak spots in your walls, and pile them into fighting steps so your archers can see to shoot over them. You could cut some trees and build a palisade there—and across there. You'd be a lot safer, certainly."

"The bann's manor is outside the village gates, my lady," Sam blurted out.

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "Yes, it is. I presume that was the bann's own decision. Well, the manor has its own defenses and its own guards. If the bann wants more, he can see to it. I think you'll have plenty to do protecting the village proper."

"My sister Kara is a maid at the manor," Sam told her, looking unhappy.

"Yes—Kara. I've met her, and a very good girl she is. If things get bad she can always come back to the village, can't she? All the more reason to do the best job you can."

Alistair smiled over at her from the mustering field. He was showing four men and a woman how to use a shield. A good shield was a weapon in itself, and Alistair was very skilled. The one woman in the group obviously found the handsome young Warden worth watching. Bronwyn smiled and waved back, hiding her annoyance.

Much remained to be done. A young girl was sent to the manor to apprise the seneschal that there would be two more guests—"Grey Warden recruits," Bronwyn specified, to get her people the best and most respectful treatment possible. Any possible Joining was too far in the indefinite future to plan for, but calling her people 'recruits' seemed reasonable to her. It would at least give them the protection of the Grey Warden name.

More questioning revealed that the local smith was in possession of Sten's armor and other equipment. No one else could possibly wear the huge man's armor, but the smith had planned to refashion it into new pieces. After some haggling, he agreed to fetch it forth and sell it back for a reasonable profit.

Morrigan, bored with watching the villagers and being watched in her turn, sauntered over to hear the end of the bargaining. As soon as the smith departed, she turned an amused look on Bronwyn.

"'Tis well you are supplied with gold, or our tall acquaintance would be wearing what scraps the Chantry girl scavenged from the dead."

"Or I'd have to have something made for him, and that would take forever," Bronwyn agreed. "It's a fair deal. The smith would have had to spend a great deal of time turning the armor into something anyone else could use."

"I find myself weary of all this incompetent sword-waving and bad archery. Have I not shown the flag, as it were, sufficiently? As there is nothing I can teach that these yokels could learn, I should like to return to the manor's library."

"Before you go, come with me to release Sten. We'll escort him up to the manor, and the seneschal will be easier if one of us is there to keep an eye on him. I'll have to return to finish here, of course."

"As you wish."

The smith returned soon, his arms and his sons' arms full of armor and accessories. Bronwyn called Scout away from his terrorizing of the village dogs, and together they found Sten, still standing with stoic patience in his cage. Some villagers came along to witness the event, and they shoved and murmured as Bronwyn turned the lock and freed the prisoner.

"So it begins," the qunari declared. "I shall follow you, and in so doing shall find my redemption."

He was somewhat surprised to have his armor returned to him, though his eyes wandered over the belongings, seeming to search for something that was not there.

"No weapons?" Bronwyn asked the smith.

"All I had was the armor," the smith answered. "That's what was there when he was taken." The men were paid, and returned to the muster, where the smith had promised to show some other men some tricks to using a maul.

Bronwyn gave the qunari a slight smile. He was handling his armor with reverence and relief, donning first the padded gambeson, and then the plate over it, like one who had lost and reclaimed his very skin.

"Well, Sten, you need something to fight with other than your mailed fists. What is your preferred weapon?"

He was very glum about it, obviously having lost a weapon dear to him, and Bronwyn sympathized. Finally he said, "A two-handed sword would be best, if one of suitable size can be had."

"One of the bandits we killed had a steel greatsword. If the villagers haven't already spirited it away, it might do. Let's go."

They walked back to the site of their recent victory, the qunari moving carefully. Bronwyn could see that he needed food and rest and reasonable exercise. A good thing they had horses.

As they approached the bodies, two figures suddenly rose up out of the grass: the two bandits who had run a few hours before. One held a sack of loot, and looked back and forth between the approaching threat and the safety of the Highway, undecided. The other dropped his burdens and took to his heels.

"Scout! Get him!" Bronwyn ordered, drawing her sword and dagger, and darting in at the irresolute man before her.

"You *really* shouldn't have come back," Bronwyn told him, just as her sword slashed his chest open.

Morrigan and Scout had between them brought down the other bandit. Sten stood over the bodies, looking thoughtful. Scout sat up and panted smugly at the qunari.

"You are a true warrior," Sten admitted, "and worthy of respect."

Scout barked an agreement. Bronwyn laughed to herself. Better that the qunari understood *that* from the first.

The qunari found the sword in question and pronounced it "adequate." Morrigan was picking through the bandit's sack, apparently finding the contents of interest. Bronwyn fought to control her disapproval. Father had explained to her that common soldiers always fought in part for loot. One must not despise them for it. Not everyone was a teyrn's daughter.

"Something nice?" she asked Morrigan.

"Oh!" The witch was uneasy. Then composing herself, she said, "Perhaps." She opened the bag and let Bronwyn have a look.

The bandits had done well for themselves. This sack must represent the best of their loot: six sovereigns, a bracelet of heavy gold, a pair of gold earrings, chains of gold and silver, a few rings. Some of the rings were gold and set with gems. It was easy now to understand why the bandits had come back for this treasure.

"That's a nice ruby," Bronwyn said, touching the bright stone with a curious forefinger. "Pretty."

Morrigan clutched at the bag, clearly wanting it for herself. "What do you intend to do with it?"

"It's not mine," Bronwyn answered easily. "It's yours. You found it. I suppose we'll all have to sit down tonight and decide on a fair policy in regard to loot, but that bag is yours. You get the jewelry and Sten gets the sword."

"And what do you get?" Morrigan asked warily.

"Powerful allies, I hope."

"Just how long were you in that cage?" Alistair asked Sten over dinner. His jaw dropped at the answer.

It was astonishing that Sten had survived all those days

without food and water. It was even more astonishing that after a hasty lunch, a bath, a nap, and a good dinner he seemed fairly fit and ready to travel. No wonder the qunari were such a menace.

More talk with local merchants had pried loose the equipment Bronwyn's new companions would need: packs and bedrolls and tents, canteens and mess kits, cloaks and socks -some socks even big enough for Sten's gigantic feet.

Leliana had few personal possessions, other than the armor and weapons she had brought with her to Ferelden. A mysterious case was revealed to contain an Orlesian triple-necked lute. It was a difficult instrument to play well-or even to play at all, as Bronwyn well remembered from years of painful music lessons.

"Are you any good?" she asked Leliana.

A sad and secret smile. "I can play a bit."

Bronwyn hoped she could. It would be very entertaining and good for morale. More specifically, it would be good for Bronwyn's morale. She liked music, though she was useless with any instrument other than a simple straight flute. If Leliana could play at all, then Bronwyn would think she had done well bringing her along with them.

She wondered what had happened to her flute. She wondered what had happened to all of her things in her room. Was some lackey of Howe's living there, sleeping in her bed, fingering her

possessions, throwing away her keepsakes? Had Howe destroyed the castle? Were the people of Highever in revolt, even now, struggling against his tyranny?

She scowled. It was useless to agonize over things she could not yet control. She would not lie awake tonight worrying about that, or about her journey to the Circle, and what she might say to insult the mages, and everything that might go wrong on the way. At least she hoped she would not.

"So I am to be a Grey Warden?" The qunari thought that over, frowning. "Or am I considered a Grey Warden already?"

"You are a Grey Warden *recruit*," Bronwyn clarified. "I won your freedom by invoking the Grey Warden Right of Conscription, which is absolute in Thedas. To actually become a Grey Warden requires additional steps, which will take place at a future date in our headquarters. For now, you will be a recruit and follow our ways."

"And those are?" asked the qunari.

"To kill darkspawn," Alistair informed him, munching. "We kill darkspawn whenever and wherever we find them. We do whatever it takes to kill them. That's our purpose."

"Our current mission," Bronwyn added, "is to enforce the treaties that support the Grey Wardens. We are going first to enlist the aid of the Circle of Mages at Kinloch Hold." The qunari frowned, not knowing the name. Bronwyn explained, "It is on an island just off the eastern shore of Lake Calenhad."

Sten's brow cleared. "I remember Lake Calenhad," he muttered.

"Well, that is where we are going first. Then we must try to cross the Lake or travel north around it to the dwarven city of Orzammar. Teyrn Loghain believes they will be strong allies during the Blight. They certainly have experience fighting darkspawn."

He nodded. "And then?"

"At that point we'll have to see if the darkspawn horde has regrouped or not. We may go to Denerim if the king is there or south to Ostagar if we need to. Ultimately, we want to search the Brecilian Forest for the Dalish clans. The Grey Wardens have a treaty with the Dalish too, but they are scattered and shy of strangers."

Sten asked, "The Brecilian Forest is closer than Lake Calenhad, is it not?"

"It is, but we might waste considerable time finding even one clan. We know exactly where the Circle is, and where Orzammar is. It will be easy to find those places, though we might face some resistance along the way."

"A Grey Warden..." Sten considered. "I have never heard of one of my people being a Grey Warden. It is a new thing for us."

"Then you will be the first," Bronwyn told him. "We are a very

ancient order of warriors. Ancient and honorable. We have protected Thedas for twelve hundred years: before the time of Andraste and the Chantry, before there was a Ferelden or even an Orlais." She gave the qunari a slight smile. "Whether any other qunari becomes a Grey Warden might very well lie with you."

"Am I a Grey Warden recruit, too?" Leliana wondered, blue eyes wide.

"Only if you want to be, at this point," said Bronwyn. "I did not have to conscript you, so there is no obligation involved. When the day comes, though, you will have to make a decision to join or not."

"You can call me a recruit, if you like," Leliana decided. "It is such an honor, after all..." She rose gracefully, and said. "I think I shall have a nice hot bath, with rose petals sprinkled on the water..." She drifted out of the hall and up the stairs. Morrigan rolled her eyes. Bronwyn smiled in spite of herself.

"Come on, Sten," she said, getting up from the table. "I want to show you your horse."

"I'll be with you in a minute," Alistair promised.

The stables were very well kept, and their own animals had been looked after properly. Scout nosed around, enjoying the smells. Bronwyn presumed that what animals Bann Ceorlic had not taken with him to Denerim had been sent to the army.

There was her own chestnut Posy- a nice animal. In the stall next to it was Trampler.

"That is indeed a horse," Sten agreed, his hand running over big animal's withers approvingly. "It should serve well."

Bronwyn was not surprised he had approved. She would add this to her letter to Fergus, and let him feel clever for giving her such a useful animal. Sten, however, was not quite the Orlesian silk-merchant Fergus had predicted.

Alistair called out, in the stable doorway. "Bronwyn? You in here?"

"Alistair," Bronwyn called back. "Come join us. Sten is making Trampler's acquaintance."

The stall next to Trampler was also occupied. Bronwyn looked, and looked again. This was not one of her horses. This was a lovely mare: a well-bred Antivan barb. Quickly she stalked through the rows of stalls, Scout at her heels. Four more horses were here: all high-quality mounts. One was a fairly big warhorse that might be a mixed Orlesian Destrier/Frostback Traveler.

We need these, she decided.

They needed more horses. They needed them for pack animals, and they needed them as spares in case of trouble. No one in Lothering seemed to have any for sale. No one else in Lothering seemed to have any at all.

In the back of the stable were three mules and a very charming little grey pony.

"We'll also take one of the mules," she said aloud.

"We'll also-?" Alistair prompted. He laughed. "Are you proposing that we *steal* Bann Ceorlic's horses? I didn't know you had it in you. You do know that stealing horses is a hanging offense in Ferelden? Well-it's a hanging offense anywhere *I've* ever heard of..."

"We're not *stealing* them," she answered, frowning in thought. "We're *requisitioning* them for use in a vital mission for the war. I shall leave a promissory note for Bann Ceorlic, and he will be paid for the animals out of Grey Warden funds in due course."

"He won't like it."

"He's not here," Bronwyn rapped out, "and I don't care if he likes it or not. We need those horses."

Sten nodded, apparently in approval. Alistair was still uncertain about the whole idea.

"We're supposed to try to get along with the local rulers, you know. Between organizing a militia and taking his horses, you could really stir things up."

"Alistair," she said patiently. "Bann Ceorlic is not *here*. If he needed those horses, he would have taken them with him. If

the darkspawn reform and attack, the poor beasts will just be eaten. We are taking the horses and we will pay a fair price for them. Not out of the funds we are carrying, of course. That would deplete our gold, and we'll need it. Bann Ceorlic is not even thinking about those horses. If I don't take them, I know we'll regret it."

Seneschal Rurik was also rather taken aback when she told him she was taking the horses. She sat him down in the library, and with him and Alistair to witness she wrote out a formal promissory note, signed *Bronwyn Cousland, Grey Warden*. The price was a good one, and was to be paid no later than next spring's Landsmeet. Bronwyn thought it a very business-like transaction.

"I'm not taking everything," Bronwyn consoled the man. "You'll have the mules for any farm work about the manor, and I can't bear to take that nice little pony into danger."

"Thank you," the man practically blubbered. "That's Lady Ethelswyth's pony. She's only eight, and losing it would break her heart."

"Of course the little girl can keep her pony," Bronwyn assured him, trying not to lose patience with the man. "However, we must take the five horses and their tack with us. The biggest mule will carry our cooking gear and some of the tents. Please see to the arrangements, and have the farrier make certain that the horses won't be throwing shoes anytime soon. We need to leave early tomorrow."

Before the village of Lothing can find more work for me,
she refrained from saying.

They left just after dawn: a rather impressive party, heavily armed and well mounted. Bronwyn distributed silver to all the servants who had looked after them, the maids and the cooks and the men who stoked the boiler. Morrigan insisted on walking down from the manor and through the village, rather than riding the lovely mare offered her.

"You can't walk the entire way," Bronwyn protested.

"I can walk through the village," Morrigan insisted. "And then I shall change into something more comfortable, so to speak. That is why I wear these robes that everyone so dislikes."

"I don't dislike your robes," Bronwyn told her. "They're just unlike any mage's robes I ever seen."

"That is because they are created and enchanted for my peculiar talents. I would have to remove those robes your tame mages wear lest I be tangled in yards of wool if I changed form in them. This garment, however," she stroked the feathers at her shoulder, "changes with me. I alter it as I learn a new shape. It mirrors my talents, and molds itself to whichever body I take."

"It's a mighty power," Bronwyn said, rather wistfully. "And very useful."

Pleased, Morrigan preened a little. "I am glad that *you*, at least, see the value of this ancient magic. The Chantry calls it evil, and claims it is only practiced by maleficarum, but *I* hold that some things are worth preserving. The only 'evil' in shape-changing is that it makes it harder for the Chantry to control me!"

"Just be careful, that's all I ask."

Bronwyn looked about the village, pleased at the changes she had wrought. Lookouts manned the watchtowers. Two more waved at the Wardens' party from the uppermost floor of the mill. Lumber was piled up where the carpenters were building a strong gate to protect that side of the village. If the place could be just a little more secure than it was when she arrived, Bronwyn would consider her two days well spent.

Early as it was, people were there to see them off. A group of children sat on the stone walls, kicking their heels against the mossy stones. The two oldest Gale children darted out to greet them.

"See!" Drisa shouted at some village girls. "We do so know them! Please, Warden! Wave at those girls and tell them you know me!"

"Me! Me, too, Wardens!" Conn called.

"Good day to you, Drisa and Conn!" Bronwyn called back obligingly. "Give my respects to your mother and to all the Gale family!"

There were "Oooohs" of awe, and a number of children jumped down and began tagging along.

Conn ran up alongside Alistair's horse. "When I'm a man, I'm going to be a Grey Warden!"

"Good for you!" Alistair grinned at the boy.

"Me too!" Drisa seconded.

"That's silly," Conn objected. "You're never going to be a man!"

"Then I'll be a Girl Warden like Bronwyn," his sister told him airily. "I'll be the Girl Warden Drisa, and all will fear me!"

"I'd rather be a mage," one daring young towhead declared. "I like her black leather."

Bronwyn smirked at a fuming Morrigan, who was on the point of chasing away some bold young admirers. She raised her hand to halt her party, and told the children. "That's far enough! Thank you for your courtesy. I hope you older children will practice your archery under your Captain's supervision. Until then, mind your elders, and keep safe!"

"I have some flowers for you," Drisa said, offering Bronwyn a handful of limp daisies.

"I thank you, Girl Warden Drisa. Until we meet again!" She whispered to Morrigan, "We really must get out of here before the whole village arrives. Please get on the horse!"

Morrigan hesitated, tempted to show these peasants something extraordinary.

Bronwyn hissed, "*Please* just get on the bloody horse!" She untied the mares' lead, knotted it around the pommel, and then held the reins out commandingly.

"I hate this!" Morrigan snarled. She made a face at the Antivan mare, who gazed back with mild brown eyes. The young witch was lithe enough to mount easily, and took up the reins just as she had seen Bronwyn do.

Bronwyn leaned over and smirked at her. "Hold tight with your legs and move with the horse," she said in a low voice. Then, straightening in the saddle, she called out, "Let's go!" and kicked her horse into a canter. Scout barked his excitement. The Wardens clattered up the stone ramp of the Imperial Highway, and galloped off together, heading west. Behind them, the children cheered shrilly.

Morrigan was surprised at the smoothness of the horse's motion: an easy rocking, and not the jerking and shaking she had expected. She saw that Bronwyn's arms were stretched out in front of her, allowing the horse's neck and head full freedom of movement. Imitating this caused the horse's gait to smooth out even more. It was not an unpleasant sensation.

Bronwyn grinned at her, shouting, "You can't say this isn't fun!"

Morrigan shouted back, "'Tis a poor substitute for flying!"

"Just a little farther. You can change once we're out of sight of the watchtowers!"

They traveled a mile, and then another, moving at an easy pace. Morrigan began to feel that there was nothing at all to riding a horse, until Bronwyn raised a hand, and the party slowed. Instantly the rocking motion became choppy, and Morrigan bounced very uncomfortably in the saddle.

"There's a trick to sitting a trot, which I'll teach you at a later date," Bronwyn said. "That's enough riding for one day. Now you can change, as you say, 'into something more comfortable.'" She told the rest of the company, "We'll reach a fork in the road in a few miles. We'll bear to our right: that road will take us along the north shore of Lake Belenas. If we keep up a good pace we should be able to camp by Lake Calenhad tonight."

Morrigan wondered if she should dismount, and then decided against it. Her legs might be-untrustworthy-after this experience, and she did not want to reveal any weaknesses that might be used against her later.

She lifted her hand and suddenly distorted in a shocking, unworldly way, like one image superimposed on an entirely different one. She shrank, feathers sprouted, legs shortened, and with a high *Creee!* of triumph, a hawk soared up and settled on a the branch of an overhanging birch tree.

"Show off," Alistair muttered.

Sten scowled in profound surprise and disapproval. Leliana was astonished, too, but also very impressed.

"Such a beautiful bird," she declared. "So proud and independent! The feathers are so pretty! The last winter I was in Orlais, feathers were very much in fashion!"

Thanks to my brilliant reviewers: Sarah1281, Piceron, mille libri, khaos974, Sati James, Zyanic, Annara Ren, bioncafemme, Eva Galana, Kempe, Angry Girl, almostinsane, Rooney, and rascality.

Oh-and some have expressed dismay that Zevran might not make an appearance. Do remember that it was Howe who contacted the Crows, not Loghain!

I am including quite a bit of canon dialogue here for the benefit of my readers who have never played the game.

Please review! It really inspires me.

11. Spoiled Princesses

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 11: Spoiled Princesses

Such a strong, well-armed, well-mounted party was hardly a target. Bronwyn and her companions rode through the Hinterlands and skirted the shore of Lake Belenas seeing few signs of life, and meeting no opposition at all.

The handful of people on the road tended to melt away into the surrounding woods at the sound of their approaching hooves. Wolves howled in the distance, but Scout seemed to sense no real threat.

They reached the branch in the road, and Alistair slowed his pace, looking wistfully to the left. That road itself branched a little farther on: The Imperial Highway ran south, back to Ostagar, but also west, around the southern tip of Lake Calenhad. The road sign made it official that that was the way to Redcliffe.

"Do you miss it?" Bronwyn asked. "Redcliffe, I mean?"

"I haven't been there in years," Alistair told her. "I don't know. With Arl Eamon gone, it wouldn't be the same. Maybe I miss

my childhood, such as it was. Maybe I wish things could have been different. Anyway, it's gone, and so is he," They cantered past, and Alistair was quiet for some miles.

This portion of the West Road was not as splendid as the Imperial Highway, but they still made good time, stopping to rest the horses and eat some bread and fruit when the sun was high overhead. Bronwyn had seen enough to be satisfied with her companions' horsemanship. Leliana had an upright, elegant seat on her mount, and the qunari knew what he was about. Morrigan flew and rested by turns, and the horses did not seem to mind the hawk perched on their backs. It was amusing to Bronwyn that Morrigan seemed to prefer to rest on the back of "her" horse—the Antivan mare. It really would be a good idea for her to learn to ride properly.

As the afternoon shadows lengthened, they came upon a small abandoned house by the side of the road—an inn or tavern of some sort from the darkened, illegible sign swinging above the open door.

"We can camp here tonight," Bronwyn decided. "There must be a well."

There was, and with good water, too. Leliana volunteered to cook the dinner, and all of them were busy for some time, unloading the gear, caring for the horses, scrubbing a table clean for their use, making a fire for Leliana to cook over. They were well-supplied, and there was no reason to stint themselves. Before preparing the food, Leliana searched the house methodically for anything of use or value. Bronwyn was

a bit shocked.

"What if the owners return?"

"Why did they leave the door open?" Leliana shrugged. "This place looks deserted to me. These foodstuffs-" she pointed at the dusty shelves in the larder "-won't last forever. We should use what we can't take with us, and take with us what we can."

There were all sorts of oddments, though not much of any one thing: a few bottles of cheap Ferelden wine, and a small untapped keg of indifferent ale. It would be good enough to drink tonight. There was a small crate of salt fish, that the vermin had not yet breached, and some onions and carrots hanging from the ceiling.

The big stewpot was filled with an amazing variety of ingredients, and soon a very savory herbal scent filled the air. They still had plenty of bread, and some cheese that could be rationed out-actually, that *must* be rationed out, or Alistair might eat the lot of it that very night.

Food was not the only thing that Leliana found in the house. Bronwyn was uncomfortable with it. The former occupants were not rich banns, but poor people. She decided that to salve her conscience she would leave some silver behind the bar the next morning. The owners might never return, but Bronwyn would be able to tell herself that she was not a scavenger.

The fish stew Leliana concocted met with general approval. and the comfort of the food made conversation easier among them.

Alistair finished inhaling his second bowl of stew, and then said to Bronwyn, "You know, you promised to tell me that story-the 'Be Bold But Not Too Bold' thing."

"I did not," Bronwyn replied saucily. "*You* promised to pester me until I told it."

"Oh, I love stories!" Leliana urged. "I don't know that one. Please tell it."

"Well-" Bronwyn considered. "If I tell this story, each of you must tell a story-not tonight, of course-but sometime in the future. That way we'll be sure of diversion when we need it."

Morrigan regarded her skeptically. "You want *me* to tell a story? Are you *sure*?"

"Yes," Bronwyn affirmed. "I am. Stories will help me understand my companions better, and there is nothing wrong with that."

Sten frowned, and then nodded. "Yes. Interesting. You wish to have more insight into the characters of those you command. An unusual method, but not unsound. I agree to participate."

"Excellent!" Bronwyn smirked at Alistair. "Well, Alistair? Are

you in?"

"Sure. It sounds like fun. You go first, though."

"All right." Bronwyn rose and stood in front of the fire. "I shall tell you one of my favorite stories, and I shall tell it exactly as I heard it from my dear nursemaid Nan: The Story of Ser Murtherous and the Bloody Chamber."

"Oh," muttered Alistair, "That sounds-gruesome."

"Ssshhh," Leliana hushed him. "I want to hear this."

Bronwyn's story of Ser Murtherus:

Lady Dara was young, and Lady Dara was fair. She had two brothers, and more suitors than she could count. But of them all, the bravest and most gallant was Ser Murtherus, whom she met at a tournament in Denerim. No one knew who Ser Murtherus was, or where he came from; but he was certainly brave, and clearly rich, and of all her suitors, Lady Dara cared for him alone. He asked for her hand and was accepted. He described his keep, and where it was, but did not arrange for her to come with her brothers to see it.

Lady Dara was full of curiosity about her new home, so one day when her father and brothers were hunting, and Ser Murtherus had gone away to tend to some business—as he said—she mounted her horse and set out to find his castle.

At last, after a long ride, she came to a solitary wood, and a fine strong keep she saw, with high walls and a deep moat. When she came up to the gateway, she saw a sign written on it:

Be bold, be bold.

The gate was closed, and no one answered. The little postern gate to the side was open, though, with room enough for her to slip through. Lady Dara had a cold feeling, like something terrible would happen. She tied her horse in the woods, well out of sight, and she entered the courtyard, all empty and silent as it was, and went to the door, and over it was a sign:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

Still she went on, until she came into the hall. It was fine and broad and high, but empty like all the rest of the castle. She found some wide stairs and went up them, until she came to a door at the end of the gallery, over which was written:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold,

Lest that your heart's blood should run cold.

But Lady Dara was a brave one, she was, and she opened the door, and what do you think she saw? A pile of bodies of other young ladies, dead and rotten, the remains of their rich clothing stained with blood. So Lady Dara thought it high time to leave that place, and she closed the door, and she ran back along the gallery and down the stairs.

But just as she reached the door of the hall, she heard loud voices, and the sound of armored feet. She rushed to a corner, and hid herself behind some barrels, and Ser Murtherus came in with his henchmen, dragging a young lady through the door. They laughed and joked, and paid no attention to the young lady's shrieks and lamentations. They forced her to drink three glasses of wine: white, yellow, and red as blood. They stabbed her, every one of them, and then she lay dead. Ser Murtherus saw a ruby ring on the lady's hand, and tried to pull it from her finger. But it was too tight, and he cursed and swore and he drew his sword, and cut the young lady's hand right off.

The hand flew into the air and fell, of all places, into Lady Dara's lap. The men roared with laughter, as they dragged the dead young lady up to the Bloody Chamber. Ser Murtherus wanted to search for the ring, but his captain stopped him and said, "Wait until tomorrow morning. That hand won't run away!"

No sooner were they out of sight than Lady Dara jumped up from behind the barrels, made a dash for the door, and was outside and through the postern gate, and on her horse, and riding for home as fast as ever she could.

Now it happened that Lady Dara and Ser Murtherus were to be married the very next day. All her father's vassals came, and her brothers and all her kin, and there was a great wedding breakfast set out. Ser Murtherus came with his henchmen and was seated across from Lady Dara, and he said,

"How pale you are this morning, my dear."

"Yes," said she, "I had no rest last night, for I was plagued by a terrible dream."

He was very gallant, and said, "Dreams go by contraries. Tell me your dream, and your sweet voice will make the time pass till the happy hour comes."

"I dreamed," said Lady Dara, "that I went yesterday to your castle, and I found it at last in a solitary wood. It had high walls, and a deep moat, and over the gateway was written:

Be bold, be bold.

Ser Murtherus looked at her strangely, and he said, "But it is not so, nor was it so."

Lady Dara said, "I went to the door, and over it was written:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

He said, "It is not so, nor was it so."

"And then I went up the stairs," she said, "and came to a gallery, at the end of which was a door, and over it was written:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold,

Lest that your heart's blood should run cold.

"It is not so, nor was it so," said Ser Murtherus.

"And then," she said, "I opened the door, and inside the room were piled the bodies of dead young ladies, their rich clothes stained with blood."

"It is not so, nor was it so," said Ser Murtherus. "And Maker forbid that it should be so."

"Then I dreamed that I rushed down the gallery, and down the stairs, and just as my hand was on the door, I heard you, Ser Murtherus, and your men coming up to the hall, dragging with you a young lady, rich and beautiful."

"It is not so, nor was it so," said Ser Murtherus, "And Maker forbid that it should be so."

"I dreamed that I hid myself behind some barrels while you and your men forced the young lady to drink your wine: white, yellow, and red as blood. And then you stabbed her, every one of you, and she lay dead. You tried to get her ruby ring from her finger, but it was too tight, and you drew your sword and hacked off her poor hand."

"It is not so, nor was it so. And Maker forbid that it should be so," said Ser Murtherus. He was rising from his seat, getting ready to say something else, when Lady Dara cried out:

"But it *is* so, and it *was* so. Here's hand and ring I have to show!" and she pulled out the lady's hand from her dress, and pointed it straight at Ser Murtherus.

And at once, her father and her brothers and all her kin drew their swords, and they cut Ser Murtherus and his evil henchmen into a thousand pieces.

The story finished, Bronwyn bowed gracefully, just like the traveling minstrels she had seen.

"That," said Alistair, "is just about the goriest thing I ever heard. I can't believe your nursemaid told you that. They never told us things like that in the Chantry!"

Morrigan laughed at him. "No doubt! I found it very diverting. An evil man's plans foiled by a woman's wit and courage!" To Bronwyn, she said, "The story you told those tiresome children back at Lothing had a moral. What is the moral here, I wonder?"

"That the ones you love aren't always the people you think they are," Leliana whispered, almost to herself.

Sten remarked, "I approve that the men executed the criminals, as is proper. The young woman also showed good sense in retaining credible evidence against them."

Bronwyn laughed lightly, "I always find it amusing that it was an arranged marriage, with the full consent of her father. Perhaps the moral is that sometimes parents choose no better for their children than the children would for themselves!"

Morrigan smirked. "You are subversive! And a teyrn's daughter, too!"

"I dislike others choosing for me," Bronwyn shrugged. "If that is subversive, so be it."

Darkness crept into the little room, making the fire on the hearth glow brighter by contrast. The companions slowly settled down for the night, each finding a place to sleep that suited them. Bronwyn sat up for a little while at the table, working on her lengthening letter to Fergus.

Leliana offered to take the first watch, and stepped outside to find a dark corner to lurk in. Morrigan seemed to like to keep her distance from the others, and claimed a room upstairs for herself. The rest of them spread their blankets out in the little common room. Once finished with her writing, Bronwyn chose to sleep sheltered behind the bar, and Scout stretched out beside her. Their situation lacked something of Lothing Manor's comfort, certainly, but at least they had not had to pitch tents.

She found it very hard to fall asleep in such a strange place. Sten snored, very quiet and very low: the sound so much like his speaking voice that it almost made Bronwyn laugh. Alistair only snored when his sleep was disturbed by nightmares, which was unfortunately often.

Finally, she drifted off, kept from true rest by gibbering monsters walking her dreamscape. It was almost a relief when Leliana gently shook her arm. She sat up slowly, and

gave Leliana a nod of thanks. Scout's eyes were already open and alert, reflecting glints of firelight in their black depths. He padded silently out just in front of her, and she shut the door.

How many nights will be like this? she wondered.

The distant lake shimmered silver under the moonlight. Deep in the sighing trees, a few nightbirds called. Bronwyn looked up at the glittering stars, searching for her favorite constellations. So strange. A month ago she could not have pictured herself standing watch near Lake Belanas, far from everyone she had ever loved, on a mission to save Ferelden from monsters.

What would Mother say, if she could see her now? That last day, Mother had worried about Bronwyn and her lack of "softer skills;" she had worried about finding her a husband. Mother had never reconciled herself to Bronwyn's arrangement with Father. When she could be brought to talk about it at all, she made plain she thought it a bad idea: bad for the Couslands in general, and very bad for Bronwyn in particular. What she wanted for Bronwyn was very different than what Bronwyn wanted for herself. Mother wanted Bronwyn to relive her own wonderful life: a lovely young nobleman with a lovely home, who with Bronwyn would make lovely children. Mother always wanted lots of grandchildren.

No. I don't want to think about Oren.

She was usually such a light sleeper. Why on that night of all nights, had she slept so obliviously while enemies crept

through their halls, while they made their way into her brother's bedchamber?

"Holy Andraste!" she hissed out loud, and then bit her lip, angry that she had given away her position. She moved silently to another dark place, and fixed her attention on her surroundings. Still the thoughts plagued her. Howe's men must have had the keys. Who gave them the keys? Did they kill the seneschal first? Or did they have a good picklock with them? Bronwyn was rather good at picking locks herself, having had practice whenever she had been locked in her room as a punishment.

If only she had heard the bastards creeping around! If only she had awakened when Scout first gave the alarm. Her imagination pictured her waking, alert and ready, arming herself quickly, surprising the intruders, saving Oriana and Oren, gathering them and Mother for an escape...

She would have sent them to the larder immediately, and looked for Father on her own. But then, reality intruded. It was more likely that Mother would have ordered her to take Oriana and Oren under her protection, and then Mother would have gone with the servants to look for Father. And she likely would have died.

She died anyway, Bronwyn thought bitterly. At least I might have rescued Fergus' wife and child. And I might not now be a Grey Warden. We could have gone west, to Bann Alfstanna's manor. She has always been a good friend of the Couslands...

But if Bronwyn were not a Grey Warden, what would have happened at Ostagar? What would have happened had she not been there to give the signal? What if Teyrn Loghain had not charged? What if he found that the King's position was already hopelessly overrun?

Bronwyn shivered, imagining the consequences: the king dead; half the army dead; the teyrn forced to choose between deserting the king and possibly destroying the entire army of Ferelden; darkspawn roaming unchecked, swarming up the Imperial Highway, their foulness surging over Lothering like an evil tide. What if Loghain had charged late, even knowing he was doomed, and died there on the field with the king? Ferelden would have been unarmed and unprotected, in chaos. Three of the country's five arls might have perished as well, and with the death of Arl Eamon, Rendon Howe would become the premier noble in Ferelden. Bronwyn thought of Fergus, wounded, dying all alone in the Wilds; of Queen Anora, far away in Denerim, hearing shreds of ghastly rumors, trying to assemble some sort of force with no one to help her...

It didn't happen. Bronwyn clamped down firmly on such frightening, disturbing images. *I didn't let it happen. I was there. I couldn't be everywhere, but I was there.*

Scout snuffled around the outside of the little house, nosing into nooks and crannies. Bronwyn made herself focus on watching and listening, while the stars in their courses wheeled overhead.

Much later, the door opened, and a tall figure emerged, stooping under the lintel.

"I have come to relieve you," Sten told her.

"Thanks. Scout and I have heard and seen nothing of concern. I can't even say it's *too* quiet, the way it was in the Wilds."

He nodded, and remained looking at her, frowning in the dim light. Bronwyn wondered what was on his mind, when he suddenly declared:

"You look like a woman."

Surprised, offended, amused, she paused, trying to think what to say, and finally replied, "I *am* a woman."

The frown deepened. "Women are priests, artisans, farmers, or shopkeepers. They don't fight."

Bronwyn smiled, remembering other debates with other people on this very point. "That must be the tradition in your country. A custom of your people, not a universal truth. Some women fight. Some women have to."

"It is the duty of warriors to fight. Not women."

"You know, Sten, my brother's wife often told me that. She was a good person and a wonderful mother. I loved her dearly. She wanted me to be like the women in Antiva, her homeland, where the women are refined and educated and never fight-except with words and poison." Bronwyn leaned

against the wall, looking briefly out to the silent road, and added, "You will notice that she is not *here*, and I am. She was killed when enemies attacked our home. Because she did not know how to fight, it was easy for those men to kill her and her child. The women of Ferelden learned long ago that the menfolk can't always be there to protect the womenfolk."

She looked up at him with a hint of challenge. "So, yes, Sten. I am a woman, and I am a soldier. I am a Grey Warden, and I am at war against the Blight. You look like a soldier yourself."

"I am."

"Have you ever fought in a war before?"

"I have always fought in war."

"Good. Then you must know your way around a battlefield."

"Some of them. They aren't all alike."

"Well said. I'll leave you to your watch."

Their journey continued with little incident and few difficulties. The second day, true, a large wolf pack followed at their heels for some miles, hoping for signs of weakness. Even the mule, however, could put up a fierce fight with teeth and hooves, and the wolves gradually dropped behind, their yips of disappointment fading into the other sounds of the forest.

They pressed on, and the road turned north as the vast grey

expanse of Lake Calenhad emerged. The West Road became the Lake Road. They eventually stopped at a farmhold, where Bronwyn dismounted and approached the house, hands empty and out.

"We are Grey Wardens, on our way to the Lake Calenhad docks. May we use your well, and camp tonight in your meadow?"

The freeholder peered out into the twilight, alarmed, crossbow in hand. His wife whispered excitedly behind the door. Permission was granted, and a little later, a young boy came out to bring them a plate of cookies.

"You're the Girl Warden, aren't you? We could tell by the helmet."

Alistair smirked at her. Bronwyn sighed, and thanked the boy for the treats.

"What are these?" asked Sten. "Some sort of local waybread?"

"Cookies, Sten," Alistair told him, grinning. "They're cookies. Try them."

The qunari did, and said nothing, but thought long on the matter.

The farmer's boy seemed inclined to linger, and Alistair answered his questions in his genial, unassuming manner.

Bronwyn knew it was silly to sulk about a name, but it was so *annoying*. She pitched her tent and disappeared into it as soon as possible, hoping for rest.

The farmer's wife insisted on making them breakfast the following morning, which saved them time and effort. They were invited into the little house and served at the family's table. Bronwyn made herself rise to the occasion, and expressed her appreciation for the hospitality in her grandest style. Before long, they were on the road once more.

There was time for talk. Hesitantly at first, Leliana spoke of how pleasant and quiet she had found life in the Chantry....but that is was....not entirely perfect. Growing more confident, she told Bronwyn more: there were judgmental people there, people intolerant of the views of others, people with whom she was never quite in tune. She called herself a native of Ferelden, but that was an exaggeration. She was the bastard child of a Fereldan woman who had been a servant to an Orlesian lady. When the Orlesians were driven from Ferelden in the wake of King Maric's successful rebellion, Lady Cecille had allowed her servant to travel to Orlais with her. Leliana had been born there, and her mother had died when Leliana was very young.

"But Lady Cecille was so kind and so gracious. She could have thrown me into the street. Instead, she kept me with her, and paid for my music and dance lessons. But she, too, died, and I was alone."

Her whole story raised more questions than it answered.

Bronwyn considered her companion as they rode together. How had Leliana earned her bread, after the lady of the house had died? Had she been married? Had she been in the Chantry in Orlais? She spoke of music lessons: was she a minstrel? More to the point—was she a bard?

The reputation of Orlesian bards as spies and assassins as well as entertainers was not mere invention. Father himself knew a number of bards and had had some—close calls—in the course of his embassy to the Empress. They were beautiful, clever, deceitful, skilled, enthralling and deadly—both the men and the women.

If Leliana was a minstrel, that was well enough: she would have musical skill and might be able to tell stories. Minstrels had a shady reputation of their own, of course, as female minstrels often supplemented their earnings from public performances with coin earned in more private and intimate circumstances. Perhaps Leliana was repenting such sins in the Chantry.

If she were actually a bard, instead—and the skills of minstrels and bards overlapped a great deal—there might be very sinister reasons for her presence in Ferelden. Father had explained that the intelligence network of the Empress spread all over Thedas: her agents were everywhere. Some of them worked openly, living at the Orlesian embassy and gathering information from the foolish or inebriated at receptions and feasts.

There were others, though: the ones Father called "sleeper"

agents. What if Leliana had been sent to Lothering to insinuate herself into the village, to listen for interesting rumors, to step forward when opportunity knocked? Things could get very, very bad, if a bard were to find out the truth of Alistair's paternity. The Empress would pay a fortune for that kind of information. Leliana would certainly not discover it from any carelessness of Bronwyn's. Perhaps she should talk about the issue discreetly with Alistair...

They met the bereskarn on the third day: the horses screaming and striking out; Morrigan darting down from the sky to pick at the creature's eyes; Leliana galloping past in a blur of speed, twisting in the saddle to shoot with deadly accuracy; Scout snarling, leaping to rip at the mighty throat. Swords slashed, as they surrounded the beast, and it went down at length, roaring in protest, stretched out on the dusty earth.

There were other hazards, other threats. A pair of incompetent horsethieves attempted to cut the horses' hobbles and make off with them, only to meet with the twin misfortunes of Scout and Trampler before the other companions even reached the spot. At an isolated house, the inhabitants tried to lure them in and poison them, but found themselves outmatched.

Only once did they see darkspawn, and it was a small group—perhaps a scouting party. Sten showed no fear of the monsters, and to her surprise, neither did Leliana, who was an aggressive fighter, and curiously bloodthirsty for someone so sweet-spoken.

Bronwyn was expecting Morrigan to freeze the darkspawn spellcaster in place, when Alistair suddenly put up his hand, and the creature's spells dried up to a pathetic trickle. He was down and dead in short order. Bronwyn stared at her companion.

"What did you *do* to that darkspawn mage?"

"Templar trick," Alistair grinned. "Sucks the magic right out of them for a minute or two."

"Impressive."

So there was danger and hardship, of course, and quite a bit of blood spilled and splashed, but they were still making good time, and on the afternoon of the fourth day a ghostly tower appeared, as if suspended in the air over the lake.

"Kinloch Hold," Bronwyn told her party. "Home of the Circle of Magi."

As they rode north, the tower grew larger and less ethereal. Eventually the bottom made contact with the island below it. Everyone had remarks to make about the imposing structure.

"Is that the prison for your mages?" Sten asked. "Ours are not so grand."

Morrigan chuckled at that, remarking, "A grand prison indeed. How appropriate that they built it in the middle of a lake and

made it look like a giant phallus."

Sten snorted. "Humans, over-compensating as usual."

"Not very practical," Alistair said to Bronwyn.

Leliana gazed at in in wonder. "Well, / think the view from the top must be spectacular!"

Bronwyn scowled. Was she the only one here who knew any history? "The tower was not built either for or by the mages. The ancient Avvars built it over fifteen hundred years ago, with the help of the dwarves. That's probably why it's still intact. The Tenvinters took it over when they conquered these lands, and after their withdrawal it lay empty for centuries until the mages moved in during the Towers Age. That's only six hundred years ago. It's true that it's prison-like, in that the causeway was deliberately destroyed, making it accessible only by boat. And yes, Leliana, I imagine the view *is* spectacular. It's nearly as tall as the tower of Fort Drakon in Denerim."

"A gilded prison," Morrigan considered, "but still a prison. How can you call it impractical, Alistair, when it serves its function to isolate and incarcerate Ferelden's mages so very well?"

Bits of Tenvinter ruins became frequent as they approached the docks and the associated village marked on Bronwyn's excellent map. By the time they reached the slope leading down to the water's edge, the road was framed by ancient colonnades. Below them lay the docks, and what must surely

be an inn.

No boats were tied up at the moment. Bronwyn bit her lip. That was awkward. She had hoped for a good-sized boat to take them across the lake. Without it, they would have the long ride around the north end of the lake before them. Well, her business at the Circle would take time. When it was complete, perhaps there would be something.

Wait—there were no boats *at all* at the docks.

"Well," she told her party, "it appears I won't be going to the Circle today. The Tower ferry must have left with someone else."

Alistair was philosophical about it. "We can go in the morning. We'll be rested and cleaned up by then. Maybe it's all for the best, if we want to make a good impression."

"Perhaps so. The inn looks tidy and well-kept, at least." They dismounted, and a boy came out to take the horses. After giving him instructions and dire warnings, they walked up to the inn itself and made out the sign. "The Spoiled Princess?" Bronwyn laughed. "I've never heard of such a name!"

"Sounds right up your alley," Alistair teased.

"Ha! No princess here! Are you implying I'm spoiled?"

"Are you saying you're not, my lady?" His smile grew softer. "And you're as close to a princess as no matter. If your father

had been elected King, you *would* have been a princess!"

"Yes, well-" Bronwyn shrugged, uncomfortable with the great interest that Alistair's revelation had generated in the rest of their companions. "*If* the ancient Tevinter mages hadn't been idiots, there wouldn't have been darkspawn, either!"

The inn was small but clean. The innkeeper was a pleasant man who welcomed them warmly, poured them some good ale, and was happy to tell them the history of inn's name-an ironic tale of sibling rivalry and the innkeeper's pampered sister's sticky end. Bronwyn asked about lodging, and he offered them the rooms available.

Which were two in number. "Another party's got the third."

"Well, that's easy," Bronwyn said, with sardonic nonchalance. "Gentlemen to the right and ladies to the left."

"I hope the bed is *really* big," Alistair muttered.

Bronwyn blew out a breath. "So do I." She had not had to share a bed in years, but she would be hanged before she would give up her share and sleep on the floor.

The room was-well-*not* very big. Bronwyn, Morrigan, and Leliana nearly tripped over each other, trying to stow their packs and wash. The bed itself would just accommodate three slender women-if they didn't move much.

"It's still better than the floor," Bronwyn told herself.

"Someone is going to have to sleep in the *middle*," Morrigan said darkly. Clearly, it would not be her.

"I don't mind!" Leliana volunteered, very cheerfully.

"And the dog stays in the common room tonight," Morrigan demanded. "I'm not catching fleas from your filthy mongrel!"

"All right," Bronwyn agreed grudgingly. Scout would probably be trampled if he slept in here.

They sent for more wash water, and Bronwyn eased gratefully out of her filthy armor. Cleaning it would occupy her most of the evening. At least she had other clothes to wear. Leliana had only her chantry robe, and Bronwyn watched the girl slip into it, determined that they would find her something else. A Grey Warden recruit in a chantry robe sent a message that Bronwyn thought was not at all appropriate. The Grey Wardens were *not* an arm of the Chantry.

"We'll have to find something new for you," she told Leliana casually. "I know how tiring it is to wear armor all the time."

Morrigan caught her eye and smirked, understanding her perfectly. She was still in her robes, not thinking a wayside inn grand enough for her green gown.

Leliana turned big, worried eyes on Bronwyn. "Should I not have put this on?"

"It's all right for tonight, but you really need something else.

"We'll see if we can find something here or on the road later."

"I haven't any money," Leliana told her sadly.

"We'll buy it out of Warden funds."

"Oh!" Leliana's face lit up. "How kind of you! Can it be blue? I love blue!"

By the time they returned to the common room, Alistair and Sten were already there, talking with a middle-aged man who must be the other guest of the inn. His commonplace traveling clothes told little about him, but his bearing revealed he was clearly no warrior.

"Brother Genetivi," he introduced himself, standing courteously as the women approached. "An honor to meet you, Wardens."

"I am not a Warden," Morrigan replied ungraciously, seating herself as far as possible from the man.

"Brother Genetivi?" Bronwyn thought for a moment. She smiled. "I believe I read a book of yours! You wrote that biography of the Rebel Queen. I enjoyed it so much."

The pleasant smile broadened. "My thanks! It was a labor of love, writing on such a very worthy subject." With a certain diffidence, he said, "I believe we have a mutual acquaintance, Warden Bronwyn. Your tutor Aldous was a good mentor to me, long ago. We often corresponded, and he had much to say about the wonderful children he was privileged to teach."

She was unprepared for the sudden pang of loss, but pushed it aside, and made herself smile a little. "We were such a trial to him! He was a good man, and a very good teacher. I am sorry to tell you," she added, "that he is dead. He was killed, along with so many others, when Arl Rendon Howe attacked Highever."

"Yes," he said, very gently. "The news of the arl's crime is all over Ferelden. The Queen herself is horrified, and is working to bring Howe to justice."

"I am glad to hear it," she managed, "but I really do not wish to speak of it now. I had rather hear," she told him, "how a distinguished scholar such as yourself happens to be traveling in such troubled times."

The serving woman brought them their suppers, and they fell to, glad of a meal they did not have to cook themselves. Over the stew and bread, Genetivi told them of himself.

"I suppose I was restless. I suppose I was tired of writing about other peoples' adventures, and wanted to have a grand adventure of my own while I still could."

Alistair pointed out, "We have a Blight on our hands, you know. Maybe it would have been a good idea to wait?"

"Warden," Gentivi laughed ruefully, "Some Blights have lasted over a hundred years. I don't have that kind of time. There comes a moment in a man's life when he asks, 'If not now, then when?' So here I am, on the trail of the Urn of the Sacred

Ashes."

Leliana stared at him in wonder. Bronwyn and Alistair looked at each other, a bit incredulous. Sten and Morrigan continued eating, quite unconcerned.

"Yes," said Brother Genetivi, "I do mean the urn that contains the remains of the Prophet Andraste herself. The remains are said to have remarkable curative powers. My research indicates that the urn still exists, and is in Ferelden."

"That is amazing!" Leliana cried, "Oh, how I wish I could go with you. I would, too, if I did not have to kill darkspawn. Where do you think it is?"

He did not seem to mind telling his story, and brought out a map, showing them the location- in the Frostback Mountains- of a remote village called Haven. "That is my destination. I believe the people there can direct me further. There is a funerary temple somewhere in the mountains nearby."

"Haven?" Bronwyn frowned, trying to place the name. "I've never heard of such a place." She got up and came back with her own map of Ferelden. Spreading it out to compare it with Genetivi's, she said, "Not here. Are you sure there's such a village?"

"I have very good information about it. I'm as sure as a cautious old scholar can be."

"Do you mind if I mark it on my own map?" Bronwyn asked.

Genetivi's map displayed other details in the west of Ferelden, beyond Lake Calenhad, that were unknown to her. Leliana ran to fetch pen and ink, and Bronwyn carefully placed a dot on the map and labeled it "Haven." There was another place, south of Redcliffe, that was called "Honnleath." She added that to her map as well. There were some interesting rivers and roads that she drew in. Smiling, she wondered what Teyrn Loghain would say when she told him she knew things about Ferelden that he did not.

"I can't believe you're going alone," Alistair said, rather concerned. "Couldn't the Chantry spare some Templars to send with you?"

Genetivi shrugged. "They're not very impressed with my research," he admitted. "They think I'm chasing rainbows. And besides, hunting apostates is easier than traveling hundreds of miles into danger. No, the Grand Cleric gave me permission to go myself, but offered me no assistance. I suppose I shouldn't have written that controversial study of the early days of the Chantry. The fact is that I'm not in favor at the moment."

Morrigan considered that, and deigned to look at Genetivi a little less despisingly.

Bronwyn said feelingly, "I certainly wish you well, Brother, and I look forward to reading an amazing book someday!"

"You are very kind," he smiled, folding up his map. "It was an honor to have met you. But now I'm afraid I must turn in. I'm not as young as I was."

When he was gone, it was time to make their plans, speaking quietly at their corner table.

"I think," Bronwyn said to her companions, "that it would be best if we did not all go to the Mage's Tower. Someone must be here to keep an eye on the horses, at the very least. Our mission would be compromised without them. And Morrigan, I do not think it a good idea to take you there. Having set eyes on you, they might want to keep you, and then there would be tiresome arguments before we left, and that too, would compromise the mission."

"I certainly have no desire to see how captive mages live," Morrigan agreed.

"Very well. I want you and Sten to stay here. I want Scout to stay with you."

A pitiful whine from below the table.

"Yes, I want you to stay, too, Scout. You won't like the Tower. It's hard stone and endless steps and no rabbits, and it's more important that you help guard the horses."

The whining stopped. Scout could see the sense in that.

"So-watch the horses and get plenty of rest. Morrigan, be very careful about your magic use. This area is crawling with Templars. If you get in a tangle with them, I'll either have to conscript you or you'll have to leave the party altogether-at least until we can get far enough away. Even then, they would

know about you and watch for you. So be *very careful*."

Morrigan rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mother."

Sten bowed his head. "I shall make good use of the time."

Bronwyn went on. "Alistair, Leliana, and I will go to the Tower. Alistair's templar training and Leliana's association with the Lothering Chantry will be of use. Don't be surprised if call you 'Sister,'" she said to Leliana. "I'll have to toady to the Templars a little, because in the end the Knight-Commander is going to be the real obstacle to getting more mages for the army. I'm going to have to be tactful for that. For the Grey Wardens, I can just use conscription."

Leliana said, "We must do the Maker's work however we can. I am sure He wants more mages in the army to help against the darkspawn."

"I am sure you're right," Bronwyn agreed, ignoring Morrigan's expression. "And we cannot let old prejudices stand in our way. Teyrn Loghain is depending on us."

"*And the King*," Alistair added, with the slightest edge to his voice.

"Of course-*and the King*." she agreed, wondering why Alistair always got that *look* on his face whenever she mentioned Teyrn Loghain. "We must get those mages for the army. And we should keep our eyes open for Grey Warden prospects, too."

"If you are looking for *tame* mages," Morrigan sneered, "perhaps a healer might be useful. I have no interest in that School of Magic."

"An excellent suggestion." Bronwyn liked the idea, no matter how it was presented. "But however *tame* these mages might be, I suspect there are at least a few who long to be free. Those are the ones we want. Keep your eyes open," she repeated.

Three women in their smallclothes in one bed was not an experience Bronwyn wished to repeat anytime soon. If she moved in the slightest, she touched Leliana, and that was so unusual and startling that she woke at once. It did not seem to bother Leliana, who actually started *cuddling* at one point, pushing Bronwyn to the edge of the bed and over.

She thumped to the floor, half asleep and cursing.

"Whatever you are doing," came Morrigan's voice from the darkness. "Stop it *at once!*"

A little later, Bronwyn cried out as the darkspawn sliced a man open, waking her two companions. They all looked around blearily for danger, before subsiding back into the lumpy mattress.

"It's all right," Leliana cooed, stroking her arm.

Later, she sat up and talked back to the Archdemon. This was

also not well-received.

"If you don't lie still, I will stick a knife in you," Morrigan snarled. "This, I swear."

Note: Bronwyn's story is adapted from "Mr Fox" in English Fairy Tales, collected by Joseph Jacobs, combined with a bit of "The Robber Bridegroom," collected by the Brothers Grimm, which has a similar theme. I eventually want all my companions to tell a story, and I don't have the codex features of the actual game. It won't be the Decameron, obviously, but stories can tell us a lot about people.

Thanks to my reviewers: Aoihand, khaos974, bioncafemme, Piceron, Sarah1281, Eva Galana, mille libri, Deviate Fish, Phoenix Fire Lady, almostinsane, phoenixandashes, Night Hunter MGS, Amhran Comhrac, ShyWriter413, rascality, Shining Girl, ByLanternLight, and Beriathwen.

Please review! It's always so interesting!

12. Circles Within Circles

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 12: Circles Within Circles

The little cockleshell of a boat swayed under them. Kester, the boatman, talked on and on, full of gossip about the important figures at the Circle of Magi.

"That Irving—he's First Enchanter—seems a decent sort. I know what the Chantry says, but the Maker made mages for a purpose, I reckon, and they have as much right to live as anybody."

Bronwyn wondered what Morrigan would say to that. Silly as Kester sounded, he was far more generous in his opinions than many people. There was widespread support for the view that mages had no right to live at all, and should be wiped out, root and branch.

Kester kept up his stream of chatter, "Now Greagoir, the Knight-Commander—he's the big man there. Very decent and affable, he is. Always asks me how my family's doing. A man to be respected, I always say."

Well, that was something. Greagoir was polite to humble

boatmen. Many wouldn't be. Perhaps he would not be like so many templars—filled to bursting with his own importance.

She studied the tower, now looming before them, so tall that she had to crane her neck back to see the top. If put to it, she could swim from the island to shore fairly easily—as long as there were no storms—and even more easily to the remains of the causeway. There was a gap of only forty yards or so between the ancient spans. The mages, however, were not taught to swim, most likely.

Bronwyn wondered if they were even allowed out of the tower to get a bit of air and sun. From the deserted look of the landscape outside, she would guess not. The Tower truly was a prison. It was a claustrophobic place: a place that looked inward to its secrets, not outward to the world. It must be very unhealthy for the children. She remembered that butcher's boy in Highever town who was discovered to be a mage. He couldn't have been more than eight. How frightened he was of those faceless Templars when they came to take him away...

"And there's been a fair-to-do in these parts," Kester nattered on. "Comings and goings like you never saw. O'course it's not everyday the King goes to war. Strange goings-on in the South, but *you* know all about that, Wardens."

Oh, yes. Kester certainly knew who they were. Alistair was quite right about the need to make a good impression. The two of them were kitted up in full fig: polished armor with their Grey Warden tunics, winged helmets on display. Leliana had

no such accoutrements yet, of course, but looked neat and respectable in her light armor.

Bronwyn had wondered if they should go armed and helmeted, since she was not exactly going to the Circle to fight—except with words and cunning—but decided that they must go as warriors to speak to the Knight Commander. No one ever saw the Templars without their armor, and generally they also wore those unnerving helmets that covered their heads entirely, leaving only the narrow slit for their eyes. It wouldn't do to look weak before them. Therefore, they would match them armor for armor, sword for sword, and helmet for helmet. The Grey Wardens predated the Templars anyway, and were far more important. Bronwyn was not going to them as a suppliant, but as an ambassador, claiming support to which she had an ancient, irrevocable right.

The great doors opened to them, and Bronwyn could not complain of her welcome. Clearly someone in the Tower had seen them coming.

A soldierly man in Templar armor, no longer young but still fit, gave them a slight bow. "I am Greagoir, Knight Commander of the Templars of Kinloch Hold."

"And I am Irving, First Enchanter of the Circle of Magi," said an elderly man with a flowing grey beard and deepset eyes filled with kindness and secrets. "You are very welcome here, Grey Wardens."

"I am Warden Bronwyn and this is Warden Alistair," Bronwyn

said, with a polite bow of her own. "And this is Warden Recruit Leliana, formerly lay sister of Lothering Chantry."

They were led upstairs to the First Enchanter's study, moving past the crowded apprentice dormitories: depressing and windowless rooms filled with bunk beds and reeking of ancient toilet facilities too close for comfort. Templar guards stood at intervals along the walls, reminders to the inmates of their fate should they prove a threat.

Pale and scrawny children watched them pass, whispering to each other. They moved through the libraries—no doubt full of astonishing lore—further on past the quarters of mages who must have moved beyond the apprentice stage.

A few came out to watch them. One young woman—fragile, blonde, and sickly-pale as the rest—called out, "Is there any word of Uldred?" before a Templar turned his impassive metal gaze on her, and her friends hushed her and pulled her into the shadows.

Leliana whispered in Bronwyn's ear, so softly she could barely be heard. "I don't care what the Chantry says. No one should have to live like this—especially the children."

Bronwyn did not remember the mages she had seen at Ostagar looking like this. Admittedly most of them had been in the army for a month or two before her own arrival. Perhaps in that time they had acclimated and become stronger. None of them had seemed particularly fit—other than Wynne, who, though old, had a certain wiry vitality. She hoped she could

find some mages who were *healthy* enough to conscript.

They followed the two older men upstairs to chairs, glasses of good wine, and a closed door.

"Word has already reached us, Warden," Irving said, "of your deeds in the south. I confess myself surprised to receive so distinguished a visitor. "

Greagoir was more frank. "No doubt the Grey Wardens wish to make further demands upon the Circle."

Alistair shifted beside her. Bronwyn sensed that he was already put out. She felt rather put out herself.

"If you have heard anything of the Battle of Ostagar, then you have heard that Grey Wardens were nearly annihilated defending this country and its king. You see before you the remains of our order. That alone should make clear to you the nature of the threat we are facing." She took a sip of her wine, her eyes not leaving Greagoir.

"Together we beat back the first assault," Bronwyn went on, not mincing words. "The next will be greater. The larger the forces we can muster now, the better chance we have of ending this Blight before all Ferelden falls." She narrowed her eyes at her hosts. "Do not mistake me, gentlemen. Fall it will if we are not united. You may think yourself safe on your island, but you may find that its comparative safety means only that you will be the last to die."

Alistair gave her the letter bag. Bronwyn said to the two men, "I have here a letter for the two of you from Teyrn Loghain on behalf of the King, supporting my efforts. The *seven* mages the Circle provided have proved of immense assistance, but against thousands of darkspawn, greater numbers are needed."

Irving took the letter, scanned its contents, and then passed it to Greagoir, who read it with a frown of concentration.

"So, aside from being a letter-bearer," Bronwyn went on, "my mission here is two-fold. The King's army needs more mages. Badly. Their value has been established time and again, in combat and in the tents of the Healers. My own brother, the Teyrn of Highever, no doubt owes his life to Senior Enchanter Wynne. But there is only one Wynne, and her abilities and strength are being stretched to the utmost. Uldred proved a mighty force on the battlefield, but one mage can be easily overwhelmed by a thousand darkspawn."

"And Ilon—" Alistair put in. "He was great. There's no doubt in my mind that he saved my life when we were fighting at the Tower of Ishal."

Bronwyn smiled at Alistair, and continued, "In addition to the army's need for mages, the Grey Wardens also require new recruits," she said. "While I am here, I hope to replenish our numbers. Mages have served as Grey Wardens since the founding of the order, and I believe that Uldred has some interesting remarks about that service in his letter to you, First Enchanter. He told me when he gave me this letter of them."

Perhaps his findings might be of interest—and provide some reassurance—to the Knight Commander."

Irving instantly broke the seal of Uldred's letter and looked through it. He read aloud a paragraph near the end of the first page:

"...in all my research, I can find no case in which a Grey Warden mage ever became an abomination or was even possessed. Something about their initiation seems to prevent it: either because the unworthy mages perish in the course of joining the Grey Wardens, or because something in the ritual itself protects them. Service among the Grey Wardens might prove a humane alternative to the Rite of Tranquility or to execution in a failed Harrowing. Such talents as they possess might there be of use..."

"Can this be true?" Greagoir wondered, taking the letter to read it for himself. He appeared skeptical, but a bit hopeful as well. Bronwyn was pleased to see that he was not one of those Templars who appeared to live only for the opportunity to put mages to death.

"Uldred is a respected scholar," Irving replied, himself rather pleased with the letter. "What sort of mages are you looking to recruit?"

"Obviously, a Healer would be our first choice, and a valuable addition to our ranks, such as they are, but any magical talent is useful. The darkspawn have mages of their own, you know."

Greagoir looked faintly ill. "So I had heard."

"Not really powerful mages," Alistair added, "but they're troublesome, and they can really make you sick."

The two men looked at each other. Not enemies, then. Mutual respect was there, at least, complicated with the Templars' naked power over the mages, and the eternal fear of magic gone wrong. Still, the men were able to work together. That might or might not prove to Bronwyn's advantage.

Irving spoke, almost to himself. "Petra is Wynne's prize pupil, and is a responsible young woman. We'd be sorry to lose her as a teacher, of course, but in these times... There's Kinnon, too. Gwyneth, perhaps—" he looked at Greagoir in a quick, questioning way. "—and possibly Eochaid."

Greagoir nodded. "Yes, those four seem likely prospects. I suppose they can be spared..."

"Four?" Alistair burst out. "You can only spare *four* mages? There are thousands of darkspawn and you offer us four mages? Duncan is dead! The Grey Wardens died to protect you! Don't you people understand what we're facing?"

"I'm sure," Leliana said softly, "that is a very good start. These are strange times, after all."

Bronwyn was rather pleased at Alistair's indignation. It saved her the trouble of being indignant herself, and let her play the role of reasonable negotiator.

"As Leliana says, four mages is a start." She smiled. "With your permission, gentlemen, I would like to address the mages. You may not know which of them harbors the desire to defend Ferelden."

"You want to address the mages?" Irving was rather surprised at the request. "All of them?"

"Yes—all. Even the apprentices. They have a right, surely, to know what is happening in the world—especially since it's a matter of their own survival."

"Is it really that serious?" Greagoir asked heavily. "Are you wardens certain that this a Blight?"

"Absolutely certain," Bronwyn assured him. "As you know, Blights have sometimes raged for decades. We are hoping to contain and crush this before it can spread. To do that, we must have greater numbers. It is the only way, and our only hope."

Within the hour, the mages and their Templars were gathered in the Great Hall, up yet another winding staircase.

From the benches, pale faces gazed up at Bronwyn: curious faces, suspicious faces, anxious faces—even eager faces. She took note of those, because they gave her confidence.

"Good morning to you all," Irving welcomed them. "An unusual gathering in this unusual times. I have called you all to meet

our distinguished visitors: the Grey Wardens of Ferelden."

A rush of whispered excitement filled the room. To her distinct displeasure, Bronwyn heard the dreaded *words* "*Girl Warden.*" Alistair nudged her, looking like he wanted to laugh. She nudged him back, forcing her face to express nothing but the seriousness of the moment.

She stepped forward. "Well met, Mages of the Circle! It is a privilege to come to this ancient place, even in these troubled times. Among other things, we come bearing letters from your friends who are serving so bravely and effectively in the king's army. Before we leave, our latest recruit, Leliana—"

Leliana gave the assembled mages a charming smile and wave—

"-will distribute the letters. From the weight of the bag, it seems like Senior Enchanter Wynne wrote to half the people here!"

Some slight smiles. Bronwyn realized that these people did not trust her. They had no reason to trust anyone.

"Many of you have heard of the great victory at Ostagar. Every man and woman there played a part in the defeat of the darkspawn horde, but I come today to tell you about the brave deeds of your own, and to urge you to seize an opportunity the like of which you have not seen in hundreds of years.

"No one—*no one*—who has been healed by Wynne, or stood by Uldred in battle will ever look or think about mages in the same way. Those seven mages of the Circle have cast a shadow beyond their small number. They are not faceless threats in a distant Tower. They are comrades—brothers and sisters in arms against the common enemy of mankind."

She had stolen the phrase from the Revered Mother in Lothering. It was a useful image, as the response of her audience proved. They were listening attentively, apparently pleased to be praised for once, rather than being told that they were at fault for every misfortune since the time of Andraste.

"*'Magic exists to serve man.'* No doubt all of you have heard that phrase scores of times. But what nobler way to serve than to take part in the great struggle of our times—to serve by saving your country? Teyrn Loghain himself has spoken with the greatest respect and admiration of mages. He calls you 'Ferelden's best weapon.' He would like at least one mage in every unit of the army. Any mage volunteering for service will be welcomed as a valuable warrior against the Blight. The more of you who serve, the greater share of honor to the Circle when final victory is ours."

She smiled at the smallest apprentices, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the benches. One of them, a pretty little girl who must have been part Rivainni from her dark skin, grinned back at her and made a ridiculous face.

"We *can* all work together. I have *seen* it," Bronwyn assured

them. "I have seen Templar skills drain a darkspawn emissary of mana, and the creature finished off by a cold spell from one of our own Ferelden mages. That kind of cooperation is a thing of beauty. Warriors and mages together, we shall defeat the Blight."

Her listeners did not need to know that she was speaking of Alistair, who had never taken Templar vows, and of Morrigan, an apostate who had never set foot in the Circle. It hardly mattered. Ferelden would be better off without all this fear and enmity between mages and the Chantry.

"We shall be here for some hours. I have been graciously invited to join you for your midday meal by the First Enchanter. Afterward, I will remain here in the Great Hall, ready to accept the enlistment of the mages of the Circle. Think carefully before you reject this great opportunity. This is your chance: this is the most important decision you will ever make. Choose wisely, mages of Ferelden. History awaits your decision."

She bowed respectfully. There was a smattering of applause, which grew rapidly in volume. The little apprentices cheered and the older mages chattered among themselves.

"Leliana!" Bronwyn called. "Please distribute the letters."

The little redhead read out: "To Torrin from Wynne!"

A dark-skinned mage came forward and hastily took his letter.

"To Gwyneth from Uldred!"

The fragile blonde hurried up and snatched at the letter, breaking the seal before she returned to her seat.

"To Niall from Wynne!"

This took some time. The mages seemed pleased with their letters. *Of course, everyone likes to get letters*, Bronwyn acknowledged. Apparently what was said was generating considerable excitement.

A pair of little apprentices approached Bronwyn, evidently on a dare, shoving and giggling.

"Please, my lady," the little girl asked, "are you the Girl Warden?"

Bronwyn smiled down at them. "I'm called that. It's just a nickname. I'm a Grey Warden, really, just like Alistair there."

"Can mages be Grey Wardens?"

Bronwyn saw others listening to the questions they dared not ask themselves. "Yes," she told the children. "Mages have always served in the Wardens. Alistair and I are looking for some especially brave mages to join us."

The boy whispered something in the girl's ear. Clearly, she was the spokesperson.

"And you wouldn't be scared of them or make them live here

in the Circle Tower?"

"Certainly not. They would live with us."

"Forever and ever?"

Bronwyn nodded gravely. "As long as we live."

The girl announced. "Then I guess we'll be Wardens someday."

Alistair came over, grinning. "We'll be glad to have you. Study really hard and learn all the magic you can! We want really smart mages."

The meal was served shortly afterward. Not bad food, though it was apparent that what the Wardens were eating at the head table was not what the balance of the mages were given. Bronwyn ate slowly, watching the whispered debate rage through the Hall, as mages exchanged letters, and gesticulated fiercely to each other.

"Uldred has stirred up his friends in the Libertarians," Irving told her, dryly amused.

"Libertarians?" Bronwyn asked, puzzled.

"Within the Circle are various factions: 'fraternities' we call ourselves. Each has a different philosophy about our role in the world, or what our role would be if we could choose for ourselves. The Libertarians believe that mages should be completely free..."

On her other side, she heard Greagoir snort in disgust.

Irving went on—"There are also the Lucrosians, who believe we should be using our gifts to amass wealth; and the Aequitarians, who believe in maintaining the status quo. They are the largest group. Another fraternity is that of the Isolationists. They would prefer that mages withdraw entirely from the rest of the world and live apart, where their magic can harm and frighten no one."

"I daresay we won't be getting any Isolationist recruits, then."

"You'd be surprised," Irving said thoughtfully. "I have always believed the Isolationist viewpoint to be one of despair. If offered other options, some might change their tune. Young Niall, for example, over there—" he indicated a clean-shaven mage with a nod of his head "—appears to be rather excited about the things he's reading. The walls of our Tower can seem very confining, especially when one is young," he added, his voice rising, perhaps for Greagoir's benefit. "It is not so extraordinary, surely, for young people to wish to see a little of the world."

Clearly, Irving was right. As soon as the dishes were cleared away, and Bronwyn arranged herself with parchment and ink, mages were coming forward to offer their services to the army.

A young woman hurried forward, and signed her name "Petra." Bronwyn remember that she was one of the candidates that Irving had predicted. Her boldness

encouraged others. Soon a line formed, though now and then the mages themselves pulled someone away, notably some very young apprentices.

"But we can help!" piped a little boy. "Enchanter Lora said my healing spell was very advanced for my age!"

"No more nonsense!"

Greagoir sat there too, watching the candidates come forward with narrowed eyes, occasionally frowning at some of them, more unconcerned about others.

"But I must go!" a young girl was crying. "How else can I expiate this dreadful curse?"

"Keili," Petra quietly explained to Bronwyn. "She's a Healer apprentice—not even Harrowed yet. She's really bought in to the Chantry view that magic is evil. She's in the chapel constantly, praying for forgiveness."

"Is she any good as a Healer?" Bronwyn asked flatly.

"Oh—yes, yes. Quite talented. But a little—off."

"I don't care about that," Bronwyn said. "If she knows what's she doing, she can help. In fact, I can think of nowhere better for a Healer apprentice to train than in a camp of sick and injured soldiers."

Even Greagoir saw the sense in that. After a whispered conference with Irving, it was agreed that the Healing

apprentices could go, as long as they were at least sixteen years old.

"I shall also send notice to the mages living outside the Tower, informing them that they may be called for service in the war." Irving told her. "There are a number of them, serving with Chantry permission in noble houses. It will take time to recall them, of course."

It must seem like a second Summersday to the mages: the regular schedule forgotten, the little apprentices running wild, playing some sort of game, touching the bases of the statues in the Great Hall.

Bronwyn was feeling quite pleased, looking down at the growing list of names. Wynne's letter had encouraged Senior Enchanter Torrin to come forward, and he had agreed to lead the party to Ostagar. Greagoir's expression showed that he respected the man—or at least did not think he would turn into an abomination anytime in the immediate future.

"Do you hear that?" Alistair asked, his head up, listening.

"That rumbling sound?" Bronwyn asked, "Perhaps the wind is up and we're hearing the waves against the stones of the island."

"Maybe." He went back to talking with another knot of young male mages, telling them the story of how he and Ilon fought their way up the Tower of Ishal together. The mages were asking technical questions about Ilon's spells that Alistair could

not quite follow, but they seemed to understand what they needed to know from his descriptions of the effects.

More names: the young Isolationist Niall, willing to give the rest of the world one last chance; Petra's friend Kinnon, talking about new "Area of Effect" spells he had learned; Gwyneth, who said little to Bronwyn, but whispered to her friends about "freedom at last!"

As more signed up for service, those who had had doubts took courage and joined the end of the line. Bronwyn knew she would have done the same in their place. She would have done anything to escape this sunless world, where faceless armed men stood guard to kill them at a moment's notice.

"Thirty-three mages!" Alistair read over her shoulder. "The King will think Satinalia has come early!"

"He'll be very proud of Ferelden's Circle," Bronwyn said for the listening ears surrounding them. "This will make a tremendous difference."

Irving and Greagoir were debating how soon the mages would leave, but agreed that it would be at least four days before the wagons, oxen, drivers, and supplies could be gathered. The mages would also need Templars to guard them, and that number was also a matter for discussion.

"I have some letters of my own that I would like to send back to Ostagar with your mages," Bronwyn told them. "I'll also compose a message to the King and to Teyrn Loghain before

I leave."

Her letters to Fergus and to Wynne were nearly ready. She had begun an official report to Teyrn Loghain that she would also complete here. She had debated whether or not she should send a short letter to His Majesty, as well, wondering if she would that be considered presumptuous. In the end, she had decided that the King would like to receive a letter from the Grey Wardens. In fact, perhaps he would be hurt if he did not...

"I knew I heard something!" Alistair shouted. Faint screams echoed down the hall, coming closer.

Bronwyn was up from the chair in an instant, knocking it over, Alistair and Leliana were with her as she raced toward the screams. At the door to the staircase, mages were bubbling up from the floor below.

"—*Demon!*"

"—*We can't hold it!*"

The mages leaving the assembly seemed to have opened the door to the Fade, and a demon had emerged to greet them.

Huge, flaming, twisting, roaring: its multiple limbs blurred, its face melted from one appearance into another. Someone threw a cold spell at it, but that only served to slow the demon slightly.

"Out of the way!" Bronwyn commanded, drawing sword and dagger. "Alistair! Come on!"

It was unnatural, but corporeal enough to feel her blades. It fought back, one misshapen arm holding an enormous sword on high. Bronwyn dodged to the right, and stabbed deep into the creature's pulsing side. Alistair bashed it with his shield. Leliana threw aside her bow and rushed in with her daggers, an Orlesian war cry echoing off the wall.

The mages were trying to help, but there were too many of them—and too many children in the way. Bronwyn bit off a scream as a tongue of blue lightning missed the demon and crackled through her instead.

Leliana was caught by one of the flailing arms and tossed aside. She was up and at the creature almost instantly, her pretty face intent and joyous. Alistair kept slamming at it with shield and sword pommel, while Bronwyn edged behind the creature and drove both blades into the shifting back.

There was a low bellow and suddenly a silence, and Bronwyn felt herself going up and up, the very air pressing on her until she felt she could never again draw breath. An explosion rocked the Tower, and she fell to the stones, slamming against the floor.

After a moment, she could hear again.

"We won? Yay," said Alistair, sitting on the floor beside her. "I think that was a demon. I'm pretty sure, anyway—"

"Alistair," Bronwyn groaned. "You're babbling."

No one was dead, luckily, and there were only a few injuries. Bronwyn was still so dazed that she hardly felt the First Enchanter's careful hands on her face, or the tickling of the healing spell.

"I didn't expect quite so much excitement on my first visit to the Circle," she confessed.

"A puppet show would have been fine," Alistair agreed. "No need to go all out."

"The ancient spirit Shah Wyrđ," Irving murmured. "Wardens, you have done us great service by defending us from this creature. It was thought destroyed for centuries, and all this time it has been lurking in the shadows. Clearly, something summoned it."

Petra bent down, and pulled out a blade of gleaming silverite from the putrefying remains.

Niall, who loved history, came forward to look at it. "I think—look at the runes!" He told Irving, "I believe this is the sword Yusaris—or a very good copy, anyway."

"Yusaris..." Irving took it in his hands, struggling with the weight of the enormous two-handed greatsword. "The Dragonslayer. A storied weapon. How did it come into the possession of an ancient demon? No matter. It is your prize, Wardens. Take it with you with our thanks."

The Templars, who had spent quite a bit of time running and hiding from the demon, told Greagoir and Irving that it had burst out of the cellars below ground level.

"Perhaps we should look into the matter," Irving said.

"Wardens, would you care to join us?"

"I didn't *summon* the demon!" the bearded, filthy, naked young man in the dungeon cell protested. Despite his bruises, Bronwyn could not help noticing that he was far more muscled and fit than any other mage she had seen. "It came out of the cellars lower down, and I was doing my best not to be noticed and killed—no thanks to you lot locking me in and forgetting about me!"

Irving shook his head. "I am not convinced that Anders here is the culprit. Summoning a demon would require a ritual, and he clearly has nothing that could be used."

"Except his *blood*," sneered a faceless Templar.

"What is this mage imprisoned for?" Bronwyn asked.

"He is a flight risk, Warden." Greagoir told her. "Six times he has escaped the Tower. He was sentenced to a year of solitary confinement, in some hopes of teaching him wisdom. Our hopes were vain, it seemed."

"I am not a blood mage!" Anders shouted back. "If Biff here hadn't taken it upon himself to rough me up, you'd see I didn't

have any cuts or wounds a blood mage could use!"

"Let me examine him, Greagoir," Irving urged. "It may well be that he is telling the truth. Reckless and disobedient as Anders is, no one has ever suspected him of blood magic."

Irving took the young mage's face in his hands, and tutted over the split lip.

Meanwhile Greagoir considered it all. "If it's not this one, then it could only be—yes! She's more likely anyway. Consorting with a blood mage... She very well might be the guilty party!"

Through another set of doors they descended to another level and came to yet another cell. This one appeared empty, until a pale face turned toward them, and they saw that a young elf girl was lying on the stone floor. She too was naked: covered in scratches and cuts, her eye swollen and her wrists and thighs bruised.

"Tara Surana," Greagoir said grimly, "We want to know what you did, and we want the truth."

"They just wanted to be *free!*" the young elf cried, struggling to sit up. "They just wanted to get out of this awful place and get married and live like real people! Lily didn't want to be a priest. Her aunt and uncle traded her off to the Chantry like an animal!"

"What is she talking about?" Alistair asked Irving, uncomfortable with the girl's nakedness and concerned about

her injuries.

Irving murmured, "She and a chantry initiate helped a blood mage escape the Tower."

The girl clutched her head in despair. "I didn't *know* Jowan was a blood mage. He told me he *wasn't!*"

"That's enough of that!" Greagoir said sternly. "We are not here about your past crimes. A demon was summoned today and set on the Circle. As it issued from the dungeons, you are the probable culprit. We suspect blood magic to have been used, and your visible wounds are proof of it."

"Of course I'm bloody, you fool!" screamed the elf. "Your oh-so-pure Templars come down here for a bit a sport now and then when they're bored! You must know that! *They* did this to me, and now your saying I'm a blood mage because I've been attacked?"

"Child, child," Irving said sadly, "raising demons to defend yourself is not the answer..."

Bronwyn thought it sounded like a perfectly reasonable answer to her. If armed men came to rape her, she would do anything to fight back.

She spoke up. "What happened to the other girl—the initiate? Is she here, also?"

Greagoir shook his head. "No. She was taken north to the

Aeonar Prison shortly after the escape of the blood mage Jowan. As she was a member of the Chantry, sole authority was mine. This mage—" he pointed with disdain at the young elf girl, "-Irving thought might be salvageable, and she was sentenced to three years imprisonment. Now she makes wild accusations against my men. Clearly, Irving's mercy was wasted on her."

"What mercy?" the elf screamed. "*What* mercy? You people wouldn't know mercy if Archon Hessarian stood beside you and shouted in your ears! I don't care anymore! Do whatever you like. You will anyway."

"A great pity," Irving sighed. "Such remarkable talent."

"Talented, is she?' Bronwyn asked, keeping her face expressionless.

"Oh, my word, yes. Powerful, too. One of our best students. I had such hopes of her, just as Wynne did of Anders."

Alistair winced, and then blew out a breath. This dungeon was a horrible place, and there wasn't a shred of real evidence against either of the battered prisoners.

"Couldn't the demon have been summoned some other way?" he asked.

"Possibly," Irving granted, ignoring Greagoir's glares. "but we have no other suspects. The demon emerged from the cellars, and only Anders and Tara were down here.'

"But—" Alistair pointed out, remembering his training, "-mages don't have to be physically close to demons to summon them. Somebody else could have done this from the top of the Tower, for all we know."

"These are the likely suspects," Greagoir ground out.

"I don't see why," Alistair muttered. Bronwyn put a hand on his arm.

"As you seem to have no further use for these mages, First Enchanter," she said in a gentle, reasonable voice, "Perhaps the best thing would be for me to conscript them into the Grey Wardens. If they are as powerful as you say, they could of great service to us."

"A blood mage?" Greagoir was incredulous. "Better to kill her at once." The Templars beside him moved to unlock the elf's cell. The girl tensed, clenching her fists. Bronwyn thought she resembled a kicked dog, turning on its tormentors.

Bronwyn moved in between the cell and the Templars, raising her voice. "I *do* invoke the Right of Conscription on this mage—Tara—and on the mage Anders. They are henceforth Grey Warden recruits."

Irving tried to mediate. "Warden, we have many better and more reliable mages in the Tower."

Bronwyn shook her head. "This girl is wounded, and yet she is still full of fight, ready to defend her life against armored men

with swords. Anders has escaped you six times. That shows remarkable resourcefulness. I'll take them with me when I leave today, and they shall trouble you no more."

"No one contests your right, Warden," grumbled Greagoir. "Merely your good sense!"

Inwardly seething, Bronwyn gave Greagoir a self-deprecating smile. "I appreciate your concern, Knight-Commander. I shall consider your words and take very great care. Is it possible for them to be clothed and healed before we leave?"

"I shall see to it personally, Warden," Irving assured her. Bronwyn thought she detected a note of relief in his voice.

She trusted the First Enchanter, but she did not quite trust the Templars. The Wardens waited with their new recruits while they were healed; while smallclothes and boots and robes were brought. Irving also provided them both with staffs of their own.

"Grey Warden, eh?" Anders considered. "That works, I suppose."

"We're not coming back to the Circle?" Tara asked, her eyes flat and hostile as she watched Irving heal her arms.

"Not unless you want to, or our duties call us here in the course of recruiting," Bronwyn said. She felt full to bursting about things she would like to say about the Circle, not one of which she could allow past her lips. It was so important to

maintain friendly relations with the First Enchanter. Those thirty-three mages were not yet on their way to the army.

Greagoir had already left—to "more pressing duties" as he said. Bronwyn led her party up the stairs and toward the entry hall, only asking Irving if there were some place she could speak privately to the new recruits.

"Of course," He led them to a door, and said to Bronwyn, "Do join me in my study when you are finished."

Once inside the little room—hardly more than a closet—Bronwyn spoke quickly.

"Welcome to you both. Anders: consider this your seventh, final, and completely successful escape from the Circle."

"What if I want to escape from the Grey Wardens?"

"Hey!" Alistair objected. "You can't leave the Grey Wardens! We're in the middle of a Blight!"

Leliana said softly, "Being a Grey Warden is a great honor. And it's nice. We travel and meet all sorts of people and kill monsters."

"I hope," Bronwyn said earnestly to both of her new recruits, "that you won't consider joining the Wardens either a prison or a punishment. In fact, it's the one way you're safe from the Chantry forever. If you're a warden, you can promenade up and down the street in front of a Chantry, waving your staff,

and no one can do a thing to you."

"Sounds like fun," Anders allowed. "When do we get out of *here*?"

"I've just recruited more mages for the army in Ostagar-"

The elf nodded grudgingly, but Anders looked completely blank.

Alistair filled him in. "We've got a Blight. Darkspawn are attacking in the south. The King led a big army down there and we've won the battles so far, but the army needs mages really badly."

"Teyrn Loghain thinks highly of the value of mages," Bronwyn added, "and there are only seven with the army now. The Grey Wardens have a treaty with the Circle and I was able to enlist thirty-three more to go to the army, but we also were looking for possible Grey Wardens. We heard you were both talented, and I thought you would be glad to get out of here."

"Mere words cannot express it," Anders agreed. "I may have to kiss all three of you passionately."

Alistair backed away in alarm, but Leliana laughed.

Bronwyn turned to the elf, Tara. "I know you were hurt badly," she said in a softer tone. "Do you feel able to travel? We have rooms at the inn across the lake, and you can rest there."

"Not very *big* rooms," Alistair muttered.

"I can pitch a tent outside," Bronwyn waved that away. "Or sleep on the floor. Tara can have the bed."

Finally the elf spoke. "I can do whatever it takes to get out of here."

"That's the spirit!" Anders approved.

"All right then," Bronwyn said. "Here is what we're going to do: Alistair—Leliana—I want you to take our new recruits to the quartermaster." She passed them a money pouch. "Get them what you can—canteens, plain cloaks, backpacks if they can be had. If they don't have what we need here, we can get it at the village up the hill from the inn. I'll go finish my letters and say our farewells. With luck, we can be out of here within the hour."

It was not that simple, of course.

The First Enchanter very kindly allowed her the use of his desk, and Bronwyn finished her letters to Fergus and to Wynne. Then she wrote with quick but careful elegance to the King. Even more carefully, she finished her longer and more specific message to Teyrn Loghain, feeling very proud of her work today. Eventually more mages would have to be called to serve, but this was a good start.

As she signed her letter to Loghain, the Knight-Commander returned to the study, and not alone. With him was a tall and handsome young Templar.

"I have another recruit for you, Warden," Greagoir said.

Note: Uldred is wrong in saying that Wardens cannot be possessed, of course, as the Soldier's Peak add-on suggests. Whether he is honestly wrong or simply lying doesn't matter. What matters is that he is believed.

Game players will have guessed that Shah Wyrd was accidentally summoned by the apprentices touching the statue bases, and hitting on the right combination. Whether Irving or Greagoir will ever realize this, I don't know. It doesn't matter at this point, anyway.

I originally planned to include Lily in the party as well, but the name confusion between Leliana and Lily was too great, nor was I sure I really had a use for her in the party. However, her imprisonment in the Aeonar will be mentioned in a future chapter.

Thanks to my reviewers: Khaos974, Aoihand, Shakespira, Eva Galana, mutive, mille libri, almostinsane, Sarah1281, Piceron, Night Hunter MGS, Amhran Comhrac, Nithu, Sati James, Angry Girl, rascality, Sailor Miaka, Persephone Chiara, and Sofaspud. Thanks also to those who have alerted, favorited, or otherwise enjoyed this story. I am getting such interesting and useful feedback from you! Keep it coming, please.

Someone will tell a story in the next chapter. Let me know if

you want a specific character to take a turn.

13. The Water of Life

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 13: The Water of Life

"Alistair," Bronwyn said. "May I speak to you for a moment?"

Her party was dickering with the quartermaster, the two mages rather lively and spirited as the reality of escaping from the Tower became more solid with every purchase. She paused in the doorway, watching them. Alistair looked up, smiling broadly, and excused himself.

"What is it? Are you all right?" he asked, his handsome face concerned.

"Come in here." She led the way into the little room they had used shortly before, and she shut the door.

"What's the matter?" he asked again. "You're upset."

"I'm very upset. I've had to do something I don't like, and I wanted to tell you first."

"Go on."

She took a deep, furious breath. "Knight-Commander

Greagoir obviously thinks I need his help. He's forced a recruit on us, and in a way I couldn't refuse. He made it clear that if I tried, the departure of those thirty-three mages would be unavoidably delayed."

"Blackmail? Is he out of his mind? This is no time to play power games!"

She ran a hand over her face, and impatiently pushed some stray curls aside. "You know that and I know that, but Greagoir thinks our new recruits are too dangerous to leave without a keeper. He's given us one of his Templars. Released him from his vows and all that, but he's to come with us. That was his price. I couldn't say no."

"Ri-ight." Alistair leaned against the wall, thinking. "There's something I should tell you about the Templars. The Chantry keeps a pretty tight rein on them. Ever wonder how all those lady-like priests control the big scary armed men?"

"Now that you put it that way, I do."

"Well—" he grimaced, and then went on. "Yeah—well—why not give away the store? It's not like they've ever done anything for me. Not to put too fine a point on it, Templars are all given lyrium to enhance their mage-fighting abilities. They end up addicted. The Chantry controls the lyrium trade. And there you are."

"Are you saying that the Chantry deliberately addicts their Templars to lyrium? That's obscene! I can't believe it!"

"Well, they do, and it is, and you should, because it's all true," he said bluntly. "Another reason I'll always be grateful to Duncan for saving me. They start the dosing just after the Templar takes his vows, so I just missed it. Thank the Maker."

"So you're saying that we're saddled with a lyrium-addicted slave of the Chantry?"

"That's—pretty much exactly it."

"I imagine he has orders to spy on us."

Alistair laughed. "At least."

"And after what that poor girl has gone through, the last thing she'll want to see is a Templar."

"So where *is* our new brother?" Alistair asked.

"Waiting back by the apprentice dormitories. We've got to take him, Alistair. Those mages need to be on their way to the army as soon as possible."

"All right. Fair enough. We have to take him. I wonder if Greagoir knows he could die in the Joining."

"Any of them could die in the Joining, but I hope they won't." She bit her thumb, thinking. "And what are we going to do about the lyrium addiction?"

He shook his head. "I don't think there's much we can do at the moment. I don't even know if it can be cured. We'll

probably have to give him a potion or two every day."

Thinking it over, she felt her resolve hardening. "We can do that. I wonder if he already has a stash of lyrium on him, with promises of more in exchange for information. I'll have a word with him as soon as we're across the lake. Meanwhile, we've got to get him kitted out, and get rid of the Templar gear. I hope the quartermaster has something he can wear, because otherwise he's going in his smallclothes!"

She was disappointed but not surprised when the excited looks on her new recruits' faces evaporated, and their expressions became guarded and then fairly horrified when Bronwyn and Alistair returned with the newest addition to the party. Cullen, however, was a recruit, too, and Bronwyn could not see any point in publicly insulting him.

"The Knight-Commander has released Cullen from his vows. He wants to join us, so we'll need something suitably raffish and untemplar for him," she said lightly.

Cullen put in, a bit shyly. "I wanted to go with you—to fight. I heard your speech, and I thought I might be of use."

"Wonderful," Anders muttered. "Our very own stalker." He glanced anxiously at Tara whispered a question in her ear.

She would not look at Cullen, but shook her head and whispered back at Anders. The tall young mage looked relieved, but still suspicious.

"—I'm pretty sure, anyway." Tara added in a low voice. "They always kept their helmets on."

"Oh, that is a picture I *did* not need in my head," Alistair said to Bronwyn.

The quartermaster had some armor that would fit Cullen: a very nice set of silverite scale that was far better than Bronwyn's own chainmail. Gritting her teeth, she reached into her money belt for the gold, since she had not really been serious about taking a recruit along in only his smallclothes. The Knight-Commander had done well for him otherwise, at least. Cullen had been given time to neatly pack his belongings, and had a tent and a bedroll of his own. Other than the expensive armor, he would not be a great drain on Warden funds.

"Go and change," Bronwyn told Cullen, nodding toward the small room off the entry hall. "Bring whatever else you want, but leave your life as a Templar behind."

She filled up the time by making some small purchases, and by chatting with her other recruits about their backgrounds.

Tara did not remember life before the Circle. She was obviously an alienage elf, but as she had been brought here when she was four years old, she had forgotten her family, and in fact did not know which alienage she had come from. She said very little to Bronwyn directly, and appeared to be in awe of her.

Anders' story was very different.

"My mother helped me keep my magic hidden until I was fifteen. Then she died, and I was sent off to live with her brother and his wife." He smiled grimly. "May they die in a fire. They turned me into the Chantry so fast that my head is still spinning. They took all my mother's money, and her house, and all her things, too. Very pleased with themselves, they were. Righteous and richer all at once, you see."

"I think the Chantry *means* well-" Leliana said to herself.

Alistair hardly knew what to say at all. His Chantry conditioning made it difficult not to regard magic as dangerous, and those afflicted with it in need of people to protect them for their own good, but he knew what it was to be locked away against his will. Would he have run away? Probably not. They would have filled him full of lyrium, and he would have danced to their tune until his brain rotted like every other Templar's did in the course of time.

Cullen was back, looking very tentative and uncomfortable—and younger and smaller too, without the massive plate armor. He had a big two-handed sword sheathed at his back, and Bronwyn hoped he knew how to use it.

"Nice armor," Alistair commented. He hefted Yusaris, newly cleaned and in a new scabbard, and Bronwyn and Leliana shifted some of the other purchases to waiting arms. Cullen gave them a hesitant smile.

"Take this, please," Bronwyn said to Cullen, passing him a parcel of potions ingredients. "Yes, very nice armor indeed. Let's get moving. You need to meet the rest of our companions."

Complicated as Bronwyn's life had just become, there was more in store, as they walked through the wide doors of the Circle Tower.

The young elf stepped out into the sunlight and staggered, green eyes bulging, looking up wildly at the blue dome of the sky over the vastness of Lake Calenhad.

"Too big," she gasped, and promptly vomited into the straggling weeds by the doorway. Moaning, she covered her eyes and retched again.

Anders put an arm out to steady her, but she was already collapsing to her knees, curling up in a tight ball of fear and misery.

"Too big," she moaned. "Too big." She began trembling, her breath coming in short, sharp pants.

Bronwyn looked at Alistair, who looked back at her, blank and helpless.

"Poor thing!" cried Leliana. "She must be very sick."

"She *told* you she doesn't remember anything before the Tower, and since she doesn't, she won't remember what it's

like to be outside," Anders told them, smoothing the girl's hair back. "Come on, Tara. You'll get used to it. Keep your eyes shut and we'll get you out of here."

Cullen had come up on the girl's other side, his face anxious, his hands reaching out hesitantly. He stepped back a little at Anders' fierce glare.

"Get away from her!"

"I want to help..."

Bronwyn pushed the former Templar aside, and knelt beside her new recruits. "Tara, we need to get you to the boat. Can you walk if Anders and I help you?" The girl nodded quickly, and then clapped her hand over her mouth, gagging. Her eyes were shut tightly, her other hand groping out for them.

Bronwyn thought about telling Anders to carry the girl, but that would not be the most impressive way for the girl to begin her career in the Grey Wardens. Instead, with Anders on one side and Bronwyn on the other, they led the girl to the boat and helped her in.

She jerked her head at Cullen. "You can help by carrying their things."

He instantly swept everything up, trying not drop the odd bags.

He seems biddable enough, Bronwyn sighed to herself. *But*

he's going to be a very tough sell to a lot of my party.

Morrigan already had problems with Alistair, who had been trained by the Templars. What would she make of Cullen, who had actually *been* one?

The old boatman had been napping as he waited at the dock. Now he snorted awake and frowned, trying to figure out the group. He clearly recognized Cullen, which seemed to give him some reassurance.

"Little elf girl's come over queer, has she? I seen that before. Not used to the big sky over the lake. A fine sight. Never get tired of it myself."

"I'm sure she'll be better once she's had a chance to wash and rest," Bronwyn said, trying to hearten her new recruit. "Maybe this would help," she said, offering her silver flask of Tevinter brandy.

Anders took a sniff, "Ah, *aqua vitae*, the drink of the Old Gods themselves! Come on, elfkins, drink up! It'll put hair in your ears!"

The elf, eyes still screwed shut, took a sip and coughed. "Anders, you ass!"

At least she laughed, and the rest of the them did too, more or less.

Bronwyn managed a weak smile. She felt like a fool. Recruiting the elf because she was sorry for her had been a

stupid thing to do, but she knew she could not have left the girl to her fate. Somehow, she would have to find a way to make this work.

Seven people in Kester's small boat left it low in the water. Bronwyn removed her gauntlet and let her hand idly trail in the chilly lake. Tara rested against Anders' broad shoulder, shading her eyes, trying to slow her breathing. Bronwyn hoped she wouldn't have to deal with a full-blown panic attack in the cramped confines of a boat in deep water.

There was a period of silence, broken only the sound of Tara's gasps and the gurgle of the oars slipping in and out of the water, when Cullen spoke up.

"Are we going to Ostagar?"

Bronwyn shook her head slightly. "We'll talk when we're all together at the inn. We have a different mission. How are you on horseback?"

"Pretty good." He seemed interested. "You have horses?"

"Enough."

"Oh, wonderful," Anders groaned. "*Horses.*"

"Not a fan, I take it?" Alistair asked.

"I've never ridden a horse," Anders declared, "but I've been kicked by one."

"Well," Alistair explained, with an air of great wisdom. "Riding and being kicked are two entirely different skill sets. We'd like you to focus on the riding bit for now."

Bronwyn said, "We're waiting for a boat to take us across the lake to Gherlen's Pass, so we'll have time for some riding lessons before we go."

Kester's attention was drawn by that. "Waiting for the *Lady of the Lake*, are you? That's the biggest in these waters. Put in here a month ago—no, I tell a lie—it was two months ago and the skipper said she needed looking to. Might be awhile before she puts in."

"Really?" Bronwyn was displeased. "How long?"

"Can't say. Might be a month, might be tomorrow."

"Lovely," she sighed.

"There's the inn," Leliana said. "We're almost there—Tara, isn't it?—We're almost there. It's very comfortable. I'll order baths for us, and you will feel much better."

"Thanks," Tara managed, gritting her teeth against the skull-burning terror of all this *space*.

"A bath would be nice," Bronwyn agreed. "And tonight we should have some entertainment. A story, I think—and Alistair —"

"Oh, Maker save me," he muttered.

"Yes, Alistair, I think tonight's the night for you."

"Oh, what fun!" Leliana enthused. "I look forward to it so much."

"And you, Leliana," Bronwyn said. "If it wouldn't be an imposition—would you consider playing your lute for us?"

Leliana smiled, brilliantly. "I shall consider it, yes!"

The boat knocked against the pier and was made fast. Tara was helped out and gently urged toward the inn.

Their approach had been noted. Sten and Scout were waiting for them by the shore.

"I must speak to you, Warden," Sten said grimly, in contrast to Scout's happy tail-wagging and frolicking.

"Go on, take Tara in and get settled," Bronwyn said, waving on the rest of the party. She gave Scout a reassuring pat.

"Yes, Sten? Is everything all right?"

"The horses are safe and I have seen no enemies approaching. All is well. There is something else I wish to discuss."

"Of course."

"You may have wondered what a Sten of the Beresaad was

doing in a human village in the middle of Ferelden."

"I wondered, yes, but I thought it best to let you speak of it in your own time."

"That is well. I came with my fellows on a mission from the Arishok to answer a question."

She waited, only raising her brows.

"The Arishok—the leaders of my people—wished to know *'What is the Blight?'* By these shores—I think south of here, we were surprised by a large party of darkspawn. I alone survived. At length I was found by humans. How I came to be in the village is a story for another time."

"Your—Arishok- must be expecting your report at some point, I take it?"

"Indeed. But I cannot return. I have lost my sword, and my people would call me soulless, and slay me."

"Your sword?" Bronwyn tried to understand the story. The qunari were just so different—so incomprehensible. "You might have dropped it where you fought. You must have your sword in order to return to your people?"

"It is so."

"Well, we'll have to find it—"

"I have word of it." Seeing her waiting patiently, he continued.

"There is a scavenger—a looter of lost things—whom I came upon. He came to sell some of his findings to the innkeeper here. He was one of those who robbed the bodies of my brothers. He says the sword was taken by a trader, by name Faryn, who was on his way to Orzammar."

Pleased that it fell in with her plans, Bronwyn said, "Well, we are going to Orzammar, so we will look for this Faryn. There is a big trading post outside the gates of Orzammar, I'm told. They have a fair that lasts until the dead of winter. We'll find this fellow Faryn, I'm sure. Oh—" she said, reaching down to scratch Scout's ears. "I don't pretend to fully understand how important your sword is to you, but I do sympathize. While we are looking for it, perhaps you would consider making use of a fine weapon we were given at the Circle..." She led the way back to the inn and a much-desired tankard of ale.

"So here it is—" said Alistair, gathering the new recruits at a table at the Spoiled Princess. Bronwyn was speaking outside with Sten, and he had a few minutes to talk before she returned. The innkeeper brought them a round of drinks, which were seized on eagerly by everyone.

Alistair told the innkeeper, "It's awhile until supper I imagine, so if you could bring us some snacks—just some bread and cheese—that sort of thing, you know—"

"—And we'll want baths as soon as we can have them!" Leliana added.

The innkeeper nodded and hustled off to the kitchen. Alistair took a long swallow of ale before going on.

"I don't know how much any of you know about the Battle of Ostagar—"

Cullen was nodding, but Tara and Anders looked fairly blank. The elf's color and condition had much improved, once within four walls and covered by a roof. She could even enjoy looking out the narrow little windows at the Circle Tower, now safely in the distance and separated from them by a fair stretch of lake.

She said, "I heard about the darkspawn invasion, and that the King had taken the army south. That's just before I got locked up."

"You know more than I do, elfkins," Anders said.

"Right." Alistair took a deep breath. "The darkspawn invaded, the King went south, and there was a huge battle. This is the bad part, now: all the Grey Wardens but Bronwyn and yours truly were killed. We were sent to light a signal beacon at the top of this huge old Tevinter tower—the Tower of Ishal. We got there, found it was already taken by the darkspawn, and Bronwyn did this big heroic thing of climbing the tower with a rope and fighting an ogre single-handed at the top and lighting the beacon. It was a tremendous victory from the King's point of view, but we still lost most of the Grey Wardens. That's why we're recruiting pretty aggressively."

"Lucky for us!" Anders remarked. "Except for the whole 'killed in battle' thing."

"Anyway," Alistair continued, an edge in his voice, "my *point* is that Bronwyn is the real deal—she really is brave and smart and heroic—and she deserves your respect. She's in charge, and I'm here to back her up, and that's the size of it."

"Is the qunari a recruit, too?" Tara asked.

"Yeah. We picked him up in Lothering, along with Leliana here."

"Bronwyn is a very nice person," Leliana agreed. "And her swordsmanship is admirable. I like the way she does her hair. Well, I do!" she said to Cullen, seeing his strange expression.

"The way she talks—" Tara muttered into her tankard. "—it's kind of fancy. She sounds like the First Enchanter."

Alistair shrugged. "Well, her brother is the Teyrn of Highever, and she's a highly educated lady."

"I should have known," Anders sighed. "A *noble*."

Cullen was very impressed. "The sister of a teyrn? Shouldn't we be addressing her as Lady Bronwyn, then?"

"Hey! We're all equal in the Wardens," Alistair declared. "We don't use titles. And since I've got you all together, let's go over the rest of the basics..." He broke off. "Oh, good! Cheese!"

Bronwyn came in to find Alistair taking care of the recruits' orientation. He was doing perfectly well at it, so she took the tankard the innkeeper offered, and devoted herself to drinking for a moment. Sten joined the others, pleased to see that the tray of snacks the landlord set on the table included cookies.

"But if Ostagar was this big victory," Anders was saying, "Why is there a problem? The darkspawn were defeated, right?"

She didn't want to hear the bad news repeated, even though it stalked her dreams. Instead, she nodded to Morrigan, coming in through the door from the upstairs.

"The Chantry scholar has departed," Morrigan told her, "so I secured his room in addition to the others. 'Tis a great deal larger, in fact, and should-are those people with us?"

"Three new recruits." Bronwyn gestured to her and they stepped back into the hallway. "Two mages and a former Templar," she whispered. "Don't look at me like that. The Templar was a concession to the Knight-Commander, so he would permit the departure of a mob of mages we recruited for the army. I'm more concerned with *our* new mages at this point. I know you despise the Circle and its inhabitants, but go easy on them-especially the girl. She helped a friend escape and was caught. She was in the dungeon when we found her, and in a very bad way. It's quite impossible that you would hate the Circle more than she does. She had problems leaving the Tower, since she could not remember ever having been

out-of-doors. The man is reportedly an outstanding Healer, but was also in the dungeons-for a year in solitary confinement-because he made repeated escape attempts. I think he's the pick of the bunch."

Rather acidly, Morrigan replied, "Then I shall handle them with velvet gloves. I *had* hoped to have a room to myself, if only to escape your nightly adventures in the Fade."

"Maybe Leliana can bear with me. If you don't object, I'd like you to share a room with Tara, and I'll share with Leliana. If the other room is larger, we'll put the men in there, and ask the landlord to lay some featherbeds on the floor. I expect to be here at least for a few days. No one knows when the boat I want is coming. I'll be giving the mages some riding lessons anyway, and I hope you will join us. And now, come with me, and I'll make the introductions."

As Bronwyn could have predicted, they did not go very smoothly. She caught the men's looks of admiration at the sight of Morrigan in her revealing robes: Anders very open about it, and Cullen very guilty. Tara looked at her with admiration too.

"You're a mage?" she asked in wonder. "A mage who has never lived in the Circle?"

"That I am," Morrigan declared proudly. "Templars came and went, but my mother and I were never caught. Never even in the least danger of it, in fact."

"An apostate!" Cullen stared in horror. Bronwyn did not like the curious blue glow gathering around him.

"Uh-Cullen," Alistair nudged him. "Don't do that. She counts as a Grey Warden ally. Remember what I told you?"

"But-"

"I'd like to speak to Cullen for a moment," Bronwyn said pleasantly. "Why don't you all get situated and washed upstairs? Tara, you will be sharing a room with Morrigan, and I'm sorry, Leliana, but it looks like you will have put up with me. Alistair-" she said quickly, cutting off whatever remark Anders was about to make. "Alistair, Morrigan took Brother Genetivi's room for us, and since it's much bigger, I think all the men can go there. Ask the the innkeeper for more bedding."

"I cannot *wait* to have a shave," Anders said dreamily, following after Sten and Alistair. "Ale, cheese, and a shave. I call that the good life. All I need now is permission to shoot lightning at fools and a harem of pretty girls-oh, wait, we've got that..."

Bronwyn smiled at the sound of his voice, fading as he went upstairs with the rest. She remained smiling as she sat down at the table and faced Cullen. She gave a nod to the innkeeper, and he hastily departed in the direction of the kitchen.

"Cullen." She sat back and regarded him, keeping her face

pleasant. "Please listen very carefully to me. I don't know what the Knight-Commander had in mind, or what orders he gave you. They don't matter. He is no longer your Knight-Commander. I command the Grey Wardens in Ferelden, and you are *my* recruit. I'm sure Alistair told you of our mission."

"He said we were to go to Orzammar to enforce the treaties against the darkspawn," Cullen ventured. He added, uncertain as to her title "-Commander."

"Call me Bronwyn. We are not formal in the Grey Wardens. We are going to enforce the treaties, yes, but that is because our ultimate mission is to kill darkspawn, by whatever means necessary. Did Alistair say those words to you?"

"I don't recall-"

"Then I shall repeat them. *'By whatever means necessary.'* Our late commander, Duncan, emphasized those words to me. Grey Wardens have always taken allies where they could find them, because the darkspawn are the supreme danger to the safety of the people of Thedas. Understand that as a Grey Warden you will not be fighting unarmed, frightened eight-year-old boys, or exhausted, escaping lone mages. Darkspawn are strong and savage and they hunt in packs and they *eat* people!"

Her voice had risen involuntarily. She took another sip of ale, thinking the man was looking sufficiently cowed. Of course, as a former Templar, he was accustomed to women telling him what to do.

More quietly, she continued. "We are not the Chantry Wardens, Cullen. We are certainly not the Shining White Wardens. If an apostate wants to stand with us and fight darkspawn, then she is our ally. In fact, I don't *ever* want to see you using Templar skills on any of our mages. Save them for the darkspawn."

The words, once spoken, disturbed her. She remembered the night before Ostagar: the council of war under the ruined arches of the ancient fortress, and Uldred offering a magical alternative to the signal beacon. The Revered Mother had rudely cut him off, telling him to save his spells "*for the darkspawn.*"

"I think there is so much you can do to help us save this country, Cullen," she told him kindly. "We need brave hearts and generous souls so very badly. But we must keep on mission, Cullen. The *darkspawn* are our enemy, and anything that prevents us fighting them. The *darkspawn*, Cullen. Do not let yourself be distracted by anything else. Have you ever seen darkspawn yourself?"

"Never," he said softly.

"Well, you'll be seeing them if you stay with us. Keep your sword sharp. And remember that the Grey Wardens are brothers and sisters to one another. Alistair is your brother, and Anders is your brother, and so is Sten. Tara and Leliana are your sisters. We are your new family, whether we are warriors or mages or human or qunari or elf."

"And you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're my sister, too."

"Exactly right," she approved. Then she gave him her most winning smile. "Just remember though, that I'm your *older* sister, and I get to tell you what to do."

"Yes, Comman-I mean-Bronwyn."

"And furthermore," she added gently. "When you need lyrium, just tell us, and we'll see to it."

"You never lived in the Circle," Tara repeated. The room was gorgeous, and she would be sharing it with only one other person. There was a big bed, and a writing table and a chair, and their own fireplace with a fire in it, and chests for storing things, and well-everything. And the servant had come in with a big pitcher of hot water, and Tara could have a bath, standing in the wide basin in the corner. Irving had healed her, but she was still filthy from imprisonment and too many faceless men.

"No, I never have," Morrigan answered carelessly. "My mother taught me my magic, and taught me well."

"You are so lucky," Tara told her. "You must not even have a phylactery!"

Morrigan frowned at the unfamiliar word. "A phylactery? Why would I have such a thing?"

"When we come to the Circle, the Templars take some of our blood and put it in a phylactery vial, and that's how they track us," Tara told her. "When I helped Jowan escape, we went to the storage cellars off the dungeons to destroy his." She added glumly. "Mine had already been sent to Denerim."

"The Templars track you using your *blood*?" Morrigan asked with incredulous amusement. "Such breathtaking hypocrisy astonishes even me. You are saying that the Chantry, that bastion against the evil maleficarum, uses Blood Magic itself? And regularly, too?"

"Yes," Tara ventured uncertainly, "I suppose you could say-" She stopped, enraged and betrayed and murderous. "Yes, they do! Those bastards!"

She caught Morrigan's eye, and shook her head, laughing and crying at once. "Those *utter* bastards!"

"This is wonderful," Anders proclaimed, digging into his shepherd's pie. "I haven't had much but gruel for months."

"It is good, isn't it?" Tara agreed. It was such a pleasant, strange way to eat. It was like a family, almost, or at least the way she had imagined a family. There was the mother at the head of the table, and the father at the foot-or was it the other way round? Well, Bronwyn was in charge, so where she sat

must be the head. There was plenty of food and drink and people were talking nicely to each other, and no one was standing guard. She was a little afraid of the big dog sitting on the floor by Bronwyn, but she was told that Scout was a friend, so she managed a frightened smile and put a piece of meat from her pie on the floor by him to buy his favor. She had never seen a dog before, and had not imagined them being so *big*.

Scout regarded the meat with a certain disdain. He had been informed that the small creature was pack, but it was clear that she was a low-ranking member, and she smelled of fear. However, meat was meat, after all...

"I cannot believe how much you two look like each other!" Leliana cried for the tenth time, smiling at Alistair and Anders. "You really could be brothers!" She turned to Sten. "Don't you think they look alike?"

"All humans look alike," he rumbled, carefully leaving room for cookies.

"You do," Cullen put in hesitantly. "There really is a resemblance, now that Anders is shaved."

"I do not look like him!" Alistair insisted. "He's all pasty-and-and-magicky!"

"Woooooo!" Anders threatened, waving his hands in weird patterns. "Magicky! I like that! I suppose nothing is impossible. I'm a bastard, after all. We could have had a

mutual sperm donor-not to insult your no doubt worthy father."

Bronwyn stopped eating, and set down her fork. Alistair turned red and looked at her from the other end of the table. She smiled lightly and said, "Where are you from, Anders? You mentioned your mother and how you avoided the Circle until you were fifteen."

"From Gwaren. I'm told my father was a soldier, but Mother wouldn't say much. She was always putting me off 'until the time was right' as she said, and then she was killed in a fall. so now I'll never know. I don't worry about it much. If my father had been worth two coppers, he wouldn't have left her in the first place."

"Maybe you're right," Alistair muttered. "I think I'm done," he said, pushing away his plate.

"Not until we have our story!" Leliana told the others, "We have made a pact. Everyone has to tell a story. It's Alistair's turn tonight!"

"Oh, very well," he groaned. "I might as well get it over with. I heard this from a minstrel at Redcliffe a long time ago and I liked it. I'll try to get it right..."

Alistair's story of The Water of Life:

There was once a king who had three sons. The king was proud of his two eldest, but the youngest son he thought a

fool, and he was called Witling, instead of having a proper name.

The King fell sick, and everyone thought he was going to die. The King told his courtiers, "In a far country is the Well of the Water of Life. Unless someone can bring me a draught of that, I shall surely perish."

The eldest prince said, "I shall soon find it." He was given a white horse and a scarlet cloak and a famous sword, and trumpets rang as he rode from the castle. He rode until he came to a deep valley, surrounding by high rocks. On one of the rocks was perched an old man with a staff and a bright red cap, who called out, "Whither so fast, my prince?"

"What's it to you?" sneered the prince.

The old man was a mage, and he was furious at the prince's rudeness. Suddenly the prince and his horse stopped, spellbound and asleep. The rocks and trees and vines surrounded the prince and hid him from the world.

After a time no one had heard from him, so the second prince said, "Sire, I shall find the Water of Life." To himself he said, "My brother is surely dead, and now the kingdom will fall to me."

So the king gave him a white horse and scarlet cloak and a famous sword, and trumpets rang out as he rode from the castle. He rode until he came to the deep valley, and the mage was there, and called, "My prince, whither so fast?"

"Mind your own business, you old busybody," sneered the prince, and instantly he was struck by the spell and vanished from the world, sound asleep.

When he did not return, the youngest brother went to his father and asked for leave to find The Water of Life.

"How could you, a worthless witling, hope to do what you brothers could not?" said the king, but nonetheless he was afraid of dying and gave his leave.

Prince Witling was given an old nag, and a rough sheepskin to keep him warm, and a rusty sword from the armory. No trumpets rang for him, but he rode out with high hopes all the same.

He came to the deep valley where the mage was waiting. The mage called out, "Prince, whither so fast?"

And the prince said, "I am going to search for the Water of Life, because my father is dying. Have you ever heard of it? If you can give me any help, I would *really* appreciate it."

"Well!" said the mage, "since you ask so nicely, I will help you. The well of the Water of Life lies to the north and the well is hidden in an enchanted castle. Follow the Dragon Star and you will find it. Here is an iron wand. Strike it three times against the gate of the castle and it will open for you. Here are two loaves of bread. There are two bears standing guard just inside the gate. Throw one of these loaves to each of the bears and they will let you alone. Walk through the castle until

you come to the inner courtyard, where lies the well of the Water of Life. There is something else there too, but I believe in pleasant surprises."

So everything happened as the mage foretold. Prince Witling struck the door three times and it flew open. There was a bear to the right, and a bear to the left. The prince threw a loaf to each and they were satisfied. He walked through the great castle, and stepped outside to a broad courtyard.

The courtyard was full of flowers of all colors, and in the middle was the well, but the prince saw something even more amazing. Standing beside the well was a beautiful queen. She welcomed him joyfully and told him she was under an enchantment; but if he could come back here after a year and day had passed, she would be free of the spell, and she and this castle and her whole kingdom would be his.

To seal their betrothal, she gave him a sword and helmet of dragonbone. The sword could cut through any armor, and the helmet rendered the wearer invincible.

"Take these, think of me, and be ever victorious," said the beautiful queen.

Rejoicing in his good fortune, he filled his flask with the Water of Life and bade the beautiful queen farewell, promising that he would return without fail.

He rode home and on the way he met the mage in the red cap who had helped him, and thanked him for all he had done. The

mage smiled when he saw the sword and the helmet. "You have won noble prizes in your travels, my prince," he said, "but I think that the best of all is what is yet to come."

The prince agreed with that, of course, and then asked the mage if he knew anything about his brothers.

"I have punished them for their pride and arrogance," the mage said, "and they are bespelled with sleep."

The prince was sorry for his brothers, and begged so hard that they be released that the mage agreed, but he warned Prince Witling: "Take care. They have bad hearts."

But the prince was happy to see his brothers again, and told them he had found the Water of Life, and showed them the flask. He also told them of the beautiful queen and his promise to return and lift the enchantment after a year and a day. The older princes smirked at each other, and while their younger brother slept, they took the Water of Life from him and put it in another flask. Prince Witling's flask they filled with scummy pond water.

When they reached their home, Prince Witling brought his flask to his father. The king drank the dirty water, and spat it out, furious. The other sons pretended to be horrified, and said, "Father, if we had known that this fool meant to poison you, we would never have allowed him to return!"

The king did not think Witling clever enough to poison him, but he thought him an embarrassment. He ordered the youngest

prince banished and told him that if he ever returned to the kingdom his life would be forfeit. The older sons watched him off and then hurried to take their father the Water of Life, each wanting to get the credit for saving their father's life, each hoping to be made the heir of the kingdom.

Meanwhile, Witling sadly rode away. He spent many months traveling, and everywhere he found battles and bloodshed. He used his sword and helmet in countless fights, and saved whole kingdoms of innocent people.

The queen in her castle far to the north waited for him, and while she waited she caused her servants to build a road of shining gold from the forest to the gate of her castle. She said, "Only he who rides down the middle of it is my true prince: let no one else pass the gate."

At the end of the year, the eldest prince decided to ride north and gain himself a queen and a kingdom. When he saw the golden road he thought it a thousand pities to ride upon it, and so he turned his horse to the left and rode up on the dirt beside it to the castle. When he came to the gate, the guards told him he was not the true prince, and to go about his business. And so there was nothing for it but to just go home.

Then the second prince saw his chance, and rode north hoping to gain a queen and a kingdom. When he saw the golden road he too thought it a thousand pities to dirty it with horse's hooves, so he turned to the right, and rode up alongside it to the castle. But he fared no better than his brother: the guards told him he was not the true prince, and to

go away. And so he had to go on home, too.

The king their father was amazed when many embassies came to him with presents, praising his son Prince Witling for saving them. He wondered, "Could I have been wrong about him?" And he searched for his son, but he never found him, for the prince was wandering the world until the time came to claim his queen. And the other brothers never told him about the castle and the queen, because they were too embarrassed.

When the year was quite gone, the prince rode north to the Castle of the Water of Life. As he rode along, all he thought about was his beautiful queen and how much he wanted to be with her. He never even saw the golden road. He cantered down the very middle of it, and the guards opened the gates to him at once. The queen kissed him, and told him that he would be her king and lord of all she possessed. So they were married amid feasting and celebration, and they lived happily ever after.

"Happily ever after!" Morrigan scoffed.

"Yes," Alistair maintained loftily. "They lived happily ever after to the end of their days. Deliriously happy, in fact. Couldn't have been happier."

"And the old king never knew what happened to his son?" Cullen said, almost to himself.

"No, never!" Anders interrupted. "Why should he? He was quick enough to throw him away when he didn't think him of any use. Serves him right, I say."

Sten frowned. "Did the prince continue to fight? Or did he fall into sloth and gluttony, fawning over the woman like a fool?"

"Hey!" Alistair objected. "He fought! Lots! People were always coming to him to help them out, and he did, but when he wasn't doing that, he was having a very nice life with his queen."

"It's a beautiful story, Alistair," Bronwyn said, liking the golden road bits especially. "Thank you. Don't be too scornful, Morrigan. Your turn is coming soon!"

"Well, I can assure you that any story I tell will not end with the words 'happily ever after!'"

"There are many different kinds of stories," Leliana granted. "All of them have their merits. Variety is very important."

"So-" Bronwyn sat by Leliana, looking at her expectantly, "are you going to play for us tonight, or not?"

Leliana smiled, and gave a slow nod. "Yes. I am ready to play again at last."

Notes: the story is adapted from "The Water of Life," collected by the Brothers Grimm.

Thanks to my reviewers: Aoihand, Amhran Comhrac, almostinsane, Persephone Chiara, Eva Galana, Shakespira, Zyanic, Piceron, SotF, khaos974, mutive, mille libri, Sati James, Lunarfox's Silverdusk, Angry Girl, Costin, kart87, Have Socks Will Travel, Porphyra, Sofaspud, ByLanternLight, WellspringCD, and Remenants. You are my inspiration.

We will return to events at Ostagar in the next chapter, while Bronwyn and her party wait for the boat and practice riding,

14. A Parting Glass

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 14: A Parting Glass

Ostagar was beginning to have the look of a small town, or at least a permanent outpost of the kingdom. Wooden huts and barracks were in the process of being constructed. The quartermaster's stores were now under permanent cover. If they stayed through the winter, the King and his nobles would have to take up residence in the Tower of Ishal, which was being readied for that contingency.

The darkspawn had been thwarted at every turn, but they had not been eradicated. Soldiers did not wander off alone from the camp, for darkspawn appeared in small packs at frequent, random intervals: pressing, probing, always challenging the defenses of the army at Ostagar.

The threat was not so great as to spread the rot of fear through the army, fortunately: morale was fairly high. So Loghain thought, leaving the King's tent for his own. Higher than ever, of course, since Bronwyn Cousland had sent them her extravagant gift.

The arrival of thirty-five mages in their six wagons had

astonished the entire army, from King down to foot soldier. Some soldiers had been intimidated. Most however, were glad—especially at the arrival of so many Healers to work in the infirmary. And the mages certainly seemed enthusiastic. Without exception they were genuinely glad to be here.

Thirty-five mages! That was an amazing contribution. If the young Warden accomplished nothing else, that alone was worthy of commendation. He had imagined she might double their number, or perhaps, if she were particularly persuasive, send them ten more from the Circle.

The First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander had not responded so generously to the King's call for assistance. Idly, Loghain wondered exactly how the girl had wheedled the mages away from those two stubborn old men. Had she scolded them, charmed them, counseled them, mocked them? Perhaps all of the above, sweetened with that smile of hers. It was amusing to imagine.

He hoped that the bastard was proving of some use to her. The boy had followed her like a puppy, those days between the battle and their departure. He smiled to himself. It reminded him a little of Anora and Cailan, at least in childhood, when the palace was their world of adventure.

A burst of laughter from the tent beyond distracted him from his thoughts. Fergus Cousland seemed in good spirits.

"Ha! I can't *believe* it! She took his horses, too!"

Another man laughed, saying something unintelligible, but Loghain recognized the voice as Leonas Bryland's.

Who could "she" be, if it was a matter of interest to Cousland, and who could "she" be, if it involved horses? They must be speaking of his sister. Curious, Loghain walked around his tent to hear the news.

Fergus Cousland, his tent open to the air, was lounging about reading, red-faced with mirth. Bryland was laughing too, putting his head in his hands in mock despair. The men looked up to see Loghain staring at them.

"Oh! Sorry, Loghain. Ha!" Fergus tried to compose himself. "I'm reading through Bronwyn's enormous letter to me! Practically a novel, this, telling me all about her adventures."

Loghain paused. His paperwork could wait, surely.

"Come in and sit down," Fergus was saying, still grinning. "No doubt she was on her best behavior in her letter to you. Have a drink! Dariel!"

Bronwyn had written to him, indeed: a very proper, very clear report of her activities and her progress with her mission. Once again, he regretted that she would never be his officer. She was of course, under his general command, and there was satisfaction in that. In combat, he felt that she could be trusted to do as she was told, and improvise when needed without compromising his own strategy.

Yes, an excellent report: respectful without subservience; witty without flippancy. He could almost hear her speaking the words.

The tent still bore a certain air of her having been there, or perhaps it was simply the well-trained Highever servants. He accepted the cider, and sat down in a folding chair by Fergus, wanting to hear about the letter. It was certainly thick enough.

Loghain remarked, "She told me that she had seen only scattered patrols of darkspawn: one a day south of Lothering, and then some up around Lake Calenhad."

"Right-Lake Calenhad. I've only scanned the letter. It looks like I've got entertainment for a night or two here," he laughed. "Bronwyn's practically sent me a diary of her adventures!" He bowed to his cousin, "She began with sending her best love to all her relatives, of course."

Bryland bowed back, "Of course!"

Loghain snorted into his cup. Cousland and Bryland had certainly begun their drinking early today. Or perhaps it was simply the letter.

"She must have left the humorous bits out of the report she sent me," Loghain said dryly.

Fergus wiped his eyes. "Not so much humorous as outrageous. Our Bronwyn has been a very high-handed girl. I'll probably have to settle things with Bann Ceorlic eventually,

but I can't blame her for taking all the horses he left at the manor."

Loghain looked up in surprise. "She did *what?*"

"She *requisitioned* them—gave the seneschal a promissory note and all, but clearly she saw nothing wrong in it. Come to think of it, I think I'll let her do the talking when Ceorlic comes calling. She can be all doe-eyed and sweet and earnest, and I'll just stand behind her nodding solemnly. She'll probably get away with it."

"Did she say why?"

"Why she took the horses? She says that she recruited two Wardens in Lothing and foresaw that she'd need more mounts. She picked up another three at the Circle: two mages and a Templar who's been released from his vows. She says that—Ahem!" Fergus' voice grew higher and lighter and considerably more polished as he read. "*'It would seem that my words struck home with a great many of our mages.'* That means, I take it, that the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander were so ill-advised as to let Bronwyn address the troops, as it were, and she laid on the charm as only she can. Hence the five wagons and the thirty-five mages. Bronwyn's awfully good at getting her way. Mother was about the only one who could resist the big grey eyes and that little throaty tremor in her voice—but of course that's because Bronwyn learned how to do all that at Mother's knee. Surpassed her, though—and early."

Bryland laughed, with a touch of melancholy. "Your father could never say no to her, certainly."

Fergus' smile became rueful. "I don't know. He managed to put her off from time to time. A flat 'no?' Well, perhaps not."

Loghain saw no reason to complain of her behavior, since she had sent him thirty-five mages. Ceorlic might never realize the horses were gone, or if he did, it might not be until next year. That sniveling coward should have given the horses to the army, anyway.

"Oh!" Fergus went back to his letter. "And she organized a militia in Lothing while she was there. Ceorlic may not like that, either. She was quite scandalized that no provisions at all had been made for the town's defense. She's got them keeping lookouts in the watchtowers and building a gate of the far side of town. She also cleared out some bandits while she was there."

"Oh, well done," Bryland saluted her with his goblet.

"—and some wolves, bears, and spiders. Spiders? She says there was a nest of unpleasantly large spiders in a hill south of town. Big as mabaris, she says."

"She's having you on," Bryland decided. "Never heard of a spider that big or even near it."

"I have," Loghain stated flatly. At that very *Loghainish* tone of voice, Bryland was silent. Loghain scowled, thinking it over.

"Until her report, I had no idea they were breeding on the surface. That could be serious in itself. There must be details there she might not have thought to tell me."

"Well—" Fergus said, scanning the pages of the letter, "from what I can see, she was running into all sorts of unpleasantness. If she'd told you about every time she was attacked, her letter to you would be as long as this!"

"No matter," Loghain said, pouring himself more cider. "What exactly does she say? I need to know everything."

Bryland raised his brows and shot Fergus a knowing look. Fergus grimaced, and paged through the letter.

"All right. There was the little boy she ran into half a day from camp, whose family lived along the Fairborn. She got the mother and children out, but the father was not to be found, and the darkspawn attacked just as they were loading the wagon. Killed them all, but the children took no hurt beyond a bad fright. Said there were others who hadn't evacuated when they were told, and were probably dead. She picked up some more refugees on the road, and then chased off some bandits south of Lothing."

"Chased off?" Bryland asked. "What does she mean?"

Fergus read a paragraph, and grinned again. "She told them that she had never met an old bandit, and that she would be vexed with them if she met them 'collecting taxes' again. They agreed with her, and cleared their rubbish off the road."

He took a sip from his goblet, and read down the page. "Lothering—everyone happy to see them, bought them drinks, and so forth. Some strange rumors passed on to her from the barman." He frowned, and passed over them without reading them aloud.

Could Arl Eamon have been poisoned? It seemed unlikely to Fergus. The man had been right here in camp when he died. Still, there *were* slow-acting poisons. Father had told him about the Crows and their tricks. It seemed impossible that a decent fellow like Teagan would be involved in something like that. He *couldn't* fake that kind of concern for his brother. On the other hand, Mother had always disliked Arlessa Isolde, and thought she was—what? '*A pious fraud.*' There was endless gossip about Teagan being unmarried and some whispers about how possessive the Arlessa seemed toward her brother-in-law...

Loghain was looking at him, waiting for the rumors. Fergus, feeling himself flush, said, "There was some talk about Bronwyn herself that she thought silly. She hates that nickname—'*Girl Warden.*' She was more concerned about reports of people vanishing from their farmholds. It's probably what she saw at that place where she rescued the family. The darkspawn burst out of the ground and snatch up the odd captive. Very unsettling."

Loghain snorted, and agreed, with heavy sarcasm. "*Very.*"

Fergus went back to the letter, "And then up to the manor, and everything very nice, and Ceorlic really is quite the

sybarite, and oh—" he laughed again, glancing through the next few pages. "—This is all about Bann Ceorlic's bathroom, and isn't it a scandalous expenditure, but she really liked it, all the same." He rubbed his jaw, trying not to laugh at her. "Bronwyn's a sensible girl, but she's still a girl, and thus had to describe to me how very much she enjoyed washing her hair properly. I think we can pass over that bit."

He moved to the next page. "And she thought she'd get an early start, but she woke to half the freeholders in the bannorn pounding at the gate the next morning, wanting to talk to anybody who might know something, so she had to address their concerns and calm them down, and then she agreed to organize their muster, but first deal with the present threats."

He huffed, in sympathetic indignation. "She's quite starchy about the helplessness of the village, standing there watching while someone else dealt with their problems. A young lay sister of the local Chantry eventually showed up with a bow, and made herself useful, but she was the only one to actually do anything to help. She volunteered to go with Bronwyn," he burst out laughing, "—saying that the Maker told her to. Bronwyn thinks this Sister Leliana is a bit bonkers, but very well-meaning, and a splendid archer. She's been recruited into the Wardens."

Fergus stared at the rest of the page. What was this? Lines of strange symbols and markings? Then he remembered.

Loghain saw his confusion, and asked, "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to puzzle this bit out. Bronwyn's written it in our old secret code."

"What?" Bryland laughed. Then he said, "I should have known!"

"No, really—" Fergus, explained, smiling. "—when we were children we made up a secret code so we could exchange messages that no one else could decipher. I'll have to sit down and do some scribbling, but it will come back to me, I'm sure. We got the idea from some story about the old Tevinters that Aldous made her read. It was a pretty good cipher, too: not just a mere substitution. She must have something to say that she didn't want any of the mages carrying the letter to see." He glanced through the pages.

"She uses it again in her bit about the Circle of Magi—at length, too. It may be important. Anyway—to get back to her story, she killed the men and monsters, and then the muster was blessed publicly by the Revered Mother in a very theatrical display on the Chantry porch. She appointed a captain—Captain Tobery, son of a village elder—whom she considers a sound fellow and a good swordsman—and laid out a plan to stiffen the village defenses a bit. Oh—and she also wrung the release of a prisoner from the Revered Mother—a qunari, whom she also conscripted. She thanks me for the Nevarran horse, which was big enough for him, since the qunari said that 'only a Ferelden would ride a dog to war.'"

"I've seen mabaris that were big enough," Bryland mused to himself. "They could certainly carry elves. Don't know how

they'd take to saddles, though..."

Loghain glanced at the arl and rolled his eyes. "A rogue qunari and a Chantry sister? That doesn't sound particularly promising."

"I don't know," Fergus shrugged. "She seems pleased with them. The qunari puzzled over Bronwyn's being a woman for a bit, but she set him straight about Ferelden. Let's see: more abandoned houses, horse thieves, some wolves...the darkspawn patrol by Lake Calenhad... Alistair's Templar skills proved useful..."

Loghain muttered, "I'm glad he's useful for *something*."

Fergus wondered why Loghain was so down on the lad. "She doesn't say that much about him, but he seems to be doing well, other than being a deplorable cook. As bad as I am, she says, which means *really* bad. He made some sort of quip about the name of the inn at Calenhad Docks where they're staying—Ha! *The Spoiled Princess!*"

"Really?" Bryland wondered. "I wouldn't call Bronwyn *spoiled*, exactly. Certainly she's used to getting her way, but she's really a very nice child. Not always demanding things, like... well...she's a very nice child. Woman, I suppose, now. *Spirited*, perhaps..."

Fergus read a little further, and looked amused. "At the inn, she met a scholar who wrote a book she liked about the Rebel Queen. Brother Genetivi is the name. It seems he knew

our old tutor. The worthy brother is off on a mission of his own to find—get this—the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

Bryland gaped. "You're joking! Or he is."

Fergus shook his head. "No. The man really and truly thinks he's found a lead. Here—" he turned the page. "She sent me a little map here of the land between Redcliffe and the Frostbacks." Seeing Loghain lean forward in interest, Fergus read aloud:

"I shall take great satisfaction in lording my superior knowledge over Teyrn Loghain, as his map does not include two villages that Brother Genetivi swears are within Ferelden territory. His present goal is the town called Haven, about which he knows little, other than that it is the human settlement closest to the alleged funerary temple of Andraste. I wondered that he would be traveling alone in such unsettled times, but he pointed out, justly, that Blights have sometimes lasted for decades, and he said something that struck me deeply: 'If not now, then when?' which is something I think we should all say to ourselves from time to time. So to this Haven—which I marked on my own map—Brother Genetivi is to go. About the other village, Honnleath, he knows nothing at all, other than the bare fact of its existence. Whether these places are the stuff of fantasy and daydream, I know not. I certainly haven't the time to investigate. I wished the good brother all success—and survival—but he is in the hands of the Maker now."

"The Urn of the Sacred Ashes!" Bryland repeated, in awe. "Wouldn't that be extraordinary, if it were true?"

"I am glad," Loghain said stiffly, "that your sister is too sensible to chase after myths and legends. May I see the map?"

Fergus passed the page to him, and went on glancing through the letter, while Loghain frowned over Bronwyn's hasty scribbles.

"All right then," Fergus said, "she made it to the Circle...some observations...lots in code...she was writing this just as she was about to leave...Right, she spoke to the assembled mages and then probably fluttered her lashes at them soulfully until they caved and enlisted. A demon!" He set down his goblet and stood up, pacing a little. "Listen to this! While she was there, a demon was loosed from the dungeons. What sort of place *is* the Circle? And...code, code, code...I think she's saying something about the Templars...anyway, she and Alistair rushed down and slew the demon while pretty much everyone else ran away. I can tell when she's unimpressed with people. Oh, and the demon was carrying a very nice greatsword called Yusaris, and I'm to find out what I can about it, because the First Enchanter gave it to her, but it's much too heavy and awkward for her, so she'll probably let the qunari use it."

Loghain was still scowling at the little map. "Have you some parchment I can use?" he asked Fergus, a bit abruptly.

Fergus gestured at the writing table, and Loghain sat down to make a copy of the copy.

Bryland suppressed a grin, and said loudly, "So Bronwyn slew a *demon*! Isn't that extraordinary, Loghain?"

With a hint of a sneer, Loghain looked up from his work and said, "Believe it or not, I *did* hear that, Bryland. Bronwyn slew a demon and won a greatsword she cannot use, named Yusaris. All hail the Girl Warden! What about those recruits of hers?"

"Nothing gets past that man," Bryland muttered to Fergus, looking disgusted. "Yes, what about her recruits?"

Fergus sat down again, and found his place in the letter. "As I said, two mages and a Templar—that last is scrawled at the very end. It looks like the Knight-Commander surprised her. Most of this is code, and she underlined some of the bits. I wonder if she was angry... She says briefly that one of the mages is an outstanding Healer and just what she needed, and he looked more fit and healthy than anyone else she saw at the tower. The other mage is a young elf woman who Irving said was remarkably powerful. Code, code, code... She says she'll try to write again when she can, but she's waiting for the big lake ferry, and has no idea when it will arrive. Her alternative plan is to ride around the north end of the lake... She's very happy that she was able to send us thirty-three mages, and we're to use them well. Love to all. She must run now."

"Thirty-three?" Bryland considered. "Maybe two more volunteered after she left."

"Very likely." Loghain finished his cider and stood up. "When you decipher the rest," he said to Fergus, "inform me. I should have given her a cipher for correspondence before she left. What you have will have to do."

Fergus grimaced, rather annoyed that Loghain should feel entitled to know the details of his sister's private letter. He supposed the man might be right about some of it being of military importance, though she had not indicated she wanted it all shared. If she said anything that might cause herself embarrassment, he would simply not communicate it to Loghain. He needed to work on remembering the cipher...

"Loghain!"

The King was striding toward them, Bann Teagan in tow, their handsome faces uncommonly serious. Another man was trying to keep up with the taller men, a young fellow in common dress.

"No, don't get up," Cailan said. "You stay too, Bryland. I'll want advice about this, if I'm to leave the camp and go to Redcliffe."

"Go to Redcliffe?" Loghain growled, a trickle of suspicion chilling his spine. "Why would you do that?"

"I've had some bad news," Teagan told him. "Something's

wrong there, and I need to find out what has happened. The King feels he should go as well."

"Well—Connor is my cousin," Cailan declared. "My *only* cousin—or first cousin, at least. If he's in danger, I must do something!"

"What sort of danger?' Loghain asked harshly.

"Perhaps, You Majesty," Teagan suggested, "It's best that Tomas tell everyone what he knows." He explained, gesturing the young man forward. "Tomas here is from Redcliffe, and a reliable young man. He came to me this morning with an alarming tale. Tell us your story, Tomas, and try to remember every detail."

The young man—really more a boy—was blushing like a maiden and stammering with nerves. "I'll—d-do my best, my lords—Your Majesty. I left Redcliffe three nights ago—"

"Did the Arlessa send you?" Fergus wanted to know. Loghain simply glared at the boy, wondering the same.

The boy gaped, thrown off his stride by the question. "The Arlessa?" he said confused. "No! I don't know if the Arlessa is alive or dead!"

The reaction to this caused Teagan to call out, "If you please—let the lad tell the story in his own way."

"Very well." Loghain sat back down, feeling very uneasy.

Could this have anything to do with that other matter?

The boy swallowed, looking at the august personages waiting on him, wishing to hide or sink into the ground. Gathering his courage, he started, haltingly, at first.

"We were that sorry when the Arl's ashes were sent to us. Nobody expected it! Ser Perth and those others came back with the urn, and told the Revered Mother, and she led the prayers for his lordship. There was talk that the Arlessa took it hard—really hard: screaming and shrieking all over the castle. The mayor and some of the folk called at the castle, to pay their respects, and ask when there would be a day of mourning declared for the Arl, but *she*—I mean—" the boy blushed again, remembering his manners, "—I mean the Arlessa- wouldn't talk to them. Took to her bed, we were told. Had the urn with her, and was carrying on day and night. We asked after the little boy—I mean the new Arl, and he was shut away with her. The chamberlain told us to come back in a day or two, when her ladyship was feeling herself, and not to come in a crowd, like we'd done, because it made her ladyship's head ache to hear us all."

"Go on, Tomas," Teagan urged kindly. "They need to hear everything."

"Well," the lad went on, "I'm afraid your lordships won't believe me, but something is not right at the castle. Murdock the mayor and two others went back to the castle as they'd been told, and they never returned to the village! We waited, and then we wondered if they'd been needed for something. A

few of us went up to the castle and the portcullis was down, and no one was in the courtyard, and we shouted awhile. After a bit the Chamberlain comes out, looking all calm-like, and asks, "What do you want, fellows?" in his high-and-mighty way. No disrespect, but there's no call to speak to free men the way he was, but he was sort of-off. We asked about Murdock and about the Arlessa. He told us that he knew nothing of any fellow named Murdock, and that the Arlessa was too busy to mind a pack of peasants."

The boy licked his lips. "We weren't having that, so we-sort of pounded on the gate a bit, and after a little more, who comes out but the Arlessa herself, all smiling. And she doesn't know anything about Murdock either, but when we asks her about a day of mourning for the Arl, she laughs in this fancy sort of way, and says there's no cause for mourning at all. The Arl's come back and he's fine, and they'll are very happy, thank you very much. She could see that we didn't-well-we didn't believe her, so she said to the chamberlain to raise the gate and let us in, and she'd show us that everything was all right now."

His listeners were utterly silent now, enthralled by the story. Tomas continued his account. "So the Chamberlain comes out and the gate goes up and he smiles and tells us to come in. And my uncle-he says to me, he says, 'Tomas, my lad, we'll go in and see what's what, but I want you to hide yourself in the corner there and wait. If we're not back in an hour or two, you run on home and tell the Revered Mother.'"

"And they did not come out, I take it," Loghain ventured. This was all wrong, horribly all *wrong*.

The boy shook his head. "Not then, they didn't," he muttered. "And when they did they weren't themselves, either." He cast frightened eyes at Teagan. "I told you how it was, my lord, how after nightfall a lot of those creatures came down the hill into the village. We all thought it was the darkspawn, but they weren't that at all. Like corpses, they were, with no weapons, but rending anything that moved with their bare hands. Folk ran home and barred their doors, and most of them were all right, but those caught out in the open were killed. I was in the Chantry, and we heard the growling and grunting and screaming. I peered through the windows-even though they're thick, and I thought that some of the creatures looked like people I knew," his voice shook. "I thought I recognized my uncle and-and Murdock and them all. They were dead, but they were *walking*."

"Do you have any idea what happened to the Arlessa and her son?" Cailan asked, horrified. "It didn't look to you like-I mean-the Arlessa didn't look *dead*, did she?"

"No, Your Majesty! Not dead, but not all right, either. Too smiling and pleased with herself by half! When daybreak came, we gathered the dead, and the Revered Mother said to burn them fast, because if the dead were walking, we needed to see that these couldn't."

"Sensible woman!" commented Fergus. Loghain nodded, still trying to imagine what had gone wrong. Had the mage...? *Surely not.*

The boy said, "Some of the Templars were in the Chantry,

and they gave me a horse and told me to ride fast for Ostagar and help. Lothering was closer, but they didn't see as anyone there could do any good. They said they'd see that folk were kept safe, as far as they could. But if the dead came back, and me three nights gone, I can't answer for anyone still being alive there. All I can do is beg your lordships to come to our aid, or everyone in the village will be dead-or worse."

"I would think, Loghain," Cailan shouted, "that you'd let me go off on my own for once! It's just a village, when all's said and done!"

"Just a village under attack by the *walking dead!*" Loghain shouted back.

The other nobles fidgeted, embarrassed. Fergus hated the very idea of getting in the middle of this, but he owed it to everyone to mediate.

"We really haven't had much activity here in the past week," he said mildly. "And Redcliffe is not really all that far. Perhaps a strong company could investigate matters at Redcliffe-"

"Well said," Loghain snapped. "It will investigate them under my command." If the worst had happened, and the mage had unleashed some sort of curse, Loghain felt he must be there to contain the damage and salvage whatever he could.

"Loghain-" complained the King.

"Your Majesty," Teagan pleaded, "Loghain is right. You are too important to risk yourself unnecessarily. I should be glad for you to come, but well supported. Perhaps it would be best if Loghain led the vanguard to explore the castle, and you could command the reserve. You would be on hand to reassure my nephew, but not in the forefront of danger."

"But who would command here?" Cailan protested.

"Teyrn Cousland is the ranking peer," Loghain said shortly, "and I believe he can be trusted. Arl Bryland and Arl Wulffe will support him. We will leave at dawn, taking two companies of Maric's Shield-

"-and the knights of Redcliffe!" Teagan added.

Loghain grudgingly consented. "-and the knights of Redcliffe. We will also take some mages, as this is clearly a situation calling for their expertise. Senior Enchanters Uldred and Wynne, and perhaps some of their younger colleagues. With a forced march, and using the hill paths, we should be in Redcliffe within three days. And then we'll see what we're facing."

The camp was in an uproar as the expedition prepared to depart in less than twelve hours. Fergus alternated between anxiety and glee. To have command of the King's Army, even if only for a few days! He had been lucky in healing as soon as he had. And then there was a brief thrill of anguish. Father would have been so proud...but had Father been here, it was

he who would have been in command, and everyone would have been confident in his leadership. Fergus admitted to himself that he hoped that nothing serious happened while Loghain and the King were away. Or if it did, he prayed he would have the wisdom to deal with it.

And he wished he could not hear the voices in Loghain's tent quite so clearly.

"But she didn't send me any Wardens!" Cailan was complaining.

"She sent you thirty-five mages, which is twenty-five more than I dared hope for. Very likely she needs all the Wardens with her," Loghain answered impatiently. "You should get some rest, Cailan. We'll be leaving before dawn."

"At least she wrote to me," Cailan was going on, a smirk in his voice. "Though I noticed her letter to *you* was longer."

"And her letter to her brother was longer still. I must speak to the captains, Cailan. Maker's Breath, get some sleep!"

The elves were packing with furious efficiency. Dariel and the others were nearly noiseless, as they helped Loghain's servants load a baggage wagon with a smaller, different tent, with supplies and arms, with parchment and maps and books. Loghain traveled light-for a great nobleman-but there were things he would not want to be without.

Fergus himself had been to see his own Highever men, and

then to arrange details with Bryland and Wulffe. He had managed to puzzle out the rest of Bronwyn's letter-

-just in time.

"Well, Cousland?" Loghain was standing in front of him, glowering.

"Loghain?"

"What did your sister have to say that she wanted to keep from strangers' eyes?"

Fergus looked about him uneasily.

Loghain waved him along. "Walk with me. We'll go down to the valley and talk to the captains of Maric's Shield."

It seemed that now that everyone could see them, no one would think of trying to eavesdrop.

Fergus still kept his voice low. "Most of the things about the Circle were her indignation at conditions there. She thinks it's a shame and an outrage that there are Ferelden children who have never seen the sun. They were all pale and sickly-looking, she thought; all under guard like criminals. She doesn't see why they can't be allowed outside to play now and then. She used words like "cruel" and "inhuman," and I'm sure the Chantry would not be pleased with her. The mages she conscripted were prisoners-both involved in escape attempts. Bronwyn said it appeared that the Templars

seemed to care nothing for their vows of celibacy when a young woman was helpless and in their power. She didn't need much experience to tell her what the girl's injuries signified. I suppose that's why she conscripted her: she couldn't bear to leave her behind."

Loghain grimaced. "She'll get herself in trouble if she uses Conscription to right what she perceives are wrongs."

"I think she knows that, too, but that's the way she is." Fergus cleared his throat. "-and then there was the other bit. That alarms me more."

"What?"

Soldiers were greeting Loghain, and he was speaking to the older ones: the ones he knew. They moved beyond a row of tents.

"It's about the recruit she picked up in Lothering."

"The qunari?"

"No. The Chantry sister. Bronwyn found it odd that the one person in Lothering who volunteered to help her had a pronounced Orlesian accent."

Loghain stopped dead, and fixed Fergus with a fierce glare. "A spy?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Sister Leliana had been at the Chantry for the past two years. Bronwyn checked her out. She's not a

fool. If the woman's a spy, she was not sent there for Bronwyn, but is merely an opportunist. Nonetheless, it's a bit worrying, and Bronwyn told me that she would take great care not to let slip anything about her fellow Warden's-" Fergus made a face, and then decided to come out with it plainly. "-Her fellow Warden's paternity."

A silence, and Loghain examined Fergus narrowly. "Has Alistair confided something significant to her?"

"He didn't need to. She's not a fool, I tell you. She also understands that in the current climate, Alistair's situation is not something the Orlesians need to know. She'll keep it secret."

"Will Alistair? Is this Orlesian woman pretty?" Loghain could well imagine the lad falling prey to a spy's cheap allure, just as Maric had. One would think that the company of a beautiful girl like Bronwyn would be enough for him, but Rowan had not been enough for Maric. Nor was Anora enough for Cailan, either. Much as he had loved Maric, there was something rotten in the Theirin blood.

Fergus had considered his question carefully, and shrugged. "Bronwyn didn't say. What matters to her is that the woman can fight and that she's either a bit mad or a spy. Either way, let's hope Bronwyn's cautious around her."

They returned to their tents to find that King Cailan had certainly not taken Loghain's advice. He was drinking with

Bryland and Wulffe and Teagan, and banns and lesser nobles spilled out of the brightly-lit tent. Fergus and Loghain could hear the party before they entered the Royal Enclave. Fergus considered disappearing discreetly, but they were spotted before he had a chance.

"A parting glass!" Cailan called, flushed and joyous, his hair a golden nimbus in the lamplight. "Don't look so sour, Loghain! Come join us! We're drinking the ladies' health!"

Fergus smiled, thinking of Oriana. Loghain saw the exact moment that the young man recollected that his wife was dead.

Nonetheless, there was nothing for it but to take the offered wine. That was the worst of life in camp—the boredom that led to the drinking. At least Cailan was drinking to Anora.

"The Queen! Maker bless her!"

"With *children*," Bann Loren muttered to Bann Stronar. Loghain scowled, wishing a lethal hangover on his son-in-law.

"And Fergus!" Cailan called eagerly. "Let's drink to your sister next! The highest-born maiden in the land, and a Grey Warden, too!"

Fergus managed a pleasant smile. "To Bronwyn, high-born and high-handed as she is!"

Laughter and lifted goblets. More ladies' names were called

out. Bryland grabbed Fergus and pulled him aside. He might have thought he was being subtle, but he was a half-dozen drinks beyond that. "Well? What did he say?"

"Say?" Fergus frowned, stepping back. "Who?"

"Loghain! I saw the two of you taking counsel together." He tapped the side of his nose, winking. "No point keeping the poor girl waiting any longer! It hardly matters now if she's of age or not!"

Too many people were listening. Fergus smiled tightly. "I assure you, we were speaking about the army."

"And you were also talking about Bronwyn! Don't even try to deny it!"

"She's a Grey Warden, Cousin. I didn't even raise the issue. There's no point now."

Fergus extricated himself and stonily placed himself by Cailan's side. Bryland saw Loghain, and shrugged expressively. "Well, I think it's a shame. Bronwyn's a wonderful girl."

Loghain scowled at him, trying to understand him through the noise and the clinking of goblets. Bryland was so drunk it was a wonder he was still on his feet. "No one says she isn't."

"Eleanor and Bryce thought she'd get over it, but she didn't. It's a shame." He refilled his goblet.

"Perhaps we should not be speaking of her in front of everyone," Loghain growled, steering Bryland out into the cool air, far from the noble crowd. "I know about her 'inappropriate infatuation.' Are you saying she still feels the same way?"

"Of course!" Bryland regarded him owlishly, and quaffed down his wine. "Steady sort of girl. Gorgeous, too. Man would be lucky to have her!"

"Yes, of course," Loghain sneered. "Unless, of course, he was already married. That might *not* be so *lucky* for her!"

"But he's not!" Bryland objected, puzzled. "I mean-you're not. Are you?"

Loghain opened his mouth, and then shut it. Then he said, "She was not in love with the King?"

Bryland burst out laughing, and then put his hand over his mouth. Loghain backed away, expecting Bryland's wine to make a reappearance. With swaying dignity, the arl declared, "Not that His Majesty isn't a splendid fellow. No. Poor Bronwyn's heart has belonged to another since she was-what?-sixteen. Every year at her birthday, Bryce would ask her if she'd changed her mind, and every year she said 'no.' *That's* why they didn't want her at Court. Bronwyn's good at getting her way, and I daresay she would have found a way to force the issue, even with you."

"With me?" He had made a ridiculous mistake. No, a perfectly reasonable mistake. It made him feel just the least bit-giddy.

Perhaps it was the wine.

"You. Lucky bastard. Imagine being married to *Bronwyn!*"

Loghain did: in an instant he could picture that young, fresh face smiling at him under a wreath of Andraste's grace, a trailing laugh, long legs wrapped around him, and *rapture*.

Slurring his words a little, Bryland told him the rest. "Bryce promised her that if she still felt the same when she came of age, he'd open negosh-neg-he'd talk to you. We all thought that would be the first thing he'd bring up once he came to Osta-osta-osgar... 'm tired..." Bryland sagged against a ruined pillar, slid down slowly, and passed out with a bewildered grunt.

Loghain considered the man and his revelation. With any luck, Bryland would remember nothing of this. Blowing out a breath, he decided to go back to his own tent and try to sleep. He would think on the matter tomorrow with a clear head.

If Cailan and Teagan and their walking dead will let me.

Thank you to my reviewers: Nithu, Shakespira, black mage wannabe, ByLanternLight, gaj620, motive, Piceron, Aoihand, Eva Galana, phoenixandashes, Sati James, YourOwnDream, bioncafemme, mille libri, Enaid Aderyn, khaos974, Persephone Chiara, Annara Ren, Have Socks Will Travel, Amhran Comhrac, Kizie, almostinsane, Lunarfox's Silverdusk, Costin, WellspringDC, dyslecksec, sleepyowlet,

and qweenseeker.

Next up: Nights of Redcliffe

15. Nights of Redcliffe

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 15: Nights of Redcliffe

The Hinterlands made way before the power of Maric's Shield. The overgrown hill paths were trampled flat by booted feet and the iron-shod hooves of warhorses. Sharp and green, the scent of bruised foliage followed them from the Wilds to the shores of Lake Calenhad.

Loghain, on the long road to Redcliffe, found himself brooding about Bryland's drunken revelation. It was nonsense, of course. He had not thought Bryland such a fool.

Still, it shed a different light on things he had understood in a different way. That the girl was not enamored of the King was plain good news. Cailan would have been easy prey for a beautiful Grey Warden. And if the beautiful Grey Warden was the daughter of the Teyrn of Highever, it could cause endless political trouble, most especially were the girl to produce a child...

But the blushes had not been for Cailan: they had been for him. Loghain fought back the smile that came to his lips at the idea of that lovely young girl wanting *him*.

And Bryce had consented? That seemed incredible to him, but after several years, perhaps she really had worn him down. He could not have been their choice for their daughter, but somehow he was the girl's.

To marry a Cousland! Aside from Bronwyn's own considerable charms, marriage to that ancient and prestigious family would have given him even more power over the fractious, imbecilic Landsmeet. With a Cousland bride, very little in Ferelden would be beyond his reach.

If Cailan were to die, leaving no heir...

Loghain tried not to think about that, but it was true that with a Cousland at his side, even the crown would be a possibility. The Couslands were the heirs presumptive, anyway, but he did not see Fergus engaging in a fight for the crown. Even the family allies would be more likely to throw their support behind the more forceful Bronwyn.

She was young, yes, and perhaps he should stand aside for a better and younger man, but who else was there, really?

He had no great respect for the nobles of Ferelden. Howe's sons were out of the question now, of course. Wulffe had mentioned her for his eldest, but she was simply too good for that fellow. There was Teagan, he supposed, and Teagan might well be an arl in short order, but why should he give away such a prize to *Teagan*?

He had given away just such a prize, indeed, long ago, but

that was for the good of the kingdom. His sacrifice had caused him years of grief, and certainly hadn't made Rowan happy. Her brief years with Maric had been years of duty without much reward, with the exception of Cailan. And if Rowan could see how Cailan had grown up...

He nearly sighed, but scowled instead. Ferelden had a strong queen: his daughter Anora. There was no need for Bronwyn to marry contrary to her own wishes.

She was a Grey Warden, of course, which complicated matters. By that order's ancient custom, she ought not to hold a title, but there was nothing in Fereldan law that set that in stone. And if she were his wife, she would not be holding the title of Teyrn of Gwaren. The title was his, and the wife of a teyrn was a teyrna, not because she held the teyrnir, but as a courtesy title. That legal nicety would pacify the Landsmeet.

If they succeeded; if Bronwyn rounded up their allies, if he threw back the darkspawn; if the Blight ended...

These were all in the future, but presuming they won, the Grey Wardens would once again slip into obscurity for the next few hundred years. Why should the girl devote her life to them, when she would already done her duty? She could retire from active service, marry, and do something productive with her life.

With very little training, he suspected that she would be a splendid administrator for the teyrnir, thus freeing him of those concerns. A suitable occupation for her talents, and she would

have the sort of life her parents would have wanted... that she had been brought up to expect...

And what a companion she would be...

He tried to put that particular consideration aside for the moment, but it was difficult. He felt the familiar rush, that ache, the longing for that kind of closeness. She was no insipid, whining, hot-house flower, but a strong and beautiful young woman. She might well become a friend as well as wife and lover. Having her in his life would be a pleasure in so many ways...

Cailan had been silent himself, which was unusual, but now he spoke up.

"I haven't visited Redcliffe in over two years, I think. I can hardly believe it. I'm always busy, of course, but I should have taken more notice of Connor. He's my only cousin, after all..."

"He's certainly old enough now to appear at the Landsmeet," Loghain said noncommittally. "He'll have to, in fact. And I recall that you found Redcliffe rather dull."

Cailan looked rather abashed. "True. It's not the liveliest place in Ferelden. The Arlessa is so very pious! She had us going to services in the chapel twice a day. It was more fun visiting Teagan at Rainesfere."

Loghain had not often visited Redcliffe, and had never liked it when he had. It was Rowan's childhood home, of course; but

her family were already dispossessed long before he had met her. He had once mocked the proud daughter of the Arl of Redcliffe as an indigent beggar, living off the charity of those who in better days she would have scorned.

Unfair and untrue, of course. He had said that to taunt her, to catch her attention, to make her feel not quite so far above him. Loghain had already had an uncomfortable relationship to the nobility, much of which had been shaped in his youth when his father had been forced to swear fealty to an Orlesian lord: the same lord who raised their taxes to drive them from the land; the same lord who had sent the men who raped and killed his mother. Nobles, at the best, had their own agenda, and were not to be trusted. Occasionally, he forgot that he was one of them, and had been since the end of the rebellion.

After the Orlesians were driven out, and Rowan became Maric's queen, she rarely visited Redcliffe. Perhaps it no longer seemed like home. Eamon returned from the Free Marches and was confirmed in the arling. Teagan, so much younger, looked upon her as a distinguished stranger. Loghain could detect nothing of Rowan in Redcliffe.

It was not much of a village, to be the seat of an arling, to be sure. Redcliffe was even more a backwater than his own teyrnir of Gwaren. That town at least had the fishing and lumber trade, far bigger docks, and the unfailing indicator of a prosperous town: a decent brothel.

By mid-afternoon, they were well within the borders of the arling. As they moved deeper, they found empty houses and

deserted farmholds. This land had never been very populous to begin with. Now it seemed abandoned. When they reached the top of a grassy ridge, they saw that a haze of smoke clung to the hills surrounding Redcliffe. Teagan spurred his horse forward, his face strained and anxious.

"I think I should ride ahead," he said quietly to Loghain, after a moment's thought. "Let me take a small band of horsemen, and assess the village's situation. It's between us and the Castle, anyway."

Loghain scowled. At this rate, they would be reaching the village just before sunset. Based on the boy Tomas' account, the monsters were quiescent until then. He could order everyone to camp and enter the village in the morning.

But that did not sit well with him. He gave Teagan a nod. "Take Merrilys and Parton with you. They're fast riders on good horses. If you need us, don't hesitate to send them."

And then Cailan understood what Teagan was planning and wanted to go too. Loghain nearly threw up his hands at that point, but arguing with the King would cost more precious time. There was no way he was going to let Cailan go wandering off into a village of walking dead, so he would just have to go as well.

"Cauthrien!" he called, and was pleased that she was there, alert as ever when he said the word. Quickly, he explained the plan.

"I am riding ahead with the King and Bann Teagan. We need to know what's happening while the sun is still up. Have the men pick up the pace, and keep that boy with you. Once you arrive, assemble the men in the village square in front of the Chantry. We will need to make our arrangements quickly once we meet in Redcliffe."

He cast a cool look at Cailan. "Well? If you want to go, let's go." And he spurred off, over the old path, up a green hill, to find out what had been unleashed in Redcliffe. The expected hoof beats followed him, just a few seconds later.

Cailan was very pleased. Once again he had succeeded in getting his way. True, Loghain was coming along, behaving as if he did not trust Cailan with command, but at least they were in the vanguard, and not waiting for the unbearably slow foot soldiers.

Redcliffe stank of burned bodies and rotting flesh. The breeze carried the reek to them lightly at first. Up on the heights above the village the smell was bearable. As they descended, it became overpowering. The makeshift pyre was in the village square, right in front of the Chantry. Nothing else could have indicated the dire situation quite so clearly.

"My lord!"

A Templar emerged from the Chantry, helmet off, eyes wide. Slowly, his face changed from worry to a relieved smile. "Teyrn Loghain! You've come! Thank the Maker!" He saw who else was riding along and his smile broadened.

"Bann Teagan. Well met, my lord! And-" he gasped and then fell to one knee. "Your Majesty! To be rescued against all hope!"

More people were pushing out of the Chantry now. There were anxious cries and questions and then little squeals from the women.

Teagan remembered the Templar. "Ser Henric, is it?"

"Yes, my lord. I cannot tell you what it means to see you! Tomas got through, after all. We feared..." He glanced at the dozen-odd horsemen a little nervously. "Are there more with you?"

Loghain told the man, "Two companies should be here within half an hour. Right now we need to know your situation. Have you had word from the castle?"

"None!" Ser Henric burst out. "We have not dared approach it for the past two days. The portcullis is closed and the dead walk the grounds. It is all we can do to gather and burn our own dead, here in the village!"

Under Loghain's stern glare, the man pulled himself together, and made way for the Revered Mother, who had joined the rest of the survivors on the porch of the Chantry.

"Bless you!" she greeted them warmly. "The Maker smiles upon us this day!"

Loghain gave her a grim nod, wanting a proper report. He had little patience with blessings, and the sun was low in the sky.

Teagan said, "There's that barn back of the Chantry for the horses."

"Good," Loghain said shortly. "See to it." He and the rest dismounted. Horses were of almost no value in this hilly terrain. The two grooms who had ridden with them took charge of the mounts, and Teagan directed them to the proper place, while the King and his nobles talked over the situation.

The reeking pyre was heaped with charred bodies. Remains had been piled there over and over again, for days. Half-burned legs and arms hung obscenely from the edges of the pile. There were too many dead to give them even the pretense of dignity.

A few more survivors crept out of the Chantry: old women, children, a pretty young girl who looked up at the armed men as if they were her last hope.

She cried out, "Please, please, find my little brother! He ran away and he's all alone! Please my lords, he's all I have..."

Loghain grimaced, and left Teagan and Cailan to the task of comforting the frightened people. He had work to do.

He beckoned Ser Henric over and leaned down to ask, "Are there any other warriors left in the village?"

"I'm the last of the Templars, my lord," Ser Henric told him, his eyes haunted. "There were some knights up at the castle, but they're not..." He looked away. "I saw Tristan last night, but he wasn't one of us anymore." A raw and anguished gaze turned to Loghain. "This was the last night, my lord. I had the last of the people I could find gathered, and we planned to bar the door of the Chantry and keep them out as best we could. Once they were in, it would be over."

"Where do they come from?" Loghain asked crisply.

Henric waved up at the heights above the village, where a battered mill still turned. "Some came across the ridge from the front gate of the castle. There was a natural bottleneck there, and we could hold them all right. We thought we were doing well, until one of the village men came up screaming that the things had somehow come across the lake and were swarming up from the docks. The militia was surrounded and slaughtered, and then the things hit us from two sides. They haven't any weapons, you see, but they're strong. You can put a sword through them and they just keep fighting. You have to practically hack them apart to put them down. So we ran for the Chantry."

He looked away for a moment, in shame. "I was the only to make it. I climbed onto the roof and waited for dawn, while the creatures shrieked and milled about. Now and then one of ours would rise and join them, stumbling and jerking. They wandered away at sunrise, but they've become bolder and bolder about the light. Up at the castle, they don't mind the sun anymore at all."

Loghain studied the terrain, making his plans. Archers with fire arrows and a shield wall would do wonders against these creatures, whatever they were. He would secure the village tonight, and tomorrow, with the dawn, they would have a look at Redcliffe Castle.

"That's the inn up the hill, isn't it?" he asked Henric. "Anyone holding out there?"

Ser Henic lowered his voice, glancing at the crying girl on the Chantry porch. "As far as I know, everyone still alive was gathered into the Chantry. Twenty-two were inside last night."

Loghain grimaced. A score of people left out of hundreds. There might be others, of course: hidden in attics and cellars.

A sudden scream made him look up.

A woman wailed, "It's the monsters! They're coming!"

Children shrieked in terror, running aimlessly like startled chicks. Shouts, prayers, curses swelled up: a confusion of voices.

Loghain shouted above them all. "Silence! It's Maric's Shield. You—catch hold of that child, right now! If you're not here to fight, get back in the Chantry!"

The Revered Mother, frowning, shepherded the non-combatants back through the doors, hushing their questions.

Cailan grinned briefly at Loghain, amused at his father-in-law's

grim expression. No doubt he had enjoyed reassuring the young woman.

"Well, Loghain? Will we be moving on to the castle?"

Is he insane? Loghain hoped that his expression did not reveal his opinion.

"No, Cailan. It's already too close to sunset, and we really have little idea what we will be facing. It seems to me that the King's place is here in the heart of the town, in front of the Chantry. The majority of those we can save are here. If anything unfortunate happens elsewhere, you can lend us your support."

Cailan nodded. It was the central position: the most visible position for the people to see their King defending them. He hoped that wherever Loghain was, it was elsewhere, not watching him like a hawk.

The column marched down the steep slope to the center of village, raising a dust. To Loghain's relief, the mages, Uldred and Wynne had not stayed with the ox cart, but had marched along with the soldiers, accompanied by a pair of youngsters, whose names he did not know.

And there at the head of them all was Cauthrien. She met him, a line between her dark brows, relief far back behind her eyes. King, nobles, and officers met to confer. Loghain gave his orders quickly.

"We have until sunset to make our preparations," he told them. "I want five squads to search the houses thoroughly for survivors. If they find corpses, they need to bring them out. We need to get them burned before dark. Cauthrien, I want you with the first platoon of Bear Company up at the mill, archers at the ready. There's a bottleneck there that attackers from the castle would have to funnel through. These creatures take a lot of putting down. Get a fire going up there and burn the bodies immediately. The mage Uldred will be up there, too, since he excels at fire spells.

"I will command the 2nd platoon on the docks, The creatures found a way to get over the water, so we must be alert for boats of any kind. I want Wolf company here in the village behind a shield wall in front of the Chantry. The King will be here, protecting the villagers. Bann Teagan and his knights will stand with him. The mage Wynne should be there to heal the wounded."

The mages joined them and were informed of their assignments. The young girl with them seemed upset, and whispered to Wynne, obviously begging for a change.

Wynne spoke up. "If I may, Teyrn Loghain, perhaps it would be wise to have a mage stationed with your men on the docks. Keili here is becoming an excellent Healer, and sometimes moments can make the difference between life and death."

The apprentice was staring at him in mute appeal. She seemed young to Loghain, but Healers were valuable.

"She'll have to look after herself," he said.

Taking that as permission, the girl fell to her knees in gratitude.

"Thank you, my lord, thank you!" she sobbed. "You won't regret it! I'll be the best Healer you ever saw! I-"

Wynne tugged at her, scandalized. "Get up this minute, Keili! There's no need to make a spectacle of yourself."

Cailan was very amused, and there were smirks all around. Loghain rolled his eyes at the girl's antics.

"Get moving," Sergeant Darrow ordered the search parties. "We've only got until sundown to get through the town. You all know what you have to do. Remember that children can hide in places smaller than you could ever imagine."

They spread out over the village, looking for trapdoors and hidden rooms; opening cupboards and chests and looking under beds and behind piles of blankets.

The dead outnumbered the living. One search party went to the smithy, and found a dead man, ripped nearly apart, reeking of spirits and bile. There was a concealed entrance to a cellar, and some arms stockpiled there, but no people. The dead smith was hauled out, and thrown on the common pyre.

The tavern on the hill was a plum assignment. The door was

splintered, and leaves were scattered on the floor, mostly clinging to a sticky patch just inside. A dark trail led to another smashed door and a cellar, where there was quite a bit of damage. A sack of coin had been torn open, and the bright metal gleamed in the half-light. Darrow picked up a piece of silver, and regarded it curiously. The blood on it had clotted some time ago.

"Reckon there was a fight here, Sergeant," one soldier remarked.

"Reckon so." He crouched down by a dark patch at the bottom of the stairs. "Somebody lost. Bloodstains on the steps looks like they were dragged away. Maybe killed at the doorway from all the blood there. Maybe he was found and burned later."

"Or maybe not," another soldier grunted. "Maybe we should search the kegs and barrels, eh, Sergeant?"

"Not tonight. We'll want clear heads. We can always come back at first light. And leave the coin. We don't know that everybody who belongs here is dead. Maybe the women went to the Chantry. Tanna and Bass: you go upstairs and search the rooms. I'll go with Gleary to the kitchen."

They even looked in the lean-to behind the kitchen and behind the bar. There was a ring of keys there. Darrow left it alone. The tankards and and cups were stacked neatly. Walking dead didn't have much of a thirst, it seemed.

In the end, they rounded up a dwarf and two rowdies who seemed to be his hirelings. They were ordered out of the house by the docks. The dwarf complained bitterly, right up until he saw the King in his golden armor standing in the middle of the village square. Sullenly, he agreed to make a stand with the soldiers at the docks, if only to keep the stupid humans from burning his house down.

And Wynne had found a survivor too, a small boy whom she ordered out of a cupboard. The soldiers with her were impressed by her command style. There was a lot to be said for having mages in the army...

A sickly green light was Cauthrien's first warning. A shout rose from the men, and fingers pointed at the phenomenon, rushing their way. Uldred stood beside her, and considered the long narrow path leading down toward them.

"When enough of the creatures are there," he told her, "I can create an inferno that will rage for some time. It should at least damage them."

Cauthrien nodded. Magic was all very well, but she had other methods to rely on, as well.

"Archers!" she shouted. "Make ready!"

The things were quicker than she would have imagined. Pinned with cloth-yard arrows, engulfed in flame, they stumbled on down the hill, seemingly insensible to pain and

fear. Some fell, and the flames took them. Some surged on, and crashed against the shields of Bear Company. As long as the shield wall held firm, no undead hands could tear at them...

Loghain waited on the docks, eyes peering into the mist on the lake. How did such creatures use an oar? Magic, he supposed. A reason that was no reason at all. Well, they were ready for them...

He heard the shouts on the heights above the village and saw green light reflected in the thick cloud cover. They were there, all right. Now, where were the rest?

The soldiers muttered and were silenced by their officers in hushed voices.

Something bumped against the piers of the dock, under their feet. Loghain scowled, leaning forward to catch the first glimpse of their foe.

And then the wet hand reached up out of the water and grasped his ankle. The soldiers beside him cried out in alarm, as the walking dead clambered onto the docks, grabbing at the living, throwing them in the water, smashing at them with dead hands.

Holy Maker! Loghain kicked away the groping monster. *The things walked across the lake bottom! Why not? It's not like they can drown!*

"They're under the docks!" he shouted. "Hack them apart as they climb up! Archers, get to the roofs and shoot down!"

There was a scramble, and there were splashes and screams. A dead face stared into his own, the hands clawing at him, the filthy teeth bared to bite. Loghain smashed it down with his shield and beheaded it. It was still kicking feebly, and another soldier hacked a hand away.

Blood trickled down under his armor. The thing had nipped him along his throat. Instantly there was a glow and the wound closed over. Loghain glanced over to see the girl mage-Keili was her name?-cringing back as if she had committed a crime. He gave the girl a nod, and she gazed at him wordlessly, and then set about looking for more wounds to heal.

"Four men!" Loghain shouted. "Grab any dead you can and carry them to the pyre! Burn these bastards!"

Grunts of approval as swords swung and axes split skulls. Some of Wolf Company trotted up to support them, catching any dead slipping through the maze of the docks, sending them reeling through a gauntlet of steel.

The attack eased off, and Loghain drew a deep breath. Was that it? Was that all?

In a moment, another wave of the things was climbing up onto the docks. There were four waves in all.

And then, it was over.

No more dead shambled down the hill or rose up from the water. The bodies were tossed on the ungainly pile of burning corpses, now burning from their own fuel. The soldiers detailed to attend to the pyre were soot-faced and sickened. Cailan promised himself that they would receive some sort of reward—a gold sovereign apiece, perhaps. It was a filthy, depressing job, but necessary. He almost never carried any money himself, though. Maybe Loghain had some on him...

Cauthrien sent a runner down to Loghain to report that the attacks had stopped. It was long after midnight, and the clouds were beginning to blow away, leaving only wisps to veil the patient stars. She posted a guard, and let two thirds of the men sleep. She slept herself, pushing aside the the memories of dry flesh cracking away under her sword...

Loghain posted his own guards and pulled most of the platoon away to allow them to find what lodgings they could in the empty houses. The docks were a shambles, but that was hardly the worst of the damage to Redcliffe. The little mage girl was following him around, staring, looking like she would like to cast yet another healing spell on him. Hero-worship made him tired, but he could not find it in him to shout at her. Perhaps he was getting soft...

Cailan was fast asleep in his neatly-arranged cot in the chapel off the transept of the Chantry. His guards kept away the curious and the well-wishers and the star-struck priests...

Teagan slept fitfully nearby, waking throughout the night from dreams of grotesque bodies and mindless faces. What had happened to Connor? Would they march on the castle tomorrow, and find the boy turned into a soulless monster? What of Isolde? He sickened at the memory of the female creatures, lost to dignity, their ragged clothes torn and disregarded. Isolde had always taken such pride in looking perfect...

Sergeant Darrow was roused from sleep by a hissed warning from Tanna.

"One of the locals coming!"

After the battle, the Teyrn had ordered him and his men to guard the tavern. Some fools were bound to get a notion to break in and drink themselves sick. A few had come nosing around, but had been set straight.

Darrow struggled to his feet, favoring the arm where the creature had clawed at him. It didn't hurt, which surprised him. Should have been torn to ribbons, by rights, but that little mage had fixed him up a treat. He rubbed his eyes, and then rubbed them again.

Striding boldly up the hill was a handsome piece with hair like fire. She gave Darrow a saucy smile as she drew closer.

"Minding the ale, are you?" she asked.

Tanna challenged her, "Any of your business?"

"I live here. Reckon that makes it my business."

Darrow and Tanna exchanged a weary look. He held out a hand to slow the girl's progress.

"Er—well—before you go in there, you should know it needs—cleaning. Looks like the monsters broke in. Did you have—family—staying there?"

She had seen the broken door by now, and the long-lashed eyes were wide.

"Lloyd was there. He wouldn't leave, not for anything."

"Was he—your husband?"

The girl laughed. "No need to pity me, my bold soldier! No, not my husband. He was a rotten bastard and treated me like a slave. Would have run off, if there were anywhere to run. Is he in there?"

He shook his head. "A lot of blood though. Looks like he was in the cellar—" she nodded, expecting that. He went on. "They got at him there and dragged him upstairs."

Not too upset at the news, the girl considered the matter, and said, "I reckon I'll need to open up then, since he won't be doing it. The name's Bella, by the way. I'm very grateful to you soldiers for coming all this way to save us. The King and the Hero of River Dane, too. That's something to tell travelers

for years to come."

Tanna grinned at him as he followed the girl into the tavern.

"Maybe you need some help..."

She did, moving bits of door out of the way. She went straight to the bar, reaching for the keys that were there, and seemed to be looking for something else.

Darrow cleared his throat. "There's some coin on the cellar floor. The purse was torn open. We left it there."

She smiled at him, radiantly. "You're a true gentleman." In a flash she was down the steep steps and scrabbling in the dirt. Darrow found a candle, lit it, and brought it down to light her way.

"That way I see it," said Bella, dropping coins into her pocket, "this tavern is mine now. Lloyd was good for something, after all. I've got plans for this place. I'm going to brew ale the right way from now on, and not water it down til it's no better than dog-piss..."

There was more money there than he had thought: quite a bit of silver and some gold, too. Bella searched under the kegs, straining to reach every last bit she could.

She pushed herself up at length, with another smile. "That last was worth it. A sovereign! Foul bloody mess on it, too, but nothing a good soak and a scrub won't cure. Fancy a pint?"

"I wouldn't say no."

By the time Loghain walked up to the mill, that wretched Orlesian woman was already running away. He briefly considered telling the archers to shoot her down. A pleasant thought, but impractical.

Cauthrien had sent for him, but the damage was done. Teagan was determined to go into the castle alone.

"What can I do?" he protested. "This is my family. Connor is my nephew!"

"You're going to get yourself killed," Loghain snarled. "There are traps, and then there are traps, and I have never seen anything before that had "trap" written on it quite so plainly."

The younger man ran a hand through his hair in exasperation. "I do have a plan: that's why I sent Isolde away. I'll go and distract whatever it is that's up there. While I'm doing that, a small force can infiltrate the castle using a passage under the lake."

Loghain stared at him. "A passage under the lake? Does the Arlessa know about it?"

Teagan smiled grimly. "I am quite sure she does not. The passage runs from there—" he pointed to the mill, "and comes up through the dungeons. The dungeons Isolde certainly knows about, but not about the passage. Eamon pledged long

ago never to tell her." He pulled a heavy gold ring from his hand and passed it to Loghain. "This ring opens the lock of the concealed door that leads down to the passage. It's old—dwarven work from the look of it—and quite sound. Your people can come up from the dungeons and make their way downstairs—or down again to the cellars, which have door to the courtyard. From there you can open the portcullis, and enter the castle. I'll sketch you a diagram."

And he did, quickly, while Cailan joined them, looking disgustingly bright-eyed.

He was not happy to see his uncle go, but was very optimistic about the scheme, and pleased that he would be in command of the main body at the castle gate.

For Loghain had decided to lead the scouting party himself.

There were many reasons for his decision. It was essential that it be done well, quietly, and thoroughly, of course, but more importantly, if anything personally incriminating was in evidence, he wanted to see it for himself and first. Teagan had said that the mage had left the Castle, but had he left anything that would tie him to Loghain?

And he felt guilty, truth be told. Whatever happened here was at least in part his doing. Arl Eamon had been a thorn in his side, but the villagers had never done him harm, and did not deserve a ghastly death at the hands of undead monsters. He owed it to them to risk himself.

"Fine," he shrugged, sneering a little at Teagan. "If you're determined to get killed, then go right ahead."

Cailan smiled, and clapped Teagan on the shoulder. "Do try not to die," he said. "It's not as if I'm particularly rich in uncles!"

Loghain chose his companions carefully. Cauthrien, because she was looking wrathful at the very idea of the scouting expedition, and she would feel better at his side. And he would feel better with that sword of hers along. He considered. Yes, Uldred. There was magic involved, and they would need expertise.

And then he decided to bring Wynne as well. The older woman was extraordinarily calm under stress, and there was just the chance that the King's cousin would be in some sort of dire state...

The signet key worked, and soon they were moving along the narrow stone passageway. It was sound, indeed: not particularly damp, and high enough for him walk comfortably. No one had much to say, fortunately, because every noise they made was magnified by the stone about them. There was a door at the end, which slid out of the way. And then they were in the dungeons beneath Castle Redcliffe.

The cells were empty. It puzzled Loghain a bit, since he could not imagine a castle ruled by a woman as volatile as Isolde not having prisoners in the dungeons. Perhaps there had been

prisoners, and they had been removed. And a little further on they came across two more of the walking dead.

Two were no challenge at all. Uldred froze them solid, and one shattered as Cauthrien brought the Summer Sword down on it. It shattered so completely and dramatically, in fact, that she backed away, startled and repulsed. Loghain found he had lost his rhythm as well. Fighting alongside mages took some adapting. An opponent shattering like an icicle simply seemed *wrong*.

But it was certainly convenient.

Cauthrien gave him a look from the corner of her eye. She was thinking what he was thinking, as she so often did. A few more of the dead emerged from the cells, stumbling toward them, moaning and roaring like nothing that had ever been human. Yet they clearly had. One had been a woman, once.

Wynne knew some handy spells, herself. She was doing something that knocked the creatures down, flat on their backs, sometimes stunning them. It was impressive, and after a moment, one learned to take the advantage and cut the thing apart as it lay helpless.

They found the staircase to the castle proper and began wandering the halls, meeting groups of the dead—now one or two, now a half-dozen. There were demons in the chapel. Loghain had come across demons very rarely and Cauthrien had never seen one. The sight made him think of Bronwyn and her Demon in the Circle Tower. Doing something that she had

done recently made her more real to him, somehow. She, too, was fighting side by side with mages.

They paused to catch their breath after the chapel.

"Aside from the demons, we've come across twenty-three walking dead since we entered the dungeons," Cauthrien said. "I wonder how many people were here in the castle to begin with?"

In another hall, they found the body of a young girl, recently and horribly dead. Wynne gazed on her in pity.

"The poor child. She must have tried to escape. How frightened she must have been." She drew closer. "Wait, my lord! I think she may be alive. Perhaps I can-"

The girl sat up, eyes blank, and uttered an awful groan. With unnatural speed, she was on her feet and lurching toward them.

Uldred froze her. "Not exactly alive, my dear Wynne."

Loghain tried bashing her with his shield. She exploded into red ice crystals.

"Not alive at all," Cauthrien remarked. "I hope."

Loghain had no time for witticisms at the expense of the dead. "Let's move on."

He hated killing the mabarais they found, but they were mad

and ensorcelled, and Uldred was clearly not interested in doing anything to them but destroying them. Mages seemed not to have much feeling for animals, but that was no doubt due to their separation from the natural world. He thought of Bronwyn's letter to her brother, and how she fumed at the treatment of the little apprentices, forbidden even to play out of doors. There might be something in what she said. The treatment of the mages in the Tower did not seem calculated to develop well-balanced individuals. Uldred and Wynne were exceptions that proved the rule.

Wynne sighed, after they cleared out the path to the kitchen. "I'm afraid that it's growing more and more unlikely that we will find that poor child alive."

Loghain grimaced. The idea that he had killed a child with his meddling-no, probably more than one-caused him some distress. The arling of Redcliffe was going to need years to recover from this disaster, and it would be his duty to support Cailan in any measures the Crown took to help the victims. The Royal Treasury was not in the best shape at the moment, due to the war with the darkspawn. He should have hired the Crows to kill Eamon.

His gauntleted hands were bloody, and left smears on Teagan's little floorplans. Loghain cursed. A big metal-shod door led to a corridor by the Great Hall, but it was locked, and too massive to blow apart without attracting every monster in the Castle. There was an alternate route...

Yes. It was better, anyway. There was the kitchen, and there

were the stairs down to the cellar. There was a little door from the cellar to the courtyard. They moved through the passages. Cauthrien gave them her most recent body count.

"We're up to forty-one. How many more can there be? We must have slaughtered the bulk of them last night!"

Loghain shrugged, shoving open the cellar door, and blinking at the sudden assault of daylight. The courtyard seemed deserted. It was just possible that Cauthrien was right. Maybe they had already eliminated the worst of the threat. Cautiously, he stepped out into the open. Fifty yards away was the portcullis and its lever. They only had to-

The world slid sideways. Loghain was on his back, crashing along the stony ground with no control over his own body. He jolted to a stop, disoriented, his ears ringing. Uldred was shouting something, and Cauthrien shrieked out a battle cry. They were coming...

Everything was very slow. The air was thick and pressed him to the ground. Gritting his teeth, he squinted up at the creature looming over him. It was in armor, and it was not human. Its sword was coming down-

He rolled to the side, hacking at the creature's ankles. It stumbled, but made no sound, as if pain were a thing unknown to it. It flared blue, as Uldred struck it with a spell to slow it. Cauthrien swung at it, grunting with effort. The thing turned to her, its blade arcing at her with incredible force and speed. There was a clang, a spurt of blood, and Cauthrien screamed.

Loghain balanced himself up on one knee, and drove his sword straight into the creature's groin. Such a move would have severed any normal creature's femoral artery and killed it in seconds, but this thing was still striking out, wordless and remorseless. Wynne cast a blue healing glow over Cauthrien and the spurt of blood slowed to a trickle.

The thing was still slashing at them, and caught Loghain along the side: a glancing blow that pit metal against metal in screeching protest. It was like being hit with a sledgehammer. Loghain used the force of the blow to add to his own strength as he hacked down on the creature's armored arm. It broke. In complete silence, the creature took up its sword with the other, undamaged arm.

More spells, more slowing, more hacking and slashing, more healing, and Cauthrien was again able to wield her blade, bringing it down in a way that would have cleft anything else from chin to breastbone. The thing staggered, and Loghain whirled, cutting into the massive neck. Its resistance to magic was nearly gone. Uldred's last spell drained it of life, and Loghain needed to do no more than buffet it with his shield to bring it to its knees and then lay it out, dead at last.

They stood there, panting. Uldred was strangely pasty under his olive skin. He reached into a pouch for a small flask and downed the contents, his hand shaking.

"A good idea," Wynne sighed, drinking from her own flask. Whatever they were taking, it had an odd, unfamiliar smell. Cauthrien mouthed the word "lyrium?" at him, and he nodded.

It must be.

"What in the Maker's name was that thing?" he asked.

Uldred blew out a breath. "A Revenant. A powerful undead being. I've never come across one before." He seemed genuinely impressed.

"Nor have I," Wynne admitted. "That was terrifying. Perhaps there's nothing worse here."

"You mean, maybe we're done? I mean-surely that was the heart of the evil," Cauthrien said. "Maker, I hope so. What could be worse than that bastard?"

"I'd rather not know," Loghain said. "Let's go let the King in. Perhaps now we can go to the Castle without being attacked every two minutes."

Cailan had seen part of the battle, and had been very impressed. He hurried to the remains of the Revenant, poking at it gingerly with the toe of his armored boot. "What a monstrous creature! Look here, Loghain, I wish you wouldn't hoard all the glory. Do give some of the rest of us a chance at slaying inhuman fiends! Ser Cauthrien," he said expansively. "You were splendid."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she answered blandly. "I was nearly killed. I would have been, but for the mages."

"Yes!" Cailan enthused. "Wonderful, really wonderful, the way

you all fought together. That just the sort of thing the army needs!"

Loghain gestured to him, and they went up the steps together. There were no guards, and the great doors were unbarred, giving way at a touch.

Uldred caught his breath, and suddenly gestured at Loghain, frowning deeply.

"I take it," Loghain growled, "that we are not *quite* done."

"There's something else here," Uldred muttered. "Something *big*."

At a glare from Loghain, the King's Guard closed ranks around them. The Great Hall was to the left...

And in it was the Guerrin family. All of the Guerrin family.

The boy was laughing and clapping, pleased and excited. Arlessa Isolde stood next to him, very still. A noble fire lit the scene in flickers of sickly yellow and blood red.

There was Teagan, putting a show of some sort. Probably not exactly what he had in mind when he said he would create a diversion. The man was leaping, cutting capers, bouncing like an Orlesian minstrel, while the child urged him on.

And watching it all was Eamon Guerrin.

Cailan gasped, and said something under his breath.

Everyone paused for a moment, to stare at the thing sitting in the arl's High Seat.

It was both like and unlike the Eamon that Loghain had known. It looked—bigger, certainly—and the features were smoother and not entirely finished. A haze clung to the edges of the creature, as if the boundaries were yet to be determined. It stared back at them, expressionless.

Loghain whispered to Uldred, "Is that an illusion?"

"Not exactly," the mage answered, not taking his eyes from the sight before them. "It is material, but bound together by magic. It is a kind of golem, but not the sort made by dwarves. I suspect the arl's ashes were used."

"It is nothing but a vile puppet, and an insult to the man's memory," Wynne muttered fiercely, clutching her staff a little tighter.

The child noticed them, and called out. His unnatural voice sent a chill through Loghain.

"Who is that man in the golden armor, Mother? I can't see him well enough."

"It is the King, Connor: your cousin." Arlessa Isolde barely looked at them, terrified and ashamed.

"King! There is no King here but me! Isn't that so, Uncle!"

"Marmalade!" shouted Teagan, with a bow and a manic grin.

Furious, Cailan tried to push past his guard. "What did you do to him?"

The demon in child form sneered. "I like him better this way. He amuses me. I warned him what would happen if he kept shouting. Nobody tells me what to do!"

Teagan nodded eagerly. "Nobody tells him what to do! No-body!"

Isolde sobbed out, "I beg you, Your Majesty! Please don't hurt my son! He only wanted his father back!"

Uldred and Wynne looked at each other, astonished. "He is a mage!" Uldred exclaimed. "Did no one know of this?"

There was an uneasy stir in the soldier's ranks. Keili whispered a prayer. "Oh come, Swift Sword of Mercy..."

Loghain was silent. Cailan looked winded. "I had no idea. Is this why you wouldn't bring him to Denerim, Isolde?"

"He was being taught to control himself!" the woman cried. "I hired an apostate to tutor him. I thought if he knew just enough he could hide his powers, no one need ever know. The mage betrayed us, and ran away. This is all his doing!"

"Lady Isolde," Wynne reproved her. "This child has become an abomination. You concealed his magic, and only harm has come of it."

"Oh, Isolde!" Cailan mourned. "Why?"

"They would have taken him away!" Isolde clutched at the demon, who shrugged off her hands.

"Fool woman!" it growled. "You are beginning to bore me!"

"Uldred—" Loghain began. "Is there any way..."

Uldred shook his head slowly, raising his staff. Cailan was near tears. Cauthrien reached for her weapon.

"Father!" screamed Connor. "Protect me!" He ran behind his mother, cowering.

The thing in the High Seat rose, growing every moment. It glowed with magic and menace, and drew an enormous sword. If the Revenant had been alarming, this was ten times worse.

Uldred flashed out a wave of ice, slowing the Eamon-thing. Teagan, his eyes unfocused, rushed forward. Loghain swung him around, and the bann's jaw connected with Cailan's fist.

"Sorry, Uncle," Cailan muttered. "You men!" he shouted at three men to his left. "Take him! Hold him down! Get him out of here and don't hurt him!"

Teagan was dragged away, unconscious, and the real fight began.

They ringed the creature, which lashed out with sword and magic. Arrows struck and were shrugged off. Swords cut through glowing flesh and wounds closed as they were made.

Uldred caught it in a glowing shaft of light, immobilizing it briefly. They hacked at it, uselessly. It had never been alive, and could not die.

Cailan swung his greatsword, and should have sheared off the thing's hand; but the blade passed through without injury to the creature at all. One of the knights, knocked flying, crashed into Loghain.

"Holy Maker!" Cauthrien shrieked in Loghain's ear. "The boy is stabbing his mother!"

Loghain looked. Isolde was on her knees, eyes glazing. Blood was pouring from her arms and sides, trickling from her mouth.

"Blood magic!" cried Wynne. "Stop him!"

Uldred downed another stinking potion. "I'll try to hold the creature still," he shouted to Loghain. "Kill the boy! Kill the boy!" Seeing Loghain hesitate, he said, "Kill the boy, and the creature will be destroyed. It is the only way!"

The thing swung its sword, and a knight screamed as the blade clove through his armor and nearly cut him in two. Blood gushed from the groaning mouth, and the man sprawled gruesomely on the stone floor.

"Maker!" Cailan roared. "Out of my way, Loghain! I'll do it!" He stumbled away from the melee and took the steps up to the dais in two bounds. Isolde clutched at him, dying, the words

bubbling from her mouth.

"Don't-hurt-him." She fell, face down, and the demon behind her looked up, small face pale, eyes wide, clutching a red-stained dagger.

"No! No! You wouldn't hurt a little boy! You *couldn't!* You-"

Cailan snarled, and plunged his sword through the child's body. Connor wriggled and shrieked, and was still. Cailan stared at his little cousin, panting, and then vomited violently, falling to his knees.

The Eamon-thing faded, shrank; and as the soldiers backed away, it slowly crumbled to dust. The sword and armor crashed to the floor, empty.

Keili was still praying, her face streaked with tears. Wynne pulled her up from her knees, and set her to work, healing.

"You can pray *after* a battle, my girl!"

The dead and wounded were gathered. Cauthrien gave orders, but Loghain was deaf to them. He had killed Eamon, and now it was clear that he had got away with it. He felt soiled, and not elated. It had been perhaps the worst mistake of his life. He blew out a long breath, and walked over to Cailan.

His son-in-law was pale and sweating, on his knees still, wiping his mouth. Loghain stood over him, and then hunkered

down to speak in the young man's ear.

"Cailan-

"I killed a child. I killed my own flesh and blood."

"The child was long gone. You killed an abomination. You did your duty, and you saved a lot of lives."

"I feel horrible." Cailan glanced over at the small body. "He looks so helpless."

"He wasn't helpless, and you know it. If you feel horrible, that's normal. If you didn't, *you'd* be the monster."

"If only-

"Don't start with that. Regrets are useless. None of us could have predicted this. If anyone's to blame, it's the mother, hiding his magic, keeping what was happening a secret. She could have warned the village, but she didn't. She deliberately led Teagan into a trap that would have cost him his life in the end."

Cailan shook his head, miserable and guilty.

Loghain scowled at him. "You always said you wanted to be like your father: a hero. Well, Cailan, I can tell you that your father felt just as you are feeling now most of the time he was king. It's the way you feel when you make the hard choices. You did the right thing today, and your father would have been proud."

Hesitantly, he put out his hand, and gave the boy a pat on the shoulder. Creaking to his feet, he said brusquely. "That's just about enough self-reproach for one day. We have work to do. Your uncle should be himself when he wakes, and he'll need your help. He'll be Arl of Redcliffe now, of course. It's not going to be easy for him. Come on."

The mage girl wanted to cast another healing spell his way. Loghain grunted his thanks, and pointed at the King.

If Loghain felt any pain, he knew he deserved it. Regrets were useless, but he had them, all the same.

Thank you to all my readers, but a special thank you to my reviewers: jen4306, Carnie Heart, Amhran Comhrac, Persephone Chiara, Eva Galana, Shakespira, almostinsane, Night Hunter MGS, Aoihand, phoenixandashes, Piceron, Angry Girl, Porphyra, Shining Girl, Enaid Aderyn, sleepyowelet, Have Socks Will Travel, khaos94, Zyanic, mutive, Beriathwen, and coko-sam.

16. Interlude by the Shores of Lake Calenhad

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 16: Interlude by the Shores of Lake Calenhad

Days passed, and the boat did not come. Rain beat down for nearly the whole of a day, a mist of silver on the lake, and turned the earth to a morass. Bronwyn and her companions waited, and while they waited, their time was filled with food and talk, with the little tasks of daily life, and the great tasks of understanding one another and preparing for the journey ahead.

The mages learned to ride, after a fashion, falling now and then into the mud. Morrigan was the best and quickest at it, as she absolutely refused to dirty her robes. Anders just mastered the basics, and Tara, the Circle mage, was still afraid of her horse. Morrigan, however, was becoming quite a good rider in quite a short time.

"It's not so surprising, really," Alistair considered. "She understands animals. Really understands them. Maybe she's using some of that shape-shifting talent to understand that horse of hers."

Bronwyn laughed. "Nerissa certainly seems taken with her

mistress, from the way she follows her around!"

They studied the maps, and sketched out their alternate route to Orzammar. If the ground dried out before the boat came, Bronwyn had decided they would have to move on, and head north around Lake Calenhad as soon as possible. It was interesting to discover which of her companions wanted to be included in the planning, and which were content simply to be led.

In the first group were Alistair and Cullen, because they clearly thought it was their duty. Anders joined them because he thought it was great fun.

"I love maps. Always have," he grinned. "Time was when I planned to run away to Tevinter and be properly appreciated for my magical genius and manly beauty. Being a Grey Warden works, too, though. I love traveling, especially as you, Fearless Leader, have promised that my journey will not take me back to the Circle. May I say that you're all right?"

"You may."

"You're all right."

There were many purchases to make-though not so many that they would unduly burden them. With one thing and another, it seems only decent that each of the companions should have something to wear other than armor or robes. There was a general store at the village above the lake bluffs, and there they found something for Tara: originally a dress belonging to

a merchant's young daughter. The only shoes that fit her were, once again, a human child's, and they were a glorious bright red. Leliana, wishing the ensemble to look properly put together, searched until she spotted a flash of crimson silk piled among the merchant's wares: it proved to be one of the wide, corset-like belts that had lately come into fashion. Tara was perfectly happy, and admired the only clothes she could remember owning that were not mage's robes.

They also found other castoffs from the wealthy and the aristocratic. What they could not find at the store, they found in the cart of a dwarven peddler. Anders, Alistair and Cullen were nearly of a size, and laughed at the prospect of trading various items. Sten already possessed a fairly decent set of clothing from his days in Lothering-something that never failed to puzzle Bronwyn, until it was explained that he was dressed in these by the farmers who had cared for him when he was injured. Evidently the farmer's wife-whom Sten had later murdered-had actually tailored those clothes for him. The knowledge made Bronwyn feel very sad for the poor, well-meaning woman, whose charity had been repaid so brutally.

Leliana had found her blue dress. It did not fit her at all, but Leliana knew how to sew. A rather ordinary light wool dress in a rather ordinary shade of greyish-blue was turned into something quite striking by her clever fingers.

Bronwyn herself bought nothing. She had her breeches and her leather jerkin and her Grey Warden tunic, and she could not justify adding weight to her pack. Leliana mourned over a long-sleeved gown in dark red that she thought would have

suiting Bronwyn perfectly, but she was doomed to disappointment.

Bronwyn smiled and shook her head. "You and Tara and Morrigan will have to be the grand ladies of our company."

"Well," said Leliana, "If I slip into a town for reconnaissance, I can blend in better now."

That made Alistair laugh out loud. "Blending in?" He shook his head. "That's a noblewoman's gown."

Leliana frowned. "Really? It seems *very* plain to me. but it would be silly for me to try to pass myself off as a peasant. I still have this accent I cannot get rid of, and men sometimes feel free to trouble a poor girl. Better and safer to be in the middle ranks of society. Such a gown, in Orlais, would be worn by a merchant, or a rich farmer's wife..."

Bronwyn grimaced at the reference to Orlais, and decided she had talked all she cared to about their fashions. She gave them a brief smile, and went off with Scout to find Cullen and make sure he had taken his lyrium for the day.

Cullen was very good about exercising and caring for the horses, and spent quite a bit of time in the stables. He was there now, currying his own destrier, Gerod: talking to it in a calm and quiet voice.

"You're fond of horses, aren't you?" Bronwyn asked, leaning against the doorframe. The air was musty with damp hay and

ordure. Little specks of dust floated in the breeze from outside. Scout nosed about, distantly friendly with the former Templar.

Cullen nodded to Bronwyn, his eyes on his mount. "Horses are good people. Not very clever, I suppose, but then, neither am I. I've always liked them. Taking care of them always makes me feel better."

"Then we're lucky to have you. How is your lyrium supply holding out?"

He understood what she meant. If they had to take the land route, the journey would be much longer. He set his jaw. "I'll make it last. I'm trying to take a little bit less every day."

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked, very seriously.

"I don't know," he confessed. "I don't what's going to happen. I thought I knew what my life was going to be like, but then everything changed."

"For what it's worth," Bronwyn said, "I'm sorry you were forced into this. It can't have been what you wanted."

"It's hard to say. I've never really been in a position to do what I wanted. I am a Child of the Chantry, you know."

"No, I didn't." A foundling, left on the Chantry doorstep, then. Probably his mother was a mage, or unmarried and poor, or he had two parents who could not afford another child. She

smiled ruefully. "You fit right in, then. Most of us are orphans, it seems. All the more reason to hold fast to each other."

The local laundress they had engaged arrived, and there was a great to-do as everyone's clothing was identified and distributed. Then there was dinner, and Morrigan announced that she was prepared to fulfill her obligation as the night's storyteller. Bronwyn wondered what she would have to say.

Looking around, she could see she was not alone. Cullen looked nervous, as he always did in any situation involving Morrigan. Alistair looked wary, and Anders amused and eager. Sten was frowning like a judge. Leliana and Tara's eyes were shining with the prospect of entertainment. Scout, next to Bronwyn, sat up very straight, a model of attention.

With a smirk, Morrigan sauntered to a place in front of the fire.

Said she: "I am called to relate a tale to fulfill my promise. I did not promise that my story would be pleasant, though there is pleasure in hearing any old story. Nor did I promise that it would be true, though I think there is truth of a kind in it. I have this tale from my mother Flemeth, and where she heard it I cannot guess. 'Tis the history of the daughter of the Sorcerer of Wildervale. Listen well, for I do not intend to repeat myself."

Morrigan's story of The Sorcerer of Wildervale's Daughter:

Long ago, before the days of Prophet Andraste and her tiresome Chantry, there was a mighty sorcerer far to the north, in the Wildervale. He lived in a great castle of magic and marble, and lived there alone but for his daughters.

Seven daughters there were: all beautiful and skilled in magical arts. They served their father's every wish, and lived in fear of his wrath. Their mothers they knew not. No one had ever heard of the Sorcerer taking a wife or mistress. It was he and they, and that was all. Over the years the Sorcerer of Wildervale had amassed an enormous treasure, and knights and thieves and adventurers from all over Thedas came to win even a portion of the rumored gold. A great horn, mounted in silver, hung before the castle gate, and those who wished to challenge the Sorcerer had but to blow the horn to summon him. Many did, but they were fools, for none was a match for the power of the Sorcerer of Wildervale. He slew them all, and their bleached bones were their only memorial.

One day, a knight, cleverer or bolder than the rest, came to try his wits and strength against the Sorcerer. He did not challenge the Sorcerer outright, but by cunning he crept through the postern gate and wandered the castle until he came upon the youngest daughter, at her work in the stillroom, brewing potions and perfumes.

She screamed out, jumping to her feet, for she had never seen a man other than her terrible father. But the knight was tall and fair of face, and he spoke to the maiden, and comforted her, and gained her favor. She had never imagined a being so pleasing and delightful, and when the knight cajoled

her to take him to her bed, she did not deny him, and they lay together in great joy and bliss.

"Oh, that we could be always thus," the knight said, kissing her fondly.

"That would be wonderful indeed," agreed the maiden, "but my father would never allow it. Do not challenge him, for he will surely slay you. I shall keep you safe in my chamber, and none need know that you are here, for the castle is vast, and I do not see even my sisters every day."

The knight sighed heavily. "Nay, that cannot be. I must challenge your father and claim you as my bride. My honor demands it. If he were slain, we two would rule this castle together, you and I."

"My sisters would not mind, I think," said the maiden. "My father is cruel, and they would be much happier if he were gone."

"Very well, my love," said the knight. "Your sisters will remain here with you always, if that is your desire, but I must find a way to defeat your father."

He asked many questions about her father: did he use arms like a warrior, or did he rely upon his staff? Did he have other items of virtue to lend him power? The maiden answered as best she could, and the knight considered her words.

At length he said, "It seems hopeless. My weapons are as

nothing to his, so the fight would be an unequal one. There is a great armorer in my city of Kirkwall. If I had sufficient gold, he could make me armor that would withstand your father's power, and a sword that would cleave even his shield of magic."

"But there is gold in plenty in my father's vaults!" cried the maiden. "I shall give you all you need, if you will only deliver me from his cruelty. I shall give you a sack of gold and jewels besides. Only swear that we shall be together!"

"We shall be together in life or death!" the knight declared, hand on heart. "Let the shadows witness it!"

So the maiden crept into the vault and gathered a great sack of treasure. She gave it to the knight, and he departed through the little postern gate, promising to return when he had the weapons.

The knight was very pleased at the result of his cunning, for he had won a great fortune without even having to fight for it. He returned to Kirkwall a wealthy man, and spent the gold on pleasure and sport, on wine and women and horses. He had gold enough to live well for a long time, but then he thought he had not enough, for more gold would buy a great estate, and then he would be rich forever. So after a time he thought that the foolish maiden could be tricked again, and soon he went north to the Sorcerer's Castle.

The little postern gate was open, and he slipped inside and made his way to the maiden's room.

She was there and greeted him, looking older than he remembered, and sadder. Nonetheless, she did not say him nay when he led her to her bed and lay with her.

"I have been waiting for you a long time," she told him after. "Where is your armor, and where is your sword with which you will challenge my father?"

"Alas, my love, the wretched armorer is a hard man. He has taken the gold you gave me as money down, but he will only give me what he has made if I can pay another such sum to him. Only one sack of gold stands between us and freedom!"

She said, "You shall have your gold. You are a strong man and can carry more than I. Come with me to the vault, and you shall have all the gold you wish."

The knight was pleased with her, and followed her into the heart of the castle. An iron gate stood before them, and it opened at the maiden's touch. Down, down they traveled to a vault below. Another pair of iron doors opened and the maiden stood back, while the knight stared at the treasure in awe.

For gold was within: gold covered the ceiling, and lined the walls, and paved the floor; gold overflowed from great chests, and amongst the gold sparkled great jewels, and long ropes of pearls gleamed like reflections of moonlight. It was the mightiest treasure of its day, and all of it lay before the knight.

"There is yet more to see," murmured the maiden, given the knight a gentle nudge. Nodding, he stepped into the chamber

and then froze, bound by terror and by magic.

For before him stood the Sorcerer of Wildervale himself, tall, pale, and smiling. On a golden bier lay another maiden, dead some months, her dried flesh clinging to her bones.

"You have done well, my daughter," said the Sorcerer to the maiden standing by the knight. "Go now to your tasks, and remember the fate of the betrayer."

The maiden left, tears glittering in her eyes.

The Sorcerer came close to the knight, who struggled in vain against the strange lethargy.

"You could not even tell the difference between them," mused the Sorcerer. "My youngest daughter gave up her life for you, and you did not even trouble yourself to remember her face. You might even have escaped my vengeance had you not returned, for I did not deem you important enough to pursue you. But here you are, greedy for more of my treasure. You shall have all you desire, for should not a father give a dowry worthy of a beloved child?"

"A dowry?" stammered the knight, his jaw stiff with the spell.

"Indeed," said the mage. ""Did you think I do not know all that transpires within the walls of my own castle? Did you not bind yourself to her? Did she not embrace you as your affianced wife? Did you not swear that you should be together in life and death? " He came closer still. "You swore it before the

shadows. And I, listening in the shadows, heard. You shall keep your word."

He stepped to the door of the vault and turned, saying. "Bless you, my children. May you be happy."

He was gone, and the iron doors shut, leaving the knight, the dead maiden, and all the treasure within.

"What a *powerful* story," Bronwyn said. "I really did not see that coming."

Morrigan smirked at Alistair, "*And they lived happily ever after!*"

"Don't!" he waved her away, "That's disgusting!"

"That is why we qunari cut the tongues from the mouths of our mages, and keep them on leashes." Sten remarked. He frowned, "I refer to the story itself, not to the witch's telling of it."

Tara started up, eyes blazing. "Oh, really? It seems to me a *brilliant* story. I've read that the hearts of men are full of deceit, and I know that everyone thinks mages are less than human. That poor girl loved the knight, and he tricked her and got her killed. No doubt he thought it was just fine, because she was only a *mage*, after all!"

Sten was a little taken aback at the little elf's fury. She got in

his face, shouting, "Yeah! Big warrior with the big sword! 'Oh, those wicked mages! How dare they try to protect their own treasure! Let's laugh at the lonely, stupid mage girl!'"

Anders caught at her hand, "Calm down, elfkins!"

Bronwyn got up and led her to the chair by her. "That's what I meant about it being a powerful story. It's the sort that arouses very strong feelings! Thank you, Morrigan. I'll never forget it. I would point out that the older mage was not the injured party, but rather the young girl, who was victimized both by her lover and her father. At least in Ferelden, fathers cannot lock their daughters away!" She winced, remembering how Rendon Howe treated Delilah. "Completely."

Cullen was dissatisfied by the story for other reasons. "It seems to me that all the knight needed to do was take the poor girl with him that first time. They could have escaped together..."

Leliana was excited by the idea. "-and then they *could* have had a 'happily-ever-after!'"

"-unless the cowardly knight," scoffed Sten, "deserted the maiden once he had reached safety, or worse, treacherously sold her to a brothel!"

"Not even *he* would do that!" Alistair countered hotly. "'Sell her to a brothel!'" Nobody would do something like that!"

Dismissing that remark as too naive for comment, Anders said

calmly, "Nobody could get away with trying to sell a mage anyway. If the knight tried it, he'd be sorry." He gave Tara a reassuring grin. She settled down a little, and ate a cookie from the plate Bronwyn passed her.

Bronwyn was thinking. "It seems to me that the knight *was* cowardly. Unimaginative, too. If I had been the knight, I would have made friends with the girl, and with all her sisters, too. Then I would have challenged the wizard, and even if he were tremendously powerful, surely all of us working together could defeat him. And then we could share the treasure and the castle, and *everybody* could live happily ever after! As far as humanly possible," she added, in deference to reality.

"Except for the Sorcerer," Morrigan smirked, amused that she had so stirred the pot with her little story.

"Except for the Sorcerer," Bronwyn agreed equably, taking another cookie herself. "But he was cruel, and a tyrant to his daughters. Of course, it would have been *really* bold to confront him in the castle, and ask outright for permission to marry the girl, and see what the Sorcerer had to say about it."

"Maybe he would have respected the knight then," Alistair said hopefully, glancing for support to Cullen. "Maybe he would have given him some challenges to overcome so they could get married..."

"-and then," cried Leliana, swept away by the glory of it, "when the knight succeeded, the Sorcerer gave them a wonderful wedding, and the other sisters were bridesmaids in

beautiful gowns, and the Sorcerer gave the young couple a bag of gold, and they-

"-went to the seaside for the honeymoon?" grinned Anders. "Well, in *my* version, the hero would be a mage himself- only young, handsome, and with a killer fashion sense- and he'd stroll in and burn the father to a crisp and get the girl. End of story."

"Oh, you!" laughed Leliana, amused and exasperated. "What do you think, Sten? What ought the knight to have done? You have an opinion, yes?"

The qunari frowned, but answered readily enough. "Obviously he should have fought, but not challenged the Sorcerer with the horn, for then the mage could fight on familiar ground with plenty of warning. No. Cunning is required when fighting against magic. He should have taken the mage by surprise, and slain him on his own terms. Then he should have seized the castle and married the daughters. And then one would hope that he ruled with logic and reason." He shrugged, as if such a thing were clearly unlikely, given that humans were involved.

"*All* the daughters?" Cullen asked, a little taken aback.

"Married *all* the daughters?" Alistair repeated, blushing.

Anders nodded slowly as he thought it over. "Works for me."

"Yes," Sten answered frankly. "I am not familiar with all the

minutiae of human marriage customs. However, as all the females of the Castle have been deprived of their male protector, it seems to me just that all of them be recompensed. Why should one female have a mate when the others do not? Would that not be a future cause of resentment and discord? Better that he mate with them all."

Morrigan laughed with delight. Leliana and Tara stared in amazement.

Bronwyn said, "Sten, I cannot *wait* until we hear your story!"

Seriously, the qunari answered, "You must. There is the Chantry sister to be heard from first. My own story is not yet complete in my mind. When it is, I shall inform you."

The cookies were soon gone, but the ale held out. There was more laughter, more debate, more drinking. Bronwyn took her tankard and stepped out into the starry night, wanting to escape the stuffiness of the inn and the unceasing din. Scout trotted along beside her, and then took off after an unlucky rabbit, out for an evening's grazing.

The cooling breeze refreshed her at once, and she strode over the rocky lawn, going down to the lakeshore. Birds called from the trees, settling down for the night. She took another sip and thought through the next day. Scout seemed to have chased down his rabbit, and looked up, ready to share it with Bronwyn. She shook her head, and waved at him.

"No, old boy, it's all yours."

He thought her silly to waste good meat. He would certainly not do so, and was pleasurably busy for some time. Bronwyn strolled in the other direction, and soon heard boots crunching sand and gravel behind her.

"Sten and Tara are engaged in a life and death struggle at the chess table now."

It was Alistair. Bronwyn felt a curious racing in her blood before she turned. Edgy and exciting, like sensing darkspawn, but not so relentlessly unpleasant.

Am I sensing fellow Wardens now?"

Alistair had once hinted that that was another Grey Warden power. It was nice, she thought. One need never feel alone. It was not quite *family*, but it was something, perhaps, of the sort. And given her ruminations earlier in the day, it might be all the family most of her companions would ever know. They had sacrificed much-and would sacrifice more yet-but they had this. At least they had this.

She turned, and gave him a smile. "I'm glad you're here. I've been struggling with a decision, and I'd like to hear your opinion on the subject before I start giving orders."

"Ask away."

"We have no idea if the blasted boat is ever coming or not. I've decided that perhaps it would be for the best if we left tomorrow. We have our supplies-what we can get. We have

no hope of purchasing other animals here. I'm inclined just to tell everyone that we're packing up and riding north in the morning."

"Fine with me."

"Really?" She asked doubtfully. "No regrets? No wishing we had waited just one more day?"

"No," he maintained, "and I'll tell you why. I don't know anything about boats. The only boat I've ever been on is the boat to the Circle Tower. If something goes wrong on a boat, there's nothing I can do to fix it. On the other hand, if we're attacked on the road, I can fight. I'm quite good at it. I won't mill about looking stupid and excessively sinkable. Let's forget the boat and just go, Bronwyn. Sure, it'll take longer than it would if the boat had come today, but it didn't. It may not come till Firstfall, for all we know, and then we'd look like morons. Besides," he finished off his ale, "King Maric was lost when his ship sank, you know. Everyone says he must have drowned. He couldn't do anything about it, King of Ferelden as he was."

"I know," she said softly. "When he was declared dead we had a service in the chapel for him."

"I'll never forget the day I heard about it. It's one of those kingdom-changing events, after all," he said, with a false, self-conscious chuckle. "I found out he was dead by overhearing Sisters Ita and Gruoch exchanging the latest thrilling gossip."

She poured out the last of her ale onto the beach, the taste souring on her tongue. "Alistair..." she sighed, not knowing if she should say anything or not. "I did hear King Cailan speak to you when we were leaving."

"Then you know. I thought maybe you did. I appreciate that you didn't start treating me *differently*. I'm glad I didn't have to tell you. Not that it matters to anyone. Not even to me."

"I suspect it means something to the king, or he would not have wished you well and called you brother. Who was your mother?"

"Nobody special, I'm told. She was a maid at Redcliffe Castle, and died when I was born. Maybe that's why I stayed there."

All right, the mother was baseborn, but Alistair was still King Maric's son! Why had he not cared for him? Why had he left him to be raised in a stable? By the time Alistair was born, Queen Rowan was dead and beyond caring. It was cruel to have deprived Alistair of a decent upbringing, and Cailan of a brother. If someone had kept Fergus from her, she would never have forgiven it. And she was still thinking over his earlier words.

"But when your father died...I can't believe such callous behavior! No one wrote to you? No one came to break the news to you?"

"No. I suppose everyone assumed that someone else would do it." He shrugged. "It's not like my father and I were *close*,

after all. I can tell you this: Duncan was more my father than King Maric ever was."

"It still must have hurt horribly."

"I suppose what hurt was the end of possibility: once he was dead, we were never going to have the big, sobby reconciliation scene with the manly hugs. That was a nice fantasy. I enjoyed it for years, and it hurt to let go of it. I was able to, finally, when the Wardens became my family." He cleared his throat, embarrassed even in the shelter of the darkness. "I can't tell you what having you with me means. You're the one bright spot in this whole awful mess. I thought about it, and I wanted to give you a present."

"Alistair, you don't have to-"

"I want to!" he cut her off, his voice sounded high and young in the open air. "Actually, I have two presents, but the first one is stupid." He pulled some folded linen from a pocket. "I found this in Lothering, and it reminded me of you."

She unwrapped the cloth carefully. Inside was a dried and thorny stem, and some scattered petals with a sweet, fugitive scent.

"Umm-this is-er, was-a rose, Alistair."

"That's right. I was going to give it to you, telling you it reminded me of you: something rare and beautiful amid all the terror and danger. But I couldn't find the right time, and it's

kind of...fallen apart. Sorry. It all sounded really impressive in my head, but it's really pretty silly, I suppose."

He looked so uncomfortable. Bronwyn thought quickly, and said, "It was a lovely thought, Alistair, and not silly at all. I have an idea..." she stripped off the last of the dried petals and wrapped them carefully in the scrap of cloth. The stem she threw away into the bushes. "What I can do is sew this linen up into a sachet and keep the petals that way. They're still fragrant, and I think Morrigan might have a bit of orris-root to preserve them. I'll put it in my backpack to perfume my shirts. It's actually a wonderful gift, Alistair. Thank you so much."

"Really?" he grinned, his strong young teeth gleaming. "See-that's what I like about you. You're always thinking about how to make things turn out right. I'd given up, so I bought a real present off that dwarf peddler. Here." He dangled a silver chain before her, the pendant in the middle reflecting moonlight. He must have made out her expression, because he hurriedly added, "I know. I know. Unmarried ladies aren't supposed to accept anything but candy and flowers, but you've seen that I'm completely hopeless with flowers, and we're weeks away from a Denerim confectioner. See," he held it closer. "It's the Sword of Mercy. You like swords and I like swords. I'll bet you wouldn't mind if your brother gave you this, and I'm sort of your brother, too, so..." his voice faded into embarrassment.

"Oh, Alistair!" Touched, she burst out gratefully. "You *are* my brother! It's beautiful! Here...put it around my neck. I'm still

holding the flower bits together."

He might be shy about speaking, but his big hands were quick and deft enough. He fastened the chain and stood back, smiling. He said, "I'd say something smooth and witty if I were Anders, but being me, I'll just be satisfied that you like it."

"I do," she replied. "Very much. Come on, then. Now that we are united in brotherhood, we can face the rest of the orphans and wanderers and give them the bad news. We ride for Orzammar tomorrow!"

Note: as far as possible with such a theme, Morrigan's story is original. I thought very carefully about what kind of story Flemeth would tell Morrigan, considering how much she wants to convince Morrigan that 1) she can never trust anyone and 2) children who disobey their magical parent come to a sticky end.

Thanks to my wonderful reviewers: almostinsane, jen4306, Shakespeira, Sarah1281, khaos974, Amhran Comhrac, Sati James, Night Hunter MGS, Persephone Chiara, Eniad Aderyn, Have Socks Will Travel, Aoiband, WellspringCD, Piceron, Kaisis, Artemys, mutive, Lunarfox's Silverdusk, dyslecksec, Thorn of the Dead Gods, qweenseeker, mille libri, Costin, NorthernBreeze, Leafy8765, Isaac A. Drake, HollylsMyName, Windchime68, and MoralityOduality. I really appreciate hearing from you!

Next up: Adventures at the crossing of the River Dane, and the appearance of Zevran!

17. On the Road to The Hero's Rest

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 17: On the Road to The Hero's Rest

"Darkspawn!" Bronwyn shouted. "Kill them all!"

The loathsome little warband rushed to meet them, fangs exposed in murderous grins. Hurlocks, genlocks, a powerful Hurlock alpha a little way back, an emissary already firing a poisonous green mist at them.

To her new recruits' credit, they moved into action with surprisingly little hesitation. There was the grimace of horror and disgust on each face, but no one was running away or even stopping to gawk. They remembered their training, and were doing just as they should.

Anders had positioned himself in the rear, as instructed. He could cast ice and lightning early on, targeting any magic user, but was needed to stay safe and heal the front-line fighters. Leliana was near him, nocking arrow after arrow with lethal speed. She was far and away their best archer, and had just brought down a genlock. It squealed and thrashed on the ground, dust rising up, and Sten finished it off. The qunari was a rock that the darkspawn cast themselves against in vain.

Any downed darkspawn was prey for Scout, worrying at them with powerful jaws.

Cullen was not bad with that big sword of his, and he was quick enough to evade the alpha's massive blows, while getting in his own. There was quite a lot of shouting and screaming, much of it from the Wardens, but Bronwyn was yelling herself, and as long as they could hear her orders, they could do whatever they needed to get the job done.

Tara was learning how to kill darkspawn very quickly. Her cold spells were powerful, perhaps even more powerful than Morrigan's. She shrieked with triumph when she hit a frozen genlock with a concussive spell and it shattered to pieces. Bronwyn stopped to blink, just for a fraction of a second. That was impressive.

And she found she was getting better at killing darkspawn herself. They really weren't so hard, if you went in fast and knocked them silly—*her sword's pommel against a bony skull*—and then when they were stunned and groggy, jamming her dagger into an exposed throat to the hilt—*twisting through the veins and arteries until the blood spurted in throbbing jets*.

They took more killing than a human target, but nothing survives when its throat is cut through to the spine, or you can see daylight on the other side of its gut, or its head is flying off into a patch of deathroot...

The Hurlock alpha was weakened, but still fighting: its blows

slowing painfully. It would not run to fight another day, or change its tactics, or beg for mercy. Darkspawn didn't, she had found.

She rushed in to backstab the creature, thrusting through where its kidneys ought to be. It was collapsing to its knees, its reek rising up into her nostrils like a blow to the skull. She must have hit something vital. Did anyone know if darkspawn were made the same inside as humans?

She glanced around. Her people were up, and the enemy was down, and all was as it should be.

Tara was ten yards away, jumping up and down, running over to a dead genlock, kicking its head. It bounced a little, and she kicked it again. She screamed a wordless war cry, waving her staff. Morrigan rolled her eyes. Cullen backed away, glancing uneasily at Alistair. Scout approved of Tara's celebration, prancing around and barking joyously.

Anders trotted up, grinning. "Calm down, elfkins," he called out. "We won. Yay!" He stopped by Bronwyn and pointed at her thigh. "I need to see to that."

She was bleeding where a blade had slipped through a gap in her armor. And then, in a flash of blue light, she wasn't. "Let me bandage you up," Anders said, moving in, professional and cheerful. "One of the shorties nicked you as he went down."

She did not even have to remove the armor for him to bandage the wound. It was rubbish, and left too many vital

areas unprotected. She did not feel they could spare coin for new armor now, but someday... She scowled, thinking of her situation. At least her weapons were first-rate.

Leliana walked among the dead, looking for valuables. She grabbed Tara by the arm, and showed her what she was doing.

Tara glanced behind at Bronwyn, and whispered to Leliana, "Is this all right? Can we really take things, or will we get in trouble?"

"It's fine," Leliana soothed her. "These are spoils of war. We're supposed to take them, especially from darkspawn. If we find anything particularly valuable, we'll show it to the company, and that way everyone gets a fair share."

"Well, if it really is our *duty*..."

Alistair talked for a minute to Cullen in a low voice, and then came over to Bronwyn, grinning broadly.

"Pretty awesome, I'd say! How's the leg?"

Anders considered. "Gorgeous. One of the finest I've ever—"

"Oh, hahaha. Very funny," Alistair loomed over the busy mage, looking threatening. Or he would have looked threatening, if Anders had paid him the slightest attention.

Bronwyn smirked. "I'm fine, Alistair. I thought that went well, don't you?"

They were all getting good at killing darkspawn, but Tara's spirit and skill had surprised her. And the girl seemed to actually enjoy combat. She was quite the little battlemage.

Of course, that was just what they needed, but Bronwyn had not really expected much of her: she was an elf, and she was small, and she had not made a very impressive showing on her departure from the Circle. Above all, she had seemed to Bronwyn to be a mere victim of the more powerful; a victim in need of rescue.

However unpleasant it was to consider, Bronwyn realized that she herself might not have been very fearsome had she been locked up naked by armed men—by Howe's men for example. Or by Howe himself, a thought that made her shiver, even now in the warm sun.

But no one in her party was a victim anymore. They were working well together, and everyone was learning how to kill darkspawn, which was a primary mission. She herself was learning new ways to kill them all the time, in fact.

Learning to camp was something else, however. To reduce the weight on the horses, it was necessary to share tents to some degree. Morrigan tried to camp apart, with her own fire, but Tara would hang about, talking, sharing spells, asking questions about woodcraft, and the camp boundaries seemed to stretch a little, including Morrigan whether she willed it or not.

It was important to learn to live off the land, so Bronwyn

encouraged Tara to go with Morrigan on her gathering expeditions. And Anders, too. Morrigan would huff and grimace, but Bronwyn wondered if Morrigan did not like Anders, just a little. He was a handsome and powerful mage, and he paid Morrigan extravagant compliments non-stop.

Bronwyn thought more about their little magical team-within-a-team. It seemed to her that Tara was encouraging Anders in his pursuit of Morrigan. It was something of a mystery to her. Tara had told her that the Circle was a world of its own, with its own rules, and that Bronwyn would not understand.

The road curved up against the lake again, and they stopped to camp. The horses were hobbled and unloaded and Cullen and Leliana led them to water. Anders showed Tara how to search for firewood, while Morrigan and Sten began setting up camp. Bronwyn walked along the lake shore, and found a stretch where the lake bottom was covered with round pebbles. The clear water revealed the silvery forms of big lake sturgeon and bluefins. Bronwyn wondered if she could still catch them the way an old woodsman had showed her. She went back to her gear and pulled a long, fine-tipped arrow from her quiver. Scout trotted up, eager to help if anything involving food was involved.

"What are you doing?" Alistair asked, seeing her shedding her greaves and boots.

"Going fishing," she told him. "Want to come along?"

He stared. "Don't you need a stick-pole-thingy with a line and

a hook? You know...things?"

"That's one way, but I haven't any fishing tackle. Take an arrow. If you're quick, you can spear them. No, a longer one..."

She led the way into the shallows, beckoning to Alistair. "Come on!"

"Ow!" He complained. "It's cold. That is really, really cold water!"

"Shh!" Bronwyn hushed him., pointing at some dim, misty shapes below. "You'll frighten them away, and then we'll be wet and cold for nothing!"

In the end they were very silly over the fish, laughing and splashing. Scout swam around them, knocking Alistair off his feet. If there hadn't been so many, they would have been dismal failures at spear-fishing. A sluggish, unwary sturgeon was messily skewered, and then dragged out of the water.

"That's a sturgeon?" Alistair asked. "Aren't they supposed to be delicacies? They look weird."

Tara came up, her arm full of sticks. "Are you using that creature for potions?"

Bronwyn shook her head, unable to stop laughing. "No, we're going to eat it." Scout barked a proud affirmation.

"Eww."

"I don't suppose you've ever seen a live fish-or a recently live fish. Take the wood to Morrigan and bring me back that long pan from the pack and some parchment. I'll show you how to clean a fish."

"Just me, or doesn't Anders have to come too?"

"Yes, Anders has to come too. If he runs away again, he needs to know how to feed himself."

Tara dashed off on her errands, digging through the packs for the needed parchment. Morrigan asked her what she wanted it for, and Tara told her, pointing down the water's edge to Bronwyn. Leliana overheard, and put up her hand up to her eyes to see what was going on.

"Ooo! Sturgeon!" Leliana called, very pleased. "How delicious! Will we be preparing it *en papillote*?"

Bronwyn paused, mentally translating the Orlesian. "That's the plan," she called back.

Getting the mages to help turned out to be more difficult than she anticipated. Tara, especially, was disgusted by the smell, by the idea of scraping off the scales, by the idea of gutting the fish. Her pretty piquant face was screwed into a grimace of disgust.

Bronwyn urged her on impatiently. "I saw you killing darkspawn. This isn't nearly so bad."

"Yes, but-" Anders pointed out. "We don't kill darkspawn with sharp, pointy things that make their insides fall out. We just wave our hands while remaining unsoiled by gory bits. Mostly."

"Do you have a spell to clean fish while remaining unsoiled by gory bits?" Bronwyn asked, a little sharply. Alistair was grinning. She glared at him. "Because if you do, I'll really like it if you performed it right about *now*!"

"Sorry," Anders apologized meekly. He and Tara scraped half-heartedly at the fish, and it was all Bronwyn could do not to shove them aside and do it herself. She thought, oddly, of her mother's patience with her when teaching her sewing.

But this was more important. A warrior had to know how to find and prepare food. Bronwyn was not about to be their kitchen maid for the duration of their quest. And Alistair was having far too good a time, so she made him draw his knife and take a turn. It transpired that he had never cleaned fish, either. Thus, it all took much longer than it should have. By the time they were cutting the fillets into portions, Leliana was coming over, armed with salt, and Morrigan had brought some herbs, shaking her head at the helplessness before her.

The pieces were wrapped carefully in parchment pouches which were folded tight to seal them, and then laid near the coals of Morrigan's good fire to steam slowly.

"You're going to like this," Bronwyn insisted. "It's a very good way to prepare fish. We need to conserve our supplies as far

as we can, and fresh food is always best."

She gave thanks to the Maker when the fish was unwrapped from the many little pouches, and was tasty and succulent enough to please even her finicky mages.

"This is wonderful," said Cullen, mopping up fishes juices with a bit of bread.

"It's good," Tara agreed. "I'd rather find smaller fish with smaller guts, though."

"Catching them was the fun part," Alistair said. "Except for the very, very cold water. Can't we just shoot them with a bow and arrow next time?"

Bronwyn shied a ball of crumpled parchment at him, and stretched her legs out with a deep, relaxed sigh. She pulled out her map. Loghain's clerk had copied it hastily, but it was a good general map of Ferelden, with not only the towns and villages marked, but also the principal inns. Not far west of the River Dane, where the Lake Road met the North Road, there was written "The Hero's Rest."

She smiled, thinking of the hero in question. Leliana peeped over her shoulder. "I can guess who stayed there once, yes? Teyrn Loghain after his great victory. I wonder if they hung a placard over the very bed."

Bronwyn was still smiling. "It's entirely possible. We can be there in another day. I'd like to hear the news in these parts."

In a few days they would not be far from the arling of West Hill, and closer still to the bannorn of Waking Sea. It was all becoming familiar country: not quite home, but the land of known neighbors and friends.

The quality of the road deteriorated as they traveled north. The River Dane had flooded here about ten years ago and washed away much of the old paving. Bann Loren, the husband of her mother's late friend, Lady Landra, was lord of the lands here about, and had never troubled himself to spend the money for the necessary road work. It would have been expensive, certainly, but maintaining the roads was a lord's duty.

Not that Bann Loren was a shining exemplar of nobility. His wife and son had spent as little time in his company as possible. Poor Lady Landra had been a sweet, well-meaning woman: not terribly clever, but very good-hearted. She had sought refuge from her unhappy life in constant visits to noble lady friends, and eventually in drink. Bronwyn would never forget the spectacle the poor woman had made of herself at Mother's last spring salon.

Dairren, their son, had been different. He was a sensitive, intelligent young man, frank about his unhappiness at serving as a squire to her father in the upcoming campaign against the darkspawn. He had hinted that he would not refuse a call to serve as a Grey Warden. Lady Landra had longed for a match between Bronwyn and Dairren, but that was never going to happen for a multitude of reasons. If nothing else,

Dairren wanted something other than the life of a Fereldan bann, and Bronwyn wanted someone else, and had not ceased to want him.

She wondered if Dairren had escaped the massacre at Highever. Mother had wept over her friend's body, but they had not seen Dairren among the dead.

Had Bann Loren even sought to find out what had happened to his wife and son? She wondered if she should call on him. It would take another day to reach his manor, and then who knew what might happen? It would certainly complicate things, and she really could not spare the time. Orzammar was calling to her, a necessity that could not be denied.

In the mid-afternoon, a young woman appeared from a side road, and ran to them, screaming for help.

"Please, please!" she cried. "They attacked the wagon! Please...this way!"

Bronwyn had no time to see her properly, other than to notice that she was young and pretty and blonde, and possibly an elf from her short stature and delicate features. The long golden hair covered her ears.

Alistair rode over, frowning. "What was that? Isn't she going to tell us what the problem is?"

"Apparently not," Bronwyn said wryly. "Keep your eyes open, everyone. You too," she directed to Morrigan, flying overhead.

The hawk creed and soared away, after the running blonde girl.

There was a tangle of brambles and logs, and a very narrow wagon track through them. It all looked perfectly natural, if you didn't look at it carefully.

Morrigan was back, and changed to human shape, landing lightly on the ground.

"A trap," she said laconically. "There are eleven of them. They look well-trained and well-armed. I believe that girl is a mage of sorts. Shall we walk by, or engage them?"

"Oh, engage them, by all means," Bronwyn said. "Why allow them the chance to create an even better trap elsewhere? Besides, I'd like to know why they want to attract our attention, instead of seeking easier prey. Dismount and tie the horses here. If there are traps, I don't want the horses breaking legs. I can spot traps more easily nearer the ground. Morrigan, get behind our new friends. The rest of you, follow me. Wedge formation."

With a grim smile, she led the way, and the group arranged themselves as they had planned, back in front of the fire at the common room of the Spoiled Princess: Scout at her heels; Tara to her right and Alistair to her left; Sten and Cullen on either flank; between them and slightly behind, Leliana with her bow and Anders with his staff.

The falling log was no surprise. Nor was it a surprise that the

blonde girl was looking back at them slyly, speaking to another fair-haired enemy—a handsome...elf, it must be. They turned and eyed Bronwyn and her party with anticipation.

The elf stepped toward them, giving a signal. *An elf was in charge?* Bronwyn had never seen a elf in charge of much of anything before, and certainly not in charge of a band of warriors. It was interesting, but...*strange*. Behind him the girl mage smirked with menace, lightning building in her hands. Another two thugs rose up from behind the shattered wagon. Bronwyn's peripheral vision caught two armed men watching the scene from the hill to the right.

"Lady Cousland dies here!" shouted the elf, lunging forward with feral grace.

"Have we met?" Bronwyn muttered. "I feel certain I would have remembered *you*." She adjusted her grip on her weapons, and moved in to meet him. Scout rushed past to knock a hireling off his feet.

Tara raised her staff, and the mage girl was suddenly still, paralyzed by magic. Two more attackers materialized from behind some barrels to their left. Morrigan froze them in place, and then directed her attention to the surprised archers on the heights above them. A twang of a bowstring, and a man fell back, feathers sprouting from his throat.

Bronwyn crossed blades with the elf in a music of silverite and steel. He was fast, by the Maker: very fast and very smooth,

and she needed all her concentration to deal with him. Their weapons locked, and they glared at each other fiercely for a moment before Bronwyn smashed her head against his, her wonderful Grey Warden helmet a lethal weapon. The elf went limp, and Bronwyn leaped over his still body to get at the underlings behind him.

Sten roared in triumph, somewhere to her left. A man rolled in front of her, nearly tripping her up, as Alistair knocked him down with his shield. Cullen was swinging his sword with creditable speed, and there was a horrible noise like a melon being split as he sliced a man nearly in two. Bronwyn cut her way past an attacker, barely noticing that the mage girl was on the ground, eyes empty. Bronwyn had no idea who had done that.

She charged up the twisting slope, Tara and Alistair just behind her. "Watch out!" she yelled, pointing at the traps. There was a quick, nasty struggle with some bowmen who were ready to fight for their lives. A light flared blue as Anders cast a healing spell. Leliana's bow sang again, and it was over.

It could not have lasted more than five minutes.

"The leader's alive!" Cullen called. "Just knocked silly."

"Nifty use of the helmet," Alistair said, grinning. "I'll have to try that one."

"Why thank you, good ser. Don't kill him!" Bronwyn called to Cullen, pointing to the stunned leader. "I really want to ask some questions. Scout!" she shouted. "Go guard the prisoner!" The dog barked once and ran at full tilt, crouching threateningly by the supine elf assassin.

Other than the massive bruise on his forehead, said elf looked comparatively unhurt and even reasonably well-groomed, his golden hair shining, his slim, bronzed body muscular and fit. Bronwyn smiled her amusement at herself for ogling him. She had never really noticed how good-looking a male elf could be before. He was well-armed, and wore well-made light armor. A thorough professional, she would guess. And the identity of his employer was perfectly obvious.

Leliana and Tara began picking their way through the pockets of the fallen. Morrigan glanced over and helped them, watching to see what would happen to the one who had led the attack.

The elf stirred, and groaned. He blinked up at Bronwyn, and was bold enough to smile faintly. Scout growled very softly.

"Ugh." The elf noticed the dog, and remained carefully still. "I rather thought I would wake up dead-or not wake up at all. But I see you haven't killed me yet."

"No. Not yet," Bronwyn agreed, unable to resist a superior smirk. "I have a few questions."

The elf laughed weakly, but seemed resigned. "Ah! So I'm to

be interrogated! Let me save you some time. My name is Zevran Aranai...Zev to my friends. I'm a member of the Antivan Crows, brought here to slay Lady Bronwyn Cousland, which I have failed to do, as you see."

Antiva! His accent stirred memories: some sweet, some painful. When Fergus had come home from Antiva, he had brought his new bride, Oriana, with him, and for years her accent had delighted Bronwyn. She had mourned when Oriana, by dint of careful, diligent work, and Mother's endless coaching, had discarded it, wanting to be a true Fereldan for Fergus' sake. Oriana had been full of stories of Antiva: the beauties of its cities, the beaches of fine white sand, the abundant flowers blooming year-round. Oriana had also told stories of the Crows, Antiva's famous guild of assassins, but those had been merely exotic tales. Here was the reality, and memories of Oriana softened Bronwyn's heart a little. She considered speaking to this Zevran in Antivan, but decided against it. It was always good to be able to do something that no one knew you could.

"I do see, Zevran Aranai. I am, in fact, Bronwyn Cousland, and I'm extremely happy you failed."

"So would I be in your place. Not so good for me, of course. Getting captured by a target seems a tad detrimental to one's budding career as an assassin."

Bronwyn nodded sagely. "It could certainly prove *fatal* to one's reputation."

"Perhaps you would like to know my employer's name-"

"No, no!" Bronwyn put up her hand to stop him. "Let me guess! Tall, thin, greying, with a bit of a beard below his lower lip, and a remarkably well-developed sneer. I see you nodding. It was my old family friend, Arl Rendon Howe, wasn't it?"

"You astonish me," Zevran said gallantly. "This is a long-standing quarrel?"

"Not really," Bronwyn laughed. "I don't know of anyone else in the world who hates me enough to pay good coin to kill me. Where was he when he spoke to you?"

"In his city of Amaranthine. May I sit up while we converse?"

"Very carefully. My friends are a bit on edge, and all their edges are very sharp." Everyone moved back a little, watching the elf narrowly. He sat up, rubbing his brow and wincing. "So you are loyal to Howe, Zevran Aranai?"

"I have no idea what his issues are with you. I imagine they are the usual thing: you threaten his power. No, I am not loyal to him. I was contracted to perform a service: that is all."

"And now that you've failed?"

"Well, that is between Arl Howe and the Crows, and the Crows and myself, unfortunately."

Alistair broke in, demanding, "Why are you telling us all this?"

Zevran laughed. "Why not? I wasn't paid for silence!"

Cullen frowned. "Aren't you even loyal to your employer?"

A lazy smirk, directed at Bronwyn. Zevran said, "Loyalty is an interesting concept. If you wish, and you're done interrogating me, we can discuss it further."

Bronwyn waved at him to continue.

"Well, you see," declared the assassin, "The Crows do not reward failure. I failed to kill you, so my life is forfeit. Thing is, I like living. And you, obviously, are the sort to give the Crows pause. So-" he paused and went on, "let me serve *you* instead."

"Ha!" Bronwyn laughed then, genuinely laughed at the elf's daring. A number of other laughed too: Morrigan, in a single, rather high-pitched burst of contempt; Tara, astonished that anyone would ever hope for mercy; Alistair, in angry indignation; Anders, admiring the elf's effrontery. Bronwyn kept smiling, thinking it over. She said, "You must think I'm royally stupid."

Zevran was not deterred, but immediately said, "I think you're royally hard to kill, and utterly gorgeous." Seeing her raised brows, he hurried on suavely, "Not that I think you'll respond to simple flattery. But there are worse things in life than serving the whims of a deadly sex goddess."

Cullen and Alistair flushed red, perhaps dangerously red.

Cullen's grip on his sword tightened noticeably.

She laughed even more at that. "And what's to stop you from trying to finish the job if I let you live?"

He blew out a breath, considering his words carefully. "To be completely honest, I was never given much of a choice about joining the Crows. I was bought on the slave market at a young age. Even if I did kill you now, they might just kill me on principle. I'd rather take my chances with you."

It was very tempting. "And what would you want in return?"

His reply was instant. "Being allowed to live would be nice. I'm more useful that way. And somewhere down the line, if you should decide you no longer need me...then...I go my way. Until then, I am yours. Isn't that fair?"

Alistair hissed, "Bronwyn!"

She said to the others, "Watch him! Alistair and I need to talk."

They stepped away from the others. Alistair whispered, "You're not really considering taking the assassin! I mean...I understand not wanting to slaughter him in cold blood now...but to take him along?"

"I think he could be useful," she said, and then added in a lower voice, "Would you want him following us, not knowing what he's up to, or coming with us, where we can keep an

eye on him?"

Alistair bit his lip and nodded, thinking it over. "I see your point. You're not thinking of conscripting *him*, are you?"

Bronwyn glanced at the handsome elf. "I think...not. He's doesn't seem to have liked being conscripted by the Crows. I daresay he wouldn't like being conscripted by the Grey Wardens any better. However... he *could* be an asset to our party." She slapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "Besides, collecting cast-offs seems to be what we do! Ex-Templars, ex-sisters, ex-nobles, ex-apostates! I think an ex-Crow would fit right in!"

"I suppose," he surrendered. "All right, the assassin stays, but I'll be watching him."

"Good."

They walked back, and Zevran relaxed slightly at the expressions he was seeing.

"Very well," Bronwyn said. "I accept your offer."

He rose to his feet gracefully. Hand on heart, he declared, "I hereby pledge my oath of loyalty to you. I am your man, without reservation. This, I swear." He bowed, and Bronwyn smiled and granted him a nod.

"Lovely," Morrigan sneered. "Let us all examine our food very carefully in future."

"Always a sensible precaution," Zevran agreed cheerfully.

Morrigan was also displeased when the assassin was allowed to ride the horse she considered her own, although she almost never rode herself. Bronwyn soothed her with promises of buying more animals at the first opportunity, even ponies or donkeys if they were all that were to be had. The thought of the assassin riding a long-eared little donkey was amusing to several in the party.

"Ponies?" Tara asked. "You mean, baby horses? Can people ride them?"

Cullen told her quietly, "They're not babies. They're just small horses."

"Well, I think that's a brilliant idea! No offense," she told her own patient mount, "but I would *love* to have a small horse. I'm a small *person*. I think we'd get on! Bronwyn," she called. "Can I have a pony?"

The Hero's Rest was a good-sized inn, with other guests. The party stabled the horses, unpacked, and then headed for the ale. They would once again have to share rooms, but that was always better than the bare ground. Bronwyn thought about her dwindling coin, and gave thanks that people were not demanding private quarters. She ordered Zevran to share with Sten, thinking if anyone could deal with the assassin, it was the qunari.

The innkeeper here was a woman named Tansy, stout and grey-haired, with shrewd eyes, a gruff voice, and a ready smile. She welcomed the Wardens' party, admired Scout even to Bronwyn's satisfaction, and raised her brow at Zevran.

"Not the lot I saw you with before!"

"Ah," Zevran replied. "These people are just so much more *fun!*"

Tansy gave Bronwyn a raking once-over, and then nodded in approval. "You're the Girl Warden, aren't you? Heard about you. Been hoping to set eyes on you myself. I've served all the great names of Ferelden in my time: King Maric, Queen Rowan...young King Cailan was here not too long ago." She pointed to the portrait over the bar. Loghain Mac Tir glared at her over his drawn bow, much younger than the man she had seen at Ostagar. "*He* slept here the night after the Battle of River Dane!" She leaned toward Bronwyn, and growled confidentially, "If you like, you can sleep in the very same bed."

Bronwyn laughed, feeling herself flush. "And on the very same sheets?"

The innkeeper burst out laughing herself, and winked. "Well...I had to break down and wash 'em, after a while...but it's the same bed. Seems fitting, you being such friends with him and all."

Bronwyn blinked. Composing herself, she said, "Thank you.

It's very...thoughtful of you."

The innkeeper lowered her voice even more. "You should know that that elf was here two nights ago with a gang of self-swords, and I could tell they were up to no good!"

"I know," Bronwyn assured her. "We dealt with the problem. He's helping us now. I was hoping to hear some news."

"Well!" And the woman was off, with a string of rumors that seemed endless.

They say that the Girl Warden is raising armies for the King...Sent him hundreds of mages, all primed to fight the darkspawn...Word out of Redcliffe is that it's overrun with monsters. Not darkspawn, mind you, but but dead people walking and attacking the living...

"Wait!" Bronwyn protested. "How do you know this? Who told you this?"

"I overheard a fellow not a week ago. Come through to go live with relatives. Says that Redcliffe's lost."

Bronwyn raked a hand through her hair, wondering if she had to do something about this, too. "Has anyone sent word to the King?"

"Oh, I reckon they did. The fellow said they did, anyway, but didn't think it'd make any difference, with the King and Teyrn Loghain busy with those darkspawn."

"All right then, What else have you heard?"

Word is that the dwarven king is dead, and that there's some sort of tussle going on over the succession...you know how those dwarves are!

Bronwyn groaned inwardly, wondering how this would affect her mission to Orzammar. With any luck, the new king would be enthroned and in a very celebratory mood by the time she arrived.

...and that Arl Howe is making trouble all through the north...Not enough he murdered the Couslands, but he's trying to take over Highever for good and all...his men were in the city, killing and looting...They burned the fields of freeholders who wouldn't swear allegiance to him...Some of them got their comeuppance though. They were marching along the coast between Amaranthine and Highever and somewhere they fell afoul of something-maybe darkspawn or maybe ghosts, but folk saw lights in the sky over the Coast Mountains, up at the Lost Peak, and none of those men have been seen since...The young Teyrn of Highever has sworn to kill Howe: scared him so he's hiding in his castle at Vigil's Keep, and only comes out at night...Maybe Arl Howe's possessed... or maybe controlled by blood mages!...That would explain a lot...and the old Teyrn of Highever's daughter became a Grey Warden...

"Oh!" Tansy gasped, turning red. "That's you!"

Zevran had come up, and was listening in fascination.

Bronwyn nodded, with a lop-sided smile, glancing at the elf. "That's me. The Teyrn and Teyrna were my parents, and I am indeed a Grey Warden now. As soon as I finish my mission against the darkspawn, I'll deal with Arl Howe." She raised her brows at Zevran. "And I won't need to *hire* anyone to do it."

Zevran accepted this without demur, only saying, "But help is often useful, yes? Even when one is the Girl Warden and a great hero."

Bronwyn took a tankard from the embarrassed innkeeper. "Thank you. Yes, help may indeed be useful. The darkspawn are a threat to everyone, but Howe knows that I'll come for him in the end."

"You do that," the innkeeper said feelingly. "You show him what's what!"

There was an explosion of laughter from the end of the bar.

"No more putting it off! It's Leliana's turn now!" Alistair declared. "Time for the ritual humiliation!"

Zevran looked at Bronwyn. She explained, "We have a pact that each of us must tell a story, in the order that we joined our company."

The innkeeper perked up her ears at that, moving closer the the group by the fire.

Applause and hoots from some, from others more dignified approbation. Leliana smiled, coming forward.

"Oh, I love stories!" she told them, flashing her beautiful smile. "I have had so much trouble deciding which to tell you! There is the story of Aveline, Knight of Orlais—the first woman to hold that title among the Orlesians—or I could speak of Alindra and her soldier, and how her tears became a river of stars—or I could tell the tale of Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds—"

Morrigan looked over at Bronwyn, a very sour expression on her face.

"—or I could tell you of our beloved Prophet Andraste, and how she became the Bride of the Maker—"

Bronwyn politely assumed an encouraging smile, cringing inwardly. She noticed a similarly forced expression on a number of faces, most notably the innkeeper's.

"—but I think there is another story I would rather tell tonight, because it has a combination of merriment and melancholy that speaks to my heart. I shall tell you of the Bard of Val Royeaux and the Flying Lute Case."

Leliana's story of the Bard of Val Royeaux and the Flying Lute Case

There was once a clever bard in the city of Val Royeaux. She

was beautiful and witty, with a voice like silk, and she could play any instrument in the world. She could uncover any secret and master any lock. She was skilled with bow and dagger, but also with fan and flirtation. She knew a thousand stories and a thousand songs, and had made a thousand friends and a thousand enemies.

At length she backed the wrong horse, as we say in Orlais, and fell from favor at Court. No one dared to engage her, for the Empress was angry with her. So she grew poor, and began to think it was time to find greener pastures.

Her bard master was angry with her, too, and disappointed that all her training should have been for nothing. When the bard wrote to her old friend for help, the bard master would not give her any coin to help her, but sent only the empty case of a bass lute.

The little note with it said, "You say you will soon no longer have a roof over your head. Sleep in this then, and trouble me no longer!"

The bard was very sad, and sadder still when she read the note. She looked at the case with a sigh, for soon she would indeed be put out of her rooms. She sat down in the case to see if it would fit her, when suddenly the room vanished, and she found herself flying through the air!

The case was a magic one, but no one in ages had unlocked its secrets. The bard was brave, and held tight, praying for the Maker's aid.

At length the flying case stopped, and then floated down onto the topmost tower of a castle in a faraway land. A prince lived in the tower, and he was delighted to meet the bard. His parents did not want him to meet common women, and had locked him away up here.

"It has been so dull," he mourned. "Do you perhaps know any stories?"

Well, of course the bard knew stories. She told the prince stories about his eyes: that they were lovely dark pools. She told him about his thick black hair: that it was like the crashing waves of the sea that swept all before them. She told him about his long, long eyelashes: that they were like the wings of a rare butterfly. She told him about the world outside the tower: about the birds and bees and the ducks and the drakes.

Yes, she told him all sorts of lovely tales. She was so clever that the Prince was convinced that his parents the King and Queen would approve of her, so he rang a little bell, and asked to be admitted to their presence for tea, and he and the bard went downstairs.

"They love stories, too," he said. "My mother likes serious stories with a moral at the end, and my father likes jolly ones, so he can laugh."

The King and Queen were impressed with the bard's cleverness in reaching the top of the tower, for it was very high.

"Perhaps you would be so good as to tell us a story," the Queen said, ' but mind you, it must have a moral."

"But not too serious, I beg you!" cried the King. "I can't bear too much pomp and ceremony!"

The bard thought a minute, and then told her tale:

"There was once a pile of kindling that was very proud of its noble heritage. Its family tree—that is to say—the big fir tree of which each piece of kindling was a tiny stick—had been a huge old tree in the forest. The kindling lay in a box in the kitchen, and went on and on to the iron pots about its youth.

"'Yes, when we lived high on the green branch,' the bits of kindling bragged, 'we were really living high. Each morning and evening we had sunshine, and dew for tea, and the birds to tell us stories. We were very rich then, for other trees had their green clothes only in the spring and summer, but we were well-dressed all year 'round! But then came the Great Disaster: the woodcutters came, and the family was split up. That is why we, from a noble family as we are, come to be in a kitchen.'

"They went on and on about their importance, but suddenly the door opened, and it was the kitchen-maid. She took the kindling and straightaway made a fire in the hearth.

"The kindling said, 'How glorious we are! How our nobility shines forth!' And they boasted for several minutes, until they were utterly consumed and nothing more than ash. And that

was the end of their pretensions."

The King and Queen were very pleased with the bard's tale, and decided they would like her to be part of their family.

"Our son has been so lonely. This is certain to settle him down, and we should enjoy hearing your stories, too!"

The bard was happy to marry the handsome prince, but remembered that all her possessions were back at her rooms in Val Royeaux. There were her silk dresses, and her satin shoes, and her lute, and her books, and her fine daggers, and she decided that she would fly back there one last time and pack.

She promised to return to the Prince before the day was out. He climbed up to the top of the tower with her, and said he would wait there until she came back.

So the bard sat in her big lute-case once more and was flown away. The wind whistled in her ears, and at last she came back to Val Royeaux. She rushed into her bedroom and began packing as fast as she could.

As she packed, the landlord came in, very angry, wanting his rent. The bard shouted at him from the bedroom, telling him she would pay him in just a moment. She folded her linen quickly, and quickly tossed her special mementos into a little casket, and turned to hurry away.

And there in her sitting room were the landlord and his son,

and they had taken an axe to the big lute-case and were chopping it up for firewood!

"At least we will have something for our trouble!" the old man said spitefully.

The prince waited for the bard all day at the top of his tower, and for all I know he is waiting yet.

The Bard of Val Royeaux still wanders the world telling stories, they say, but they are not so merry as the one she told about the kindling.

A brief silence, and then talk and applause.

Tansy declared, "That was some fine story-telling. Well worth a round on the house!" More applause.

Sten nodded sagely. "A wise warning against putting too much value on material possessions."

Bronwyn blew out a breath. This from one who was desperate to find a sword, when he was currently using a weapon that was unquestionably superior. The lesson here, she thought, was that people did not always understand one another, or comprehend why a thing despised by them was precious to another.

Anders, surprisingly, agreed with Sten. "If I hadn't left things behind that I cared about, I never could have escaped from

the Circle. I learned that from my mother. She told me about the rebellion in Gwaren. People wouldn't leave their houses or their shops until it was too late, and they were slaughtered. Or they'd try to sneak back and pack up later, and they were hanged for 'looting' their own houses!"

There was solemn agreement at this. Alistair, however, was grinning.

"I like the story-in-a-story, and how the bard made fun of snobbery. Made fun of it right in front of the King and Queen, too! People are always going on about their ancestry, but without money and land it's worth less than zero."

Bronwyn had her own and somewhat different viewpoint about the value of family, but she understood why Alistair might think his own ancestry not worth boasting of.

Tara smirked. "I liked it when the bard told the prince all those stories about how gorgeous he was. I'll have to try that."

"You may start with me, fair one," declared Zevran, hand on heart. Tara giggled.

Cullen glared at the assassin suspiciously. Bronwyn could hardly blame him. She had never met anyone who merited constant suspicious scrutiny more. And that was when he was simply sitting and listening to stories...

Morrigan was sitting back with an air of superior understanding. Clearly, she felt she had learned something

about Leliana that the others had not, but Bronwyn thought the two of them had come to the same conclusion.

Supper was served: a good supper, with more talk and more laughter. Bronwyn was quiet, thinking over the news she had heard, and thinking, too, over Leliana's story.

Later, when Bronwyn was alone with Leliana in their comfortable room upstairs, she asked the question that had needed asking since Lothering. "You're a bard, aren't you?"

Leliana did not appear startled, but merely smiled ruefully. "Once I was. I left that behind me in Orlais, with my silk dresses and my beautiful shoes. I am a servant of the Maker now, and I have sworn myself to the Grey Wardens."

"Why did you leave Orlais?" Bronwyn probed. "You could have entered the Chantry there."

"Perhaps someday I shall tell you," Leliana said, one hand resting lightly on Bronwyn's brown hair. "Oh, look, what a tangle is here! Let me brush your hair, Bronwyn. You don't take proper care of it, and it is such pretty hair, too."

"If you must," Bronwyn sighed, secretly pleased not to have to deal with that awful mess herself. She glanced around the room. Sure enough, there was a carved wooden placard above the bed, telling of the distinguished visitor, with the name "Teyrn Loghain Mac Tir" in huge letters, and an arrow pointing down at the bed. She laughed at the sight. She leaned back as Leliana began brushing her hair, and asked,

"And would you tell me about Aveline, please? I don't know that one."

"Well," Leliana paused, smiling at the prospect of telling another story, "A long time ago, a girl-child was born to a poor farmer..."

Notes:

Leliana's story is adapted from "The Flying Trunk" by Hans Christian Andersen

Tremendous thanks to my reviewers: Shakespira, Eva Galana, Nithu, Night Hunter MGS, butterfly, Porphyra, Zeeji, Amhran Comhrac, Sarah1281, Piceron, bioncafemme, Costin, kwintessa, mutive, too lazy to login from mobile, White Ivy, Enaid Aderyn, Sati James, Windchime68, fussyat, almostinsane, Aoihand, Leafy8765, mille libri, alice, jen4306, JackOfBladesX, roxfox62, wisecracknmama, derko5, and Cobar713. You have wonderful ideas. Keep them coming!

The portrait over the bar at The Hero's Rest is inspired by a chapter in Amhran Comhrac's Apostates of Amaranthine called "The Secret Heartthrob of Ferelden."

I am considering visiting Denerim and the arling of Amaranthine in the next chapter, so we can have a look-in at the doings of Queen Anora, and of course check out the

nefarious plots of Rendon Howe!

18. Queens and Knaves

Victory at Ostagar

Here I must insert a disclaimer, as sometimes my readers think that the words and thoughts I assign to my characters represent my own beliefs and opinions. Please understand that just because Howe, for example, thinks something, and I don't add a long sermon about the many ways in which he is wrong, that does not mean I agree with him. I am trying to do justice to the characters. In the case of Howe, especially, I think there must be a reason for his behavior, aside from the usual "Ha-ha! I am evil!" one. A reason: not an excuse, certainly.

Chapter 18: Queens and Knaves

"Your tea, Majesty," Erlina murmured.

Fragrantly steaming, the little tray was arranged on her desk exactly as the Queen liked. Before her was a dainty pot of Highever honeygrass tea, her special painted cup, and a silver dish with half a cucumber sandwich and two oatmeal cookies. In a slender, iridescent vase two white roses were arranged, proud and perfect.

Anora was a disciplined person, first and foremost. Unlike her disorganized and lovable King, she was an adult, and behaved so on all occasions. There was a time and place for everything: mornings for the careful grooming befitting a public figure, a brisk walk in the garden, a sensible breakfast, reports from her seneschal, her guard captain, and her major-domo; afternoons for the verbal combat of audiences and council meetings and the respite of a quiet cup of tea; evenings for correspondence and wholesome suppers, followed by some music or reading or a game of chess; a relaxing bath, her hair brushed a hundred strokes, and then plenty of refreshing sleep. It would be so easy to grow slovenly and self-indulgent; sitting up all night in revelry and drinking and flattery. She was Anora Mac Tir Theirin, Queen-Consort of Ferelden, and did not need the opinions of others to judge herself fairly.

She was quite aware that Cailan found this regimen of hers a trifle—dull. He was such a *boy*, after all. And naturally, as a young man, he felt the need for more physical activity. Anora was quite willing to walk with him in the palace garden, but he walked so *very* fast, and was so easily distracted by everything from a new guard to a pair of butterflies, that it was difficult to achieve the proper rhythm for the exercise to really do one good.

The parts of her day that he found the dullest were the ones she found the most essential: the cup of tea, partaken of in quiet, while she digested the latest news; and the long ritual of bath and hair-brushing and eight hours of sleep, without which

she would be raving like a madwoman and tearing out huge clumps of the golden hair that Erlina brushed so assiduously.

She allowed herself a small sigh, glancing at the neat pile of correspondence. There was plenty of cause to tear her hair and rave.

That unspeakable ruffian, Rendon Howe, had set the north of Ferelden ablaze, murdering Bryce and Eleanor and their little grandson and their daughter-in-law. Anora hated the thought of Eleanor being dead. When Anora had first come to Denerim, so many years ago, it had seemed to her that the only real people there were her father, King Maric and Cailan, and Bryce and Eleanor Cousland. Otherwise the much-anticipated Court was a snake pit of petty spite and selfish maneuvering. Eleanor, especially, had been unfailingly kind to her, and had been able to converse with Anora about the things that mattered: about politics and foreign affairs; about poetry and history. She had fought as well as read, and had stories of her own about the Rebellion. And both her appearance and her manners were irreproachable, and would have been quite acceptable even at the Court of the Empress herself.

It was Eleanor who had helped her to accept that things are the way they are, and that most people were blind to anything but what they perceived as their own personal interest. Most of the time they were deceived even in that. The ability to rise above greedy short-sightedness was the hallmark of the truly great, like her father, and to a certain extent, like King Maric, she supposed. The Couslands, too, had had a touch of

greatness, and put duty before all else. Fergus would be teyrn now, of course, which was as it should be. Anora quite liked Fergus Cousland. He was a genuinely nice man, and too devoted to his wife to remember that he was supposed to stupidly flirt with the Queen. It was very refreshing. How tragic for him to lose his little son...

It frustrated her beyond words that the forces she had at her disposal in Denerim were completely unequal to doing anything at all about Arl Howe. They could only guard the northern approaches to the city and keep watch lest the madman try to attack while the bulk of the nation's forces were in the south. Meanwhile, what intelligence she received indicated that Highever was in chaos, and that Amaranthine was being squeezed by the Arl's ruthless demands for money to prosecute his campaign to subdue the Couslands' rightful teyrnir.

If only Father would settle the darkspawn, and come home!

That was a foolish fantasy, and Anora sipped her tea, forcing herself to be calm. Cailan was convinced that this was a Blight, and even her father now seemed to believe it. Of course, that was only because *Bronwyn Cousland* said so.

As fond of Eleanor and Bryce as she had been, Anora was not sure what she thought of their daughter. She had not seen Bronwyn in years, and there had been horrid gossip about her: Habren Bryland had told her that Bronwyn had had a bastard by an elven servant, and had been sent to a remote farmhold to deliver the child, which was born with a harelip

and six toes on each foot, and which was then shipped to distant cousins in the Free Marches. No one else seemed to believe that, and Habren was so very, very nasty that Anora acknowledged that she was capable of concocting that vicious lie all by herself.

The story that Anora *did* believe was that Bronwyn had been rustivating in the country because she was in love with someone unsuitable, and her parents wished to avoid a scandal.

Was it Cailan she loved? That had been the most likely possibility, and it had bothered Anora a great deal. It had bothered her even more when that first dispatch came from Ostagar, consisting nearly entirely of Cailan's rhapsodizing over Bronwyn the Beauteous Battlemaiden.

For Bronwyn Cousland was now a Grey Warden, and Anora knew from experience that Cailan found the Grey Wardens very exciting. Cailan was *such* a boy.

However, Father himself had written of Bronwyn's brave deeds in the great battle against the darkspawn, and Father was not one to exaggerate heroic exploits, whether his own or anyone else's. He did not go on as Cailan did about her appearance, but rather wrote quite a bit about her fine mabari hound, who was named Scout and who evinced near-human intelligence. That Father actually knew the name of Bronwyn Cousland's dog seemed very significant to Anora.

A subsequent letter had piqued her interest further. Cailan

waxed hilarious over the sight of Father flirting with the young Grey Warden! Anora found the idea markedly less amusing, but Cailan could not have invented every detail.

"There he was, Anora—I swear to you. He was whispering in her ear, and his fingers lingered on hers as he passed her a cup of wine. Bronwyn blushed very becomingly, and looked into his eyes with her soul shining in hers. It is perfectly clear that she fancies him: her warrior's heart beating in sympathy with the rugged older hero's. All very understandable, I suppose, though the sight of Loghain expressing the tender passion to a beautiful young woman was not one I had previously hoped to witness in this life or the next..."

Allowances, large allowances must be made for Cailan's tendency to embroider the truth when he found it too dull. He was hopelessly fantasy-prone. Nonetheless, the sight of Father flirting with Lady Bronwyn had quenched Cailan's own desire for her quite entirely, for while he described her as beautiful and heroic and all that was admirable, Anora noticed that his descriptions were no longer those of a man personally enamored. Perhaps Father should try that technique more often.

Could Grey Wardens marry? It had occurred to her from time to time that a second marriage might be a very nice thing for Father, if only to absorb some of his boundless energy. Cailan did not seem to consider Lady Bronwyn marriageable, but Anora had heard that Orlesian Wardens did in fact sometimes marry. Duncan himself had referred to such a couple in her

hearing once.

Duncan! Well, he was gone now, and Cailan remembered to be sad about it from time to time, but Father could hardly contain his satisfaction. Whether it was simply satisfaction to be rid of someone he had disliked so cordially, or satisfaction that Duncan had been replaced by the comely and amiable Bronwyn, Anora could not hazard a guess.

And she was a true Fereldan, which clearly pleased Father, as it would any sensible person, for that matter. People were already calling her "The Girl Warden," which was an perfectly ridiculous name, but just the sort of thing to capture the imagination of the common folk.

At any rate, Bronwyn had left the camp to track down Grey Warden allies for Ferelden, which was more than Duncan had ever undertaken. Anora liked that very much indeed. Whether Bronwyn succeeded in her quest or not, she was not in Ostagar flirting with Cailan or enticing Father into an undignified dalliance.

She did not like so well the news that Bronwyn was accompanied by the only other Warden in Ferelden: Alistair, Cailan's bastard half-brother. It was a niggling worry in the back of her mind. A Cousland and a Theirin—even a half-blood—made for a potent combination. Were Bronwyn not romantically involved with Father, it might even be alarming.

A knock at the door already, and she had not even finished her second cookie. Anora eyed it with a hint of regret. Erlina

went to speak to the visitor, explaining that Her Majesty was involved in affairs of State and could not be disturbed.

"She'll see *me*, surely," the self-satisfied male voice declared. Anora forbore to make a face. Making faces, even when alone, was a bad and undisciplined habit. She found Bann Vaughn profoundly repugnant, but he was part of her world, and she must deal with him.

After she finished her cookie.

While munching, she mused on the complications of being Queen in the city of Denerim, which, while the capital of Ferelden, was not precisely the King's-or Queen's-city. It was the fiefdom of the Arls of Denerim. Anora could command the Palace and Fort Drakon, and to some extent the Great Gate. Everything else was under the direct jurisdiction of the Arl of Denerim, and in Urien's absence, of his son, the odious Vaughn. So it had been for hundreds of years, and so it would be, it appeared, for hundreds of years to come. It was a most unsatisfactory arrangement. In a well-ordered world, the King of Ferelden would also be the Arl of Denerim. Anora had amused herself once, planning out a very pretty and efficient city charter that eliminated the existence of the inconvenient Kendall family. It was tucked away in a drawer, along with her plan for a Ferelden university that Cailan had found so very amusing and that Father had grunted at dismissively.

The cookie was consumed, and she had no further excuse for delay, other than the fact that Vaughn really was odious. Anora knew more than she liked about him. Erlina hated him,

and had told Anora how he leered at her, and touched her in 'accidental' ways. Vaughn's behavior in the alienage was a scandal known to the entire city. The most recent story put about by the Arl's people was that an elven whore had attacked the bann and tried to rob him after a night of sport. Opposed to that was the tale, spread by a reputable priest of the Chantry, of young brides and their attendants abducted from their own wedding and brutalized. One of the brides had attempted to preserve her honor and had been killed. Her body had been strung up in front of the Arl's estate, naked and bloody, as a warning to- what? Anora's lips thinned. To other women not to resist Vaughn? It was cruel and unfair, but the elf had raised a weapon to the bann and he was legally within his rights to have her killed as he liked. There was no doubting he had the law on his side in that, and it was impossible for the elves to sue for satisfaction in the matter of the abductions and rapes. The bann had legal jurisdiction over the alienage, and the cases would obviously never be heard. However, Anora herself was keenly aware of the difference that sometimes existed between the *legal* and the *right*.

The alienage *itself* was a scandal, for that matter. Perhaps alienages were a necessity, but it was hardly necessary for them to be so entirely squalid and disorganized. It was impossible for her to interfere directly, and Vaughn-and his father Urien-were deaf to her hints.

She would certainly not admit *Vaughn* to her private sanctum. If he wished to speak to her, he could do so next door in the Little Audience Chamber, with her guards out of earshot, but

able to see her clearly.

The linen napkin was touched briefly to her lips, and she rose, drawing herself up straight. She glided through the door, head held high. Vaughn bowed, and gave her that horrid, slieazy smile he imagined charming. Anora noted with satisfaction that the well-deserved scar from jaw to ear was still luridly red.

"Your Majesty," he simpered.

"Bann Vaughn. An unexpected pleasure..."

"Another caravan on its way, my lord," Captain Chase informed the arl. "Went past the Keep just now. Three wagons, and six-and-twenty elves. Wagon master told me that elves were coming from all over the country now, hoping to be hired on."

"Splendid," Rendon Howe told the man. "Accompany the wagons to Amaranthine, and send someone ahead to alert Caladrius."

Just when he thought there was no more coin to be had, a brilliant idea had come to him.

Rendon Howe had been let down by some of his more recent brilliant ideas—the purging of the Couslands had not gone at all as he had planned—but this was a genuinely brilliant idea—an idea that no one who mattered would care about. He could take a resource of no value—something that Ferelden had

entirely too much of, and which was worthless to the nation—and turn it into pure gold.

Pure gold Tevinter coins, to be exact.

If a few elves left to seek their fortunes and never returned home, who would be the wiser? If every elf in Ferelden vanished, who would care?

The idea had needed some tweaking. It had not come to him instantly. Amaranthine had no alienage of its own, and the elven population was not large. Highever's alienage however, was just as unruly as the rest of that contentious, desirable teyrnir. The elves, for some unfathomable reason, were very attached to the Couslands, and had rioted in the streets. A number had been hanged or otherwise colorfully executed to make Howe's ascendancy perfectly clear, but shortly after the fact, Howe had found himself approached by an—entrepreneur, he might call him. Yes, an entrepreneur of sorts, who explained that *dead* elves were worthless, but that *live* elves, while not exactly worth their weight in gold, could still have real value among men of good sense.

The deal was struck, the ships were loaded under cover of night, and Highever lost its excess population. Strong males and pretty females commanded the best prices, but even children were worth something. The story given out was that the elves were to be imprisoned in Amaranthine for their trouble-making. For the most part, not even the rebels themselves cared for the fate of the elves. It had been done all at once, too, so there were no survivors telling tales. Howe

had learned his lesson about leaving survivors. The alienage itself would be demolished, and a fine estate erected in its place. Highever Castle was hopelessly antiquated, and no one had yet managed to scrub out the bloodstains.

So the elves were sold, and that great, sudden infusion of gold brightened Howe's prospects immeasurably in the north. He had paid his men, kept their loyalty, and gained precious time.

For time was what he needed most: time to strengthen his position; time to subdue Highever; time to gain allies; time to correspond with Loghain, to make him understand the absolute necessity of what he had done; time for the Queen to calm down; and time for his assassins to do their work.

While he could not duplicate the feat of turning hundreds of elves into gold with a single transaction, he still had a steady income, due to his quiet arrangement with that greedy fool Bann Vaughn. Howe had sent a reliable agent to tell Vaughn about Amaranthine's desperate need for manual labor, and they had settled on a moderate sum, in exchange for which Vaughn would send teams of elven laborers up from the Denerim alienage, up the Pilgrim's Path, to Amaranthine. Vaughn welcomed this opportunity to get the overcrowded population of the alienage under control. The elves were driven directly to the docks; with some persuasion, they were loaded on to the ships, where they were promptly chained and caged; and then, after Howe received a bag of gold of appropriate size, they were taken away, over the horizon, and good riddance.

Really, when the people of Ferelden understood what he had been doing, they would probably erect a statue to him.

"Father!" Thomas Howe barged into his father's study, made bold by indignation and a little too much to drink too early in the day. "That bastard Chase forbade me the stables! Says I can't have a horse to go to Amaranthine!"

"Not today, Thomas," Howe said calmly. "This is not a good day for you to go. *Tomorrow* you may go to Amaranthine. Perhaps we should all go: you, I, and your sister as well. You can enjoy yourself with your friends, and Delilah can do a bit of shopping. I have some people to see. Yes, tomorrow will do very well."

"As long as I don't have to make up to that horse-faced Esmerelle," Thomas muttered.

"You will speak courteously of our loyal ally Bann Esmerelle. She is a personal friend of mine. I do not ask you to "make up to her," but to conduct yourself toward her as a nobleman does to a noblewoman. *'Make up to her?'* What a vulgar phrase."

Thomas studied his boots, cowed and unhappy.

His father walked over to the window and looked at the little wagon train disappearing into the northern horizon. "However, there will be a dinner, no doubt, that I require you to attend, and to attend in possession of all your faculties. Afterward, you may do as you like. There's no reason we need hurry

home the following day."

Thomas had not left, but lingered, looking anxiously at his father's desk.

"You've had a letter from Nathaniel."

"I have."

"Is he all right?"

"He is." Thomas was looking at him like a child pleading for sweets. Howe hated that kind of sniveling, but he supposed the cause was not inappropriate. Brotherly affection, after all, was a useful tool in maintaining family alliances and standing strong against the enemies of the Howes. "He has learned all he believes he will learn there. If the situation here improves in the next month or two, I shall send for him. It is time."

"He'll find himself in a hornet's nest if he comes."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I am hardly beaten, Thomas."

"The Couslands aren't exactly beaten either."

Howe laughed mirthlessly. "Perhaps not yet. 'We have scotched the snake, not killed it,' as the old story says. Never fear. The Couslands are doomed. Even if my hirelings fail, the evidence is on my side. Bryce and Eleanor were traitors, and sold themselves to the Orlesians a thousand times over. I suspected the worst when Bryce lingered there a little too long last year. When those documents came my way, I was

not entirely surprised."

"What about Fergus' son? He was six years old. Was he a traitor, too?"

"The death of young wolves is never to be pitied," Howe declared loftily. "Once Loghain examines the documents, the Couslands and all their heirs will be attainted traitors. Fergus will be lucky to be exiled, rather than executed outright. He can scrounge for scraps at the Empress' table like the dog he is. The Couslands as a family are dead. They just haven't realized it yet."

"Bronwyn's a Grey Warden now, and I hear the King thinks a lot of her. Teyrn Loghain, too. Won the Battle of Ostagar for them, everyone says..."

"Yes, yes, how very nice. Bryce's little spitfire, still playing the man. No doubt Loghain finds all that rather stimulating. Quite understandable, and right up his alley, if the old rumors are true... It is even possible that the girl was ignorant of her parents' plans for her-which are now moot, due to the interference of that fool Duncan. At any rate, *she* will be exempt from the King's Justice, as the crime was committed prior to her recruitment. If she survives-which given her adventurous nature is rather unlikely-she will no doubt be allowed to slink off to the Anderfels when the darkspawn incursion is over and done."

"Father-" Greatly daring, Thomas burst out, "Are you sure? Are you absolutely *sure*? Or do you believe this because it fits

in with your plans? Because Bronwyn said no? Could the papers be forged? What if it's an Orlesian plot to divide the nobility-?"

"The evidence was damning," Howe said with satisfied certainty. "A disaffected bard picks up all sorts of odds and ends. I have seen the papers for myself. The Crown for Bryce, and marriage with an Imperial Prince for the daughter. Ferelden sold like an ox at the market. Once the woman finishes collecting the rest of the correspondence, I shall present it to Loghain, and I have no doubt he will know exactly what to do with it. I am happily certain that the Girl Warden's charms are not proof against threats to the security of Ferelden."

Note: thanks to my readers and reviewers: most especially roxfox62, khaos974, Cobar713, Amhran Comhrac, Sarah1281, Enaid Aderyn, Zute, Shakespeira, Have Socks Will Travel, Aoihand, mille libri, mutive, almostinsane, JackofBladesX, Windchime68, jen4306, rascality, Costin, quintessa, ElaineMcFG, demoniconargles, and derko5. I really appreciate you taking the time to give me your opinions and advice!

Yes, there were little bits from Macbeth, Othello, and the Duchess of Malfi among Howe's speeches.

Yes, the Orlesians are up to something, because the Orlesians are always up to something. They may be up to

more than one thing, and they may be up to something you didn't expect, and not up to something you anticipated. Ever since David Gaider announced that Loghain was absolutely correct in his analysis of the Ostagar letters, I've been revising my original outline like mad.

Next chapter: In the Halls of the Dwarven Kings

19. In the Halls of the Dwarven Kings

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 19: In the Halls of the Dwarven Kings

The only challenge they faced in the foothills of the Frostback Mountains was the land itself. In between the rocky outcrops, the soil was thin and poor, the grass thinner. The few fields were unsuited for any grains other than oats and barley. The people kept sheep and goats mostly, and a few cattle. The only horses were shaggy hill ponies. Luckily she had done her serious horse-trading down in the flats, and had laid hands on a smallish Frostback Traveler, and most fortunately, another mule.

Bronwyn felt a little guilty about the mule, knowing that the man had only given in and agreed to the sale out of fear of Bronwyn's well-armed party. They had gathered about, watching the haggling, hands on their swords. She had not actually threatened the man, but she knew that he had *felt* threatened.

While the land might be unprofitable for farming, no one could complain of the scenery. The Frostbacks, serene and snow-capped, grew closer every day. The sky was a delirious, burning blue as they gained elevation. In such a landscape, it

was possible to think of their lives as a great adventure.

Zevran was a decent rider, and got on well enough with his new mount. He did not seem to be able to stop talking, but that was a failing he shared with Leliana, Anders, and Tara. And Alistair, too, all too often.

They stayed at farmholds when they could, and camped when there were none nearby. Most farms had a barn large enough to bed down in, and straw was warmer and more comfortable to sleep on than the bare ground.

Bronwyn continued to write to Fergus, nearly every night, her bundle of parchment grower thicker and thicker. At times she thought about finding a bookbinder, and sending her epic letter to Fergus in codex format.

One night, Alistair came to sit by her as she wrote. There was whispering among the mages. Leliana and Zevran were trading witticisms, and Sten was polishing his armor. Scout came over to see what Bronwyn was up to, and if it involved food.

"So..." Alistair began, his brown eyes alight with mischief. "I think it's time you told me your real opinion of our companions!"

Bronwyn raised her brows, and set down her quill. "Time for the juicy gossip, I take it? Well, since you ask, I like and esteem all our wonderful companions equally!"

He poked her, grinning. "Always the diplomat! No, really, I want to know!"

"Alistair, I don't think dishing the dirt on everyone is exactly-"

"Morrigan, for example," he went on, "You're always talking to her. Do you really *trust* her?"

As it happened, Bronwyn did not, entirely, but did not think it a good idea to voice that openly. "She's been very brave, Alistair, and she's stood beside us all the way from Ostagar. Have you ever seen her shirk a duty?"

"No, but that doesn't mean...Oh, all right, her mother is horrible, anyway. I know we can agree about that!"

"Flemeth? Yes." If there was anyone who Bronwyn *did* distrust, it was Flemeth.

"And what about Sten? The way he's so silent. Creepy."

"It's the custom of his country to speak only when he has something to say, Alistair."

"Is that a rebuke? Should my heart be broken because you are implying that I talk too much?"

She laughed. "This is about them, I thought. Not about you."

"All right, then. Leliana. She's crazy, right? I mean, you don't believe she really had a vision from the Maker?"

"I think it's possible that she believes it. If she does, and it comforts her, what harm does it do?"

"You are no fun at all to gossip with, you know. Isn't there anybody you *don't* like?"

Bronwyn thought instantly of Rendon Howe, the murderer of her family, and decided not to mention him. Alistair was just having fun, and did not deserve to be slapped down by a reminder of her own disasters. She answered, "Among our companions? No, not really. Everyone is different, Alistair. I can't expect all the world to be like my home in Highever. People have their own way of looking at things, and their own dreams and goals. Sometimes they won't be the same as mine. As we travel farther, we're going to meet even stranger people, and we're going to have to find a way to deal with them. I don't think waving a Grey Warden treaty at them and demanding they do as we say is necessarily going to work."

His face fell. "I'm worried about Orzammar, too. I wish I knew more about it."

"So do I," she confessed. "It's going to be a different world."

"Anyway," he said, leaning closer, "back to our gossip session. Who is your absolute favorite of everyone in camp?"

"You really want to know?"

"Absolutely."

She told him, and laughed at the face he made as he stamped off to play chess with Cullen.

She returned to her letter:

...and I take a great deal of pleasure in observing my little company, seeing how alliances are being formed amongst them. Despite Morrigan's aloofness, the mages get on well together, each finding a niche within the party: Morrigan, the shape-changer, is our formidable scout; Anders is our healer, of course; and Tara the aggressive battle-mage, usually at the vanguard of the attack at my side.

Alistair and Cullen get on very well together, their similar background and training creating a bond, despite Alistair's avowed dislike of his Templar days. Cullen also gets on surprisingly well with Sten, perhaps due to their use of a greatsword and the same fighting style.

Leliana and Zevran chat a great deal, though much of that is Zevran attempting to flatter and beguile her, as indeed he does all the companions, men as well as women. Leliana is full of lively talk about her youth in Orlais, when she was the ward of a wealthy noblewoman who left Ferelden in the wake of King Maric's victory. She has made no move to establish any outside contacts, which is somewhat reassuring. She is certainly a pleasant companion, and quite a good camp cook.

Alistair just had the impudence to ask me to name my

favorite companion! I told him that it was Scout, of course! You should have seen his face...

The great monolithic statues were the first indication that they had reached their destination. The admirable stonework was alien in style, the figures mere impressions rather than lifelike representations. Perhaps they were meant to symbolize the strength of the dwarven people as a whole. They crossed a long stone bridge and before them was the Frostback Fair. Beyond the colorful tents and the tables of the traders loomed the Gates of Orzammar.

There were humans and dwarves, in a fairly even ratio. Some of the dwarves' faces were heavily tattooed. Bronwyn wished she knew more of dwarven culture, for she had no idea at all what the tattoos represented. Was it a sign of high status or maturity, as it was among the Dalish? Her father had visited Orzammar once, but had said nothing of the people being tattooed. She was becoming more and more aware that she would be entering an unknown world when she entered Orzammar. She wished she had a guide-or even a book to advise her.

Down the valley to the other side were a few log buildings. One thing she had heard about dwarves was that often, when a dwarf left Orzammar to live on the surface, he was not welcome again below. Apparently the buildings were lodgings for surfacers, warmer and more permanent than the tents of the fair.

Their horses were attracting a great deal of interest. There was something in the distance that looked like it might be a stable, and Bronwyn headed toward it, hoping to find a place to board the horses. They did find so, and the cost was startling.

"That's robbery!" Alistair nearly shouted, as they walked away.

"Stabling and feed for eleven beasts," Cullen sighed. "It was bound to be expensive."

"We have to pay them enough to keep them honest," Bronwyn said grimly, "and I think one or two of us should visit from time to time to make sure the horses haven't been traded away!"

"I do not think that will happen," Sten said, surprisingly calm. "I made the proprietors aware that I would fold them in half backwards if anything untoward befell our mounts."

"That would probably hurt," Anders agreed, with a slow smile. "Can we have a look at the fair before we plunge into oblivion, Bronwyn?"

Bronwyn glanced at Alistair, who was looking at her with puppy-dog eyes. "Absolutely. It will do us all good. Besides, I have to look for a trader named Faryn..."

There was much to see. Bronwyn had not visited such an event for several years. There were many weapons-vendors, naturally, but other goods were for sale as well. From the

growing delight in nearly every face, it was apparent that most of her companions had never been to a fair at all.

Tara grabbed Morrigan by the hand, and dragged her away, pointing. There was a table laden with pretty flasks-probably of scented oils-and small shining objects. Morrigan pretended to be above it all, but her eyes gleamed. Bronwyn already knew about Morrigan's penchant for jewelry.

Alistair and Cullen were looking at a display of figurines, talking. Bronwyn kept her face grave. Alistair was no doubt sharing his delight in...no, Bronwyn would never say the word...not "dolls." Certainly not. Alistair liked "action figures:" educational models of historical Thedosian warriors, for the most part.

"Look!" he was saying, "it's a Tevinter cataphract! You can make out the scales of his armor. You don't see that every day!"

Zevran seemed to be examining the stalls of the leatherworkers-perhaps looking for something practical. Leliana was admiring a silk-dealer's wares.

No one troubled Bronwyn, for she was accompanied by a mabari warhound on one side, and a heavily-armed qunari on the other. Nevertheless, she learned a great deal as she made the rounds of the vendors. Among other things, she found that the tattoos were hardly the mark of the elite. She had heard that dwarven society was highly stratified and that social mobility was nearly non-existent. One's place in life was

determined entirely by one's birth. The tattoos were the mark of the casteless, those on the lowest, most hopeless rung of dwarven society. Those born casteless were doomed to remain there: unemployed, unemployable, and utterly despised. Sten growled his contempt for such foolishness. Bronwyn, accustomed to the privileges her birth gave her, saw the point of social classes, but among the humans of Ferelden, nothing was, so to speak, set in stone.

A common man, like Loghain Mac Tir, could rise to the ranks of the nobility by means of his courage and outstanding merit. The wastrel younger son of a noble might find himself stripped of privilege by base deeds. One could marry above or beneath oneself, and consequences would follow.

And the daughter of the greatest nobleman in all Ferelden might find herself a Grey Warden.

Really, compared, to the dwarves of Orzammar, social status in Ferelden was as fluid as oil over shifting ice. When Bronwyn took vengeance on Rendon Howe, it was likely that an ancient noble family would cease to be represented at the Landsmeet. Such were the whims of Fate. The dwarves behaved as if they had never heard of Fate.

There was talk of the contest for the throne. Most of the dwarves—men and women of the smith and merchant castes—seemed to support the young Prince Bhelen, who had the name of a reformer. Harrowmont, a friend of the late King, was clearly the choice of the traditionalists. Bronwyn simply did not know enough about Orzammar to hazard a guess as

to which was better.

When they reached a boldly-striped tent that sold wood carvings, success was theirs at last.

"Faryn? Foxy little bloke that way. You can't use a candlestick, Warden? How about these napkin rings?"

They walked over to said Faryn. Bronwyn stood a good six inches taller, and Sten simply towered over him. The merchant began his pitch, but Bronwyn interrupted him.

"We're looking for a qunari sword."

Faryn tried looking stupid. "A qun-qun-qunwazzit? Sorry, I don't know-"

"It's *mine*," Sten snarled. He could see the hilt, half-concealed by spear shafts.

"Oh-that? I had no idea it was stolen! I swear, by Andraste's dirty knickers! Here, I'll make you a deal..."

It could have been worse. Bronwyn made the trader throw in a little portrait miniature she saw Sten eyeing appreciatively, and the bargain was made. Sten clutched his own sword once more, and appeared to be actually smiling. At least it, Bronwyn hoped that expression was a smile.

"Yes! Completion." Sten admired the gigantic blade in quiet content. "I had almost forgotten the feel of it. You say you are a Grey Warden," he said. "but I think you must be an

ashkaari, to find a lost sword in a country at war. I call it Asala, the soul. It is my soul, and I cannot offer thanks sufficient for its return."

"It's a beautiful weapon," Bronwyn told him. "I am very glad to have found it." As they walked away, Bronwyn remarked, thinking about the miniature, "I did not know you were interested in the Ferelden Royal Family, Sten."

"I am not. I am interested in the art of the painter. This work was performed with skill and discipline. Observe the fine depiction of the eyes and the reflection of light on the jewels. Splendid craftsmanship. This is a picture of one of your rulers?"

"Yes. Moira, the Rebel Queen, the grandmother of the present King Cailan. She was noted for her courage and inspiring leadership."

"It is well. This will serve admirably as a keepsake of my travel to your land, and a sample of the skill of your artisans."

Everyone was glad to see that Sten had his sword back, but they were also very interested in the wares for sale, and the fact that Sten had got something new. That was a tricky business, for there were many things of wonder and delight to be had at the Frostback Fair, and the companions were short of cash.

"You can each choose something," Bronwyn said finally. "The price can be no more than fifty silver. One thing."

They all went mad. Sten declined, as he already had Asala and the fine portrait miniature, but the others enjoyed their fairing even more for having something to take away from it. Morrigan found a jeweled bangle, and Anders a gold earring, which he rather horrified everyone by putting through his ear on the spot. It was fortunate that he was a healer, and could stop the bleeding with a word. The effect was not bad. With the earring, Anders looked like a rather posh pirate-mage.

Alistair had a a little warrior carved of onyx, and Leliana a pretty silver amulet. Cullen liked a cleverly-made bootknife, and Tara was in ecstasy over a pair of combs studded with amber.

Zevran did not seem to want anything, instead saying, "If it is all the same to you, I would prefer to have the fifty silver. The Crows did not trust us with money."

Bronwyn paused, but then understood. Money was independence to Zevran. Money represented his new status as a free man.

"Fifty it is, then."

They had to decide what to do with Yusaris, since Sten no longer needed it, but it is indeed an ill-wind that blows nobody good. Sten might have set Yusaris aside for Asala, but Cullen was only too grateful to be gifted with the ancient blade. They sold Cullen's greatsword for a decent price, and added it to their treasury. Sten had regained his "soul," and Cullen now had a better weapon.

"This is superb!" he said, a shy smile on his lips. "I'll use it well, Bronwyn."

"I am sure you will," she said, glad to make someone else happy.

"But what did you get, Bronwyn?" Tara asked. "Didn't you get anything for yourself?"

"I really don't nee-"

"You have to get something," the elf insisted. "It's only fair! Aren't I right?" she demanded of the rest. There was some shuffling, and a general admission that Bronwyn, too, ought to have something from the fair.

Rather than make a scene about it, Bronwyn quickly found something suitable. One booth had journals and notebooks for sale-very nice ones-bound in buttery-soft leather. Bronwyn quickly picked out one with a green cover wrought with the image of a dragon in flight.

"A dragon!" Alistair complained. "Isn't that rather...ominous?"

No further delay was possible or appropriate. Orzammar must be faced. They marched up to the Gates. Bronwyn stated her business and, by way of a letter of introduction, presented her treaty.

"This treaty is with the King of Orzammar, Warden," the guard

told her. "In the absence of one such, I advise you to find Steward Bandelor at the Assembly. He will know what to do."

Well, that was something. Or at least a starting point. It was enough to open the gates for them. They yawned wide, and the companions stepped forward, into the underground kingdom of the dwarves.

It was a new world: stone beneath their feet, stone forming the walls, heavy stone over their heads. Bronwyn took a deep breath, refusing to think about tons of stone crashing down upon her. Dwarves lived under the stone all their lives. Surely she could manage it for a day or two.

There was something to be said for wearing their Grey Warden tunics and helmets. The dwarven guards recognized them at once, and gave them respectful greetings. This was the Hall of Heroes, of which Bronwyn *had* heard. heated by streams of lava, lined by the statues of the dwarven Paragons: those remarkable individuals whose historic achievements caused them to be revered among the dwarves almost as gods.

Bronwyn looked about. The only other people here were dwarves. She wondered what it would be like to spend days-possibly weeks-among people so much shorter. She must be very careful about implying that anyone else was short. No doubt they regarded her as unnaturally tall!

Another set of heavy doors, and they were in Orzammar proper, and in the midst of the city's unrest.

A man was being mobbed up ahead. Two groups of men were snarling at each other like dogs, and one had gone too far. An axe swung wide and then up and down. Both sides hurried away, looking over their shoulders, but the side that had killed looked smug.

A heavily armed and armored dwarf came upon the scene almost as they did, and they learned he was a guard captain. "Stupid deshyrs," he snarled. "They'll never be happy until they've destroyed the city." He look at Bronwyn and her companion with no attempt to conceal his hostility. "This is not a time to admit strangers among us. No doubt you'll carry tales of the savagery of Orzammar to the surface."

"I know that there is a contest for the throne," Bronwyn told him quietly. "Those men were obviously of the warring factions."

The captain laughed grimly. "Those weren't just faction members. Those were the men themselves: Bhelen and Harrowmont. This time I'd say that Bhelen had the better of it."

"I may need to speak to those men," Bronwyn said. "Where can I find them?"

"For the most part they speak only through their seconds: Harrowmont's representative Dulin Forender is usually with his master at Harrowmont's house. Bhelen's man Vartag Gavorn tends to haunt the Assembly."

Bronwyn had no idea where to begin. "Is there a place where I can learn more about your city? Perhaps I should understand more of your ways."

"Yes, perhaps you *should*," the captain sneered. "Go to the Shaperate. Up through there to the Diamond Quarter. The Assembly, the Palace, the noble houses, the Shaperate are all up there. Take all the time you want, Warden. I don't see this mess being straightened out any time soon."

It would be rude to sneak about Orzammar without paying respect to its leaders. As the city was temporarily under the tenuous control of the Steward, Bronwyn decided they must go first to the Assembly. The setting was exotic, but the nasty quarrelling of the deshyrs was not that different than the mutual recriminations one always heard at the Landsmeet. The dwarves were, perhaps, a little more forthright in their death threats. The presence of the Grey Wardens was noted, and very shortly the Steward met with them outside the Assembly Chamber.

Stress lined Steward Bandelor's eyes. "This is a city in crisis," he told them candidly. "Blood runs in the streets, and so it shall be until the contest for the throne is resolved. Nonetheless, Wardens, we can make you welcome. Respect for your role is great. The Grey Warden hostel is at your disposal. I shall instruct a guard to direct you."

Bronwyn and Alistair exchanged quick, interested looks. *Grey Warden hostel?*

"Let's go there," Bronwyn whispered. "We'll get ourselves in order and have a meal, and then we'll find out where this Shaperate place is and figure out what to do."

It transpired, much to their pleasure, that the Grey Wardens had permanent lodgings in the Diamond Quarter. A fine house, attended to by members of the servant caste, with a sizable hall for gathering and dining, ten bedchambers, and two bathrooms. They were currently the only Grey Wardens in Orzammar, and the house, for the moment, was all theirs. It was the baths that excited Bronwyn the most, and she was not the only one.

"This is brilliant!" cried Tara. "What a use for runes! Look, Morrigan! Come on and look! All you do is touch it to get hot water!"

"I can heat water with magic, and so can you, you foolish child!"

"But now we don't have to heat water for everybody else!"

"Ah, now that is indeed something to celebrate."

They could bathe. They could be clean, and the servants would do their laundry. They could rest, and enjoy the simple fare provided. The hostel was a home-like place. Within these walls, Bronwyn could forget the tons of stone overhead, pressing down on her.

She pushed the unpleasantness of being enclosed by rock

aside, and decided to chat with her companions instead.

"You called me an ashkaari, Sten," Bronwyn said, sitting down by him. "I do not understand the word."

Sten pushed his plate aside, and devoted himself to the conversation, steepling his enormous fingers. "An ashkaari is a seeker after truth—a philosopher, some might say—but that is insufficient. An ashkaari sees beyond the surface and moves ever toward the light of knowledge. To understand better, perhaps I should tell my story now, for an ashkaari appears in it."

"That would be wonderful!"

In a few minutes, everyone was gathered at the table, and Sten began his tale:

Sten's story of The Five Wise Words of the Ashkaari

There was once a young soldier of the qunari, who was declared ready to begin his service. He was ordered to report to the fortress of Qunab, and it came to pass that he met an ashkaari on his way: an enlightened seeker after knowledge. He conversed with this wise one, gaining much insight, and when the time came for them to part, the soldier requested some parting words of advice.

"You are a soldier," said the ashkaari, "and your path lies clearly before you. My words to you are few, but of great worth. If you can remember these five precepts, no evil can

befall you."

The soldier listened with suitable respect to the ashkaari's five wise words.

"First," said the ashkaari, "always obey without question the commands of your superior officer; second, never speak rudely of anyone, for it is unnecessary; third, never lie to your commander; fourth, never attempt to change the condition in life to which you have been assigned by the Tamrassan; fifth, wherever you go, if you meet those who teach the way of the Qun, stay and listen, even if only for a few minutes, that you may be strengthened in the path of duty."

They parted, and after some days, the young soldier arrived at the fortress of Qunab. He was brave and skillful and willing, and the commander regarded him with satisfaction. They received orders to protect a trade caravan that would be traveling through the dry lands of Abbassir, and the young soldier was chosen to serve in the guard.

They traveled for several days, until they entered a country that was like a sea of sand, where the swirling dust floated in clouds, and men and beasts were half choked by it. They came at length, parched with thirst, to a village of elves, who regretted that they had insufficient water for the caravan.

However, the elves told them that to the north, only a few miles away, was a great well, which the Tevinter lords had made hundreds of years before. It was immense and inexhaustible, covered in heavy stonework, with steps that

spiraled down into the very bowels of the earth. They themselves did not go near it, for they believed it to be the habitation of demons, and none that went there ever returned.

"It is said," said the commander, turning to the young soldier, "that no one can be trusted until he has been tried. Go then, and scout for this well."

The young soldier well remembered the first counsel of the ashkaari: *Always obey without question the commands of your superior officer.*

He struck out for the north and in a short time came to a spot where great trees towered above the barren country, whilst under their shadow lay the dome of an ancient building. The soldier found the opening of the structure, and descended the winding alabaster stairs down into the darkness. All was silent, but for the echo of his boots. Still he went on, until at last he reached a wide pool of sweet water, and saw that the well was indeed as the elves had said.

Suddenly, something moved in the shadows, and he saw a mage standing not ten yards away. His staff was in his right hand, and in his left arm he clasped to himself a dreadful looking mass of bones.

"What thinkest thou, O qunari," asked the mage, "of my fair and lovely wife?" And he looked lovingly on the bones.

Now it is written that this mage had had a very beautiful wife, but when she died, her husband, not being fortified by the

Qun, had refused to believe in her death, and always carried her about long after she had decayed. The soldier of course did not know this, but there came to his mind the second wise saying of the ashkaari, *Never speak rudely*, so he replied:

"Truly, I am sure you could find nowhere such another."

"Ah! What eyes thou hast!" cried the delighted mage. "I cannot tell thee how often I have slain those who insulted her by saying she was but dried bones. Thou art a fine fellow, and I shall grant thee a boon."

"The favor I would ask," said the soldier, "is that you leave off haunting this well, so that all may come and fetch water."

Perhaps the mage expected some more difficult request, for his face brightened, and he said he would depart at once. As the soldier returned south to his company, the mage strode away north, further into the desert, with the bones of his dead wife in his arms.

Great was the approval in the camp at the soldier's success. No one ever saw the mage again, and all in the caravan drank their fill. The elves of the village, too, offered thanks to the soldier, and listened with respect to the lessons of the Qun.

The commander was much pleased with the soldier's conduct, and as time passed, gave him promotion, for the soldier was mindful of the third wise saying of the ashkaari: *Never lie to your commanding officer*.

Unfortunately, the magistrate of the district in which they were stationed was not a man of integrity: he sought to use his position for personal enrichment and power. He wished to lay hands on the funds of the fortress of Qunab, and to do this he needed to gain the compliance of the soldier, who was now entrusted with their protection. He was too cunning, of course, to tell the soldier all his wicked plans, but he sought to win the soldier's allegiance, and offered to remove him from the dangers and hardships of army service to a position of comfort and power as his First Secretary.

The soldier, however, would have none of this, remembering the fourth wise saying of the ashkaari: *Never attempt to change the condition in life to which you have been assigned by the Tamrassan*. Therefore, he respectfully declined the magistrate's offer, and told him he would live and die a soldier of the qunari people.

The magistrate was enraged by his refusal, and resolved that the soldier must die.

He sent a message to the guard of a neighboring town, telling them that if someone were to come the next day to inquire when the new granary was to be finished, they should chop off his head and bury his body in secret. The magistrate then went to the commander of the fort, and requested the services of the soldier as courier.

The soldier rode to the neighboring town as ordered the next day, but as he passed the market, he saw that people had gathered around one who was reading from the Qun, and he

recalled the ashkaari's fifth saying: *If you meet those who teach the way of the Qun, stay and listen, even if only for a few minutes.*

So the soldier dismounted, and sat down to listen. He did not mean to stay long, but the sage was very wise, and he became so deeply interested in the lesson that he sat, and sat, and sat, while the sun rose higher and higher.

Meanwhile, the wicked magistrate was waiting to hear of the soldier's execution, and being a greedy fool could not be patient. He rode to the neighboring town and approached the city guard, saying, "Now then, you men, why do you stand idling? Is it done yet?"

The guard, thinking from that question that he was the one they were bid to slay, dragged him from his horse. A sword flashed in the sun, and off flew the wicked magistrate's head. The body and head were immediately and thriftily disposed of by adding them to the foundation of the new granary.

The soldier, who had listened to the lessons of the Qun with great attention, realized that he had tarried too long. He went swiftly to the Master Builder of the town, obtained a detailed report of the progress of the granary, and returned to the fort to give this information to the magistrate.

But the magistrate did not come, and the soldier notified his commander of his absence. At length the magistrate's fate was revealed, and all found enlightening how his stupidity and greed had led to his own undoing.

The soldier continued to be the trusted subordinate of the commander. In time, he rose to become the commander himself, and he imparted to all his young recruits the five wise sayings of the ashkaari.

Approval and applause followed. Bronwyn was pleased, feeling that she had learned something useful about Sten and the qunari. Alistair rather tactlessly said, "So, not all the qunari are perfect, after all!"

"I am unaware," Sten replied, gritting his teeth, "that I ever made any such claim for the qunari people. Better, yes. More efficient, yes. Only a fool would claim perfection."

"Indeed," Morrigan agreed. "I found the story most interesting."

Anders grinned at her. "A tale of discipline and ultimate success. What's not to like? Except for the creepy mage and the bones. Actually, I admit I liked that, too. Devoted mage husband and all that. Love beyond death." Morrigan rolled her eyes, but looked smug, all the same.

Leliana complimented the qunari. "You are an excellent storyteller, Sten! Is this a common skill among the qunari? Do you have bards of your own?"

"Naturally, we have those who entertain and teach and tell tales and perform music. Those who have those gifts are assigned those tasks. I was not trained in such, other than the

training that comes with learning to give a clear military report. The two skills overlap somewhat, I suppose."

"Yes, I can see that." Bronwyn thought about it. "You really do tell a good story, Sten. Thank you."

She excused herself early, and went to her quiet chamber, almost comfortable in the strange stone bed. The servant told her that the mattress was filled with dwarven hair, of all things. Bronwyn found that faintly disturbing, and mentally listed what she thought a mattress ought to be filled with: straw, feathers, wool. Those things, however, were not readily available to the dwarves. This was a mysterious land of stone and metal, and Bronwyn had better adapt herself to it, before seeking interviews tomorrow with the seconds of the warring lords of Orzammar.

Note: Thank you to my readers and reviewers: jen4306, Gene Dark, Sarah1281, Cobar713, JackofBladesX, Enaid Aderyn, wisecracknmama, khaos974, Amhran Comhrac, Nithu, Aoi24, demonincargles, roxf0x1962, almostinsane, mutive, kirbster676, Piceron, Have Socks Will Travel, maskedpainter, Costin, Windchime68, Eva Galana, Lehni, Shakespeira, mille libri, derko5, Lehni, and WellspringCD.

Sten's story is adapted from a Punjabi tale.

20. Hearts of Stone

Note: Some rude language in this chapter. Rude people, too.

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 20: Hearts of Stone

Bronwyn awoke with a plan.

The scornful guard had been right: she was too ignorant of dwarven ways to act effectively. So to the Shaperate they went.

And after all, it was just a library. Well, that was not entirely true: it was the best run, best organized library she had ever seen, with none of the dotty carelessness of the Circle's cataloguing, or the idiosyncrasies and gaps of the Cousland collection. The elderly Shaper of Memories was cooperative, respectful, and willing to talk endlessly of history and customs. He had a large staff, all highly educated and well-trained.

She could not do all this herself, so everyone had an assignment. This morning they would read. They would all read, and they would all learn something about Orzammar and the dwarves. Not everyone was happy with the assignment.

"Oh, come on, Alistair! You like history. You told me so.

Look," she said, tapping on the thick green volume she had given him. "*Together Against the Darkspawn: The Grey Wardens in Orzammar*. I thought that sounded like just the thing for you. Read as much as you can, especially the first and last chapters, where the writers always summarize things."

"I like history I *understand*. I don't know any of these places they're talking about, except for Orzammar."

"Anders," she called, noting with vexation that Tara and Anders were giggling over their reading like a pair of schoolchildren, "you've got the *The Dwarven Thaigs* over there. Help Alistair out."

It really was a problem, Bronwyn agreed, sighing over her book on the genealogy of the noble houses. It was not easy to understand many of the books, since the authors took for granted the reader's understanding of the underlying context. She would have to look at those maps of the thaigs herself. In fact, she needed a copy of them. The Shaper did not seem inclined to let the books walk away from the Shaperate. She needed to know who among her people might be best at copying drawing and maps.

Thank the Maker for Sten, who was studying his book on dwarven social customs with admirable diligence, the pages turning with relentless regularity. Morrigan looked a little bored, and perhaps reading about crafting with lyrium might not be particularly exciting, but the dwarves thought it was. Leliana was smiling over dwarven poetry.

Cullen was reading about the Legion of the Dead, a frown knitting his handsome face. Zevran rarely allowed himself to frown—probably concerned that it would make wrinkles—and he was serenely studying the dwarven economy, or at least the chapter titles and the charts. That would have to do. To truly understand the dwarves would take years. She had only a morning—or what she thought might be a morning—to spare.

Aldous had always deplored Bronwyn's ability to skim a book and gather sufficient information to answer questions in a glib, superficial way. "Tasting books" he called it, shaking his head. She was doing it now, but in the end she also would have to take some notes and then pick the Shaper's brains. She had vaguely remembered before she arrived in Orzammar that the dwarven King Endrin had three children, and that was all. Who was this Harrowmont, and by what right did he claim the throne?

The more morally upright of her companions were not satisfied with their current mission, and were asking questions.

"Because I don't want to publicly unsheathe my sword over dwarven politics!" Bronwyn answered wearily. They had met with the seconds of the claimants for the throne, and now they were reduced to running errands.

They were off to Tapster's Tavern at the behest (through his second) of Prince Bhelen, whom Bronwyn now knew was the

third and only surviving child of King Endrin. Who, furthermore, was widely thought to have murdered his elder brother, and pinned the blame on his innocent and very popular sister. The sister had been exiled to the Deep Roads, unarmed and unarmored, and was now presumably dead. The King had purportedly named Harrowmont his successor, and further had made Harrowmont swear never to let his kinslaying youngest child succeed to the throne.

But this was all rumor and hearsay. Ultimately, Bhelen's possible guilt and Harrowmont's possible claim were not issues that should concern the Grey Wardens.

"That fellow Vartag is a sleazy piece of work," Alistair grumbled. "I hope Prince Bhelen isn't as oily as his second."

"He can be an animated oil jar for all I care, if he'll fulfill the terms of the treaty," Bronwyn shot back. "It is not our duty to determine the best possible king for the dwarves. They should have done that for themselves. It is our duty to determine the king most likely to support the Grey Wardens and the struggle against the Blight. Everything I hear about Bhelen indicates that he has a lively interest in surface matters, and everything I hear about Harrowmont indicates that he is a traditionalist who barely acknowledges the surface exists. Because he has the name of an honorable man, he will do his duty, but no more. And I will not engage in some ridiculous Honor Proving so I can be shown off like a Grey Warden trophy!"

"For all their talk about respect for the Grey Wardens," sneered Morrigan, "both parties are quite happy to demand

you perform errands for them as proof of your good faith."

"Exactly," agreed Bronwyn, with a nod to Morrigan. "That is *exactly* how I see it. Therefore, I shall deliver these papers to Lord Helmi and Lady Dace, a task less conspicuously partisan than fighting in the arena."

She took only Alistair with her when the tavernkeeper, Corra, pointed out her first target. The rest of the companions were free to mingle in the tavern, find themselves some drinks, and generally become more acclimated to Orzammar.

Lord Helmi, in the midst of a radical political rant at the tavern, was affable enough to her. He apparently had views about the caste system, which while rather naively expressed (he actually seemed to think that surfacers were all "equal," whatever that meant), seemed less hidebound than the average deshyr. He accepted the documents at face value, and promised his support to Prince Bhelen.

Her companions had learned interesting things while she was occupied. Dwarven ale was nearly undrinkable, and the tavern was filled with a number of strange types. Cullen fell into an interesting conversation with a warrior who had known Duncan. He gestured Alistair over to talk at length with the dwarf. The title "Grey Warden" meant something in the place, though, alas, it did not mean "free drinks."

Bronwyn attracted a great deal of attention, or rather, Scout did. Dogs were virtually unknown in Orzammar, and animal life was largely limited to vermin like deepstalkers and giant

spiders. The only domesticated animals she had heard of were creatures called "nugs."

Eventually, when they left the tavern and continued their exploration of Orzammar, they actually saw one. "Oh!" cried Leliana. "I've heard of those! They're a kind of subterranean bunny-pig. Aren't they adorable?"

Scout whined. Bronwyn caught her dog's rolling eye, and scratched his ears consolingly. She thought the half-blind, hairless creatures revolting, but there was no accounting for lack of taste.

She talked to every merchant who would talk about politics. Bhelen was definitely the choice of the lower castes: the smiths and the merchants above all. Those were the people who had the most to gain by increased contact with the surface. She had only met one noble, and she suspected he was not representative of his class as a whole.

Back in the Diamond Quarter, they found that Lady Dace was not so agreeable as Lord Helmi. On the contrary, she made plain her contempt for all surfacers. Only after seeing the documents did she show any interest in the conversation. Bhelen apparently had evidence that Harrowmont was cheating on some sort property agreement—or Bhelen had manufactured such evidence.

Bronwyn found she did not much care. Resenting with all her heart the labyrinthine politics of Orzammar, she simply presented the documents without comment.

And then an additional complication unfolded. Lady Dace could not make decisions for House Dace without the consent of her father, Lord Dace. Lord Dace was currently in the Deep Roads, leading an expedition to the Aeducan Thaig. Bronwyn ground her teeth in frustration.

Lady Dace was good enough to give them a pass to the Deep Roads, and a detailed map. The rest was up to the Wardens.

The Aeducan Thaig had once been a settlement belonging to House Aeducan, the family of the late King Endrin, and was the thaig closest to Orzammar. The Shaper repeatedly told her that a thaig was not a town or a city or a village. It was a thaig. There were always problems when communicating with a different culture. "Thaig" *did* seem to have some of the meanings of "colony" or "settlement." However, it was easier, safer, and less confusing just to use the word "thaig" herself.

The thaig had been abandoned for many years, one of the last lost to the darkspawn over the past millennium. From time to time the dwarves attempted to reclaim the lost thaigs, but only a great effort enabled them to seize the closer ones even temporarily.

"My readings," Sten said thoughtfully, "lead me to conclude that there are simply not enough dwarves."

The entrance to the Deep Roads spoke of dwarven power and ingenuity in the ancient days before the darkspawn. A magnificent highway stretched out before them: carved

pilasters soaring up to the dim ceiling far overhead. It was majestic, it was like nothing Bronwyn had ever seen, and it came to a halt a few miles away, where the darkspawn had hewn side tunnels and blocked the way. From then on they moved back and forth between the fractured Roads proper and the network of tunnels, and they lived in a world of stale air and hard stone; of ambushes and traps. The constant presence of the darkspawn crawled like spiders over Bronwyn's consciousness.

"I'm getting better at sensing darkspawn, I think," Bronwyn told Alistair, "or maybe they leave traces wherever they go."

"That's certainly true," agreed Alistair, wrinkling his nose. "Everybody, be careful of that black stuff you see on the rocks. That has something to do with them, and it can poison you."

"Up ahead!" called Zevran, from his position on point. Bronwyn mentally blessed the Maker for giving elves their superb night vision. They broke into a run and heard the deep shouts of dwarves intermixed with horrible squeaks, all echoing off endless stone.

Thus, they did not meet the deepstalkers unprepared. The foul little creatures had attacked Lord Dace and his party. With the bodies of naked geese, and worm-like heads on their long necks, the deepstalkers were a nasty and persistent enemy, and the poisoned spit *hurt*. Once again, Bronwyn thanked the Maker for mages and their freezing spells.

"My thanks, strangers. You pulled me from a tight spot."

Lord Dace was not as arrogant as his daughter, or perhaps he was simply grateful for his life. Bronwyn showed him the documents, gathered that he was equally grateful to be apprised of Harrowmont's dishonesty, and together they returned to Orzammar.

The dwarf noble unbent somewhat on the way. He showed a certain respect for Bronwyn's status as a Grey Warden, and some of it seemed genuine. Bronwyn saw no reason not to tell him the reason she was here.

"You say the darkspawn have risen to the surface?" the noble asked, frowning. "But that only happens during a—" he paused, and said slowly, "-a Blight. I see. You are certain?"

"There is no question."

"This is grave news." The old man looked weary. "Mind you, I don't know if it will make any difference to most of the deshyrs. We are locked in the contest for the throne, and all eyes are on that."

"It sounds like the ideal time for the darkspawn to strike in force," Bronwyn agreed coolly. "Thrones mean nothing to them."

"Too true. For good or ill, we must resolve the succession, and soon." He nodded. "Very well. Bhelen will have the support of House Dace. May the Stone accept it."

Success brought them an invitation to the Palace, and an introduction to Prince Bhelen himself.

"I am impressed, Warden. Not many visitors to Orzammar grasp our rather...*convoluted* politics so quickly."

Bhelen was in fact *much* oilier than his second, but he was also vital, energetic, and driven. Bronwyn thought briefly of King Cailan, and wished her own king showed a tenth of this dwarf's burning ambition. And then thought again. If Cailan were anything like Bhelen, she would tremble for Ferelden.

He was not unappealing, too, despite the dwarven stature and a nose of truly prodigious size. And he agreed with Bronwyn on the main point.

"We both know that fighting the Blight is all that really matters. We must have absolute unity to face the fulcrum of true evil."

Bronwyn regarded him gravely. The phrase might be considered hyperbolic, but it was also completely true. She suspected that he thought his own elevation to monarch equally important. Nonetheless, if he believed that only he had the ability to recognize the danger facing them for what it was, then she could understand his will to power. As he pointed out very justly, the treaty only bound the *King* to assist the Grey Wardens. In the absence of such, she would be quite out of luck.

Her intervention had won him two more votes, but more was

needed. Bronwyn listened to his further demands, willing herself not to sigh.

"Crime is rampant in the streets. How could anyone win the support of the Assembly if they permitted such chaos?"

There was a something called the Carta, which was a criminal organization based in Dust Town, the home of the casteless. Bhelen believed that the current gang leader was a woman named Jarvia. Bronwyn's mission was to hunt down this Jarvia and her Carta, and eliminate them.

With that, he dismissed them.

"More errands," muttered Alistair.

"At least these errands involve fighting," said Sten.

"They involve fighting *dwarves*," Bronwyn frowned. "When did we become the Orzammar City Guard? I'd go to Harrowmont, but I suspect he'd ask exactly the same of us."

"And so you'll have to unsheathe your sword over dwarven politics after all," Morrigan said dryly.

"So it would seem."

She strode to the Palace doors, head down in thought, and nearly trampled someone.

"Your pardon, lords," squeaked the young dwarf woman, scurrying out of their way. Bronwyn noted that she was pretty

and well-dressed, and that she had the mark of the casteless tattooed on one cheek. That was...interesting.

Bhelen had a casteless mistress? She must be his, for no one else would dare bring a "brand" here. That certainly threw a new light on his politics. It was possible that his liberalizing attitude was not a mere pose.

What a thing is was to travel and to see the wonders of Thedas for herself, Bronwyn thought, grimacing at the irony of it. She descended into Dust Town, where the Carta had its base, and thought the Deep Roads might even be an improvement on this. The construction here was cruder, and its crumbling, unfinished nature reminded Bronwyn somehow of the Highever Alienage. In one way it was better, for the inhabitants never needed to worry about the weather, but in every other...

Tara faltered. "This is..."

"...horrible," agreed Anders.

"No one should have to live like this," Leliana said softly.

Morrigan sneered. "Why do the poor not rise up against their betters? This I have never understood."

Sten nodded. "I estimate that the dwarves waste a full sixth of their population. It is irrational, as the population is already small to begin with."

It was filthy, and it stank. It *reeked*, actually. The companions passed a sort of crude butcher shop, where the carcasses of gutted nugs were hung on display. The proprietor grinned at them with green and filthy teeth. The dwarves here were all tattooed across the face, and scuttled from shadow to shadow, dressed in filthy rags.

Until they leaped out and attempted robbery, poor fools.

So Bronwyn indeed drew her sword and killed them. Killed them dead in the dusty pathways, and no one said a word.

"I take it the City Guard doesn't come here much," Alistair remarked.

"Why would they?" Tara said bitterly. "Nobody cares what happens to these people."

There were beggars, of course, just as there were beggars everywhere. An older woman gladly gave Bronwyn directions to a Carta safe house for the price of a meal. Hungry eyes fastened on the woman as Bronwyn and her companions stepped away, and who knew how much of her money the old woman would be allowed to keep?

"Please," called a young woman in a soft voice. "Please...my son is sick. Can you spare a few coins?"

Bronwyn looked at her, and then looked again. "You're not one of the casteless," she said slowly. "What are you doing here?"

It was the same old story, with dwarven variations. Listening to it, Bronwyn learned more about dwarven inheritance customs than she might have from any book. Caste was inherited by gender, mother-to-daughter and father-to-son: the sex of a child determined its entire future.

Zerlinda had fallen in love with a casteless man and had born him a son. He had hoped for a daughter, and indeed that was the entire reason for his pursuit of a young woman of the smith caste. A daughter would have inherited her mother's caste, and the father would have been permitted into the family. Instead, the unwanted son inherited his father's casteless status, and was useless. Zerlinda had not seen her lover since. Her parents had thrown her out, demanding that she abandon the child in the Deep Roads before she could be welcome at home.

It was a sad story indeed, and Bronwyn was so impatient with the lords and the deshyrs and the castes of Orzammar that she gave the young woman her real opinion and ten silver coins.

"Go to the surface and make a new life for your son there."

The secret lair of the Carta reminded Bronwyn irresistibly of the Royal Palace: a twisting tunnel with stone chambers branching from it. There were bedchambers, and storage vaults, and offices. All of them were filled with warriors, and none of the warriors fled their duty. Here, in the depths of Orzammar, the casteless had made a kingdom of their own.

It even had a doorman.

"What's the password?" he demanded gruffly.

Anders burst out laughing. There were smirks and some rolling of eyes. Scout lowered his head and growled.

Bronwyn smiled faintly. "Get out of my way, or I'll kill you."

"But—that's not the passw—"

Their invasion was a slaughter. The casteless were good fighters, but not brilliant ones. The few mercenaries they had as support—some qunari whom Sten held in contempt for abandoning their customs, some elven apostate mages—were cut down too. There were no escape routes built into the Carta's den. Once the Wardens pushed defenders into a stone chamber there was almost never a rear exit. The defenders stood and died. No one offered to surrender. Mercy was unknown in Dust Town.

Around another outcropping, they came to a kind of crossroads. On impulse, Bronwyn chose the door to the left.

"Cullen," she whispered. "You, Tara, and Sten stay here. Watch to see if anything comes out of there—" she pointed to the right-hand door "—to attack us."

Yes, the Carta hideout was much like a palace. It even had its own dungeon.

The stone chamber they next attacked was well-defended. A

burly dwarf with a maul rushed them, flanked by some hard-eyed thugs. One flinched away from Bronwyn's sword flashing before his eyes, and stiffened as she plunged her dagger into his side. Within a few minutes, the guards were down, and the companions were studying the little prison with curiosity.

"Over here!" croaked a voice from the next room. Bronwyn made her way over there warily, and Zevran pushed to her side, sword at the ready.

There were cells. And prisoners. The Carta *jailed* its enemies?

One of the prisoners was male, a small, emaciated dwarf who pleaded, "Let us out! Just let us out! We've been here for a Stone's age!"

In the other cell was a woman, who stared at Bronwyn with burning eyes. "Yeah," she rasped. "Let us out. I got a score to settle with that bitch Jarvia."

"Actually," Alistair said pleasantly, "we're on our way to pay a call on your friend Jarvia ourselves."

"No friend of mine!" protested the scrawny female. She shoved past the unlocked door, all wound-up energy and focused hate. "I'm going to gut her, and dig out her eyes with a *spoon!*"

"Why a spoon?" wondered Alistair.

"Because it'll hurt more!" snarled the dwarf. "You got anything to eat?"

Bronwyn, her eyes still on the woman, dug into one of her small pouches for the snack she always carried: some jerky, some hard and crunchy biscuits, a bit of cheese. They were snatched from her hand by the woman, almost faster than Bronwyn could see. The man scrambled over, trying to catch at the crumbs, but the woman kicked him aside, and shoved the food into her mouth, hardly chewing, grunting like an animal.

Alistair grimaced and felt in his own snack pouch. He pulled at the man by his bony shoulder.

"Over here," he muttered, and gave the poor soul what he had.

Within seconds, the food was consumed. The woman wiped her mouth with a grimy forearm, and considered Bronwyn.

"By the Stone! You're really...tall!"

She was a dwarf, of course, though not short for one of those. Her filthy hair stuck out from her head in a few short pigtailed. It was impossible to guess at its real color, for she was dust-colored all over, all but her fierce black eyes. She stank worse than the rest of Dust Town put together, but that was understandable, given her captivity. Tara looked at her with wide-eyed pity, obviously remembering her own days in a cell.

Bronwyn thought this her best chance to find out more about the Carta.

"I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn. What is your name?"

The dwarf woman stared at her blankly, nonplussed that anyone would want to know her name, especially a rich surfer with fancy armor. And a Grey Warden, too! After a moment, she replied cautiously.

"Brosca. I'm Freydis Brosca. People just call me Brosca. That's my friend Leske."

"Very well, Freydis Brosca. Tell me everything you know about Jarvia and this Carta."

She knew a lot, having been a member in good standing before she became a member in such poor standing indeed that she was locked away to die. After she told Bronwyn everything useful, she and Leske began scrambling around the room, looting the dead men. Alistair made a face, but Bronwyn shook her head at him. The rest were sympathetic, and Leliana helpfully pointed out some dropped coins that Leske had missed.

"You're all right, Red! I mean... my lady," the dwarf mumbled, ducking his head as if expecting a blow.

"So anyhow," said Brosca, as if continuing a conversation begun long ago, "we go find Jarvia and kill her, and then we loot the place from end to end. I know a good fence here in

Dust Town. Make a bundle." She peered up at Bronwyn. "What do you say to fifty-fifty?"

Bronwyn opened her mouth, but Brosca cut her off, "Yeah, I know. Leske and I get ten percent each then, all right? That's fair, isn't it?"

Bronwyn had actually been about to say that the dwarves could have it all, but then shut her mouth. Her funds were seriously depleted, and the Carta's storerooms were stuffed with valuable goods: mostly arms and armor, but some food and clothing and luxury items, too. Neither Bhelen nor Harrowmont had offered her any recompense for her trouble and danger. Father had always told her that wars were fought with coin as much as they were with blood and iron. They had already found quite a bit of coin here, but they could sell other things for even more.

"All right, ten percent each. Eighty percent to the Wardens. First we deal with Jarvia."

"I like the way you think, Boss," grinned Brosca, hefting a dagger in either hand.

At the next chamber, they burst in like a thunderbolt. The carta thugs were frozen and knocked down before they could breathe twice. Brosca gave a whoop and sat on one of them, holding a dagger to his throat. His eyes opened, and he grunted in surprise.

Brosca grinned back at Bronwyn. "Sorry, Boss, but I've got to

talk to this one. Gotta find out about my sister. You know Rica, don't you, Folden? Where's Rica? Did Jarvia get her?"

The dwarf snorted a laugh, cut off suddenly when Brosca dug the point of her dagger into his neck.

"She's all right! Rica's all right!" he screamed. "I'll tell you about it! She bagged a noble! I swear! Bagged the biggest one of all! She's up in the Diamond Quarter, living like a noble herself. She had a boy, and she's made for life!"

Brosca's face stretched into an expression of incredulous joy. "You mean it? You're not lying? Rica made it out of here? What about my Ma?"

"Lives with her! I swear! They're living in the Palace, they are! I swear! Too good for the likes of us now!"

Very interested, Bronwyn leaned over to ask, "Are you saying that her sister Rica is the mistress of Prince Bhelen, and that she has born him a child?"

"A boy!" shouted Brosca gleefully. "A boy! I have a nephew! I'm aunt to a prince!"

"Where is Jarvia now?" Bronwyn pressed.

"In her quarters, meeting with some of the boys," Folden gasped out. "I swear! She wanted to fix Rica, but she couldn't. That prince of hers sent for her as soon as he heard she had a nug under her apron, and she cleared out before

Jarvia could get her."

"Thanks, Folden," Brosca said, very sincerely. "That's the best news I ever heard." With a quick slash, she cut the man's throat to the bone, and he died with a red, bubbling protest.

She got up and slapped herself across the chest. "Well, I feel great! I never have to worry about Rica ever again! Let's go kill Jarvia now. She's one tough bitch, but I'm tougher today!"

Bronwyn turned into the tunnel, "I take it you know where her quarters are?"

"Oh, yeah," Brosca said, falling into step beside Bronwyn, black eyes gleaming like a hard coal fire. "Oh, yeah."

Alistair and Cullen raised their brows. Sten merely looked interested.

The best fighters in Dust Town were in Jarvia's quarters, and she was the best of them all. She was very strong, very fast, and an imaginative fighter who knew every dirty trick and had invented some of her own. She was surprised to see Brosca and Leske, but unimpressed with her other visitors.

"Grey Wardens? Huh! Not very choosy about the company you keep, are you?"

"You screwed up, Jarvia," Brosca drawled. "The nobles didn't give a shit about what we do in Dust Town until *you* gave them a reason, you stupid nugsucker!"

"So the mighty nobles have decided they have to do something about me?" Jarvia sneered back. "It doesn't matter who's King in Orzammar, as long as they know who's the Queen!"

Acid splashed into Alistair's face, and he screamed, temporarily blinded. Brosca dove, and hit Jarvia at the knees, bringing her down. Bronwyn ducked under an axeman's furious swing, and stabbed him in the back of the neck during his follow-through, neatly severing his spine. Scout bowled an archer over, and shook him like rat.

Anders was casting healing on Alistair, while Morrigan and Tara sucked the life from the Carta thugs. Dwarves were resistant to magic, but they were not immune.

A blast of fire knock Cullen's feet from under him, and he fell heavily on his back, winded.

"Traps!" shouted Leliana. "The room is rigged with them!"

Sten roared, and his greatsword swept a vast arc of destruction in the wake of Tara's paralysis spell.

Jarvia kicked Brosca away and darted, blades out, straight at Leliana, who was disarming a tripwire. Zevran threw a dagger, and Jarvia shrieked, weapon dropping from her ruined hand.

Alistair smashed her down with his shield, and Brosca tackled her again. Around them was a hell of slaughter, as Jarvia's

henchmen were cut down, one by one.

In a last, desperate ploy, Jarvia pulled a thin bodkin from her coiled hair and thrust it into Brosca's face. Brosca dodged, and the point pierced her ear, ripping it open. Brosca bellowed in rage, and drove her daggers into either side of Jarvia's throat. Sprays of crimson dyed her hands.

"Bitch! Fucking bitch!" screamed Brosca, stabbing at the dying Jarvia again and again. "Think you can lock up me and give me to your goons?"

Bronwyn eased her stiff neck and shoulders and walked over to watch the dwarf vent her fury on the dead Carta leader. Cursing, Brosca viciously stabbed at the dead, open eyes. Blood and matter squirted up. Scout sniffed at the interesting smell. Bronwyn grimaced and scratched his ears.

"Feel better?" she asked Brosca.

"Yeah. I do. So much for that bitch." Brosca began rummaging through Jarvia's armor for her possessions. "Fuck! I ruined her armor! Fuck, fuck fuck!"

Leske slid over and whispered, "Hey, Brosca! We're not supposed to talk like that in front of folks who aren't Dusters! You can get in trouble!"

This penetrated the bloodthirsty haze. "Sorry. I guess I got too excited. That was good armor. I shouldn't have gone crazy like that."

"What will you do now?" Alistair asked.

"Don't know. Think of something," Brosca mumbled. "Got to get the loot first."

Leske's eyes widened, "We could take over the Carta," he breathed.

"No good," said Brosca, shaking her head dolefully. "Carta's dead. We killed it. It'll take years to come back. Besides, I don't want to see this shithole ever again. Excuse me," she apologized to Bronwyn.

"If your sister is the King's mistress," Anders suggested, healing her torn ear, "maybe she could do something for you."

"That's true!" Leske said, full of excitement. "Member, Brosca? Beraht was gonna tell everybody he was Rica's brother and live in the Palace. You really are her sister, so you could live there. And maybe," he said, with pitiful hope, "you could put in a good word for me? Say I was a relative or something?"

"Right," Brosca snorted, trying to wipe her face, and smearing the blood instead. "Can you picture me in the Palace!" She finally got to her feet and said to Bronwyn, "But I need Rica to know I'm alive. If you've got an in there, could you get a message to her? Tell her I'm all right?" She shuffled, and said, "'cos I could pay you and everything..."

Weird and brutal as this woman was, Bronwyn understood

what it was to long for family. She said, "You can tell her yourself, but you'll probably want to get cleaned up first. Why don't you both come back to the Grey Warden hostel and have a bath?"

Or two, she thought to herself.

"Really? You'd let me have a bath at your place? That's in the Diamond Quarter!"

"You're all right, Warden!" Leske said. "She's all right!" he told Brosca.

"Let's grab what we can and go to Alimar's Emporium," Brosca said, licking her chops at the thought of the stuff that was in this place. "We can't do it all in one go, but we can make a start. No more nug leather for me! I could get clothes of real cloth like a lady, and Rica wouldn't be ashamed of me!"

Their garments were so forlorn that Bronwyn allowed the two dwarfs to equip themselves out of the Carta's bounty: light armor, sound boots, strong studded gauntlets. Helmets even, and proper weapons. The two of them were still scrawny and hollow-eyed, but they no longer looked like dying beggars. Everyone in the party gathered up as much as they could. Even Scout carried an axe in his powerful jaws. Laden with loot, they followed Brosca and Leske out of the tunnels to Dust Town, and through the door of a very shady establishment.

"Hey Al!" Brosca grinned at the proprietor. "We just cacked Jarvia! All this stuff is from her place! Neat, huh?"

Their loot brought in nearly sixty sovereigns. With the coin they'd uncovered, their total take was over seventy. After the dwarves' commission, the Grey Wardens had fifty-three gold, twenty-six silver, and a heavy bag of copper. They could count the copper back at the hostel. Bronwyn felt deep relief. They would be able to reequip and provision themselves for the return journey without stinting necessities. Some kegs of surface ale and dried fruit they would take back to the hostel now. And there was still plenty of loot left, back at the ravaged hideout...

"Eleven sovereigns!" Brosca exulted. "I'm as rich as a noble!" She grabbed up a dwarven woman's dress: a strange garment of cloth, leather, buckles and mail, and held it up to herself, dancing. "Thanks, Jarvia! Dying was the best thing you ever did!"

Leske gaped slack-jawed at his coins. "By the Stone, I never got more than two silvers for killing *anybody* before! This is great!"

"Warden, get those stinking Dusters out of here," growled the storekeeper, "and tell them to shut up about killing Jarvia!"

Thanks to my reviewers: WellspringCD, Nithu, Shakespira, Amhran Comhrac, Eva Galan, mille libri, gaj620, mutive, Aoi24, jen4306, Chatoyant Tiger, Sarah1281, Enaid Aderyn,

*JackOfBladesX, demoniconargles, Lehni, Gene Dark,
Piceron, roxfox1962, chocolatebrownie12, khaos974,
Windchime68, almostinsane, derko5, and ArtemysFayr.*

Next up: Cities of the Dead

21. Cities of the Dead

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 21: Cities of the Dead

Dwarven plumbing was a marvel. It was quite impossible to present themselves at the Palace in their current condition, so Bronwyn led her party—along with their two new acquaintances—back to the Warden hostel. Rank had its privileges, and she had her bath first. That gave her time to have a welcome meal and think over her next moves, while the others ate and bathed and rested.

Admittedly, it did not sound like Brosca was resting. She was enjoying her bath entirely too much. She emerged, her freshly braided pigtailed still wet, wearing the elaborate dwarven garment she had bought at the shop. It bunched at her shoulders and bulged at her waist, but she was clearly very, very proud of being so well-dressed.

"So we're going to the Palace, boss?"

"We are. I see you are dressed for the occasion."

Bronwyn was not planning to take her entire retinue on this visit: Scout, of course, and just Anders and Sten. She and

Alistair had decided between themselves that when they divided their little company, one of the Wardens must remain with each group in case of disaster.

The two dwarves were very impressed by Scout. With considerable bravado, Brosca swaggered up to make friends.

"So I hear you're a dog. Never met one before. You're from Ferelden, I guess. I'm Brosca, but you probably heard that already. I didn't catch your name."

Scout cocked his head, puzzled.

Bronwyn smiled, and said, "His name is Scout."

Now Brosca looked puzzled. "Yeah, I heard he was your scout, but what's his *name*?"

Bronwyn stared at her, nonplussed. Anders was convulsing with laughter, and Bronwyn shook her head at him.

Sten frowned, and said, "His name and function are identical. It is a logical system of nomenclature. My own rank and name are the same."

Scout barked, agreeing with Sten's sensible remark. Brosca asked, "Does he speak some sort of foreign language?"

Beginning to understand, Bronwyn said, "Scout doesn't speak language in the sense I think you mean. Dogs' throats really aren't designed for it. He understands everything you say, and he can communicate with barks when he needs to." Scout's

means of communication were actually far more extensive than that, but Bronwyn was not quite ready to discuss the subtleties of communication between a mabari and his imprinted human.

Scout barked a proud assent. Leske said, "Yeah, 'member old Cut-Throat Karney? After Beraht stabbed him in the neck, he couldn't talk anymore, but you could understand his signs."

"Yeah, that's right," Brosca nodded. She said to Scout, "Didn't mean to be impolite, big guy."

They entered the palace without hindrance, and with only a few looks askance at the two casteless accompanying them. In fact, news of their approach had preceded them, for the timid and pretty dwarf woman Bronwyn had noticed before came rushing at them, arms out to hug her sister.

"Freydis! You're alive!"

"Yeah, the Grey Warden here busted me out of Jarvia's jail. Wow! Look at you, Rica! Is that really you under all those jewels?"

"It's me! Hello, Leske! I'm glad to see you!" She beamed up at Bronwyn, eyes shining with a hint of tears. "Thank you so much. You don't know what this means to me."

Bronwyn smiled kindly, surprised that the rowdy Brosca's sister should be so well-spoken. Obviously, she had received whatever education the family could afford. "I have a brother I

once thought was killed in battle, so I think I do. Your sister and her friend were happy to hear that you were well and safe, too."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! Come on, Freydis, you have to see my little Endrin! Mother is here too, and I want to show you two where I'm living now!"

"Great!" Grinning, Brosca let herself be pulled along.

Leske followed, calling over his shoulder, "Thanks, Warden!"

Brosca yelled, "Yeah, thanks a lot! If I can, I'll do the same for you someday, if you get thrown in jail or somethin'..."

"You've simply outdone yourself, Warden," Bhelen purred. Oozing charm from every pore, he sprang his next demand. "The elimination of Jarvia won me great favor, but to truly displace Harrowmont, we'll need something...dramatic..."

Bhelen wanted the support of a Paragon. Bronwyn understood a little better now what a Paragon was, and what such a being meant to the dwarves. Dwarves didn't have religion, as topsiders understood it. If they worshiped anything, it was the memory of their ancestors, and chief among them were the Paragons, dwarves who had contributed meaningfully to dwarven society. And there was one living Paragon at the moment, the Paragon Branka.

Branka sounded like a very difficult person. Individuals of

genius often were, of course. This Branka was born of the smith caste, and had invented something that impressed the dwarves, a smokeless forge, to be exact, and had thus been empowered to establish a House of her own. She had taken said House with her when she departed for the Deep Roads over two years before, on a hunt for some sort of lost dwarven treasure. Bronwyn's heart plummeted at the idea of a wild-goose chase far in the Deep Roads, following a two-year old trail.

"And what do you expect me to do if I find this Branka?" she asked, her face carefully blank.

"I was hoping you could use your legendary charm to persuade her to support the election of the rightful King," Bhelen suggested, his flattery smooth as a greased griddle. "If, however, her time in the Deep Roads has addled her wits, perhaps it would be best that she not return from the Deep Roads alive..."

He could provide her a map that would take her at least part of the way: a map to a place called Caridin's Cross, named after a great Paragon smith of old. The rest of the impossible task was pretty much up to her. And he let her know that Harrowmont was looking for Branka as well.

She stalked out of the palace, burning with fury, wishing she had never heard of Orzammar. It was made clear to her, too, that there was no changing sides at this point, when a gang of truculent dwarves attacked them outside the palace, shouting their support for "Lord Harrowmont!"

Bronwyn was too angry to try to reason with them. They met, sword to axe, and the dwarves were knocked off balance by Scout's powerful rush, and hampered by Anders' powerful magic. Between them, Bronwyn and Sten hewed the opposition down, and walked on.

And the battle had not cooled her anger, for now she would need another bath.

"We could be down there for weeks!" Alistair protested, horrified at the idea. "For months!"

"For years, decades-even centuries. *Forever*, in fact," Bronwyn agreed bitterly. "I think we have to make at least a show of going. Maybe we can find some reliable evidence that she is dead. That would satisfy Bhelen, I think, for if he could not rely on her support, he could be certain that no one else could have it either." She slumped... gingerly... on the stone bench, and placed her elbows with care on the stone table. It did not due to be reckless in this hard land of stone.

"We'll need a lot of food-and at least *some* water."

They put it to the fellowship, and everyone had ideas of what needed to be done before they left on an expedition of such magnitude in the tunnels under the earth.

Alistair, Cullen, and Sten would go to the surface, check on the horses, and buy some foodstuffs to take with them. Morrigan, Anders, and Tara would copy maps and lore at the

Shaperate. Bronwyn, Leliana, and Zevran would go about the city, visiting the various shops and taverns to listen for gossip: especially the least morsels of information they could discover about Branka.

"I think we should get every bit of loot we can out of that Carta hideout," Tara suggested. "If we don't, somebody else will. I think we should go down there right away and clear it all out first."

It was a sound plan, and they acted on it without delay. It was not just the loot, but the food and drink as well. There were little luxuries that would improve the Grey Warden hostel. Amidst a heap of treasure, Bronwyn had noted a lute. Leliana had her own, but it was something that could be left at the hostel, a source of recreation for some other Grey Warden.

Most of inhabitants of Dust Town gave them a wide berth, since word of the Carta Massacre had spread. A few harsh words were shouted, but Bronwyn's party was simply too numerous and powerful to defy. No one was thanking them for clearing out the gang, which probably meant that the casteless had probably been as proud of Jarvia as they were afraid of her.

They even discovered another entrance to the tunnels, and it came up inside one of the merchants they had visited earlier: the armorer Janar. He was horrified at their sudden appearance and their revelation that there was a hidden door in his shop, but he was willing enough to trade for their loot. Bronwyn made arrangements with him to use his shop in

future to enter the hideout, and thus they no longer needed to go through Dust Town. In a few more visits, they would have cleared out everything of use or value. It was very agreeable to have Sten amongst them, as he was able to carry entire barrels of ale or flour.

In the confusion as they emerged into the Orzammar Market district, a young girl outside Janar's shop approached Tara. In the brightest, perkiest voice possible she asked her, "Excuse me! Have you ever heard of a place called The Circle?"

Tara stared at her. A host of memories horrible, happy, tender, and heartbreaking assailed her. After a moment, she said, "I was trained at the Circle."

"That's wonderful!" A wave of enthusiasm threatened to drown Tara, as the the dwarf girl chattered on about her interest in magical theory and the readings she had already undertaken. "Oh, I'm Dagna, my lady. I so honored to meet a real mage of the Circle at last! I've written to the Circle, asking for permission to come and study there, but they've never answered."

"You *want* to go to the Circle," Tara managed, not quite sure she had heard correctly. She waved Anders over. He listened, bemused, and then shrugged.

"You can't *do* magic. Dwarves just can't. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, I know! But the theory is so fascinating!"

"You'd have to go live on the surface, and from what I've read, you couldn't come back to Orzammar," Tara added.

"I'd do anything to study at the Circle of Magi," Dagna said fervently. Her hands twisted anxiously, as if these two outcast mages had the power to make or unmake her life.

Anders looked at Tara. "Since she's not a mage, it's not like she'd be a prisoner. Why not? I tell you what, Dagna: if we survive the next few weeks, I'll write you a letter of introduction. Won't Irving be excited to hear from *me*?"

Cullen overheard, and snorted. "You'd do better if Warden Bronwyn wrote the letter," he told Dagna.

"Where's the fun in that?" Anders protested.

Their preparations were nearly complete. There was nothing for it but to descend into the Deep Roads. Everything they had heard indicated that this was pointless nearly to suicide, but they still had a King to crown and a treaty to enforce. After selling all the loot, Bronwyn sent the appropriate share to the Palace for Brosca and Leske. Not too long after, the doorknocker to the hostel boomed.

"That crazy dwarf is back," Alistair told Bronwyn, "and she wants to talk to you."

Brosca was at the door, shuffling and fidgeting: no longer in the elaborate dwarven gown but once more in her serviceable

armor.

"Come in, Brosca," Bronwyn welcomed her. "I trust you found your nephew well? And your mother?" she added, remembering Brosca's mention of "Ma."

"Yeah, yeah, they're great. Except Ma, of course. Not even living in a Palace with all the food she can eat could make *her* happy. Rotten old bag," she muttered. "Anyway, Rica's fine and the kid, too. They're all fixed up. Rica told everybody Leske was her long-lost brother, and so they found a corner for him to bed down in. He'll be all right."

Bronwyn waited, but the dwarf woman kept shuffling around the point. "Would you care for-" she was about to say "tea" and realized that Brosca probably would not know what that was. "-some ale?"

"That'd be great!" The big common room was filled with interested onlookers, and she whispered to Bronwyn, "but can I talk to you private-like?"

"Certainly. Come over here," she gestured Brosca to a corner and looked at Leliana and Zevran until they moved.

Once they were gone, the dwarf asked, "Is it true that you and your gang are going down into the Deep Roads?"

"My companions and I are going, yes," Bronwyn said carefully, adding, "The Grey Wardens are not a *gang*."

Brosca looked confused, but said, "Whatever. I mean, gang, Wardens, companions—that's a fancy word. You're a noble. I get it. Anyway, you and your boys are all right. I'm in."

"You want to come along with us? I thought you were going to live with your sister at the Palace."

"I tried that. Now I think I'd better do something else. Leske may be happy finding a corner of the Palace to hide out in, but I'm too loud. I don't want to embarrass Rica or the kid, and that's all a brand like me could do. But if Rica could tell the kid that her sister was a Grey Warden, then that's something he could be proud of, right?"

Bronwyn had seen her fight, and did not want to turn away skilled help. For her own conscience's sake, though, she felt she had to say something.

"Becoming a Grey Warden is dangerous."

Brosca stared at her, not quite comprehending.

Bronwyn tried again. "You could be killed."

Brosca was still puzzled, but nodded, thinking it over. "I figure you got to die of something."

So be it. "Then welcome to the Grey Wardens."

The dwarf grinned enormously. "Thanks, Boss! I brought all my stuff along in case you said yes."

They agreed they would have a meal and a long sleep in actual beds before departing. Bronwyn wrote diligently in her beautiful leather-covered journal. She was recording all the companion's stories, and of course, adding to her continuing letter to Fergus.

We have quite the little army now. Ten of us two-legged creatures, and eleven with our mighty Scout. My dwarven recruit thought dogs could talk! She really and truly attempted to chat up Scout. It was very amusing, though she meant only to be polite.

There are a great many flirtations going on, here in the Warden hostel. Sometimes rather more than flirtation. I do not forbid or interfere in any of it. Indeed, I am only too glad that some of my companions are finding some measure of joy in our current situation. Leliana is such a sweet girl. I sometimes wish that she and Alistair could come to an understanding.

Unfortunately, Alistair seems to have eyes only for me. He is a very fine man, and a formidable warrior, but I feel nothing for him but friendship and sisterly affection.

Bronwyn paused over her writing, uncomfortable with the half-truths she was writing. Alistair was a very fine man indeed, and a handsome one, and had a sweet way about him. Bronwyn's heart and faith belonged to another, but sometimes she was so *lonely*...

Cullen fancies Tara, I believe, but it is difficult to tell. He stammers and blushes when speaking to her, but so he does when he speaks to me, too, and I do not believe he is in love with me! I hope not, anyway, because that would be very unfortunate. For that matter he stammers and blushes near Morrigan and Leliana too. Not too much with Brosca, which is all to the good, since she would certainly laugh at him.

I think of you often, and of everyone at Ostagar. I hope the King is behaving himself, and I hope Teyrn Loghain is not too taxed by the incompetence of the rest of the world. I am trying very hard not to be incompetent myself, but it seems that whatever I do, there is something or someone hindering me, preventing me, throwing obstacles in my way like poisoned caltrops.

And there is more. My time at Orzammar has opened my eyes to the larger issues in our world. Our friend Morrigan was studying the lore that the dwarves have collected about the darkspawn, and in a book called The Stone Unheld, there are references to Blights as seen through the eyes of the dwarves. We surface folk do not appear very impressive in them. Here are some excerpts:

3:10 Towers-They name it a Blight, the third by their reckoning. It was just "the fight" to our ancestors, continued even though it shifts setting. The hordes that press their border surge and release, spilling across the surface. They fortify and follow. It was not their way to

let the enemy rest.

3:25 Towers-The surface kingdoms declare victory. The horde is crushed, the push halted, and celebrations begin as humans thank the skies and their Maker. Beneath their gaze and their feet, the darkspawn retreat to the steps of our thaigs. New front lines are drawn across old. They settle in to breed, the Memories say, as happened twice before, and likely in the darkness before that.

5:12 Exalted-The surface declares the fourth Blight, a number that means nothing to the Stone. In the depths, the events are inverted, our Blight spanning the interim years. Seven generations of shifting lines and darkness. Our Ancestors are the reason the surface kingdoms don't know a darkspawn by sight, why even their eldest have never heard an accounting first-hand. They believe the Blights are defeated by a gathering of allies with singular focus. Eventually, they will be lost by attrition in the depths.

The spawn surges and releases. We fortify and follow, although doubts are raised.

7:0 Storm-The wars continue in the depths and the border thaigs are lost. Orzammar fortifies and holds, but the lost ground is not regained and remains dead space, where darkspawn multiply. It was a surge, but the surface was not breached, there was no great archdemon behind them. No Blight was declared, no rallying cry was

given. The Wardens slumbered.

After centuries of constant skirmishes, a trend becomes clear. The first line of defense, unacknowledged for centuries, weakens.

9:13 Dragon-The Blight is building, though it is years from being named by the surface. But the Memories know the signs. The Legion has lost Bownammar, though in truth, it was lost to the living long ago. The spawn are moving freely and have numbers even the Memories haven't seen. They will surge, release. We will fortify and follow. That is the way, and will always be so. Until we fall, and the surface wonders what has changed.

How cowardly and feeble our efforts-and in this I include those of the Wardens-sound in this context. In this thirtieth year of the Dragon Age, are we to do the least amount possible or are we to honor our obligations to the fullest? I wish I knew more of the Grey Warden strategy against the darkspawn. I wish I knew that there was a Grey Warden strategy against them. It all sounds like a patched-up business, quickly forgotten when the darkspawn no longer threaten the surface.

It is apparent to me that the dwarves are fighting a losing battle, and have been for a number of centuries. Slowly and inexorably, they have been pushed out of the thaigs until only Orzammar and distant, disaffected Kal-Sharok remain. It is a defeat: a defeat so slow and incremental that most the

dwarves themselves are not fully conscious of it. I fear it will end in annihilation, and then, without the dwarves to hold them, very likely the darkspawn will spill out onto the surface, unhindered and unabated. Why do we not

"All right, all right!" Anders shouted back. Bronwyn glanced up, distracted from her writing. It was not a quarrel, she was glad to see, but a friendly dispute.

"But perhaps your eloquence is unequal to the task," Morrigan said archly.

Tara shook her head. "That would be a sorry thing to contemplate."

"And it is your duty," Sten pointed out. "Our commander wishes to hear these stories in order to comprehend our characters."

"Are we going to have a story?" Bronwyn asked, pleased at the thought of some distraction.

"A story!" Brosca said, looking excited. "A real surfacer story? What do you people tell stories about?"

"About the world and everything in it, my little friend," Zevran assured her. She laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, rather heavily. Zevran caught Bronwyn's eye and winked.

"Very well," Anders conceded, with mock despair. "Everyone grab a drink, put your feet up, and don't stand on ceremony

with me. We shall commemorate our departure to the nether regions with a bit of entertainment, provided by me! Yes, Tara, I go first, because I am senior to you by a quarter-hour, and you will just have to show some respect. So, Bronwyn, what would you like to hear a story about?"

Instantly, she answered, "Something that has nothing to do with being underground."

"Something with fighting in it," Alistair suggested. "Oh, that's right, you're a *mage*..."

"Excuse me," Anders replied haughtily, "remind me not to save your unmagical arse anymore. Or heal it, either."

"Now, now, children..." Bronwyn rebuked them mildly.

"Something with romance and adventure," Leliana said dreamily.

"Romance and adventure are good," Tara agreed. "Well, they are," she told a skeptical Brosca.

"If you say so. Romance usually means gold exchanging hands, and adventure usually means somebody getting knifed. I guess that's all right."

Zevran burst out laughing. "I could not have put it better myself!"

"Can we get on with it?" Sten asked, though clenched teeth.

"We can," Anders assured him. "I have a fabulous story. It's about *magés*," he said, with a mocking bow to Alistair and Cullen, "so brace yourselves for something very shocking. It's about *free, adventurous, romantic* magés. And they fight, so I believe it has something for just about everyone..."

Anders' Story of the Archmagi Virgilius and Flavia

Long ago, in the great days of the Tevinter Empire, there was born to a Tevinter knight and his lady a little boy named Virgilius. He learned to read when he was only three years old, and by the time he was seven, he was already famous for learning. Many stories are told about the youth of Virgilius: how he defeated a demon, how he found the fabled Black Book of Enchantment, how he escaped the boredom of country life by studying with the greatest magisters of the Empire.

His only rival was the brilliant and beautiful Flavia, niece of the Chief Archon. She, too, was a prodigy, and was mistress not only of magic, but of all the logical and rhetorical arts. When Virgilius came to Minrathous, there was endless trouble and confusion, for the two of them were at odds, playing tricks and performing enchantments and illusions of every kind, wishing to prove themselves the better mage.

At length, the Chief Archon, to quiet the chaos their magical rivalry had unleashed, proposed a contest. Whoever could devise the best means to avert danger and promote peace would be declared Archmagus of Tevinter, and Protector of

the Empire. Virgilius and Flavia withdrew to their libraries, to ponder the matter.

At length they emerged, ready to challenge the other with their creations. The people of Minrathous gathered in a great multitude to see what feats of magic would be performed, and high above on their marble dais, the archons prepared themselves to judge the contest.

Flavia clapped her hands, and cried out in her sweet voice. At once the multitude screamed and drew back, for seven huge dogs of solid bronze leaped forth, eyes rolling, and they rushed about the city, catching thieves and rioters, shaking the malefactors in mighty jaws. The criminals tried to climb up step and hide, but the dogs could sniff out wickedness and always catch them. In less than an hour, the city was at perfect peace, and the citizens eyed one another in fear and wonder, resolving never to do anything to attract the attention of Flavia's Hounds.

Virgilius bowed, and then, with great ceremony, pulled away a sheet and revealed a display of statues: the gods of all the neighboring nations and of the subject peoples of the Empire. In the middle was a great statue of the God Dumat, the mightiest of all dragonkind, as a symbol of Tevinter power. The other gods, it was noted, each held a bell in one hand. The bell in the hand of the God of the Rivainni rang, and Virgilius explained that when any nation wished harm to Tevinter, that god's bell would ring. They knew that the Rivainni were rebellious, as the archons had sent troops there to subdue the people. However, the beauty of Virgilius'

statues was that they would ring their bell if the people even so much as thought of violence, and thus troops could be sent more quickly.

The archons conferred, and the Chief Archon pronounced that they could not judge one feat greater than another: Flavia's Hounds would protect the people of Minrathous from criminals, and Virgilius' Statues would protect them from invasion and rebellion. Both were vital for the stability of the Empire.

"Therefore," pronounced the Chief Archon, "We name Virgilius and Flavia equally to the title of Archmagus, and thank them for their contributions to the might of Tevinter!"

Flavia and Virgilius glared at each other, furious, for the Archon's judgement resolved nothing between them at all. Flavia transformed into a hawk, and swooped up to peck at Virgilius' eyes. He fought back, transforming into a great raven. The birds darted and soared above Minrathous, attacking with beak and claw, flying so high as to be lost in the sun, and then diving down, scattering the people in confusion. For hours they fought and flew until Flavia alighted on the Great Tower of Zazikel, and transformed back into a beautiful human woman. Virgilius transformed, too, and they stared at each other, blood surging in wrath and pride.

"To fight each other profits nothing," said Flavia softly. "Think of what the two of us could achieve if we joined together!"

Virgilius agreed with all his heart, and swept Flavia up in his

arms, kissing her passionately. Hardly had his lips touched hers when she slapped magic-suppressing charms upon him, rendering him helpless. Quickly she conjured a rope and tied it round and round his body, and then tied the end to the stones of the Tower. Heedless of his shouts and protests, she pushed him off, and Virgilius hung there in sight of all the people, speechless with humiliation.

"Let all see who is the real Archmagus of Tevinter!" cried Flavia. She leaped from the tower, arms outstretched, transforming into a hawk in midair. With another triumphant cry, she sped away, back to her own palace. Not for some time could the servants of the archons rescue Virgilius and remove the charms that bound his magic.

Virgilius swore revenge of Flavia for this trick, and the very next morning every fire in Minrathous went out, nor could any mage light a fire by magic. The archons, guessing that this was the work of Virgilius, begged him to break the spell. Then Virgilius ordered a scaffold to be erected in the market-place, and for Flavia to be brought, clothed in white. He bade everyone to take fire from her, for to her horror and embarrassment, flames blossomed from between her legs. The citizens break torches, and straw and tinder, and fires were kindled in Minrathous again. For an entire day she was forced to stand there, her skirt up to her hips, exposed to every eye in Minrathous. Virgilius felt he had won the war.

But the Chief Archon was furious, for Flavia was his kinswoman. He sent his mages and knights to take Virgilius, and they locked him in a tower to await execution. The day

was hot and Virgilius asked for some water. A pail was brought, and Virgilius cried, "All hail the Archons! No one can hold me captive!." With that, he jumped headlong into the pail, and vanished from their sight.

He was gone from the city for some time, and events moved on. One day, word came to the Archons that some sailors had discovered the Tree of Life in a land far to the east, across the great Amaranthine Ocean. It was clear, even from studying the leaves retrieved by the sailors that this tree had astonishing powers. Naturally, the archons wished to obtain it, or failing that, to obtain a living specimen: a cutting, or a seed, in order to examine it. As Archmagus of Tevinter, the duty fell to Flavia, and she devised a wonderful ship that could sail without wind to propel it. The ship was long and narrow, with room for an entire tree. Eyes were painted on the prow with lyrium, so that the ship could see dangers ahead in the water. Flavia stepped aboard the ship and it slipped away from the harbor of Minrathous, and was soon lost to sight.

But Virgilius had heard of the Tree of Life as well, and he thought that finding it for the archons would be the perfect way to win back their favor. He too, devised a ship, stole a copy of the map they had given Flavia, and traveled east, along the path of the rising sun.

The Tree of Life was near the shore, and it was enormous: many branched and glowing with power. Its trunk was as thick as the hindleg of the God Dumat. Scattered about were a quantity of golden nuts, which themselves had great powers. And there Virgilius and Flavia met once more.

Flavia was greatly shocked to see her rival, but before the two of them could begin to quarrel, they found themselves in terrible danger. The sailors had seen the tree in summer, and had arrived and departed unnoticed by the inhabitants of the land. Flavia and Virgilius arrived in the autumn, when the boughs of the Tree were heavy with nuts. Those inhabitants arrived on the scene. Hearing a shout of rage, the two mages saw an immense host of fierce savages, enraged at the sight of Virgilius holding one of the precious nuts.

Suddenly nets were cast down from the trees branches, surprising the two mages. They could stir neither hand nor foot, for the nets were soaked in a potion that made them sleepy and unable to gather their strength. Their staffs were taken from them, and they were carried to the native village and were shouted at and cursed, for the people of that place hated all strangers. More and more people poured into the village: a host too great for two mages to overcome, even with the most powerful blood magic. Dark days passed, in which Flavia and Virgilius were imprisoned in a filthy hut, thinking that this might indeed be the end.

At length, they were carried to the place of execution. There they were cut loose in order to lay them more easily on the great blood-stained stones where the savages cut out the hearts of their enemies. This was the chance they had needed, for luckily the savages did not know with whom they were dealing.

"Flavia! Fly!" cried Virgilius, himself transforming in a bird. The people of that place had never seen such magic, and in that

moment of surprise, the mages made their escape. They flew swiftly away, and the savages pursued them with bolts of raw magic of their own, and with a host of spears and a cloud of arrows. The mages' first thought was to find their ships and sail away, but when they reached the shore, they found, to their horror, that the savages had found them first and had burned them both to the waterline. The savages pressed their attack, and Flavia and Virgilius flew west, out to sea, only wanting to be far from that terrible land.

A long time they flew, days and nights together, but they were weary with magic and with hunger. They were faltering, no longer able to sustain their shapes. For a moment, Virgilius turned into a man, and the nut he had gathered dropped from his garments. No sooner had it touched the water, than it sprouted into a great tree, and earth rose around it, making a fair island in the midst of the ocean. Flavia and Virgilius dropped down to it, overjoyed to be saved. They rested, and made peace with one another, and found the new land so beautiful that they had no desire to leave it and return to the endless strife and politics of Tevinter. Together they worked wonders, creating a palace of matchless beauty on that island, which they named Aureliana, the Golden. And there they remained, happily together; and there it is said, they remain to this day, welcoming any wandering mage to their magical island as to his rightful home.

"When we're done with saving the world," said Tara, "let's all go live there."

"We 'll never be done with saving the world," grunted Alistair, "so *that's* a moot point."

Morrigan smirked at him. "*You* are not a mage, and thus *you* are not invited. It sounds a pleasant place to me." To Anders she murmured, "You will never stop bothering me about learning to shape-shift, will you?"

"Never," Anders admitted, without a trace of shame. "It would have saved my hide a hundred times. Maybe more. I think all mages should learn it."

Sten considered the story. "This tale may have fighting and romance and adventure in it, but it is not about those things. This tale is about escape. Do you wish to escape from the Grey Wardens?"

Bronwyn thought this a very just analysis, and wondered the same. Anders must have seen it in her eye.

"Not likely! I have a comfortable, if hair-stuffed bed, I'm surrounded by pretty girls, and I'm allowed to shoot lightning at fools. What more could I ask?"

A half-drunken storm of red hair, red beard, and giant axe descended on them as they approached the entrance to the Deep Roads. Out of the whirlwind, a whiskey-bass voice growled a greeting:

"Stranger, have you seen a Grey Warden around here? I

heard he-or she-was setting out to search for Branka on the Prince's own orders!"

Bronwyn paused to consider the burly dwarf in her path. "I am that Grey Warden, and that would be 'she.'"

The dwarf muttered, "Guess the quality's gone down a bit, at that." He spoke up, noticing that she was listening. "Say! Can I ask you a favor?"

"Why not?" she said bitterly. "Everyone else does."

He fixed her with a rolling, blood-shot eye. "If you're looking for Branka, you want to talk to me, because I'm the only one in all Orzammar who sodding knows what she was looking for."

Alistair looked at her, brows raised. She sighed. "All right, talk."

"Yeah," the dwarf agreed. "I'll talk all right, if you take me with you. If we pool our knowledge, we have a chance. Otherwise, you got nothing."

The companions were looking at each other skeptically. Brosca stood on tiptoe to speak in Bronwyn's ear. "That's Oghren, Branka's husband. Everybody knows about him. He pisses ale and kills little boys in first-blood duels."

Oghren snorted, and said to Bronwyn, "That's... mostly true. Take me or leave me, I'm the one who knows what she

wanted, and I'm the one who knows where she went."

The shadows closed in about them as they moved along the great underground highways of the Deep Roads. The ancient lighting system the dwarves had devised still worked, after a fashion, though dimly. In the crude connecting tunnels, they relied on their mages to cast enough light to find their way. This time Bronwyn was glad to have two dwarves traveling with them. The dwarves' stone sense would tell them if they were moving in the right direction, and even help measure time, to a certain extent. They were not the only people in the Deep Roads, they discovered, and the first few fights would have badly disoriented them, had they had nothing but their own surfacers' instincts to rely upon.

Having gained his point, which was to be part of any expedition to rescue Branka, Oghren became expansive, telling them all they wanted to know about her and more. Branka, it seemed, was looking for an artifact called the Anvil of the Void, created by the Paragon Caradin to produce the golems that had given Orzammar a century of peace.

"She'd look for it in the Ortan Thaig, because that was Caridin's home. He was an Ortan before he was made a Paragon, and spent a lot of time there, even afterward. Nobody's been to Ortan Thaig in five hundred years. You could get there from Caridin's Cross, I hear, but..."

"I have a map to Caradin's Cross," Bronwyn told him, tapping her cuisse.

Oghren grinned. "And I have a map from Caridin's Cross to Ortan Thaig. Guess we're in business."

Bronwyn supposed they were. They had maps, and a plan, and a pretty solid force. Oghren had gone all out in those first few skirmishes, fighting like a madman. Or like the berserker he was, she thought, using the correct term. He had squinted at Brosca, and Brosca had glared back at him, but Bronwyn had made clear that there were no castes in her company. They could fight as far apart as possible, if they liked, but they were allies and equals in Bronwyn's eyes.

As they penetrated deeper, they made contact with darkspawn: first in small bands, then in larger, more concentrated ones. By the time they reached Caridin's Cross, they were clearly in darkspawn country, not just in connecting tunnels, but even in the main halls of the Deep Roads.

Traps and ballistas challenged them, and even some of those huge beasts of burden the dwarves called brontos. The brutes had hide like veridium plate, and were as hard to kill as an ogre.

And they were seeing ogres, for that matter, now and then. They brought back horrible, heart-racing memories of the Tower of Ishal. Constantly, Bronwyn reminded herself that she was not alone: she had a trio of powerful mages, and she, Leliana, and Zevran could do great damage with their arrows before the the monsters could close with them.

There was no day and no night in these endless halls: only

endless twilight, the reek of darkspawn, and the constant danger of a hideous death. One ate when one was hungry. One slept when one was tired. There was not a breath of clean air, nor the softness of grass underfoot, nor the sweetness of flowers, nor the blessed light of sun, moon and stars.

But there was treasure. Other adventurers had been here before them. Zevran stumbled on a cache of weapons and gold in a side tunnel. There was so much treasure that they started making caches themselves: marking their maps to remember what they could not carry with them; keeping some of the gold and the best jewels; sometimes trading an inferior weapon for a work of genius.

No one needed tents in the Deep Roads. They would make camp and build a fire with roots and discarded trash, with old axe handles and crumbled coal from the seams in the tunnel walls. They would lie down on their blankets and shut their eyes against the dim, eternal light, and try to sleep.

After an appropriate interval, they were on the move again, following the the map, trusting to the copyist's accuracy. Endless miles of magnificent, ruined hall, endless miles of winding tunnel, one foot in front of the other.

Bronwyn experienced unutterable relief when at last a tunnel opened out into a vast vaulted space, and Oghren declared, "There it is. Ortan Thaig."

It was like and unlike the Aeducan Thaig she had visited

before. This was bigger and even more fouled with centuries of darkspawn. The Aeducan Thaig was still somewhat in contention, and was visited regularly by dwarves seeking to regain it. This, however, had long ago been abandoned, and it looked it. Filth coated the walls of the dwarven dwellings, carved with such craftsmanship into the rock. This thaig must have had a large population in the great days of the dwarven empire. Stone bridges soared over rivers of dark water and rivers of glowing lava. The remaining sections of Deep Road attached to the thaig were still masterpieces of the mason's art.

It was full of darkspawn of course, but it was also the domain of giant poisonous spiders. Some of her companions really, really did not like spiders, Bronwyn discovered. Cullen, for one, found them so repulsive that he could hardly bear to look at them once he had killed them. He even tried to physically restrain Tara from approaching the carcasses.

"Don't be a baby, Cullen," the elf said, shaking off his hand. "We need some of the toxin. It's very useful in pain relievers."

"And it is *essential* for many poisons!" Zevran grinned, neatly extracting a sac.

Anders smiled smugly at Cullen, and eased another spider's tissues apart so Tara could get at the poison sac with her knife. "That's right," he said, very loftily. "Don't be a baby." The ex-templar glared at him.

They camped there, allowing time for everyone to brew.

Bronwyn lent a hand herself, learning a bit of the craft from Zevran and Leliana. Brosca edged in, listening hard, relating what she had heard about the spiders. The mages worked together too, very efficiently.

"Morrigan," murmured Anders, "your emulsion is so lusciously *smooth and creamy*..."

Tara giggled.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes, but was glad that there was something to do to break the horrible monotony. She performed her share of the stirring dutifully, and refilled her little crystal phials with the feeling that she had actually accomplished something.

While she was putting her gear away, Oghren came up and squatted down by her. "I've been taking a look. This place has Branka written all over it." He held out a massive hand. In it was a bit of rock. Bronwyn looked at it blankly.

"See," he said impatiently, "From this side you can tell it was deliberately chipped away to mark the walls. Branka always did that, marking her way and taking samples to analyze. She was here, all right."

"The map indicates there's a lot more to the thaig."

"Aye, that there is." He pulled out his map. It was greasy, and stained with substances Bronwyn dared not guess at. "She might still be here, I suppose... Or we might find a few more

clues. Let's get some rest, and then-" He traced a tunnel from the big chamber they were in "-let's go down that way. That was the heart of the old thaig. They might even have moved into the old houses. There were over two hundred people in Branka's House, after all. They must have left something behind!"

It occurred to Bronwyn to wonder why of those two hundred people, Branka had not chosen to take her husband.

"Bronwyn."

She thrashed out of the Fade and immediately went for her dagger. Leliana was leaning over her, shaking her shoulder. For a moment the pretty face was one with that of the menacing Archdemon of her dreams. She hissed and lay back, feeling sick.

"Fool," said Morrigan, from a few yards way. "Do not touch her when she is having one of her nightmares. Here." She rose and brought over a steaming cup. "Drink this," she told Bronwyn. "'Twill quiet your mind."

Bronwyn warmed her hands with the cup and breathed in the fragrant steam, the scent of the sweet herbs raising the ghosts of summer grass and wildflowers in the sunlit world above. She sipped the drink slowly, wanting to smell it as long as she could. After a while, she subsided back onto her blanket, staring up into the dim stone above, wishing she were anywhere else in Thedas.

How long have we been here? Is this all a terrible mistake? What if I have led all these people down here to die in the dark to gratify an ambitious dwarf?

She did not want to die. Not here, not now, not so utterly stupidly and pointlessly in this strange and loathsome place.

The others were stirring, and the dwarves were already getting their gear in order. This, then, must be "day." It was Sten's turn to cook, and he had prepared oat porridge, the amount nicely judged to sustain them, but nothing more. Bronwyn sighed, and resigned herself to hunger. Scout licked his bowl, and whined a little. Bronwyn dug out a piece of jerky and slipped it to him. They had to manage their supplies very carefully. At a certain point they would simply have to return to Orzammar and resupply, and they must make certain they had enough to sustain them on the journey back.

Brosca was whispering with Zevran, who was explaining to her about how elves and humans dreamed, and about the Fade, and what they saw there when they slept.

"By the Stone, I'm glad I'm a dwarf!" Brosca swore. "I don't want to see whatever it is the boss dreams about!"

"No," Alistair said sourly, sitting up and scratching his head sleepily. "You really don't."

Bronwyn decided she could tell time by marches. They headed out, with Brosca on point. During this march, they found Branka's journal, and a cache of equipment that had

been left behind.

"She gone out to the Dead Trenches!" Oghren shook his head. "Then I guess that's where we're headed."

"Dead Trenches?" Alistair muttered to Anders, "Doesn't that sound... ominous?"

"So we must wander even farther in these tunnels?" Sten demanded. "At what point do you say 'enough?'"

Bronwyn looked him in the eye. "When the King of Orzammar agrees to honor his treaty with the Grey Wardens. Move out!"

There were golems, and more spiders, and even a pitiful dwarf who lived in a little hidden alcove in the rocks. This dwarf, Ruck by name, frightened Bronwyn more than the spiders, for he admitted to consuming darkspawn flesh, and was well on his way to becoming a ghoul. Most horrible of all, he sensed the Taint in Bronwyn, and claimed her as kin.

"Pretty Lady. Pretty hair, pretty eyes, blue as the deepest rock...when you take the Darkness inside you, then you do not miss the Light so much. You know what it is I mean..."

"Come on, Bronwyn," Alistair whispered, pulling on her arm. "Let's get away from here."

"Yeah," Brosca agreed. "Crazy bastard." She scowled back over her shoulder at Ruck, and flipped him off.

Once again, they were on the march, one foot in front of the

other. Darkspawn barred their way, viciously identical. And after three long marches, Oghren finally called out, "We've made it! Around the bend is the road to Bownammar, City of the Dead!"

Rounding the bend, Bronwyn discovered that there was plenty of life there, despite the name, for there she saw the Archdemon, her nightmares made flesh.

It was big. A very, very, very big dragon, and it looked *wrong*. Bronwyn had seen it in the Fade, but now she saw it, undistorted, with her waking eyes. It was across a gorge, bellowing a challenge, rallying its followers. Far below the steep stone cliffs, the Horde was marching.

Bronwyn felt for her bow, but knew she could not make the shot at this distance. She could, of course, draw the attention of the entire Horde to her, but perhaps that might not be the most effective way to end the Blight. The monster bellowed again, and backwinged off its stony perch, soaring away under the vast ceiling of the Dead Trenches.

A huge stone bridge spanned the gorge, and on the other side were gigantic gates that, according to Oghren, could only be the gates of the Fortress of Bownammar, once the home of the Legion of the Dead.

"Of course, the Legion still exists," Oghren rumbled. "They just don't control Bownammar. It belongs to the darkspawn now."

Nonetheless the Legion was still out here, and still fighting. Another turn led them to one end of the bridge, and directly into a battle. Bronwyn shouted, "Charge!" and they joined in, fighting beside the famed Legion of the Dead. Some of the warriors sported the tattoos of the casteless, for in no other context were the casteless legally permitted to bear arms.

The commander himself was heavily tattooed. He called out to her as he kicked a dead hurlock aside. "You're far from the surface, stranger!"

Bronwyn tapped her chest by way of introduction. "Bronwyn. Grey Wardens."

"Kardol. Legion of the Dead."

There was no time for further ceremony. Soon The Wardens were moving further along the bridge, ahead of the Legion, meeting small bands of their mutual enemy. Zevran and Brosca, Tara and Scout ran beside Bronwyn, freezing and stunning and knocking the darkspawn off their feet, while the warriors behind her hewed the creatures apart. Magic and arrows from further sought their targets. They ran all the way across the bridge, hardly slowed by the darkspawn coming to meet them.

At the other end were the Gates of Bownammar, held by ranks of genlock archers. The massed darkspawn were consumed by a storm of ice and fire. The mages stank of lyrium, the air around them crackling with power. Dim shapes tottered and fell, shrouded in steam. A limping ogre blundered

out of the whiteness. Bronwyn forced herself to run at the thing, grasping a massive arm and swinging up to slash the throat open; jumping down and running past to hamstring the legs. The ogre clutched at its throat and sank ponderously to the stones, measuring its length at last. Brosca did a little victory dance on the corpse. Bronwyn scowled and beckoned her away.

"Maker's Breath! Be careful! Their blood is deadly poison, and you have no immunity!"

"But you practically drink the stuff, Boss!"

"I'm a Warden, and you're a recruit. When you're a Warden you can drink their blood, too!" Bronwyn shouted, exasperated.

Alistair began choking. Cullen thumped him on the back. Bronwyn realized what she had said, and burst out laughing. Her people looked at her, wondering if she'd gone mad.

The Legion caught up with them. Kardol looked up at her with some curiosity. "You've got skills, Warden, if not much sense." His eyes slid to Oghren, and he grunted, "Drunks make poor allies."

Bronwyn was perfectly aware that they did, but Oghren's supply of strong spirits was long-since consumed, and the berserker was as sober as he was likely to be. Instead, she questioned Kardol about Branka and the Anvil of the Void. He was convinced that Branka had been dead for two years, and

that the Anvil was a fairy tale. He thought her plan to travel beyond the Gates of Bownammar further proof of her insanity, but did not bother to talk her out of it. He wished her luck and turned away.

"Boss!" shouted Oghren. "Over here!" The dwarf was standing in the mouth of a tunnel that seemed to wind past the Gates. Bronwyn walked over, Scout trotting at her heels.

"Look!" Oghren pointed at the tunnel wall, squinting. "More chips were taken here. Branka came this way for sure!"

Alistair looked at her. She walked away to talk to him privately. He said, his voice low, "At least we're on the trail. It looks like we can go another seven days-I mean-marches or whatever they call days around here-before we absolutely have to turn back. If you want to try, I'm with you."

"It's going to be bad, Alistair. From now on it's nothing but darkspawn all the way. I find it hard to believe that Branka survived, even with two hundred followers and good equipment. How would they reprovise themselves? There's been no communication with the rest of Orzammar in two years."

The likeliest scenario was that Branka and all her people had been massacred shortly after she passed the Gates. If they had survived, it could not have been for long. They might eat deepstalker and the occasional bronto, but in the end they would have turned to the darkspawn, or equally horribly, on themselves. At that, if they turned on themselves, at least they

would not become ghouls. It was in every way appalling, but Bronwyn must have an answer that Bhelen would accept.

So they followed the signs: through mobs of darkspawn, through traps and ambushes, through ancient tombs and rifled sarcophagi. The name 'Ciry of the Dead' was no exaggeration. Bownammar was nothing so much as a vast cemetery. That, too, disturbed Bronwyn, who found the whole idea of bodies stuffed away in stone boxes to slowly rot-or, as here, to be pawed at by the darkspawn and curious adventurers- profoundly disgusting.

Tara and Brosca walked at the rear of the party, searching the broken coffins for coin and small, portable treasures. Zevran saw them at it and gave them a wink.

"You're sure the Boss doesn't mind?" Brosca asked. "What kind of cut does she get?"

"Well," Alistair said, attempting to make light of it, "*that's* new. Anybody know what that is?"

Bronwyn shook her head, gazing at the long streaks of red, fleshy matter spilling across the stone floor. "There are worse things than monotony, I suppose," she murmured.

Tara kicked at the red stuff, and then backed away. "It's soft," she said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "I think...maybe...it's sort of...alive."

Cullen took a swing at it. Very thin ichor oozed from it. The mages leaned over, and Anders pulled Tara's hand away. "Don't touch it. I can say with an expert's certainty that this is Bad Stuff. I don't know what kind, but I know it is."

There was more of it, and it was everywhere, thick and ropy, covering the floor and walls, dripping down from the ceiling, forming nasty, flesh colored pockets and sacs.

They began to have a better idea of what kind of Bad Stuff it was, after they met the crazy dwarf woman. Taint was erupting from her body, greying her flesh, filming her eyes with the blank glassiness that heralded the transformation into a ghoul. She had a great deal to tell them, though very obliquely.

Oghren knew her. She was, in fact, a cousin: his cousin Hespith. The little rhyme she mumbled unceasingly froze Bronwyn's blood.

"First day they come and catch every one;

Second day they beat us and eat some for meat..."

"She was captured by the creatures?" Morrigan mused. "Why would they have let her live?"

"Fifth day they return, and it's another girl's turn..."

"Hespith!" Oghren roared. "Stop it!"

Anders put his hand on the dwarf's shoulders, and told him quietly, "We have to hear this."

"Seventh day she grew as in her mouth they spew;

Eighth day we hated as she is violated;"

The women looked at each other, realizing something quite awful, realizing their personal, peculiar, *specific* danger...

"Ninth day she grins, and devours her kin;

Now she does feast, as she's become the beast...

Broodmother..."

She could not get away. Bronwyn would not let the woman get away until she gave them answers, and the answers were not very satisfactory for anyone.

It was knowledge no one could want, this knowledge of how the darkspawn replenished their numbers. It had never occurred to any of them to think about it, and it was so vile in so many ways that they shuffled and avoided each other's eyes, not wanting to talk about it.

Except for Oghren, who merely grunted, "So that's how it's done."

He was hardly pleased to know that he had been left behind because his wife was having an affair—a poetic, romantic, soulful affair—an affair in which the parties called each other

love names like "dream-friend"-with his cousin Hespith, whom he had never though particularly attractive.

She chose her over me?

No one else was pleased to know that the Paragon whom they were searching had used her people with ruthless calculation to further her own ends. The Anvil of the Void was not far away, but it was protected by a gauntlet of ingenious traps. First, Branka had sent her people through, hoping that they would either disable the traps or spring them, rendering the traps innocuous. That had not worked. As the numbers of her followers dwindled, Branka hit on a new tactic: offering the last women of her House to the darkspawn, knowing that they would be made into broodmothers. Their monstrous offspring would be forced into the gauntlet, as a last-ditch effort to clear the way.

"Broodmother," Bronwyn murmured, the new word unfamiliar and sour on her tongue. The word opened a door into terror and darkness: a whole new way of thinking about the darkspawn, a whole new reason to fear them. Who knew about this? Did the Wardens know how the darkspawn reproduced? Had Duncan known? Was that the reason there were so few female Grey Wardens? Had he know of this, and still recruited her?

Hespith whispered on, her story a web of horrors. "...I prayed that they would take Laryn instead of me...she ripped off her husband's face..."

"So Branka," said Bronwyn, "deliberately gave you and this Laryn to be raped by the darkspawn. And Laryn was, and she has...become...this thing?...this Broodmother?"

Hespith stared dully before her.

"That's where they come from,

That's why they need us,

That's why they hate us,

That's why they feed us."

"Bronwyn," Alistair said thickly, "maybe we'd better..."

"Right," Bronwyn interrupted him. "This Broodmother creature. We've got to kill it. We can't allow anything like this to go on. We'll continue down the tunnel...very carefully...and I think we can guess what that stuff on the walls might mean. Don't touch it except with your weapons. I wonder how big this Broodmother is..."

They moved along the corridors. One of the fleshy sacs sticking to the wall had grown large, and pulsed like a beating heart. Cullen looked at Bronwyn, who nodded. He cleaved downward with Yusaris, and a half-formed genlock spilled out, squeaking and struggling. The party groaned with unanimous disgust and hit it with everything they had. As they moved along, they found more of the sacs, and destroyed them all.

"They're all attached to ropes of this...matter," Morrigan pointed out to the thick red strands twining along the walls.

"And they're all genlocks, so far," Brosca remarked. "Anything about that seem strange to you?"

They could sense a big chamber up ahead. The air was different and there was a deep groaning sound, as if the earth itself were vibrating. Red matter covered the floor like a vile and spongy carpet. Bronwyn made herself walk lightly, not liking the sensation of sinking into darkspawn flesh...

And then, there she was. 'She,' indeed: prominently, archetypically female, with rows of breasts all the way down her vast, putrid hulk. Legless, tentacled, stinking, pitiful: her tiny, distorted head a mockery of her past existence, mounted like a toy atop her swollen carcass.

Very softly, Bronwyn whispered, "Laryn?"

The Broodmother saw them, and screamed.

Many thanks to my readers and my reviewers: jen4306, Shakespira, almostinsane, Persephone Chiara, Enaid Aderyn, Sarah1281, Eva Galana, JackOfBladesX, Aoi24, Amhran Comhrac, Lehni, mille libri, Kempe, demonichargles, wisecracknmama, Leafy8765, mutive, derko5, khaos974, roxfox1962, Costin, gaj620, Piceron, Have Socks Will Travel, Dragon Cultist, Gene Dark, Windchine68, Schneewante, ArtemysFayr, and Caleb Nova. I

very much appreciate your interest and your contributions.

For Anders' story, I used bits of the medieval legend of Virgilius the Sorcerer, and you can read a bowdlerized version of that by Andrew Lang ([The Violet Fairy Book](#) is online). However, I changed the story around entirely. The part about fire issuing from the girl's vagina was a favorite of medieval illustrators.

Next up: The Last of the Paragons

22. The Last of the Paragons

Victory at Ostagar:

Chapter 22: The Last of the Paragons

Raucous, animal, mindless: the shattering scream of the Broodmother gave notice that whatever this creature might once have been, it was now a monster.

"Stinks worse than a cesspit," Oghren grunted, just before a massive tentacle shot out of the ground and slammed him against the wall of the cavern.

Horribly startled, Bronwyn ducked away from another tentacle, and nearly tripped backwards onto the vile and spongy floor. The strands, the ropy matter they had seen before, it was all the Broodmother. So were these tree-like tentacles, suddenly bursting out of the floor, flailing at them, smashing them down. They were tough as dragonthorn, hard as whitewood. The warriors hewed at them with the swords, with just about the same effect as they would have had in cutting down a tree. Oghren, with his massive axe, stumbled toward one of them, half-dazed. The tentacle wriggled, and he struck at it with a bellow and a two-handed blow, biting deep.

Bronwyn saw only the Broodmother's bloated body. There

were the shriveled useless arms, the tiny, distorted head...

Kill the head, and the body dies.

"Freeze it!" she shouted to Tara. "Freeze that thing! Morrigan! Lock it down!"

She was fast: she had always been fast. She could dart past the sweeping tentacles and close with the creature. The feeble, atrophied arms held no weapons, the slack, mindless face hid no clever tactics. "Follow me!" she shouted.

"I'm with you, Boss!" Brosca yelled, and pounded after her.

Bronwyn dodged the thick, stumpy tentacles nearest the gross bulk of the creature. She vaulted up, clambering on the doughy grey flesh, pulling herself up toward the lolling head. Her boot slipped, and she dug a dagger into the screaming Broodmother to give herself purchase. Down below, Scout's jaws closed on a massive grey nipple. Bronwyn grimaced in disgust.

Up closer, the arms did not look so impotent: the bony fingers ended in claws that sliced out, ripping at a leather strap. Zevran was beneath her, stabbing into the body, defeated by the massive layer of fat protecting the creature's vitals. Brosca used her daggers to scramble up, and was suddenly flung away by a grasping tentacle.

Bronwyn glanced to see if the dwarf was all right, and then turned back to face the Broodmother. She had attained eye-

level with the monster now, and stared deep into the red and rheumy eyes. The Broodmother opened her mouth, almost as if she meant to speak. Bronwyn paused in mid-stab. In a flash, she wondered if she was wrong, and it was possible to communicate with this creature.

And then the mouthful of poisoned spit hit her full in the face.

She saw that thick gobbet of phlegm, green as early apples and young leaves, for a split-second, before she saw nothing else. She shrieked, her eyes on fire, her face on fire. Fire raged red before her. She groped for the Broodmother's face, stabbing, ever stabbing. She scissored her sword and dagger against something that might be the flabby neck, and she gritted her teeth at the feel of bone and cartilage parting. More wet slime sprayed on her, hot and viscous. The Broodmother's howls become guttural, choked on her own blood. Bronwyn stabbed the thing again and again, and felt it weakening.

A lull, and a gasp of relief. She tried to wipe her eyes with the back of her gauntlet, but she was still blind. The Broodmother shuddered and grunted as if deflating. Bronwyn's grip slackened, as she took a deep breath.

Then she shrieked again as a claw ripped down her face, tearing the skin away. There was a horrible moment of cold air on bone, and she was falling, landing hard on solid rock. Scout howled, and Zevran swore in Antivan.

"Finish her!" Morrigan was raging nearby, her magic crackling

wildly. "Finish her!"

Hacking sounds, the noise of blades on butchered meat echoed wetly. The Broodmother uttered a long moan and was silent as last. It all barely registered on Bronwyn. Zevran was dragging her away, one hand holding her face together. There were screams when people saw her, and Anders shouting, pushing everyone aside.

"Maker's blood! Put her there. Elevate her head a bit. Yes, thanks, Tara! Lie still, Bronwyn. Let me have a look at you."

Sheer pain made it difficult to speak, difficult to think. Bronwyn trembled on the cold stone, her head in Tara's lap. Scout whined, driving Bronwyn in a panic.

"Is Scout all right? Is he hurt? Tell me!"

Alistair was murmuring in her ear, his voice thick. "Scout's fine, Bronwyn! Just a little scratch. He's already healed. Don't try to talk-

"Hold her still!" Anders snapped. "Here! Sten! Help hold her!"

Huge hard hands grasped her on either side of her skull. Someone was sitting on her legs. Disembodied hands held her wrists. Panic swelled, bursting out of her in a shriek.

"Yell all you want," Anders said to her. "That might help. I've got to clean this wound before I can heal it. It's going to hurt a lot."

"It *already* hurts a lot," Bronwyn choked, swallowing sour bile, swimming in nausea. She screamed as something ripped her face away again. Scout whimpered pitifully, and then growled. Anders muttered, "Quit it, you bloody mutt, I'm trying to help her. Sit down by her so she can feel you. That might calm her down a little."

Massive doggy warmth curled against her side. The musty canine smell of Scout drifted up to her, reassuring and familiar. Faint and far off, she heard sobbing, and Morrigan scolding someone.

"Be quiet, fool! Tears are useless."

"Is the Boss going to die?" That was Brosca, sounding scared.

With terrible calm, Sten asked, "Will she be blind?"

"Shut up! Everybody just shut up!" Anders' shout was warm on Bronwyn's face. "She's not going to die! That's not going to happen!" He added, a little more uncertainly, "And she won't be blind... Just shut up and let me work!"

A silence more dreadful than clamoring panic blanketed Bronwyn's world. There was now only Anders' ragged breathing; scrapes of boots on stone; an occasional grunt from one of her captors, Scout's quick, anxious pants. Cold water splashing in her face made her whimper. Anders pried her eyelids open and bathed the sightless orbs. Bronwyn tried to imagine that the lights had gone out and everyone was as in the dark as she, but that illusion was spoiled when Anders

said, "A little more light, Morrigan. Cullen: hold the torch a bit higher so I don't cast a shadow."

She moaned when a white-hot seam of fire scorched down her face, around her eye.

"You're doing fine, Bronwyn," Anders murmured. "I am the best, remember? You're still going to make all the other noble ladies jealous with that face of yours."

"What's wrong with her eyes?"

"Broasca! Shut up and stand back. Now." Anders' voice grew soothing. "Your eyes were irritated by the poison, Bronwyn. That's why you can't see right now. I'm going to cast several layers of healing spells on your eyes, and then I'm going to close and immobilize them. We'll put a bandage over them, with a poultice to ease the pain. It will take some hours to work, so maybe we should get some rest and eat something."

"The Healer speaks sense," Sten rumbled.

There was a pause, and a longer pause. Bronwyn longed to see what was going on, but Anders was murmuring strange words, and her eyes felt sore and heavy, as if they had turned to heated stones inside her skull. She bit back a cowardly whimper.

"Right," Alistair said at last. "Oghren: keep watch at the mouth of the tunnel over there. Broasca, the other side. There doesn't seem to be any other way darkspawn can get at us. Morrigan

and Leliana, get a fire going with whatever you can."

Anders's hands were gentle as he pressed a damp poultice over her eyes, and bound it round and round with a linen bandage.

"You can let go of her now," he told the rest, and Bronwyn sighed with relief as her legs and arms were released. Sten removed his hands from her head, careful not to jar her.

"Thank you all for your help," she said softly.

Zevran's lighthearted voice came from somewhere near her feet.

"Anything for a chance to get closer to you, Fair and Noble One."

Bronwyn smiled, and smiled again as she caught the scent of the poultice on her eyes. It had a musky, flowery fragrance that recalled the gardens of Highever: roses and feverfew and yellow madcap. She forced herself to slow her breathing. Scout pressed closer, and she groped out, smoothing his short, silky coat. A wet tongue licked her jaw.

"It's all right, boy," she whispered. "I'm all right now."

Tara brushed Bronwyn's hair back. "Anders," she asked "Can Bronwyn have some water?"

He nodded, and then remembering that Bronwyn could not see him, said, "Yes. Would you like some water, Bronwyn?"

"Thank you," she managed. "That would be very nice."

Cool, with a heavy mineral tang like all water they had found in the Deep Roads: it soothed her throat and calmed her somewhat. "I need to talk to Alistair, Call him over here."

"Alistair!" Tara's clear voice rose of the hum of conversation and activity. "Bronwyn wants you."

A familiar tread, a crunch of boots, the creak of leather and the clank of metal as he crouched down by her. "I'm here, Bronwyn."

"Alone," she said. "I need to speak to him alone. Just for a little while."

Most of the companions were not surprised to hear Alistair start shouting.

"Absolutely not!" he protested. "How can you even imagine I'd do that?"

Sten and Zevran looked at each other. Zevran blew out a breath. "Would he be able to do it, do you think?"

Sten frowned, and considered the matter. "No. He would not. She would have to order someone else to. It is the logical decision if she is blind, but he is not a logical man. I would not relish the duty, but I would follow orders, as a soldier must."

"And I swore to be her man, without reservation," Zevran

mused. "It would be ironic beyond measure if I left the Crows to follow her, only to kill her at last."

At first hesitating, the companions came back when Alistair waved to them, and then began crowding around their fallen leader.

"Is there anything you would like, Bronwyn?" Leliana asked, hovering. "Anything we can do for you? Anything at all?"

"You could try not harassing her with your useless sympathy!" Morrigan suggested.

"I would like not to think about myself," Bronwyn said quietly. "I would like to be distracted. Could I hear a story, do you think?"

"That's a great idea!" Alistair seized on the suggestion. "Tara, it's your turn. Are you ready? If you aren't-"

"Stories?" Oghren asked, nonplussed. "She wants to hear a story at a time like this?"

Brosca gave him a shove. She whispered. "It's a thing they do. Everybody tells a story. Shut up and pay attention."

The group settled down to listen, and those on guard sat a little further off to keep their eyes on the possible points of attack.

"Wait!" said Tara. "Let me think! Uh-yes. Yes. I've got one,

but it's going to sound stupid," she apologized. "I can't remember any grand epics or noble romances right now. The only story I can think of is one I learned when I was a very little girl."

"From your mother?" asked Alistair.

Tara shook her head. "I suppose other people have family to tell them stories, but I don't remember my family at all, so they don't count. I can't remember anything before the Circle. When I arrived I was very, very young, and I made a friend who was a little older than I was. He knew how to read, and I didn't. In a corner of the library, on a low, low shelf, he found a thin little book of children's stories, and he read them all to me, over and over. This is the one I liked the best, because it's about friendship and about magic, and about how both can save us. It's the story of Sparrow the Elf Child."

Tara's story of Sparrow the Elf Child

Long ago, in the days when the elves of the Dales fell to the Exalted Marches, there was a human lord who lived with his little son in a remote castle.

One day, when the lord was out hunting, he heard a strange cry. He followed the sound and at last came to a big tree where a little elf child was sitting on a high branch. The child was trembling and covered in blood, and the lord guessed that this elf child had escaped the slaughter of her clan. The lord was a kindly man, and he said, "I will protect this child, and

bring her up with my little Roland."

So he took her home to his castle, and the two children were brought up together like brother and sister. The foundling was called Sparrow, because she had been found in a tree like a little bird. Roland and Sparrow were very fond of each other and could not bear to be out of the other's sight.

But the lord had a younger brother, who was secretly envious, and all he thought of, all day long, were ways to get his hands on his brother's lands. When the lord had to go to Lydes, he left his brother in charge of the castle, and made him swear to look after the two children. And so he rode away.

Sparrow was very small, and very good at hiding, and the day after the lord left for town she overheard the wicked brother talking to two of his henchmen.

He said, "Take the boy into the forest and kill him. We shall say he was lost, and then I shall be heir to my brother's castle and land."

Sparrow ran to Roland and said, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland answered, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

Then Sparrow said, "I must tell you what I heard. Your uncle is planning to kill you, so he can inherit your father's castle. We must leave quickly and run away."

So the children got up, dressed in warm cloaks, and hurriedly left the castle.

The henchmen looked for the boy, and could not find him. The brother shouted, "Fools, go look for him! And when you find him, kill him!"

The children grew tired, and rested under a linden tree. They heard the men coming, and Sparrow said to Roland, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland answered, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

Then Sparrow said. "Do not be frightened. I shall turn you into a rosebush, and I will be a bee buzzing nearby."

When the three men reached the wood, they found nothing but a rosebush and a bee buzzing by it. They stumbled and bled as the rose's thorns ripped their legs.

They said, "Let us leave this place. We have lost the trail."

So they went home, and told the brother that they had seen nothing but a rosebush and a bee buzzing by it.

"Fools!" raged the brother. "You ought to have hacked the rosebush to pieces and crushed the bee. Off with you now, and do it!"

But the children heard them coming a long way off, and Sparrow said to Roland, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland promised, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

Sparrow said, "Do not be frightened. You shall become a warm rock, and I a serpent sunning myself upon it."

The henchman found nothing but a serpent sunning itself on a large boulder. When they tried to get by, the serpent hissed at them and stung them.

"Let us leave this place," they said. "We have lost the trail."

When they returned to the brother, they told him that they had seen nothing but a rock, with a serpent sunning itself upon it.

"You idiots!" stormed the brother. "You should have cut off the serpent's head and smashed the rock to flinders. Why must I do everything myself? Get out of here before I kill you!"

So he ran off in search of the children alone. The children saw the brother a long way off.

Sparrow said, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Roland answered, "I will never forsake you as long as I live."

"Do not be frightened. You shall become a clear stream, and I a duck swimming in it."

When the brother reached the stream, he lay down on the bank and tried to drink it up, but the duck swam forward and seized his nose with her bill and dragged him underwater. The

brother thrashed and shouted, but he was carried away and drowned, and that was the end of him.

When he was dead, the children went home, and they were very glad when their father came back. He wondered what had become of his brother, but the children never told: neither that the brother had tried to kill them, nor that Sparrow had done magic. And they lived happily together to a very great age.

"A lovely story, Tara," Bronwyn murmured. "Thank you."

Anders thought about it. "That was Jowan who told you the story, wasn't it?" He said to the others, "Jowan was a mage who perpetrated the most spectacular escape in recent memory. Successful too, or at least if the Templars caught up to him, they're not telling."

"They'd tell us if they caught him," Tara said.

Cullen was angry at the sound of the name. "Jowan was a blood mage. He deceived us all—especially you, Tara, and that poor initiate. Then he ran away and left the two of you to pay for his crimes. I know he was your good friend for years and years, but what he did was unforgivable!"

"He was my first friend, and my best friend, and they were going to make him Tranquil!" Tara shot back. "He was terrified at the idea. Who wouldn't be? To be stripped of emotion—to be ripped from the Fade—to be made an obedient slave of

the Chantry? It makes me sick. No one should have that done to them against their will, and in fact, I don't think it should be done at all. Jowan wasn't half as powerful as I am, and using blood magic he knocked the Knight-Commander and the First Enchanter off their feet when they confronted him. Me, too," she confessed. "If I'd had my wits about me, I would have run out the door right after him. I'll never be so unprepared again."

Alistair protested, "The Tranquil aren't slaves! Don't you think you're exaggerating—"

"They are so!" Tara hissed. "Do they get paid for all the amazing things they create? No. Are they given any choice about where they go and what they do? No. Mundane humans in Ferelden are so proud of their freedoms, but they certainly don't want to share them with anyone else!"

"Don't say 'mundane,'" Cullen was indignant. "It makes you sound like a Libertarian!"

Tartly, Tara answered, "If I wasn't a Libertarian before I was locked up, I certainly am now!"

"Could we not argue about politics right now?" Leliana pleaded. "Bronwyn needs rest and quiet. Everyone have something to eat. I have the rations here. You are a wonderful storyteller, Tara. Your tale was sweet and deceptively simple. That is a subtle art."

Bronwyn wanted to refuse to the piece of hard waybread, but ate it hungrily enough. It stuck in her teeth until Tara handed

her another cup of water to wash it down.

Sitting down by her, Anders said, "I'm going to cast Sleep on you, Bronwyn. You'll sleep a pretty long time. Later, I'll take off the bandages and we'll know more about how you're doing."

"And you're going to be fine," Alistair insisted. "Don't worry about anyt-"

She was already asleep. This was the Fade, which she knew well. She stepped cautiously through the fog, careful not to stumble. Vague shapes formed and broke at a distance. Darkspawn chuckled and gibbered, but she walked past them, and they did not seem to see her.

The path before her was winding and treacherous. A small boy dashed in front of her, chasing a ball.

"Oren?"

He was gone, and from far away, another woman's voice echoed, "Oren? Oren?" It sounded like Oriana.

A roof slanted down over the path. Bronwyn opened the door before her, and walked through. She recognized the distinctive profile of the man in the High Seat immediately. Rendon Howe was receiving his vassals, smug in his power. Bronwyn drew her sword, and shouted a challenge, but no one took any notice of her. The room swam away, and

Bronwyn, after a moment of baffled rage, found herself going through another door. Queen Anora was suddenly illuminated, pacing back and forth in her bedchamber, a long furred robed trailing behind her.

"Your Majesty..." Bronwyn called. Anora paused, as if listening, and then resumed her restless pacing.

Bronwyn pushed the next door open and was in a sunlit garden. Two young people sat side by side on a marble bench, holding hands. Bronwyn did not recognize them at first, but then gasped and rushed to them.

"Mother! Father!"

They did not hear or see her. They had eyes only for each other, and were speaking with them, needing no words.

"Don't you see me? Can't you hear me?" Bronwyn pleaded. Her father pressed a kiss on her mother's hand, and she smiled on him with all the love in the world. Then they embraced and kissed passionately. Bronwyn felt herself blushing, and hurried away, conscious that she ought not to see her parents like this.

Another door. King Cailan was naked, in a wide camp bed, and not alone. Bronwyn did not recognize the woman, but she had the look and physique of a soldier. Rather scandalized, Bronwyn stalked away, slamming the next door open.

Her heart lifted. It was Teyrn Loghain, looking younger and happier than she had seen him at Ostagar. Then she saw that he was speaking to a tall woman with curling dark hair, dressed in an old-fashioned gown of flaming red silk. They were deep in conversation, though Bronwyn could not hear their words. Disappointed and embarrassed, Bronwyn turned away, and nearly walked into a young King Maric, who came bounding into the room. Loghain and the woman smiled at his entrance, and King Maric put a hand on each of their shoulders...

Another door. Bronwyn pushed it open and gasped. She was looking out to sea, over the cliffs of Conobar. A younger, beardless Fergus was checking the ropes for their climb today, and looked up, smiling. Relieved to tears that someone here would acknowledge her, she smiled back.

"Come on! I think there's a tern's nest down there. I want to take the eggs to Father as a joke. You know-a tern's eggs for a teyrn!"

"Your wit is dazzling."

"Well, it's not so bad, especially if we can get the eggs. What are you wearing all that armor for? Take it off, and come on..."

Bronwyn caught at his arm and whispered, "Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you."

Fergus grinned. "I will never forsake you as long as you live."

Light glinted off the peaceful sea, the wind was mild and fragrant, and there were the two of them, alone on the edge of the world...

"Bronwyn," said Anders, "it's time to wake up. I'm going to take off the bandages. All right?"

She was on her back, looking up. She squeezed her eyes shut and then blinked. Looking back at her was a circle of anxious faces. She blinked again, but they remained. Alistair and Tara might have been crying. Sten and Morrigan were very grave.

"Andraste's nightgown," Bronwyn's wondered aloud. "Was it something I said?"

Instantly, their worried faces transformed into templates of joy and relief. Anders said, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"How many am I holding up, Boss?" Brosca asked, leaning over and grinning.

"Very funny. I don't believe that is an official Warden greeting."

A ripple of laughter.

"Move your eyes, Bronwyn," Anders ordered. "Follow the tip of my finger. Look up. Look down. How do your eyes feel?"

"Sore." Bronwyn got up slowly, her muscles objecting to having been unused so long. She forced herself to ask, "How bad do I look?"

"You look beautiful," Zevran said at once, in a tone of complete reassurance. "If there are scars, I cannot see them in this light."

"Your eyes are funny," Brosca told her. Alistair stepped on the dwarf girl's foot. "Ow!"

Leliana said softly, "You must be bursting. We can go up this tunnel. It is safe."

Bronwyn needed relieve herself very badly, and she really needed to get away from all the general rejoicing that she was not blind and would not have to order someone to kill her. Letting Leliana lead the way, she left the renewed gossip behind. They went deep into a cul-de-sac, where the voices grew jumbled and indistinct.

After Bronwyn rearranged her clothes, Leliana pulled a small mirror from a pocket. "Here," she said. "You should look."

Bronwyn studied herself in the dim light, and sighed, willing herself to accept it. Zevran was not perfectly truthful, or perhaps had not looked closely enough. She could certainly see a thin white scar, marking her from above her right eye to

just under the hinge of her jaw. Considering what had been done to her face, she knew that she was incredibly lucky to have been in the hands of a healer of Anders' skills. More disturbing were her eyes, which simply did not look like hers anymore.

Her father's grey-blue eyes were gone. The Broodmother's spit must have leached into the fragile membranes. Now they were a shocking green. Not a natural green either, but a little darker than the color of the poison that had nearly blinded her.

"Thank you," she said to Leliana, giving her back the mirror. She leaned against the stones of the tunnel, taking a deep breath. She had been impetuous: she had been a fool, charging like an idiot against an enemy of which she knew nothing. The scar and her altered eyes would remind her not to be so impressed by her own reputation. "It could have been so much worse. I can live with this. I'm lucky to have a face, and the eyes are certainly distinctive."

Leliana laughed. "Yes. You must find some green velvet to match them! And emerald jewelry. It will be very striking." She took Bronwyn's arm. "And the scar is not bad at all. It may fade in time, and there are cosmetics in Orlais that would cover it entirely. I know that men like to show off their honorable scars, but it is different for women, yes?"

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "It certainly is." However shallow it might be of her, she hated the idea of losing her looks. Being pretty was part of what she was, and she did not want to let it go. The idea of men who had once sought her favor—even

men for whom she cared nothing—now turning from her in disgust was a painful and disturbing one. It was different for men, certainly, no matter what people liked to pretend. "We'd better go back."

She came back to the others, blinking a bit, but full of grim purpose.

"Now," she said, accepting her weapon harness from Zevran and buckling it quickly, "before we go a step farther I want to know everything anybody knows about golems and about this bloody Anvil of the Void. I need to know why Branka would think it's valuable enough to kill everyone in her House or give them to the darkspawn! Oghren!" she snarled. "Start talking!"

Oghren scratched his beard. "Well, Boss, what do you want to know? Everybody's heard of golems, but I've only seen a few. Nobody knows how to make them anymore, see. The Paragon Caridin invented them, which is why we went to his thaig first. Then he disappeared and they never found him. They sent the Legion of Steel after him—"

"—What," Bronwyn asked wearily, "it the Legion of Steel? Don't assume I know anything. Pretend I'm a child who knows nothing at all."

"The Legion of Steel was a regiment of golems. Like I say, they went to look for Caridin. They never returned. What few golems remain are locked up tight by the Shaperate. I know that in ancient times, we dwarves sold lots of golems to the Tevinter Empire, but they're too valuable now. Sometimes if

things get bad enough, they're hauled out of storage, but only if the battle with the darkspawn is desperate enough to risk losing them."

"I didn't know about golems," Brosca declared. "I bet other people don't either."

Cullen agreed. "I've only barely heard of them. Back during the Rebellion, there was a mage in King Maric's service who had a golem. Some sort of huge fighting machine. Because the mage did so much to help the king, he was given his freedom and disappeared shortly after the war, along with that golem of his. Are they always made of stone?"

Oghren shook his head. "Stone sometimes, but they can be metal too. They're not really machines at all. More like stone or iron creatures, really, I guess you'd say. I've heard it has something to do with lyrium, and that golems aren't mechanical at all. I do know that they have these things called 'control rods' so people can make them follow orders."

Bronwyn nodded, thinking to herself. "Branka thought she could use this Anvil of the Void to produce golems again."

"An army of golems, " Morrigan considered, "would be of great assistance against the darkspawn."

Bronwyn shrugged. "Maybe. Branka is quite obviously insane now. It would be madness to trust her with any power whatsoever after what she's done. Besides, the dwarves tried the golem solution: this Legion of Steel Oghren speaks of. It

did not work then, and there is no reason to think it would work now."

Consulting together, Bronwyn and Oghren drew the new places they had found on their maps, while the rest packed up the camp.

"You want to move on, then?" Alistair asked her quietly.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for anything. Maybe we'll find Branka's body, or Branka turned into a Broodmother. If we do, we'll use ranged weapons at first...and long-distance spells. We'll hack down the big tentacles one a time: it will take some time for the Broodmother to generate more, I would think. I suppose it's even possible we'll find Branka alive. I daresay she'd have enough to eat, since her House is no longer alive to consume their supplies."

They moved out without much more conversation. Oghren pointed to the marked walls, testament that Branka had continued to chip away rock samples.

"I can't believe Branka could have gone much farther on her own. Wherever she is, she will not be unprepared."

Bronwyn only grunted, deciding that she had had just about enough of the Paragon Branka for one lifetime.

After a long march, the caverns opened out once more. Zevran shouted back that he thought he had seen someone, when a barricade slammed down behind them.

A hard-faced dwarven woman emerged from behind a rock shelf.

Without preamble, she grated out harshly. "Let me be blunt with you. After all this time, my tolerance for social niceties is limited. I hope that doesn't bother you."

Oghren's face lit up. "Branka! Shave my back and call me an elf! I hardly recognized you!"

The woman's face did not betray a flicker of anything other than contempt.

"Oghren. It figures that you'd eventually find your way here. Hopefully you can find your way back more easily." She cocked her head, studying Bronwyn.

"And how shall I address you? Hired sword of the latest lordling to seek me out? Or just the only one who didn't mind Oghren's ale-breath?"

"Be respectful, woman!" Oghren protested. "You're talking to a Grey Warden!"

"Oh?" Branka was unmoved. "An important errand-girl, then. I suppose something has happened. Is Endrin dead? That seems likely. He was old and wheezy the last time I saw him."

Bronwyn narrowed her eyes. "Yes. The King is dead and the Assembly is deadlocked. The heir, Prince Bhelen, seeks your support to succeed to the throne."

"I always thought him a twisted little cretin," Branka shrugged, "but I really don't care if the Assembly puts a drunken monkey on the throne. I've put all such trivialities behind me. There is only one thing that matters: the Anvil of the Void. It was our protector, our great invention. the thing the ancients created that made our armies the envy of the world. The Anvil of the Void was the means by which the dwarven armies held off the first Archdemon. Now it is lost to the very darkspawn it was created to fight. It's here: so close I can taste it."

Bronwyn considered her words. "Close it may be. As you are not currently in possession of it, it is apparent that you have a problem."

Branka's nostrils flared. "Caridin created a gauntlet of traps to protect the Anvil. My people have given body and soul to find their way through. This is what's important. This is what has lasting meaning. Kings...politics...all that is transitory. I have sacrificed everything to find the Anvil."

"And that would include Hespith and your entire House, I take it?"

"I needed people to break through Caridin's traps. There is no way to do it but by trial and error. They were all mine, all pledged to my house. Enough questions! What you need to do is find your way through Caridin's maze. I command you to do this as your Paragon. There's only one way, Warden. Forward."

Bronwyn snorted in contempt. She had not gone this far

already to run away like a little girl. "Come on," she said to her people. "Let us solve this *Paragon's* problems for her. It's what we do."

Bewildered, Oghren rumbled, "What has this place done to her? I remember the girl I married, who could talk for one minute and you could see her brilliance. Now—"

Alistair patted his shoulder. "Let's go."

Mobs of darkspawn crowded together in the narrow tunnels: mostly genlocks. They were poorly armed and quickly dispatched.

Anders wondered aloud, "I wonder if these were that dwarf's —"

"Don't!" cried Leliana. "It's too horrible!"

Morrigan shrugged, and drained the life from the last monster. "Horrible or not, we must face the truth. These are the brood of that wretched creature. Branka must periodically force them through the gauntlet of traps ahead, hoping to clear the way. As the traps are obviously not cleared, 'twould appear that the scheme is ineffective, and a useless waste."

Alistair turned on her, "*Ineffective?* Branka killed her people or turned them into monsters, and you object only because it *was ineffective?*"

Morrigan's voice sharpened, "I object to stupidity, in all its

forms!"

There was no time for this. "Then I suggest we all use our wits," Bronwyn hissed, "and be very, very *clever*. Zevran, your eyesight is the best. You and Brosca take point, and look for anything that might be a trap. Let me know, and then we'll all think *very carefully* about what to do!"

These tunnels had obviously been mines once. Hot blue streaks of raw lyrium fluoresced in the half-light. Ribbons of the mineral twisted overhead in fantastic whorls and flourishes. Cullen hung behind and scraped bits into a leather pouch. Bronwyn considered taking some herself. The Chantry had a monopoly on the lyrium trade, and even a pouch like Cullen's would be worth a fortune. Perhaps later...

After a short walk through the twisting tunnel, the way straightened. Brosca called out, "Boss! There's a room up ahead."

A haze hung heavy in the air, pooling to the floor in the chamber they approached. The green color of the air made Bronwyn nauseous: made her remember the Broodmother. Anders flicked out a spell, testing the air. "Poison," he said briefly. "Not powerful, but enough to kill you if you linger too long."

"Could it have killed all of them?" Tara asked, pointing at the corpses scattered over the chamber floor, corpses of dwarves and of darkspawn. Some hulking figures stood rigidly at attention in the middle of the chamber.

"So," Bronwyn said, "those must be golems. Are they dead?"

"Hard to tell," Oghren said. "If nobody's operating their control rod, sometimes they stand just like that."

"Look at the bodies," said Anders. "Some might have died of the poison, but that thing over there had its skull crushed. Poison gas doesn't do that. From the condition of the body, that was fairly recent. Those golems aren't dead."

"Perhaps moving through the room sets off an alarm of some sort," Morrigan suggested. Anders nodded with admiration, and casually laid a hand on her back. She did not shake him off.

"Let me go first," Leliana offered. "I am quick, and light on my feet."

"Not alone." Zevran shook his head. "This gas-it must come from somewhere. Perhaps there is a container of some sort. Perhaps one can shut off the flow of the poison. If the golems attack, one of us can distract them."

Bronwyn considered. "No. We're all going. Mages: freeze anything that moves.. Alistair, Sten, Cullen, and Oghren-concentrate on the golems. You too, Scout. Leliana, Zevran, Broasca, and I will look for the source of the poison gas. Let's go."

She moved quickly, refusing to let the idea of poison frighten her. Once in the room, she could taste the substance in the

air, feel it seeping into her lungs, constricting them. Her eyes began to water...

And the golems burst out of their slumber, shaking the stones under their feet, lashing out with their boulder arms. Bronwyn saw one stopped in its tracks by Morrigan's spells, and then focused on her own task.

The room was ingenious, interlaced with pipes carrying the poison, and with spouts that spewed it into the room. The closing valve was not hard to find. She closed it and shouted to the others. The valves were scattered through the room, and it took agility to dash past the battles and reach them. One or two people alone could not have survived.

So they left the room behind, quite pleased with themselves. The poison was dissipating, unreplenished by more. The guardian golems were in pieces.

"We know how to fight them now," Bronwyn said. "A good thing. Somehow I think we'll see more of them."

More traps. There were indeed more rooms with golem guards. Ice was the best weapon against them. Further on, they came upon a device that released enraged spirits to attack them. While it was time-consuming, it was easy enough to defeat it. From the lack of remains, it was clear that none of Branka's people had ever made it this far.

Around another corner the walls opened out into a vast cavern vaulted with lyrium veins, and lit with lava flowing in channels

down the walls. To the back of the chamber, an immense block of shining metal gleamed, and Bronwyn realized what it must be. A double rank of golems stood guard, and at their head was another golem: one of immense size. Bronwyn walked softly into the vast chamber, clinging to the walls, wondering if they could expect an attack.

And then the huge golem spoke, its inhuman voicing rolling like thunder.

"Welcome, strangers. My name is Caridin. Once, long ago, I was Paragon to the dwarves of Orzammar. If you seek the Anvil, you must hear my story, or be doomed to relive it."

"Caridin?" Bronwyn looked at Oghren.

He stammered out, "Caridin? The real Caridin? As is Caridin's Cross? As in Anvil of the Void Caridin?"

"Impressive," Morrigan whispered to Anders. "Extraordinary, really."

The golem answered them. "I was once that Caridin, indeed. I made many things, but was famed for the Anvil of the Void above all. You see it before you. It allowed me to forge a man of stone or steel, more powerful than any before, but I told no one the cost." The golem rumbled, "No smith, however skilled, can create life. I had to take life from elsewhere."

All right, Bronwyn thought, now we're going to move past the realm of myth and legend, and find out the awful truth. And I

suspect it will be truly awful.

Caridin said, "At first, we used only willing volunteers, but it was not enough. King Valtor had many enemies, and soon a river of blood flowed from this place."

"Volunteers?" croaked Cullen. "Who would volunteer to become...this...?"

Bronwyn saw it, too. "You had to use other dwarves." She felt sick, imagining it: a living soul trapped inside a shell of stone or steel...

Caridin did not deny it. "At last it became too much. I refused, and Valtor had me placed on the Anvil myself. It was not until I too felt the hammerstroke that I fully realized what I had done. I entombed myself here to find a way to destroy the anvil, but no golem can accomplish that. I cannot destroy the Anvil myself, but I beg you, stranger, to help me. Do not let the Anvil enslave more souls than it already has!"

"Do consider—" Morrigan began.

Bronwyn did not want to hear it. "No—I agree with Caridin. How would *you* like to be made a golem? Branka would never hesitate to throw away more lives, and Bhelen would never hesitate to make his political enemies his victims. Very well," she told Caridin. "I will help you destroy the Anvil, but you must lend me your support in choosing a King—"

Bearing down on them, eyes fever-bright, Branka burst out of

the shadows, her harsh voice unnaturally loud.

"No! The Anvil is mine! You can't take it from me!"

Bronwyn turned sharply toward the maddened dwarf, loathing twisting in her belly. "Yours? In what way? Because you *want* it? Not good enough. It is I who won the way to the Anvil. In less than ten days from Orzammar, I might add, and with all my companions alive and whole. In two years, you could not do this. Instead, you have killed your people-or worse. You were not able to defeat the traps, which I believe you easily could have, had you gone yourself and used the wits that so impressed your fellow dwarves. Instead you hid behind your people, and, like a coward, sent them to their deaths. Then you whored the last of your women off to the darkspawn."

"Nothing is more important than the Anvil. When you reach for greatness, you have to make sacrifices! As many sacrifices as are needed!"

"Your *sacrifices* were wasted. Your people approached the gauntlet too few at a time to overcome the golems. The darkspawn are mindless, and could not think their way past the gas valves. Your people gave their lives for nothing."

Branka snorted something resembling a laugh. "Plain-spoken, aren't you? I thought you were looking for a Paragon to help you deliver Bhelen his throne, errand-girl! With the Anvil I can make you an army the like of which the world has never seen!"

Oghren muttered, "Branka, you crazy nug-tail!"

"We don't need golems to defeat the Blight." Branka threatened another rant, and Bronwyn cut her off ruthlessly. "Because you are a smith," she said with nicely-judge contempt, "you see only a smith's solution. Smithcraft will not save the dwarves. My father said to me, long ago, that in the end, flesh is stronger than steel. For every golem created, Orzammar loses a dwarf. Dwarves can create more of themselves: golems cannot."

There would be blood over this, Bronwyn knew, and shifted her weight, readying herself. There was one more thing she had to say...

"A Paragon indeed," she drawled out, in her most insufferably upper-class tones. "you *are* a perfect example of what happens when someone unqualified by training, aptitude or birth assumes military command. Because you invented some kind of fancy oven, the dwarves gave you a title that went to your head. You left behind your husband, who is an experienced and capable warrior..."

Oghren perked up noticeably at the praise, and puffed out his chest.

"-and instead took command yourself, I suppose to impress your girlfriend. I met her recently, and she's not so impressed with you now..."

She saw the shield coming at her face in plenty of time to sidestep it. What she had not expected were the golems. In the Deep Roads, Branka had somehow found a pair of control

rods and had two golems to fight beside her.

But Caridin was there, and he was greater than them all. Strong as the foundations of the earth, invulnerable, relentless, he crushed everything in his way. Bronwyn left him to it, and concentrated on Branka. She was a smith, but she was also a strong swordswoman. Bronwyn parried a lunge with her dagger, hooking the guard around Branka's hand. There was a crunch as a knuckle snapped, and Branka grunted, surprised by the pain. A mutual battering: Bronwyn using her greater height and reach, and Branka relying on her low center of gravity and well-forged armor.

Oghren was lost in the berserker blood-rage, swinging his axe in huge arcs, stone cracking and crumbling from the golems with every blow. Bronwyn had wondered which side he would choose, in the end. Perhaps had not chosen to support Bronwyn, as much as he had chosen to defy Branka. It made no difference at the moment.

Zevran backed into her, and then grinned, twisting in mid-air to strike at Branka from the side. From the corner of her eye, Bronwyn could see the mages engage the golems, freezing them into immobility, smashing at them with hammer-blows of magic.

Another buffet from Branka's shield forced Bronwyn back, toward the melee. She whirled, dropped her weapons, and threw herself flat, knocking Branka's legs out from under her.

Branka howled, thrashed briefly on top of Bronwyn, and then

rolled away, unbalanced. Her grasp on sword and shield was too tenacious for her to lose them, but they were useless when she was face-down on the stone. She was strong, too, very strong, and began to rise, trying to throw Bronwyn off. Bronwyn kned her in the back, and grabbed her by the head, twisting with all her strength. Branka's neck should have snapped, but she was a dwarf, not human. Bronwyn snarled, and smashed the woman's head against the stones, again and again.

Brosca saw them wrestling on the stones, and screeched in triumph. Diving down, she drove her dagger into Branka's sword hand. Zevran ripped the shield away. Branka howled with rage and scrabbled with her shield hand at a hidden dagger. Bronwyn yanked her elbow straight back, breaking her arm. With her right hand, she snatched the dagger from its sheath and drove it into the unprotected back of Branka's neck, using all her weight, severing her enemy's spine. A brief, frenzied convulsion, and Branka groaned and lay still.

Branka's golems were down too, sprawled like so much rubble on the stone floor of the cavern. One of Caridin's golems was dead as well. Bronwyn hauled herself up, and strode toward the massive form of Caridin, wanting to have this over and done. Absently she wiped Branka's blood from her face. She glanced back. Oghren was looking down at the lifeless Branka, shaking his head. Bronwyn hoped he would not completely lose his mind and insanely seek revenge. Luckily, he seemed weary and listless in the wake of his berserker rage.

"Another life lost to my invention," Caridin mourned. "I wish the Anvil had been utterly forgotten."

"Yeah, you ain't kidding," muttered Oghren. "Crazy woman. I always knew the Anvil would kill her."

"I am very sorry it came to this," Bronwyn said. She walked forward to Caridin. "I will do as you asked me, and destroy the Anvil, but you must grant me the boon of your support in the Assembly's election of the next King."

A pause, as the golem considered. "Your boon is granted. I shall put hammer to steel one last time, and give you a crown for the king of your choice. No. Do not tell me his name. I do not wish to hear it, or know anything about him. I have lived too long past my time."

Slow as boulders in a river, Caridin and his remaining golems ascended the tongue of rock where the Anvil gleamed. They conferred, and then the sound of hammer on metal resounded.

Meanwhile Anders treated the injuries: Leliana's bad scrape, Cullen's broken nose, everyone's cuts and bruises. As soon as they were fit, Tara, Broasca, Zevran and Leliana began searching the bodies and the area for treasure. There was quite a bit of it.

"Let's have a rest and something to eat," Bronwyn ordered. "Also, I'd like everyone to gather some lyrium. Our party will have enough to supply us for years, and that will save us a

great deal of gold. Be careful and don't get it on your skin."

Oghren lifted Branka in his arms and carried her over to a crack in the rocks. He laid her out gently and folded her hands over her breastplate. Bronwyn watched him from a distance, not wishing to intrude.

He slumped on a stone, and motioned her over. Bronwyn sat down beside him, waiting for him to talk. He ran a hand through his wild red hair and grunted, ""That pretty much beat the sod out of how I imagined it. Ready to head back and share the news? Those deshyrs have been trying to destroy the city for years. Haven't managed yet."

He was taking it better than she had any right to expect. Perhaps he had bidden Branka farewell long ago, in his deepest heart. "We'll go back a lot faster than we came," Bronwyn said, with a wry smile. "With any luck the darkspawn haven't filtered back to the tunnels we cleared. I won't mind some easier going."

"You and me both."

The crown Caridin presented to her was the gaudiest object Bronwyn had ever seen. The most elaborate goldsmithing imaginable, a rainbow of jewels set cunningly in channels: it was glorious and depressingly ugly all at once. No one but the greatest of craftsmen could have devised it. Morrigan opened her mouth to suggest a change of plans about the Anvil, but desisted at Bronwyn's level look.

Destroying the Anvil was rather fun. They all joined in and released a lot of anger and tension in the act. Many took a turn with the immense hammer, and the mages had tricks of their own. When the device was utterly ruined, Caridin spoke briefly to Bronwyn in farewell.

"You have my eternal thanks, stranger. *Atrast nal tunsha*: may you always find your way in the dark."

He moved to the edge of the cliff, tottered at the brink, and then the glowing river of lava below them swallowed him whole. Bronwyn and her party watched the solid figure break apart and tumble away in the current.

Bronwyn said, "So much for the last of the Paragons. Let's go."

"Can I carry the crown, Boss? Can I?" Brosca asked. "It would be neat to wear it! Can I? Just for a little while?"

They made their way back in less than half the time it had taken them to reach the Anvil. Past rotting darkspawn and dwarves, past shattered golems and broken swords they traveled. They retrieved treasure from their caches, and found booty they had hitherto missed.

Coming back through Bownammar, they met the Legion of the Dead. Kardol stared at Caridin's Crown, which was currently decorating Zevran's head.

"That's quite a chunk of gold."

"It is a crown of Paragon make for Orzammar's next king," Bronwyn said briefly, having practiced her speech about it. "The Anvil was not a myth, by the way, but it is gone now."

"And Branka?" the tattooed warrior asked.

"Yeah," Oghren growled. "We found her. She's dead. We've got to get back to the Assembly and settle things while there's still an Orzammar."

Kardol stared at them a little longer, and then nodded. "I'll come back to the city with you. If we really are to have a new King, he'll have orders for the Legion." He shouted back at his soldiers. "I'm going into Orzammar with the Wardens! Tharkel! You're in charge while I'm gone. I want four volunteers to travel with me!"

They were on the move again, and moving fast. Kardol's warriors were a taciturn lot. Only once did one of them speak to Bronwyn, coming to her side while they ate another tasteless meal of waybread and water.

"So you're going to make Bhelen King?" The woman warrior asked. She was young: Bronwyn guessed her to be about her own age, but it was hard to tell with dwarves...

"If I can. He's the best choice to face the Blight. Harrowmont would only do the minimum, and Orzammar needs more than that."

"It doesn't trouble you that he's a kinslayer?"

"He's the right choice to fight the Blight. That is all I ought to concern myself with. And I don't know that he *is* a kinslayer."

The dwarf woman smiled bitterly. "I do. Is it true that he has a son? Bhelen, I mean?"

Brosca overhead them and bounded over. "Does he ever! My sister Rica is the new prince's mother! He's the best-looking kid you ever saw!"

"The mother is a noble-hunter?" the warrior asked, with a faint hint of distaste. She slipped her helmet on again, completely covering her face.

"Hey!" Brosca protested. "As noble hunters go, my sister is the best! Bhelen doesn't have any reason to complain. She worked hard to get where she is!"

"I noticed that your sister was a woman of some education," Bronwyn said kindly. "Your family must have made great sacrifices-"

Oghren cackled to himself, and Brosca just look puzzled.

She explained the situation to the surfacers. "Nah, it was Behrat. He was head of the Carta before Jarvia. Leske and me cacked him, too. He looked on Rica like sort of an investment. He took her off the street and paid for her to learn to dance and sing and play the string-harp and give

massages. With her looks, he figured she just had to get lucky, and then he was going to claim to be our brother and live in the Palace with us. Bastard."

"Massages?" Leliana asked. "Music and dance yes, but *massages*?"

"Massages are good," Zevran countered. "People really like them, especially rich, important people. I myself have such training, and I would be delighted to share it with you..."

Alistair and Cullen looked at each other. Alistair ventured, "You mean your sister was...I mean... I don't mean to be rude..."

Brosca was still puzzled. Oghren slapped her shoulder. "These surface folk don't know about noble hunters! They're too polite to call your sister a whore!"

"A noble hunter is a really *high-class* kind of whore!" Brosca protested. "The very best, especially if they give their patron a boy! It's not like being a street-walker, or working in Walleda's house. You know dusters aren't allowed to work at anything respectable. So it's be a beggar or a whore or Carta muscle like me. Rica got lucky, and so did I!"

They wrapped the amazing crown in a cloth before they entered Orzammar. They had washed and polished their armor after their last sleep, and marched in looking nearly respectable. Without delay they presented themselves at the

Chamber of the Assembly, which was in complete chaos, as threats and insults echoed from the ancient walls.

Steward Bandelor gave Bronwyn a look of desperate hope, when she appeared at the door of the Chamber. He proclaimed, "The Grey Warden has returned!" and the pandemonium hushed somewhat, while Bronwyn strode to the center of the room. Oghren flanked her on one side, and Alistair, holding the hidden crown, on the other.

Bronwyn looked at the bickering nobles without fear and without respect. These were not her people, and there was no shared history between them to soften their failings. It really was a wonder that Orzammar had survived at all, with leaders like this. Harrowmont and Bhelen stood above the fray, but were certainly part of it.

"Well, Warden? Have you news for us?" demanded the Steward.

Bronwyn declared, "I bring a crown forged by Paragon Caridin on the Anvil of the Void." She flicked away the coarse linen. A gasp of wonder rose as Alistair lifted it up for their inspection.

Oghren took up the tale. He was even sober. "Caridin was trapped in the body of a golem. This Warden granted him the mercy he sought, and in exchange he forged a crown for Orzammar's next king, chosen by the Ancestors themselves!"

Bronwyn had not quite believed that such a claim would be credited for an instant by anyone with a full set of wits, but

Oghren had known his own people best. Only Harrowmont expressed doubt. "I would like to believe Oghren's tale, but everyone knows that the Grey Warden is Bhelen's hireling."

The words were deeply offensive, but Bronwyn only gave the elderly man a burning look, and waited for the Steward to examine the crown himself. He said, deeply impressed, "Silence! This crown is of Paragon make and bears the seal of House Ortan. Tell us, Warden, who did Caridin choose?"

She smiled coldly, and made them wait, glancing over the room, watching the nobles eye each other, as they hoped to hear something to their advantage. From his place across the room, Bhelen stared at her with blazing expectation. She was not feeling particularly friendly to him at the moment, and so answered in a way calculated to make clear to him exactly how much he owed her.

"Caridin left the choice entirely to me."

An uproar. Harrowmont's supporters shook their staffs of office at her, and their leader shouted, "That is preposterous! Why would a Paragon leave the choice to a stranger who knows nothing of our ways?"

"Because I was *there*, and you were not, my lords! I delivered him from his penance, and his gratitude was *mine!*"

Bandelor called the Assembly to order. "We have argued in these chambers too long. The will of the Paragon is that the Grey Warden decide. Tell us, Warden, who shall be King?"

"I grant the crown to Bhelen, son of Endrin."

Bhelen stamped triumphantly, and roared, "At last! This farce is ended and I can take my place on my father's throne!" He sneered at Harrowmont, "Do you accept this?"

Harrowmont sank to one knee. "I cannot defy a Paragon. Take your throne, King Bhelen."

Bhelen stepped forward, victorious, and Bandelor set the crown on his head, saying, "Let the memories find you worthy, first among the lords of the Houses, the King of Orzammar."

Bhelen being Bhelen, Bronwyn was not surprised that his first act of office was to call for Harrowmont's execution. There were quite a few executions that day, and Bronwyn watched them impassively. Alistair was distressed by the idea that he had helped unleash a tyrant, but even he could not find fault with the honors and respect being heaped on the Wardens and their companions.

"I remember, I remember," he muttered to Bronwyn at the inevitable celebratory banquet. "Duncan always said we had to do whatever was necessary, but I'd rather be fighting darkspawn than playing politics!"

"I, for one, am glad of a decent meal," Bronwyn answered, digging into her dinner. She kept her eyes on her plate and her companions, preferring to look there rather than at Harrowmont's head, on display above the throne. "Bhelen's

giving us everything we wanted. We have his word, his signature, and his enthusiastic cooperation. Sending his army out against the Blight is his way of uniting the dwarven people behind him. He recognizes the darkspawn threat, and it also fits in with his agenda. We may not trust him personally, but he will honor his word because it suits his own plans. He wants stronger ties with the surface, and aiding in the defense against the Blight is the best way to do it." She speared another piece of lamb, imported from the surface, incredibly tender and juicy, and tossed it to Scout. "And now Kardol has agreed to lead the Legion of the Dead to our aid. The King's all for it, too. That's more than the treaty even called for. We've done well. Better than I hoped."

"I suppose Cailan will be pleased," Alistair sighed. "Can we go? Really soon?"

The others were looking at her. Alistair had spoken for them all.

"I agree that we should leave as soon as possible," she said, "but I don't even know what time of day it is. Cullen, I want you and Leliana to go check that out as soon as this gala event winds down. The rest of us will go back to the hostel and start getting our gear together. I need some straps replaced on my armor. If anyone else needs gear repaired, see me."

They were happy enough to return to the hostel and its baths again, though Bronwyn felt that no place underground could ever truly feel like home. She was approached by the head

servant as soon as she arrived, and given a letter.

"Grey Warden," said the dwarf respectfully. "One of your order arrived a few days ago and left this for you. As you were not expected anytime soon, he did not linger, and only asked that you read it as soon as possible."

"A letter?" Alistair gazed on it in awe. "From other Grey Wardens? Wow! Open it, Bronwyn!"

"Let's go to my room," she said, "It may contain Warden secrets." She snorted. "Warden secrets that we do not even know yet."

Alistair nearly carried her off in his eagerness. They closed the door on the little stone room, and Bronwyn broke the griffon seal. She read it aloud, but quietly.

Greetings, sister:

Word reached us some time ago, both of the disaster at Ostagar, and of your brave deeds there. More recently, we learned that you were on your way to Orzammar, to seek alliance with the dwarves, according to the ancient treaties.

Do not imagine that you are alone in your struggles. The Wardens of Orlais are also your brothers and sisters, and we stand ready to give you all the assistance in our power. To that end, I ask that you come to the border crossing at Gherlen's Pass. The guards on either side are always courteous to Grey Wardens, and allow us to move freely.

Simply give a note to the guard on the Orlesian side, and word can be brought to Jader in less than a day. It would appear that both of you are young in the Wardens, and may not be aware of the full range of our responsibilities.

I Joined the Wardens with Duncan, and was proud to call him my friend.

Your brother,

Riordan

Senior Warden of Jader

Note: Thanks to all my readers and reviewers: Deviate's Fish, WellspingCD, Nithu, demoniconargles, Derko5, jen4306, Eva Galana, Shakespira, Gene Dark, Sarah1281, Aoi24, Lehni, JackOfBladesX, mutive, Amhran Comhrac, wisecracknmama, Costin, Have Socks Will Travel, khoas974, fergy13, Kempe, KCousland, almostinsane, Sunnydale-High-Class-Of-98, hdonald, Piceron, Talia Gea, mille libri, Windchime68, Teutonic Knight 92.

I'm so thrilled at the response and thoughtful remarks this story has generated. You give me such wonderful ideas and constant support.

Tara's story is adapted from "Fundvogel," collected by the Brothers Grimm.

23. Shield Walls and Siege Engines

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 23: Shield Walls and Siege Engines

"Hold them! Hold them!" Cauthrien's shout lashed at the soldiers and mages at the palisade. The darkspawn impaled themselves on the ranks of pikes in their mindless bloodlust. Dead grinning faces were pushed forward by their fellows, their tainted blood oozing over the pike shafts.

"Another ogre! You mages! Freeze it!"

A hint of chill in the air, a crackle of cross-firing spells. The ogre stopped in its tracks. Some of the weaker darkspawn next to it crumpled to the ground, dead. Blue and green lights streaked to the ogre, prying its life away with tendrils of magic. The ogre took a faltering step, attempting to shake the spells. It took another, and then tottered over, crashing like a felled tree.

Loghain watched from the upper works, smiling grimly. His army had learned new ways of war to fight the darkspawn. He was learning new ways himself. Luckily for him, he had no noble knightly traditions to uphold. If a weapon worked, it was fine with him. Case in point: the curious machine the dwarven

engineers were about to demonstrate for his edification.

From an observation post, a lookout bellowed. "They're forming for another attack! They're on the move!"

"We're ready now! Watch this, my lord!" the dwarf beside him cackled. "You're going to love it!"

Another mass of darkspawn broke out of the trees across the valley, rushing at the fortress in a wide dark wave.

"Archers, make ready!" Cauthrien commanded. From the terraced breastworks and upper palisades, from the high redans thrown out from the stones of Ostagar, the archers nocked their arrows and bent their bows. And waited.

On the parapet where Loghain stood, the dwarven engineers were grinning wider than any darkspawn.

"Now!" screamed Dworkin Glovak, and his brother yanked the trigger. This huge mechanism—they called it a trebuchet—thudded into movement, launching its heavy missile at the massed darkspawn. Loghain watched its trajectory, soaring out, and then down, down...

A thunderous explosion. Smoke and fire rushed up from a massive gap in the darkspawn ranks. It was as if the Maker had struck them with a hammer. The darkspawn on the leading edge of the wave escaped the worst and came on, into bow range.

"Loose!" shouted Cauthrien. Hundreds of arrows soared out, seeking their targets.

More darkspawn fell, and the mages raised a storm of blizzard of ice and lightning, all along the line. One of the mages, a pale blonde girl named Gwyneth, looked a little crazed. It was astonishing that such a delicate creature could wreak such havoc. If Loghain had his way, not one of these mages would return to captivity in the Circle.

For some reason, he remembered that Wilder girl who had hung about the Highever tent. A hawk! He would ask Uldred if any of his mages could shape-shift into a bird. Such a scout would be invaluable, and if the Grand Cleric disapproved, she could put on a suit of mail and fight the bloody darkspawn herself.

The storm died down, giving the captains a chance to see what was left of the darkspawn. Unlike a human enemy that might retreat and live to fight another day, the darkspawn would keep on coming until you killed them, or they killed you.

"Loose!" Cauthrien shouted to the second rank of archers. This volley finished off most of the attackers. Few made it to the shield wall and the merciless barbed pikes. Most of the arrowheads were poisoned, since they had a better idea now about what slowed or killed the darkspawn, and what did not.

There was a little shed nestled safely behind the stones of the upper citadel where clever craftsmen—and women—brewed poisons day and night for the army. Wulffe and Urien were

uncomfortable with the use of poisons in warfare: it was unchivalrous and simply not done. Loghain had shrugged off their discomfort, more easily since Cousland and eventually Bryland had accepted new ways. Cousland, especially, was young and pragmatic, and was willing to do whatever was necessary to beat back the darkspawn.

What worked against other men did not necessarily work well against darkspawn: a cavalry attack was pointless. Horses could not be made to charge darkspawn. Nor were the mindless, fearless darkspawn intimidated by horses, as human footsoldiers were.

On the other hand, darkspawn were so stupid and so utterly unable to improvise that Loghain had discovered that long pikes behind a solid shield wall were tremendously effective against them. A company of Maric's Shield and a company of Highever men had been armed and trained to move as one, and to execute maneuvers efficiently, while not breaking formation. With archers and mages protected behind them, the pike companies could hold ranks until the darkspawn dashed themselves to pieces. And a pike was not expensive or a difficult weapon to use, nor were there complex techniques requiring years of training. One did not even have to be exceptionally strong, as long the shields were held in the correct overlapping position. They could double their defensive power, with one rank kneeling and the second rank standing behind them. The old Tevinter legions had used similar tactics, and they had conquered all of Thedas.

It was safer for his soldiers, too. After all, the darkspawn

spread disease, and their casualties sprang from the Blight disease as much as from battle. Better to keep the darkspawn at the end of a ten-foot pole.

The Glovak brothers and their team-surface dwarves all-had arrived in Ostagar, offered their services for a reasonable sum, and had done a great deal to make Ostagar more defensible. Loghain had already ordered ditches dug and abbatis constructed, stretching out like fangs toward the enemy. The dwarves had done more: repairing the ancient stonework; creating fire and acid bombs and pit traps that would decimate the darkspawn; throwing out redoubts and redans to break up a massed attack; inspecting the camp and the fortress for possible tunneling.

They had caught two attempts to burrow up under the camp, and another to break into the lower chambers of the Tower of Ishal again. The tunnels had been collapsed, and poison poured into the breaches, killing anything down there that moved. It had been quite a success.

"So, my lord?" asked the older, saner brother, Voldrik. "What do you think?"

"Effective enough against a mass attack by darkspawn. In more normal times it would be a usable siege weapon against a fortified enemy."

"Yeah," Dworkin said, "that's what we thought. You could blow a breach in a wall bigger than the Hall of Heroes with this thing. So, whadda you say? Can we build some more for

you?"

Hard bargaining followed. The price the dwarves were asking for three of the monstrosities was astronomical. Then they showed him how neatly the machines could be disassembled and transported. Even when not fighting darkspawn, and with only stone as missiles, the engines were of great value. Loghain maintained his most impassive and unimpressed countenance, and eventually squeezed an agreement for five at the same price.

His gaze shifted toward the distant shadow of the trees. Movement had ceased out there. The darkspawn seemed to be done for the moment.

The men were cheering now, as time went by and the attack was not renewed. Loghain gave his officers grave nods, but did not cheer himself, even in his heart.

For all his successes, the darkspawn were growing no weaker. They would attack and die, but there were always more of them in a day or two. Was this what always happened during a Blight? Bronwyn clearly thought all these buildups were merely preliminary to the appearance of the Archdemon, who would manifest when the horde was large enough. At least the current attrition of the darkspawn ranks might delay that for some time.

But for how long? Could the army winter at Ostagar? That was the question that plagued Loghain, night after night. They *should* be able to, but *could* they?

Cauthrien ran up the steps, eyes shining.

"My lord! That was amazing!"

Dworkin winked at her. "More where that came from, Missy!"

She actually smiled back, rather than taking offense. "I hope so! The whole center was pulverized. Just pulverized!"

Loghain moved away, to speak to her privately. No sooner had he done so, than she said, "You look tired, my lord. It should be quiet here for days, after the darkspawn spending themselves like this. Perhaps you should—"

"Don't try to mother me, Cauthrien!" he said, more sharply than he meant to. He lowered his voice, and said, "I shall return to my quarters. I need to talk to Cousland anyway, and see if our King found his company more amusing than mine."

The commanders, along with a great number of their men, were now housed in the Tower of Ishal, and stone-hard and stone-cold they found it. It had taken the elven servitors quite a long time to clear out the darkspawn and human dead and scrub it out, and even now one sometimes found...traces. Most difficult to get rid of was the huge ogre carcass at the top, Bronwyn's trophy. That had been hacked into pieces, and the elves had gingerly thrown them through the windows to the ground far below, rather than try to carry them downstairs. He had seen the remains himself, and was impressed by anyone who took on such a monster alone.

A sudden tingling: a boost of vitality and well-being flowed through him. Loghain stopped and glared, catching the sight of the hem of that little mage Keili's robes, just fluttering around a corner. *Interfering girl-*

He stalked across the bridge, barely noticing his guards, deep in thought. With the end of the attack, the mountains and forests surrounding Ostagar had fallen into stillness again, a dreamy peace broken only by the hoarse shouts of soldiers and the chopping of wood.

Somehow Ferelden had to keep feeding this mob in the south. Ostagar and its environs was pretty thoroughly bare of game now. Either they were hunted out, by human or darkspawn, or the wiser and more wary had fled.

Once in his room, away from prying eyes, he could sag wearily into his chair, and drop his head into his hands. Yes, they were holding the darkspawn. Yes, the mages were performing splendidly. Yes, the dwarven engineers had done wonders. All of this would mean nothing, of course, if Orlais decided to march over the border. Stripped of its defenses and its defenders, northern Ferelden could be swallowed in a week. Perhaps it was only fear of the Blight that was holding the Orlesians back. Perhaps it was only the shadow of his own reputation.

Winter would be upon them in only a few months. *Could* the army winter here in the south? Perhaps the real question was: could the army winter here under constant attack, with its supply lines threatened? And what if the Archdemon, the Grey

Wardens' great bogeyman, actually made an appearance? How big and how dangerous was an Archdemon, anyway? What were its capabilities against their fortifications? How did one fight an enemy that could fly? He had filched Cailan's Grey Warden books to find out, but to his disgust he discovered that Cailan had only brought the silly ones: fairytales with colored illustrations of Wardens and their loyal pet griffons.

He should talk to that madman Dworkin some more. Could a ballista be modified to shoot a bolt into the air? Could it hit a flying target? Was a ballista bolt too heavy to ascend far enough? Would it also need modification? Maybe if it were lighter, thinner, poisoned—no, it would fall to earth again, possibly on the very engineers who had launched it. But if it exploded in the air...

Boots scraped outside his door, and his guard challenged the newcomer. A young, breathless voice answered.

"I'm a courier arrived with letters from Denerim. This lot is for Teyrn Loghain."

Loghain raised his voice. "Bring them in."

His guard showed the courier in: a young lad smelling of horse sweat and cheap leather. He bowed shyly, and set the letter bag on the table, where Loghain was pointing.

"Any trouble on the road?"

"A bit, my lord. Darkspawn patrol ambushed us about five miles north. Killed one of the horses, but there were only four of them, so we were all right. Darkspawn attacked Lothering a few nights ago, but the militia and the Templars held them off. There's some letters in the bag about that, too."

Loghain grunted and waved him out, and then set about looking at what he had. His secretary emerged from his own little cubbyhole.

"My lord! Allow me!"

Impatiently, Loghain dumped the contents of the bag on the table, sorting through it. Some of the letters he threw at the secretary. There was one with the Queen's seal that he would look at himself. Another...he paused at the bear crest. He would read Howe's letter last, after all the rest. So Howe wanted to make terms, did he? Loghain sneered, and the secretary flicked an uneasy glance his way. Nothing with a griffon on it. His secretary looked through the papers before him.

"A letter from Bann Ceorlic, my lord. A letter from one Ser Bryant, a Templar of the Lothering Chantry." The secretary smirked, "A letter of a sort from a fellow named Tobery, calling himself Captain of the Lothering Militia..."

"What does Ceorlic want?"

"He's protesting the conduct of 'that Cousland girl,' as he calls her. His seneschal wrote him about her taking his horses and

leaving a promissory note, and his lordship says this was not at all his intent in allowing the use of his manor. He demands immediate restitution, or her arrest for horse-thieving. He's also very angry to hear that a village militia was organized without his permission and contrary to his wishes. He wants to know what you're going to do about it, my lord."

Loghain scoffed, and poured himself a cup of cider. "Set it aside. I'll worry about Bann Ceorlic later. What's in the two letters from Lothering?"

"This letter from Ser Bryant details an attack two nights ago—from the time the letter was written. Around fifty darkspawn made an assault on the village. Luckily the village lookouts saw them coming in plenty of time and sounded the alarm. The militia got behind the town walls and did pretty good service with their bows. Not all of them: some of the militia ran on home at the first sight of the brutes, but enough stayed that they accounted for a good half of the enemy at long distance. The Templars reinforced them. Three villagers were killed, one of them a child. A party of darkspawn attacked the manor, too, and there was some fire damage, but luckily there's been a lot of rain lately... There's implicit plea for troops to bolster Lothering's defenses."

"No doubt," Loghain snorted.

"And he commends the conduct of the militia captain, Tobery Salt, who fought most bravely and effectively."

"Let's hear Captain Salt's report," Loghain said.

The secretary raised his brows, and read:

"Yer Lordship.

"I am Tobery Salt of Lothing and the Gurl Warden came throo awile bak and made mee Capten of the Lothing Milisha. Yer lordship wee have dun ar best but the Darkspoon ar too much for Man nor Beste and too nights bak they attaked us and ther war Peeple kilt ded by them Monsters and even if the litle Child was an Elf she was a Child of the Maker. If the Gurl Warden had not ordred us to bring our Wepons to the Muster and made a Milisha we wud all bee ded. So we ar thankful to her. We need mor Men heer in Lothing. Can yer Lordship send sum?"

Respectfully,

Yer sarvant,

Capten Tobery"

The secretary set down the dirty parchment and remarked, "A hand more accustomed to the sword than to the pen, apparently."

Loghain bridled a little at the condescension. "A good thing for Lothing, too!" He wondered briefly what his soft-handed secretary would have made of the brash young Loghain, who had so grudgingly learned his letters from his mother at the rough kitchen table of their farmhold. He had not been more than barely literate until he was in his twenties.

"I will take Captain Tobery's request under advisement. I may be able to spare a company. The villagers may find they don't like billeting troops, but we cannot lose Lothing."

No, they could not lose it. The Imperial Highway had to be kept open, and Lothing was that vital, closest link.

"I'll read these others myself. Do what you like with yourself until this evening."

"My lord." The secretary happily bowed himself out the door, and Loghain was left alone to deal with his two letters in peace, Anora's first. It was in cipher, of course, but it was their personal cipher that he knew well.

Dearest Father,

I would like to say that I am well, and that everything is quite under control. That would be a slight exaggeration. I am well, I suppose, as far as physical health is concerned, or I would be well, did I not have this constant sensation of being squeezed by events. At times I feel that I am Queen of the Palace in Denerim, and of nothing else.

As to Denerim itself, I shall write more below, but I first wanted you to know that I received a very curious missive from Arl Howe: a very soothing, flattering epistle indeed, assuring me of his heartfelt loyalty. I feel some alarm even at his name, for my people tell me there is word that he is hiring mercenaries at a great rate, though no one seems to know from whence his gold is coming.

He insists that he has written proof that the Couslands were in league with the Empress of Orlais to overthrow Cailan's rule. According to these documents, Bryce was to have had the crown; and to strengthen the ties between the two nations, Bronwyn was to have been married to the Imperial Prince Florestan. That, Arl Howe writes, would explain Bryce's curious reluctance to betroth her elsewhere, or even to allow her to go to Court, where she might have become personally attached in a manner that might hinder her parents' schemes.

Granted, it is odd that no arrangements were made for her, especially now that it would seem that gossip was in error, and that she is not disfigured or half-witted or otherwise unpresentable. However, I find the story very difficult to believe. Rumor also had it that she was in love inappropriately, and while I shudder at the implication that Cailan was the target of her misguided affections, it would be just as good an explanation as some sort of plot to transform a Fereldan shield maiden into an Orlesian princess!

Arl Howe, in an attempt to seem reasonable, states that he thinks it possible that Bronwyn was unaware of her family's plans for her: that they indulged her reluctance to bind herself to any than the object of her affections merely in order to keep her unattached, waiting for the right moment to send her to Orlais to cement the alliance.

While we are on the subject of Bronwyn Cousland, Bann

Ceorlic sought audience with me to protest the conduct of the Grey Wardens at his manor in Lothering. His seneschal wrote to him of the requisitions and the organization of a village militia, and he is very indignant. Must Bronwyn Cousland be so high-handed? The last I heard of her, she was heading west to Orzammar by the northern land route. The dwarven king, I understand, is dead, and there is a dispute over the throne, so it is unlikely she will get any help from that quarter for some time.

Refugees from the north are in Denerim, and they say that Arl Howe is dealing very harshly with Highever in his attempt to put down unrest. The unrest has spilled over the borders into West Hill somewhat, and it has trickled down the Pilgrim's Path, nearly to the gates of Denerim. Something must be done, but I have not men to do it.

And there is unrest in Denerim as well. Bann Vaughan has locked down the alienage. Some elves stole the remains of the young girl Vaughan killed for her defiance, and he has forbidden the elves to leave their quarter as a punishment. Not all of them, however, for I have learned he is shipping parties of elves out of the city under cover of night. They may be going as laborers to Amaranthine, which implies an alliance between Vaughan and Howe. Such an alliance, it need not be said, makes me very uneasy. Did Arl Urien really mean to give his son such a free hand?

I will not even ask you if Cailan is behaving himself. I am

already resigned to the truth...

Loghain read it to the end, and then decided to read it again before he attempted a reply. There was much to consider here, and most of it unpleasant.

After a long swallow of cider, he broke the seal of Howe's letter, as reluctantly as he would have put his hand in a sack of snakes.

Greetings, my lord Teyrn,

Despite rumor to the contrary, I remain your loyal colleague, and the faithful subject of King Cailan and Queen Anora. It was only when I received irrefutable proof of an Orlesian plot to overthrow Ferelden, and make us once again slaves of Orlais, that I struck a blow against the perpetrators...

Here is was: Anora had not quite presented it fairly, or, more probably, Howe had not sent her copies of the documents. They were only copies, so there was still the issue of forgery, either by Howe himself or by others, but if Howe believed them genuine, it was not surprising that he had taken violent action.

Howe himself did not believe that Bronwyn was party to any plot. Loghain was certain she was not. He considered himself a fairly good judge of character, and nothing in Bronwyn's demeanor or conduct suggested the faintest hint of duplicity. She had, in fact, spoken out strongly against Orlesian intervention, and had presented him with a reasonable

alternative.

Bronwyn as an Orlesian Imperial Princess? The absurdity of the thought made him smile briefly. If some mask-wearing, pastry-eating poltroon tried to transform her into a twittering courtier, she would probably break his nose. Then he thought more on the matter, imagining Bryce and Eleanor suddenly commanding her onto a ship, and her tears and resistance. Would she have obeyed her parents? He frowned. Yes. If they had used all the power that her filial affection gave them, then, yes. She would have gone, and done what she mistakenly believed to be her duty. It was a disturbing line of thought.

What about Fergus Cousland, who was all ways that mattered the effective second in command, here in Ostagar? He was a useful and hard-working young man, and Loghain had no qualms about admitting in the privacy of his own thoughts that he wished Cailan were more like the young teyrn. Would Bryce have told Fergus about this scheme? The bluff, honest young face did not seem the mask of an intriguer, but perhaps it was merely a very good mask indeed.

Except that the man's wife and son had been killed, and if Cousland had known why Howe had attacked, and if Orlesian plotting was at the heart of it, would not the young man be wracked with guilt as well as grief? Cousland's anger was directed outward entirely, as far as Loghain could tell. He spoke of Howe as a treacherous, ambitious snake, whose own lust for the teyrnir of Highever had caused him to stab his old friend in the back.

It did not add up. Perhaps Bryce had kept his own counsel, or shared some of it with Eleanor. Perhaps she knew only that he was seeking to make a firmer peace with Orlais, in the footsteps of Maric. There was the long diplomatic visit, the gifts which the Couslands had not attempted to conceal...

If these were forgeries, they were very good ones. The letter from Bryce sounded like the man: elegant, polished, dignified, and direct. The confidential assessment of Cailan, while scathing, was all too accurate. It was not impossible to credit that a man could, in good faith, consider Cailan an inadequate leader in the best of times, and a disaster in the worst. What was written about Anora hurt more. Cousland granted Anora's abilities and intelligence, while deploring her base birth. He had not opposed the match at the time, since it was clearly King Maric's own choice, but he had come to believe that Maric was wrong. The marriage had not been blessed with children, and the succession was once again an open question.

Still, the question remained: why had Howe not presented this information to Loghain, or arrested Bryce on their journey south? He could have brought Bryce directly before the King, to face his justice. Fergus would already have been in their hands. Did Howe think that that Eleanor would have opened the port of Highever to Orlesians warships, and allowed her son and husband to have been executed? The only heir left would have been Bronwyn, whom the Orlesians would have been forced to set up as their puppet queen, since the little boy was just too young to make a credible viceroy. Maker

help them. He could not imagine Bronwyn permitting any such thing.

Unless the King had killed her father and brother. Then it would be a blood feud, and she might very well accept the alliance with Orlesians in order to have revenge. Perhaps they would have brought in the Empress' cousin, that Imperial Prince, to marry her. That bastard Meghren had never attempted to conciliate Ferelden by marrying a native bride. Perhaps the Orlesians had learned from their past mistakes. An Orlesian prince, as consort to the Fereldan heiress-presumptive: now that was something that many of the nobles would accept, though it galled him to admit it, even to himself.

Where did Howe say he had come by these documents, anyway? A disaffected bard? That was not promising. The bard could just as likely be a provocateur, sent deliberately into Ferelden to foment suspicion and civil war. Loghain stirred uneasily, considering how very easy it would have been for Howe to make his case, had Bronwyn not been here and so obviously loyal.

An awkward situation. If the documents were fakes, Howe would have to be brought to justice, and even then, there would be those who would whisper at a cover-up. If the documents were genuine...

If the documents were genuine, then Bryce and Eleanor had paid for their treason with their lives, and the life of their innocent grandson. Howe had still not played the part of a loyal subject, for his troops were still in the north,

consolidating his power, rather than in the King's service, supporting the war against the Blight. From a pragmatic standpoint, the Couslands were more valuable than the Howes. Fergus was here, with his men, and performing good service. Bronwyn was trying to raise armies for the kingdom...

Unless she wasn't. Loghain grimaced. She had gone west to Orzammar, but Orlais was in the same direction...

No. Probably the best thing, as long as Fergus and Bronwyn could be cleared, would be to leave it to a contest of arms before the Landsmeet. Fergus' odds against Howe were better than good. Fergus could kill Howe, and the King could mediate an armistice between the warring families. He did not think much of the possibility of persuading Fergus Cousland to marry Delilah Howe, the best option for peace. And persuading Thomas Howe to marry Bronwyn...no...the lad probably would be delighted to marry Bronwyn, but Bronwyn had already refused him, and Loghain did not see the need to sacrifice her. He had other, better, plans for Bronwyn Cousland...as long as she was not a traitor to Ferelden...

"Out of the way!"

"Make way for His Majesty!"

Shouts and shoving pushed milling soldiers aside, where they crowded at the north side of the fortress, the terminus of the Imperial Highway.

"Maker's Blood, that *hurts!*"

"You're going to be fine, Your Majesty," Wynne told him, her voice warm and soothing. "A little rest, and you'll never know you were wounded."

"I'll never forget an arrow that went all the way *through my side!*" Cailan shouted back.

Fergus led the way, his frown deepening. Loghain had thought the King might respond better to a younger man, since lately Cailan had lived to ignore or subvert Loghain's every order. The King was in nominal command of the northern defenses, but Fergus was supposed to keep him under control, and safe. He had failed. The King had rushed forward from cover, been wounded, and now they were taking him back to face Loghain's fury.

Not that it was a particularly bad wound. The arrow was not even poisoned. In the excitement of the moment, Cailan had stood up, exposing himself needlessly, and waved his greatsword on high, in a heroic, menacing gesture. He had promptly been shot, and the arrow had gone through the skin right under his arm, where there was a gap in his armor. A flesh wound, only, but it had hurt, and there had been blood, and the King, it appeared, really, really disliked pain.

The darkspawn had been dispatched, and a larger party they had been trailing had suddenly moved south, apparently to reinforce the big attack on the east side of the fortress, down in the valley. That had been defeated too, as Fergus learned

as he shouldered his way to the Tower of Ishal, supporting the King on one side.

"Those dwarves threw a bloody big bomb at them from one of those machine things of theirs," a sergeant shouted back in answer to Fergus' questions. "Smashed them to bits. Knocked the stuffing out of them for a week or two, I'll warrant!"

Fergus nodded at the man, laughing, "I thought it was thunder, and under a clear sky and all!"

The King was scowling, and Fergus rearranged his face into the proper expression of concern for the King's pain and distress.

"I've had just about enough of Ostagar," Cailan complained bitterly. "If we had some Wardens here, this wouldn't have happened!"

Fergus bit back a retort to the implied criticism of his sister. The great door of the Tower of Ishal opened, and they made their way to the King's quarters, waving off the questions of the guards.

"His Majesty is perfectly all right. A minor wound."

"It could have gone all the way through my lung!" Cailan contradicted under his breath.

Fergus replied, just as quietly, "We don't want to alarm the men, Your Majesty."

"I know, I know! I just want to lie down a bit!"

The king was helped to bed, and hovering servants removed the armor and cut the bloody shirt away. A young knight of Highever, Ser Rona, pushed forward, her face anguished. Fergus gave the young woman a hard stare, and she blushed and looked away. It had come to his ears this morning that she was the King's latest bed warmer. Fergus was sorry for her family's shame when they heard of it, and he planned to tell Ser Rona so himself. Wynne cossetted the king with more poultices and healing spells.

"Ow! You don't have to rip the skin off!"

"This will ease the pain, Your Majesty..."

Fergus looked on, brows knit, and did not turn around to acknowledge the new presence in the room. The subtle shifting of the soldiers and the looks told him who it was. Ser Rona slipped away, face averted.

"It's not a serious wound," Fergus told Loghain quietly. "Arrow took him through a bit of the skin near the armpit. It surprised him, naturally."

"Naturally."

Wynne shooed them out, citing the King's need for rest, sparing a little more deference in her shooing for Loghain and Fergus.

Cailan shouted over her head. "We need to talk, Loghain! After dinner tonight!"

Fergus nodded toward his own quarters. The two men rounded the curving hall, and closed the door for privacy.

"What happened?" Loghain asked, without preamble.

"He was posing for a statue again," Fergus answered bluntly. "He stood straight up and waved his sword very impressively. That's when the genlock got him. It completely ruined the effect."

Loghain snorted in disgust and walked to the window, looking out over the camp. "Our King tires of army life, I think."

"He said it wouldn't have happened if the Wardens were here. Bronwyn doesn't deserve to be blamed because he has to make a spectacle of himself."

"Men say stupid things when they're hurt or frightened. Stupid, petty things. I grant that he's been moody and morose lately, but the King loves the Grey Wardens."

Fergus shook his head. "He feels abandoned by them. I suspect he'll have something unpleasant to say at dinner."

The servants were dismissed, the doors closed, and the King and his nobles were left to discuss how things stood. Cailan sat back against the carefully arranged cushions of his chair,

his wound heavily bandaged.

"There's so much I need to be doing in Denerim," he pointed out. "I can't neglect all my other duties because we're at war. I think I should look in at the capital—see how things are going—see Anora. I'll return in a few weeks, as the weather permits."

Loghain listened to him in silence, feeling the words like a death knell. If Cailan left the army now, Loghain wondered if he would ever come back at all. Certainly, he would not share the privations of winter in the south with them. And who knew what he would get up to, there in Denerim?

And the King's words launched the inevitable cascade of complaints from the nobles, who had been gone so long from their own lands.

"I think the King has a point," Arl Urien agreed, seizing on the possibility of escape. "I don't like the things I'm hearing from Denerim. At my age, a man needs to take care of himself. I could ride back with the King, and send my son in my place. Maybe it's time Vaughan got a taste of campaigning!"

There was some sympathy for him, since Urien had not been particularly well of late. He was only a little older than Loghain, but had not lived the same kind of life, nor taken care of himself in the same way. He suffered badly from the joint-ache and a persistent cough that the Healers could not quite eradicate. And after all, perhaps his son *should* experience warfare at first hand against an armed foe, instead of bullying

the elves of Denerim.

"We're holding the darkspawn, Loghain," Arl Wulffe said, considering the matter. "We're holding them. I know they keep coming back, but we've held them so far. We've got to do something about the north and all this Howe business. I've heard from my sons and from Alfstanna and Reginalda. Things are in a blasted bloody mess. I know *you* want to do something, Fergus!"

Fergus looked at Loghain, bleak despair in his eyes. "More than anything, I want to kill that bastard. But we can't simply leave, and let the darkspawn swarm up and have the country. We're holding the darkspawn successfully, but *only* holding them, and there always seem to be more."

"With Orlesian reinforcements," Cailan said airily, "We'd be free to deal with the unrest. All I have to do is say the word, and the Empress will send us their Wardens, and four legions of chevaliers besides."

Loghain glared at him. "And just how," he asked, his voice ominously soft, "*just how* do you propose to get them to *leave*, once they're invited over the border?"

"We're doing all right on our own, Your Majesty," Bryland said. The very mention of the Orlesians recalled the bitter memory of running for his life, terrified and hungry, after the disaster at White River. "We've got the dwarven engineers and all these mages now. That's made a tremendous difference. And Bronwyn's gone to Orzammar, I hear, to raise

the dwarves..."

Cailan slammed down his wine cup. "I have heard from the Queen that the dwarven king is dead and the throne is in contention. Bronwyn will be cooling her heels in Orzammar for months!" He subsided into his carved chair, sulking. "I wanted her to go to the Dalish *first*..."

Very offended at more criticism of Bronwyn, Fergus gave his king an unfriendly stare. "Why do the Orlesian Grey Wardens, if they're so eager to help us, need the Empress' permission? Why don't they just come and leave the chevaliers behind? Bronwyn said she'd be glad of some veteran Wardens to fill her in on the lore. We could admit a few as advisers and such. Why the Wardens *and* the chevaliers?"

"Because that was the deal she offered!" Cailan shot back, furious at being challenged.

Urien supported the king. "It would mean some needed rest for the army, if we could leave the Orlesians to it, down here the South. Nothing here that anyone wants, anyhow..."

"Nothing but the southern half of the kingdom!" Bryland shouted at him. "Maybe it doesn't matter to you, but South Reach is only days from Ostagar, and I don't plan on being ousted by those bastards again!"

Loghain sat back, refusing to intervene. More were with him than with Cailan. It was Wulffe who interposed, his lined face grave and weary.

"It wasn't just the south that suffered under the Orlesians," the Earl of West Hill pointed out. "My arling has never completely recovered from the Occupation, and it would be the first hit in an invasion. I've got to speak plain, Your Majesty. Nobody wants thousands of Orlesian chevaliers prancing down the Imperial Highway, feeding off our crops like they used to, bold as you please! We're doing all right here, as Leonas says, and we'll do better when we get those reinforcements your sister is after, Fergus. I say we've got to do something about the trouble in the north. People are hurting. My boys write me that they've heard dark things out of Highever City. Fergus is too loyal to say how much he wants to go north and settle with Howe. It's got to be done, and sooner better than later. This kind of trouble makes us look weak, and not just to the Orlesians!"

Loghain studied young Cousland. He had been pleased by the lad's words opposing the package deal of chevaliers and Wardens. It tended to support his own belief that Fergus was not involved in any conspiracy with the Orlesians.

"What do you say, my lord of Highever?" he asked quietly.

Fergus sat back, and looked Loghain in the eye, to the furious annoyance of the king. "I agree with Wulffe that we can't let this go on with Howe. He's a traitor, not just to my family, to whom he swore loyalty as a vassal, but to all Ferelden. He hasn't supported the war against the darkspawn, and he's letting us take casualties while he builds up his power and gets rich from picking the corpses of the people he murdered, like the vulture he is. He's tormenting the people of my teyrnir.

My own men are restless and angry. They want to go home and see to their families. Howe must be stopped." He sighed, frowning. "Does anyone think that he could be called to a session of the Landsmeet for a challenge? I would like to meet him face to face, and make him pay for what he's done."

"He'd never come unless he thought it was a sure thing," Bryland muttered.

Cailan was pleased. This was something that he could do, and it would give him a perfect excuse to spend some time for needed rest and recreation in Denerim. "I could call a Landsmeet. I know you can't possibly leave the Army, Loghain, so Anora could represent Gwaren for you. Yes, Fergus, I'll give you your opportunity to challenge Howe. You could come with me, Urien, and send Vaughan down for a taste of campaigning. Give him some experience, eh?" he laughed. "If Howe fails to show, then we'll have to move against him. Perhaps by *then*," he granted to Fergus, "Bronwyn might have succeeded in her mission, and more of the army will be available to deal with something other than darkspawn."

Loghain hated the idea of Cailan on the loose, but Anora would be waiting in Denerim, and presumably could rein him in. No, he could not leave the army. It was extremely unlikely that Howe would put his head in the lion's mouth of the Landsmeet, when Fergus was so much in favor at the moment. The question was: which of the Highever troops could they spare from the army? For it was certain that a considerable force would have to be mobilized to deal with

Howe. Not the precious newly-trained pikemen, but two companies of foot and one of Highever knights, perhaps. Urien would want his personal guard, but that is all he would get, for Loghain would not allow him to decimate the army, especially since there was an implicit promise that Bann Vaughan would replace his father.

More talk, more debate. Cailan, having gained his own point of escaping the boredom and danger of the Wardenless army, was prepared to be generous.

"Very well. I shall leave in two days with Fergus and Urien. I'm sure we can raise more men as we go north, Loghain. I wouldn't want to strip the army bare, while you're sitting down here in the south besieged!"

There was an uneasy stir in the room at the word. No one liked to imagine how bad things might become if the darkspawn horde swelled its numbers even more.

"It is not yet a siege, Cailan," Loghain said, keeping his voice level. "In time, it might well become one. For now, there is no better place than Ostagar to hold the darkspawn at bay. If we pull back, the darkspawn will follow, and then where will we make our stand? Lothering? South Reach? *Denerim*?"

Note: The command for archers is "Loose!" rather than "Fire!" Ain't no gunpowder in a bow. Early firearms, however, did require the use of a match or lit fuse, hence the command.

I know the cut scene of the Battle of Ostagar seems to imply that the darkspawn have siege weapons, but nothing we see of them later would support that. Their only devices are crude traps and ballistae, and the latter were probably made by someone else. Their emissaries might be able to throw long-distance fireballs. Possibly with dwarven ghouls/thralls, they could have some decent weapons, but the darkspawn could barely learn how to load them, much less repair them, and siege weapons require constant maintenance.

Thanks to my splendid reviewers: mille libri, mutive, Lehni, demonichargles, qwintessa, jen4306, Donroth, Shakespira, JackOfBladesX, Costin, Aoi24, almostinsane, Eva Galan, Sarah1281, Amhran Comhrac, Piceron, Rathian Warrior (no, Bronwyn didn't get her head on one of the giant statues), mieuwings, Derko5, Windchime68, PiotrMc, Gene Dark, WellspringCD, wisecracknmama, WraithRune, and Have Socks Will Travel.

24. A Rock and a Hard Place

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 24: A Rock and a Hard Place

There are spoilers for the DLC "Leliana's Song" in this chapter. The DLC is not at all consistent with the story Leliana tells the Warden in game. Here she is a bit more honest.

"This is the plan," Bronwyn told her companions. "The dwarven army will move out in two weeks, and go by the Deep Roads to an exit east of Lake Calenhad where they will resupply. They will go south to the sealed exit just east of Lake Belennas. Bhelen is rallying surface dwarves to set up supply depots in both places. Some contingents will march on the surface to become acclimated."

She produced a map drawn on parchment scraped thin to transparency. It proved to be a map of southwestern Thedas: Orlais and Ferelden. It was to exactly the same scale as a heavy vellum map of the Deep Roads. The map of Thedas could be superimposed over the Deep Roads. The sight intrigued the surfacers, and was of some interest to Oghren. Brosca, to whom both maps and writing were unplumbed mysteries, palmed another piece of some surface fruit that

was bright red on the outside and then white and sweet when she bit into it. Wardens ate well. If for nothing else, she'd join for the food.

Alistair measured distance by stretching out his fingers. "So the Anvil of the Void was under the Dales in the south of Orlais. The same distance, south southeast, takes you to that exit past Lake Belennas."

"But you do not intend to sit here and wait for two weeks, surely," Sten frowned.

"No, indeed!" Bronwyn waved everyone forward to give them the news. "We have received an invitation of sorts that will fill some of that time. A senior Grey Warden from Jader has written to us, offering assistance. Alistair and I have agreed that at the very least, we will go to the border and meet with this Warden Riordan. We hope to hold a Joining ceremony for you, rather than having to wait for the opportunity to return to Denerim, which frankly does not seem likely to happen anytime soon."

"Will we go to Jader?" asked Leliana, tense with excitement. "Jader! It is so close! It is hardly a day away!"

"What's Jader?" Brosca asked, tossing her apple core under the table. Scout sniffed disapprovingly.

Alistair told her, "Jader is a city in Orlais. It's the closest Orlesian city to Orzammar. In fact, it's the closest surface city to Orzammar. The closest Ferelden city is West Hill, and

that's a day north of that Hero's Rest inn we stayed at. They say that Jader is the most Ferelden of all the Orlesian cities."

"Well..." Leliana scoffed. "The most Ferelden? Perhaps, but it is really nothing like Ferelden at all. It is a charming place, and many of the public buildings are very handsome and faced with dressed greenstone..."

"Sounds fancy," Oghren nodded. He had moved into the Wardens' hostel with them and seemed to have no desire to leave. He had told Bronwyn and Alistair that he had no future in Orzammar, and no past he cared to remember. He had not exactly expressed a desire to be a Warden, but he wanted to continue to fight at their side.

"Our plan is *not* to go to Jader," Bronwyn said firmly, giving Alistair a significant look. "I don't see any reason to go that far out of our way. We will travel to the border fortress of Gherlen's Halt. I will cross the border, and give a letter to the commander of the Orlesian fortress of Roc du Chevalier. Warden Riordan says that a courier there can bring my letter him within a day. I hope that this Riordan will come and that we can arrange for a proper Joining for those of you who wish it. And there are other matters that Alistair and I need to discuss with him as well."

"Roc du Chevalier," Cullen murmured. "I've heard of that place. Though people just call it the Rock. Back during the Occupation, a lot of Fereldans disappeared into its dungeons, and were never seen again."

Some would have to ride double. There were no more horses to be had, and no time to acclimate the dwarves to the concepts of horsemanship.

"Cullen, look after Brosca. Zevran, Oghren will be with you."

"You are a hard mistress, *bellissima*," sighed the elf. "It is, perhaps, a just punishment, but a stern one, nonetheless."

Oghren was not particularly pleased, either. "Say, Boss, you couldn't see your way clear to putting me behind Red, could you? Huh. Thought not."

There was another party member to provide for. On their way up to the surface, Bronwyn was waylaid by a warrior of the Legion of the Dead, who quietly asked for a word with her before she left.

Wondering if Kardol had a final message for her, Bronwyn allowed herself to be drawn into the shadows. The warrior removed the heavy helmet, and Bronwyn recognized the woman who had accompanied them to the city.

"I hear you are recruiting Grey Wardens. I wish to volunteer."

She was a handsome woman, with strong, regular features, unmarked by duster tattoos. Bronwyn sensed an air of someone accustomed to respect—even command. She was a sound fighter, from all reports, but Bronwyn did not want to antagonize Kardol, and said so.

"Here is his permission," the woman said, passing her a parchment. "He gives leave for me to accompany the Grey Wardens, as he thinks it will help to have one of our number accustomed to the surface when we march out. That is perfectly sensible, of course, but in truth, I would want to leave, whether the dwarves mobilized or no."

Bronwyn considered her. "There is little to choose between the Legion and Wardens, as far as I can see. We are both pledged to fight darkspawn until death."

"That is true," the woman granted, "but at least I will not die in service to *King Bhelen*. My belly roils at the very thought of it."

"You are a partisan of Lord Harrowmont?" Bronwyn asked. There were plenty of those about Orzammar, and very discontented they were.

"No. My name is—or was—Gytha Aeducan. I am King Bhelen's sister, whom he killed."

"So she's technically dead?" Alistair whispered loudly. Bronwyn hushed him. Much of their conversation could be covered by the sound of him honing his beautiful new sword. They had found it in the Deep Roads, long abandoned, and it was a beauty: a dragonbone longsword, richly enchanted with runes. It was a sword fit for a King...or a Warden. They had done a bit of research, and believed they knew who it had once belonged to—a Warden who had come, centuries ago, to

the Deep Roads to fight his last battle.

Bronwyn admired the blade, and whispered, on a thread of breath, "Yes. She was put out in the Deep Roads without armor or weapons; without an opportunity to defend herself before the lords of the Assembly. She found the Legion and joined them, but in doing so, lost all right to challenge her brother for the crown of Orzammar. She is legally dead, and that, by ancient law, cannot be reversed. She has no future here."

Alistair grinned. "It's true. Being a Grey Warden is totally better than being dead. You're going to bring her along, aren't you? Gossip says that she's quite a warrior—she even fought in her own Honor Proving and defeated all comers!"

"Frankly, I'm worried about how well our dwarves will adjust to the surface, but yes, I won't refuse her. If it's all right with Kardol, I see no reason to object. I'm glad she's kept her helmet on, though. Someone might recognize her, and the King would certainly get the wrong impression, if he heard she was in our company. She wishes to use the name Astrid, which was the name of the warrior who last wore the armor she bears now. It was her name in the Legion. I'll have Leliana ride double with her. If we're attacked, the dwarves are to dismount immediately and fight on foot."

"And then we hope that Riordan will put together some sort of Joining for our recruits."

"I don't see why he couldn't," Bronwyn said, pulling a flask out

of a bag. "While I didn't have everyone gather a vial of their own, I collected this. Anders put a preservation charm on it for me. There should be enough here, don't you think?"

Oghren dealt with the surface the best of the three dwarves. He swayed, his eyes rolling a bit, and took deep breaths.

"Remember what I told you," Tara said anxiously. "Don't look at the sky. Look at the ground. Focus on that. I know what it's like to see the sun and the sky for the first time!"

Brosca stared at the sun in awe. "It's so bright. It's like a thousand torches! It hurts to look at it."

Anders grabbed her head and pushed it down. "Don't stare at the sun! You can go blind!"

Astrid—the former Gytha Aeducan—said nothing at all, but clutched the stone of the doors of Orzammar, looking sick. She glanced briefly at Bronwyn, saw her sympathetic look, and snarled softly. She shook her head, fixed her eyes on the ground, and walked forward into the sunlight.

"This is weird," Brosca complained, clinging to Cullen. "It's like being on the outside of the world!"

"We *are* on the outside of the world," Cullen pointed out.

"Yeah. That's just *wrong*." She hid her face behind his broad back.

It took a day or two before the dwarves could deal with simply walking back and forth from the inn to the stable and back. None of them had ever seen a horse, and it seemed a good idea to accustom them to the idea that they would be sitting on those tall, powerful, four-legged creatures.

"Like brontos," considered Oghren, "but skinnier."

"How smart are they?" wondered Brosca. "Are they smart like Scout or stupid like nug? Do they eat what we do, or do they hunt their own prey? Are they always big like that?"

Tara told her, "There are short horses called ponies. We don't have any, though. Bronwyn likes big horses."

Brosca nodded, and looked closer. "Is that horse-?" She looked again and burst out laughing. "Somebody cut his balls off! Did he get in a fight?"

"Horses are cut to keep them docile," explained the better-read Astrid, gritting her teeth. "And *quiet*."

"I can be quiet," Oghren assured them all. "And I'm going to sleep in my armor, just in case anybody's wondering..."

Anders urged his horse forward, and muttered in Bronwyn's ear. "They're not happy. Not happy at all."

Bronwyn looked back at the dwarves, uncomfortably riding pillion behind her other companions. "I don't blame them, but it

can't be helped. We'll be at Gherlen's Halt by nightfall, and they'll be indoors then. Of course it's very unpleasant and disorienting for them. Do you think it could actually make them sick?"

"Possibly. It's good that they'll have a rest under a stone roof tonight. I'll keep an eye on them. So will Tara. She understands what they're feeling."

Sure enough, Tara was chatting earnestly with a sullen Astrid, who was riding behind Leliana. Leliana, too, put in some cheerful words. Oghren took frequent swigs from the leather flask at his side. Brosca was completely hidden by Cullen, except for her arms, which were wrapped tightly around him. The ex-Templar looked bemused. He sensed Bronwyn's gaze and turned red. Bronwyn hid her smile at the sight.

They stopped for a meal when the sun was directly above them, and Zevran surpassed himself with a tasty stew. The dwarves did not eat a great deal, but Bronwyn and Alistair certainly enjoyed it, unabashed about consuming what their new companions did not. Astrid sat a little apart, not speaking with her fellow dwarves. Bronwyn hoped that her high birth was not going to prove a problem, because in real terms it was worth less than nothing. Oghren and Brosca grunted agreement that the sun was unnecessarily bright, and that the blue sky was a pretty color, but very flimsy-looking.

It was chilly as they moved into the Pass proper, and Bronwyn began thinking that a warm fire inside stout walls would be the best possible thing for her, too. She was about

to tell Alistair so, when Morrigan, in hawk form, screeched out an alarm. Scout barked once, and lowered his head to charge.

A rustle of leaves, a muted whistle, and arrows began thudding into saddles and armor. Trampler reared and screamed an arrow hanging loosely from his powerful neck. Sten ripped the arrow out, and looked about furiously.

The ambush was above them, the assailants sheltered behind a rockfall. Lightning spat at them.

"A mage!" Bronwyn shouted, spurring her horse forward.
"Morrigan! Target him!"

More arrows hissed at them. Whoever had attacked them was very professional. There were muttered orders, but no curses or threats, no posturing at all: just a steady stream of arrows and spells.

Tara shrieked an incantation, waving her staff. Brosca slid off the back of Cullen's horse, and began clambering up the slope, dodging behind rocks and shrubs. Oghren and Astrid were with her.

Charging up on horseback, while tempting, just made her a bigger, easier target. Bronwyn leaped from her horse and ran, crouched low, blocking one arrow, and ignoring another that *thunked* into the ground beside her. Scout was by her side, as she pressed herself flat against the rocks, and caught her breath. Leliana had found a good spot and was returning arrows at the attackers when they stood up to shoot.

"Ha! Got you!" she shrieked.

Astrid called out to Alistair and the two of them locked their shields together. Bronwyn darted out to shelter behind them, Scout running ahead. In a flash, Zevran and Brosca had joined them and they ran as one up the slope. They glimpsed the enemy mage, struggling against a glyph of paralysis, and then they gave a shout, falling on the ambushers, peeling off as each chose a target.

Tara ruthlessly pressed her attack against the mage: another young woman, another elf. Within moment, the unknown mage was fading to the ground, sapped of magic and life.

"Get the little redhead!" ordered a big man further up the slope. "Get her! She's the one we want!"

Bronwyn slashed at a hard-faced man in leather armor, feinting with her sword and stabbing with her dagger. He tried to bash at her with his shield, but she side-stepped him, and stabbed again, where his armor joined at the side. A howl of pain, and he froze just long enough for Astrid to hew his legs out from under him. Scout grabbed his shoulder in massive jaws, and shook him like a rat.

A tingle of rejuvenation: Anders was looking out for her. Further up, Sten had engaged two of the ambushers, and was using his blade to demolish the stunted tree they were trying to use as cover. Leliana got one with an arrow through the temple. The man's look of horror made Bronwyn queasy for a moment.

A crash of armor: Cullen had been knocked flat on his back by a big qunari mercenary. Brosca lunged in, cutting the man's hamstrings as he brought up his sword for a killing blow. He sagged, and Cullen was up and ramming Yusaris through him. Brosca squealed in blood-thirsty delight.

How many ambushers *were* there? A few more archers up on the rocks, and that leader who had rallied them against Leliana.

"I want that man alive to answer questions!" Bronwyn shouted pointing at him. The man was tough, no doubt about it: he shrugged off a cold spell, fighting desperately as Zevran and Alistair attacked him from either side.

The twang of a bowstring came only from their side now. One of the enemy archers had fallen from the rocks, sliding down in a rush of gravel and a heedless clatter of arrows. The leader, bleeding heavily, was trying pull back, possibly to make a run for it. Brosca caught him across the face with a well-thrown rock, and Zevran tripped him.

He crawled away crab-wise, as if he imagine that he could escape the Wardens. He had good armor. A well-paid mercenary? Bronwyn strode after him remorselessly, a deadly rhythm to her stride.

"Don't hurry away, " she said calmly, "We haven't had a proper chat. You're going to tell me everything, or the next few minutes are going to be thoroughly nasty, especially for you."

Anders came up to join them, healing a cut above Cullen's brow. He gave Bronwyn an uncharacteristically stern look at her words. She gazed back blandly. Scout growled at their captive.

The mercenary looked up at the faces around him. His hand moved for a dagger, and was stilled, as Oghren stamped on it with a metal-shod boot.

Bronwyn asked abruptly, "Who sent you?" The mercenary spat on the ground in defiance.

"Ah, my friend," Zevran sighed. "Do not be foolish. I speak as one who has been in exactly your position. You are bleeding, and will not survive long without the favor of this noble Grey Warden. You do not look surprised to hear the name. So you *did* know that your target was traveling in the company of Grey Wardens. That was very bold of you. I salute your courage."

Leliana spoke up, her pretty voice hard. "It was Marjolaine, wasn't it? Is she still in Denerim?"

The mercenary sneered at her. "You're as good as dead!"

"Well," Bronwyn said mildly, "You would know. You must be feeling quite light-headed by now. I have an excellent healer with me, but I see no point on wasting his ability on someone who prefers to die."

"I'll talk," the man growled, "but only to *her*." He jabbed a

gauntleted finger at Leliana. He grinned horribly, blood frothing over yellow teeth, and beckoned. "Come a little closer, and I'll give you the message she sent..."

"Unacceptable," Bronwyn refused briskly. "Speak up."

"Bronwyn," Anders murmured, "if I'm going to do anything, it needs to be *now!*"

A small sliver of metal spun from the man's left hand, almost too fast to see. Leliana jerked back, and it struck Morrigan, standing just behind her. The witch shrieked, startled and hurt.

"Die, bitch!" the mercenary grunted, and then groaned, impaled on Sten's sword. Oghren kicked his hand away, and he rattled out his last breath.

Morrigan sat down abruptly, eyes wide. The dagger was lodged just under her collar-bone. Anders was with her in an instant, lowering her back gingerly on the stony ground. Scout whined.

"You're all right," he said, voice warm and soothing. "You're fine. I can fix this right away." The tiny dagger was meticulously removed, sniffed, and then cast aside. "Nothing that I can't deal with. Zevran, get the blue flask out of my bag while I work on the bleeding."

The antidote was smeared on the open wound, and then Anders' fingertips shivered with healing magic, running delicately over Morrigan's skin. "See?" he murmured. "Not

even a scar."

Morrigan, lips pale and thinned with anxiety, shuddered under his touch. "I had rather not been stabbed at all!"

"No doubt, but it's nothing," Anders assured her. "Absolutely nothing in the world. Have a swallow of this, and don't move for a few minutes." He sat down beside her, holding her hand, and she did not reject him. He waved the others away. Tara and Brosca grinned at each other. Bronwyn stood back, watching the scene, once again congratulating herself for conscripting Anders.

She raised her voice in command. "I want you to search the bodies of all these men!" she ordered. "Search their pockets, their clothes, their boots. Search everything! Lay everything out beside each man, so I know who had what. I have a lot of questions that need answering."

She turned to Leliana. "Come with me," she said quietly, taking the girl by the arm. It was clearly not a request. "Scout! Stay with Morrigan and Anders!" They walked together in silence, until Bronwyn reached a crag overlooking a turn in the road. "Let step a bit out of sight, shall we? I hope it's not necessary for everyone to see how angry I am."

Leliana flicked a guilty look her way. Bronwyn let go of her arm, leaned back against the rock, and wasted no time.

"Now we are going to talk—frankly. And I don't want it to be about what the Maker told you or about what Andraste said or

about anything other than the questions I am going to ask. You are going to tell me why someone spent a great deal of money tracking you down and wanting you and everyone you travel with dead. You are going to tell me all about this Marjolaine person. Now."

Leliana's large blue eyes were full of tears. "I had put that life behind me—" she looked again at Bronwyn's expression, and stopped. "You are right. I must tell you everything. It all happened so long ago. I thought she had forgotten me, or decided I was of no importance."

Bronwyn stared at her stonily. Leliana twisted her hands together. "The man said 'she.' '*She*' can only mean Marjolaine. My bardmaster. I was...a bard...before I entered the Chantry."

"I thought as much," Bronwyn said briefly. "You were no mere minstrel. I do know something of Orlais. I assumed you were a bard who found that life tiresome, for some reason or other. Now that your former associates have tried to kill me, I cannot let you keep secrets. Why does Marjolaine want you dead now?"

"She may still be angry about how we parted..."

"No." Bronwyn cut her off, lips pressed together in controlled fury. "No. She could have killed you any time in the past two years. She obviously knew where you were. What is it about your current situation that drew her interest? Which of us in this party? Or is it the mere fact that you appear to be going

to Orlais? Is she afraid you will contact someone?"

"I am not sure. I am no longer current with the Game. You must understand that I am telling you the truth! I will tell you everything, and you must judge for yourself."

So it all came out: how Leliana had been trained by this Marjolaine. How she had loved her, and how Marjolaine had betrayed her, making it appear that Leliana had stolen state documents. It had all been a prank, Leliana thought, a trick to embarrass a great nobleman. When she had actually seen the contents of the documents, she realized that the Game was being played for stakes far higher than she had imagined. Marjolaine had been very kind, and agreed that she should be allowed to put the documents back where she found them. Leliana had thought herself safe, right up until the moment Marjolaine stabbed her, and turned her over to the guards...

Bronwyn wondered about the documents, and let the girl continue her story.

"This all happened at the *Arl of Denerim's* estate in the city? Not in Orlais?"

"No—no. Marjolaine has worked in Denerim for several years now. When I went for the documents, I thought she was charming an officer away as a diversion, but when I was captured, that officer, I discovered, was her lover. He was a terrible man. His name was Harwen Raleigh."

Brought up short, Bronwyn stared at her. Harwen Raleigh had

been a very notable figure in the Rebellion, and commander of a famous company, The Hard Line. He had been dispossessed by the Orlesians, and his hatred was such that he and his men had tortured and killed prisoners in ways so vicious that King Maric had disavowed him. Raleigh's lands had not been restored, and he had taken service as commander of the Arl of Denerim's guard. He had been murdered, under mysterious circumstances—

-Two years ago.

"Did you kill him?" Bronwyn interrupted to ask.

"Yes." Leliana met her eyes with a dark look. "Yes. I mean...the last blow was struck by my friend Silas, who had suffered from him as well, but I was there. Marjolaine escaped, and I was sickened by it all, and did not pursue her. You must understand, when I was captured...He did terrible things to me..."

"I am sure he did. Where is this Silas now?"

"I am not sure. He, too, decided to give his life to serving the Chantry. The last I heard, he had become a Templar, and was stationed at the Chantry in West Hill."

"Do you think this Marjolaine would pursue him, too?"

"No...no. Silas only aided my escape. I think this is about something else."

"It's about those documents you stole and returned isn't it?"

"I think it must be."

"And you read them."

"Of course."

Bronwyn glared at her. "I'm waiting."

Leliana hesitated. "This is...perilous information. I am afraid that it will endanger you..."

"It has already endangered me. This Marjolaine of yours will proceed on the assumption that I have this information, anyway. Tell me everything."

Leliana took a deep breath, and plunged into her explanation. "Marjolaine is a...conduit of information. She is the eyes and ears of the Empress in Denerim-though I believe the Empress has other eyes and ears as well. Many people wish to communicate with the Empress of Orlais, but of course it would be considered treason to do so through any but official diplomatic channels...You know this, I am sure. Still, there are those who *do* wish to communicate privately with the Empress, and Marjolaine is their contact."

"Who?"

"The Arl of Denerim is one. The letters I saw mentioned the Arl of Redcliffe as well-the one who is dead now. Marjolaine also...received communications from the Palace. She did not

tell me outright, but I believe King Cailan used her to send messages to the Empress that he did not wish his Queen or Teyrn Loghain to know of."

Bronwyn felt a cold trickle of dread at the words, and believed them if only for that reason. Cailan treating in secret with the Empress? *That fool!* she thought instantly. *Playing at diplomacy like a child! What has he told her? What undertakings has he made?*

Keeping her voice level, she said, "I need to know exactly what those papers contained."

It could actually have been worse. Leliana recalled no explicit vows of loyalty in the letters, but the Arl had given the Empress a great deal of useful information, apparently in exchange for gold and some quiet trade concessions: the numbers and armaments of the Royal Army; details of the fortifications of the walls, the Gate House, and of Fort Drakon; plans for ship-building and new fortifications at Highever and Amaranthine; gossip about the fractures in the relationship between the King and his father-in-law; the state of health of everyone of importance; and the Arl's own opinion that the Queen would never bear a child, not because she was necessarily barren (though that was a useful rumor), but because the King was sterile.

At that last, Bronwyn gasped and leaned against the stones, now warmed by the late afternoon sun. "Maker's Blood!" she groaned. "Do you know where Marjolaine lives in Denerim?" she asked, after a moment.

"I know the house where she lived two years ago. It is in the Market District..."

"Good. I believe we shall have to pay her a call. Very soon."

The pass narrowed up ahead, and was mostly filled by the road. Bronwyn could see why the Orlesians had chosen to invade by sea, rather than squeezing through this difficult mountain route. That the Tevinters of old had succeeded in putting the road through here was a testament to their brilliant engineering and powerful magic.

Bronwyn called all her companions together, and impressed on them the importance of saying absolutely nothing about the ambush. If they were to have revenge, no warning must reach those who had paid for the attack. No one was to speak of it: not to the the soldiers at Gherlen's Halt, not to the maids, the stableboys, or any chance acquaintances.

The papers on the mercenaries were vague-or more likely, made use of code names-but they hinted at things that made Bronwyn very worried about the state of Ferelden. It would not be enough to simply send a note to Fergus, warning him about this woman Marjolaine. She needed to be stopped, and all her correspondence needed to be impounded before she could destroy it.

But did such a mission justify the attention of all the Wardens in Ferelden? Probably not. If Riordan came...if there could be a Joining...if enough of her companions survived...*Oh, Maker,*

protect them!...Then, perhaps, she might consider dividing their force. Alistair could lead the party that would travel with the dwarves on the surface. She could take a few reliable companions and ride for Denerim, as quickly as possible.

A few twists, and they came upon a small fortress, carved out of the living rock. This was Gherlen's Halt. Dwarven work, by the look of it. Not half a mile away, its twin frowned at them, The Orlesian castle, Roc du Chevalier, was more elaborate and much, much larger.

Gherlen's Halt was quite old, and bore the scars of the terrible siege of Blessed 8:85, when it held out for eight months against the Orlesians. It had fallen at last, and the survivors of the garrison had been slaughtered to the last man, woman, and child. Unsurprisingly, the current garrison regarded their opposite numbers on the other side of the border with inveterate dislike and suspicion.

"I'm not to give passage to parties of Orlesians of over ten," the commander warned them. "Not even if they're Grey Wardens." The man's voice gentled. "Not to be disrespectful. We've received word of the Battle of Ostagar, even in this Maker-forsaken place. We've heard what you did. It's just that I have my orders, you understand."

"Of course. I intend to go to the Rock alone to deliver a message. One of the Orlesian Wardens said he would meet with me if I sent a message to him in Jader. I wasn't a Grey Warden more than a day before the battle, and there's a great deal about the Grey Wardens I simply don't know. Are

you sending reports regularly to Teyrn Loghain?" Bronwyn asked, fastening on his earlier remark.

"Every month, my lady. Mind you, I don't always hear back. Queer things happen to the couriers, sometimes."

"No doubt! However, I have news for the teyrn that he will want as soon as possible. Would it be possible for me to send a report to him through you? And a letter to my brother, Teyrn Cousland?"

"Of course, my lady!"

This was plain good news. Equally welcome was the commander's willingness to put up their party, dwarves, elves, qunari, and all.

"I still don't like the idea of you going by yourself, Bronwyn," Alistair complained.

"Alistair," Bronwyn said softly. "You can't cross the border into Orlais. Not half a mile, not a yard, not an inch. It would get about that you "went to Orlais," and you know it would make people suspicious of your motives. You, above all, can't do anything questionable."

"You mean *Teyrn Loghain* wouldn't like it!" he challenged her.

"Obviously he wouldn't like it, but I'm just as worried that other people will start whispering that you were secretly dealing with the Orlesians. After what happened on the way here we

can't take for granted that your secret really is a secret. People are watching us, Alistair: people who have motives and agendas of their own. You think nobody knows that you're the son of the King, but I suspect that one day it is going to come out, and then people will scrutinize your every move very carefully."

Alistair was not the only one who disliked the idea of her riding across the border alone.

"I'll go with you," Cullen volunteered. "Why shouldn't you have a companion? It's appropriate, after all."

"I could go—" Anders spoke up.

"No mages," Bronwyn decided. "No mages at all. We know that the Orlesians are even more strict about Chantry doctrine than we are in Ferelden. You're not officially a Grey Warden yet, and if they knew that, someone might try to make trouble. If you really want to go, Cullen, let's get moving. No, Scout, you stay. Orlesians don't understand about proper dogs."

The towers and battlements of Roc du Chevalier loomed closer as they trotted across the no-man's land between the two castles. Bronwyn felt horribly exposed. They were challenged at the gate house, and Bronwyn called back. "I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn. I have come with a message for the Senior Warden of Jader!"

There was an inaudible exchange, and the enormous portcullis was cranked up.

"You may pass, Grey Wardens!"

Bronwyn kept her face completely blank, thinking that nearly all Fereldans who had seen the wide and paved courtyard of the Rock had seen it as prisoners, who were either awaiting execution by beheading or breaking on the wheel, or who had been sentenced to be cast into the notorious *oubliettes* of the dungeons, where they would never see the light of day again. She glanced up at the heavy stone gate, and saw a murder hole directly above her, where defenders could pour boiling oil or molten lead on an attacker. She gritted her teeth, refusing to shudder in front of the enemies of her blood.

Deferential elven grooms hurried up. They helped Bronwyn and Cullen dismount, and held their horses, eyes cast down.

A tall chevalier in splendid armor emerged from a door at the top of a stone staircase. He came down the steps with dignity and gave them a gracious bow. "You are the Grey Warden Bronwyn Cousland, I presume?" he asked. "Berthold de Guesclin, Commander of the Rock, *à votre service*."

Bronwyn bowed in her turn, and slipped into Orlesian easily enough. Her parents had insisted that she must know Orlesian, and know it well. Aldous had drummed it into her, sometimes with a whitewood switch. A pillar of her education was the demand that she speak, read, and write this language, and thus avoid the thousand inconveniences, embarrassments, and dangers that befell nobles on a diplomatic mission who did not speak the local tongue.

De Guesclin was impressed by her fluency and charmed by her excellent accent. His brows rose and his smile broadened as he complimented her gallantly.

"You are the daughter of that noble man, *le Prince Cousland*! I once had the honor to be in company with him, on the occasion of his visit to Val Royaux."

He was courteous to Cullen, too, at first thinking him Alistair. Bronwyn watched these civilities uneasily. De Guesclin was very well informed about her party. Then she relaxed. Of course, the Grey Warden messenger sent by Riordan would know the names of the two actual Grey Wardens.

De Guesclin led them to his luxurious office, offered them wine, and mentioned that the last Grey Warden to visit had been hoping that Bronwyn would have a message for the Senior Warden of Jader.

"I received his invitation, as you see," said Bronwyn lightly, "and I am here. I have a letter to be delivered to him in Jader, if it does not inconvenience you."

"No inconvenience at all," de Guesclin assured her with a laugh. "I was not proposing to deliver it myself. Ogier!" he called.

A young officer appeared.

"The Grey Warden Bronwyn has a message for the Senior Warden of Jader. It is to be delivered to him with all speed."

He turned to Bronwyn. "Is the letter already prepared?"

"Yes." Bronwyn passed the sealed parchment to young Ogier. "My thanks!"

"An honor," Ogier assured her. De Guesclin waved him away, and the young man hurried out, boots sounding on the stone of the steps. He called for a horse and within a few minutes was clattering out of the courtyard.

"He will be there by tonight," said de Guesclin. "The road to Jader is excellent. It is entirely possible that Warden Riordan will be here before noon tomorrow. I gathered that he was most anxious to speak to you."

Bronwyn smiled. "I am most anxious to speak to him." She considered the contents of her brief message.

Greetings, Senior Warden Riordan:

Your message gave Alistair and myself no small amount of pleasure. We have arrived at Gherlen's Halt. We bring with us a number of recruits who wish to take the Joining. It would be of great service if you would bring what is necessary. Since some are still undecided, we must plan for a maximum of eight, and a minimum of five.

If you have any books of lore that you think would be of use to new Wardens, it would be a kindness to allow us a look at them.

Your sister,

Bronwyn

Since she had no idea what it was proper to call her herself, she gave only her name. She was about to write "Cousland" after her first name, and then remembered that Grey Wardens were not really supposed to have family names. Teyrn Loghain might regard her as the commander in Ferelden, but to call herself commander when she commanded only one other Warden seemed foolishly arrogant. No doubt this Riordan would regard her as a neophyte, and she had no desire to appear any more green than was completely unavoidable.

And then there was a need to deal with de Guesclin briskly, for the chevalier offered them the hospitality of his castle until the arrival of Riordan. This Bronwyn had expected, and had prepared a polite refusal, and a reference to her companions left at Gherlen's Halt. It was impossible to expect a Fereldan to voluntarily stay at a place so infamous, and perhaps de Guesclin understood that, for he very civilly did not press the matter. Bronwyn and Cullen finished their wine, paid the appropriate compliments, and rode out through the portcullis again with all the dispatch consistent with courtesy. Bronwyn gave a deep sigh of relief when she was out of bowshot.

The accommodations at Gherlen's Halt were not at all up to the standard of the Wardens' Hostel in Orzammar, but Bronwyn did not expect them to be. They were given a big

stone room with a fire on the hearth and rough bunk beds lining one of the walls. There was a trestle table with benches in the middle of the floor. The food they were served was plain but plentiful, and Bronwyn kept a close eye on her people, just in case someone should start blabbing about today's adventures when the servants could hear them.

Alistair spoke low, his hand over his mouth. "So we're going to Denerim to track this woman down? Isn't that out of our way?"

"It *is* out of our way, but Marjolaine has threatened the mission of the Wardens. We can't let that stand. And there is the matter of Howe, too. He may be in Denerim, pleading his case before the Queen. He, too, has tried to thwart us. It all depends on who we're left with after the Joining. I'm praying that they all make it. If there are enough of us, we might split up."

"They might," Alistair consoled her. "They just might! They're a tough bunch, and they've all fought darkspawn now. I've heard of Joinings that everyone survived. It happens. One request: if we split up, don't put me in charge, and don't make me take Morrigan."

Bronwyn laughed out loud at that, shaking her head. If they split up, Alistair would definitely be in charge of his party, and he would have to accept his responsibilities, both as a Warden and as King Maric's son. There would be time to persuade him of the necessity later. "Cullen!" she called down the table. "Thank you for riding with me today. You looked

suitably stern and impressive."

The man blushed, and Brosca jabbed him in the ribs, grinning broadly. "Big and healthy! I like that in a man! So," she said, "How about it?"

Cullen looked at her warily out of the corner of his eye, ready to run. "How about what?"

"A story!" Brosca shouted. "You're next! I know you are! Here we are in a nice, safe, *stony* place, so it's time for you to tell a story."

"I know he's got one," Tara declared. "I've seen him practicing."

Cheers and applause. Now red as a sugar beet, Cullen rose, stood by the fire, and cleared his throat. Several times.

Cullen's story of the King of the Golden Mountain:

There was once a young man named Jack, whose father and mother had died. The farm went to his elder brother, and the brother's wife wanted to get rid of Jack, for she said he was too big and too clumsy, and was eating them out of house and home. So Jack went out into the world to seek his fortune. He took service on a ship bound for the north, but there was a great storm, and the ship broke apart. Jack was very strong, and clung to a piece of wreckage all night, and in the morning found himself on the shores of a strange land.

He roused himself, and looked about, and began walking. Soon he saw a beautiful castle before him, and set out to go to it. But when he entered it, he found that it was cursed. Everywhere were snares and traps. Jack had no weapon but his fists, and fought manfully every step of the way. He went through every room, but all were empty until he reached the last, where a snake lay coiled in a ring. Jack looked for something he could use to kill it, when the snake spoke to him.

Now this snake was an enchanted maiden, who rejoiced at his coming, and she said, "Have you come at last, my deliverer? I have waited so long for you. I and my kingdom, the Golden Mountain, are enslaved by magic, and you must set us free."

"How can I do that?" wondered Jack.

The snake replied, "Tonight will come twelve demon thralls, covered with chains, who will ask what you are doing here; but be silent, give them no answer, and let them do what they will with you. They will torment you, beat you, stab you, but do not speak. At midnight they must go away again. On the second night twelve others will come, on the third, four-and-twenty. These will cut off your head. At midnight, however, their power will be over, and then if you have endured all, and have not spoken the slightest word, I shall be delivered. After they have gone, I will come to you and will have, in a bottle, some of the Water of Life. I will rub you with that, and then you will come to life again, and be as healthy as before."

Then said he, "I will gladly set you free."

And everything happened just as she had said, the demon thralls could not force a single word from him, and on the third night the snake became a beautiful princess, who came with the water of life and brought him back to life again.

So she threw herself into his arms and kissed him, and there was joy and gladness in the whole castle. After this their marriage was celebrated, and he was King of the Golden Mountain.

They lived very happily together, and the queen bore a fine boy. Five years passed, and then the King bethought him of his brother, his heart was moved, and he wished to visit him. The Queen, however, would not let him go away, and said, "I foresee that it will cause us unhappiness."

He would not be denied, and allowed her no rest until she consented. At their parting she gave him a wishing-ring, and said, "Take this ring and put it on your finger, and then you will immediately be transported whithersoever you would be: only you must promise me to return in three days."

That he promised her, put the ring on his finger, and wished himself at home, just outside the farmhouse where his brother lived. Instantly he found himself there, but when he came to the door, his brother's wife did not know him at first, because he wore such strange and yet such rich and magnificent clothing. Then she recognized him, and thought, "Jack has come into some money. It is time he shared his good fortune with his family."

His brother came from the fields, and his wife whispered to him of Jack's great wealth. They made a great show of welcome to him and gave him a good meal, and asked him where had been for the past five years. Then he told them that he was King of the Golden Mountain, that a wise and beautiful Queen was his wife, and that they had a fine son, just turned four years old.

"He has come to take back the farm, certainly," said the brother's wife. The brother agreed, for Jack was bigger and stronger, and in the past five years had become bigger and stronger still.

Then the wife put a certain herb in Jack's ale, which caused him to fall asleep. While he slept, the brother and his wife stripped him of his clothes and jewels and coin. They even took the wishing-ring, but when the brother's wife touched it, it burnt her finger, for it was a thing not right for her to touch. This angered her, and she threw it in the dung-heap. They put Jack in a wheelbarrow, and trundled him, half-naked as he was, out to the forest, and left him there.

When he awoke, he found himself in nothing but his smallclothes, and the ring was gone from his finger. He rushed from the forest in a rage to seek revenge against his treacherous brother. When he came near the farm, however, he saw that a crowd of neighbors were there, for the brother and his wife had sent word that Jack was a mage, and had threatened them. Jack listened from hiding in dismay. He could prove he was not a mage, but he could not prove they had robbed and betrayed him. Sick at heart, he turned away,

only snatching some ragged garments from a clothesline to cover himself. Even his fine boots were gone.

He said to himself, "I must be off, and find a ship that can take me back to the Golden Mountain." So he went away in sorrow, and walked far and wide for many months, hungry and alone, but no one he spoke to knew where he might find the Golden Mountain.

He came one day to a glade where some Dalish elves were gathered, disputing with each other because they did not know how to divide their clan's heirlooms.

When they saw him passing by, they called to him and said, "You are a shemlen and have no personal interest in our quarrel, and thus will be able to divide our heirlooms fairly."

There were three items in dispute. The first was a sword, set with fine jewels. This sword had a great power. If anyone took it in his hand, and said, "All heads off but mine," every head would lie on the ground. The second item was a cloak which made anyone who put it on invisible. The third was a pair of boots which could transport the wearer to any place he wished in a moment. Jack agreed to help them, and said, "Give me the three things that I may see if they are still in good condition."

They gave him the cloak, and when he had put it on, he was invisible indeed. Then he said, "The cloak does all you claim. Now give me the sword."

They said, "No, we will not give you that, for if you were to say, 'all heads off but mine,' we would be beheaded straightaway."

Nevertheless they gave it to him on the condition that he was only to try it against a tree. This he did, and the sword cut in two the trunk of a tree as if it had been a blade of straw. Then he wanted to have the boots likewise, but they said, "No, we will not give them, for if you had them on your feet and were to wish yourself at the top of the hill, we should be left down here with nothing."

Jack shook his head, and said, "Oh, no. I would never do that."

So they gave him the boots as well. When he had got all these things, he could not help thinking of his wife and his child, and no sooner had the wish to see them crossed his mind, then he vanished from the sight of the elves, and thus was their inheritance divided. Jack knew he had wronged the elves, but he did not regret it, for before him was the Golden Mountain, and he would soon see the ones he loved again.

As Jack came to the palace, he heard sounds of joy, of lutes and of flutes, and the people told him that the Queen was celebrating her wedding to a great nobleman. Then he fell into a rage, and said, "The wicked woman! She, too, has betrayed and deserted me!"

So he put on his cloak, and unseen by all went into the palace. When he entered the dining-hall a great table was spread with

delicious food, and the guests were eating and drinking and laughing and jesting. The Queen sat on a royal seat in the midst of them in splendid apparel, with a crown on her head.

Jack placed himself behind her, and no one saw him. When she put a piece of meat on a plate for herself, he took it away and ate it, and when she poured out a glass of wine for herself, he took it away and drank it. She was always helping herself to something, and yet she never got anything, for plate and glass disappeared immediately. Then she arose and went to her chamber and wept, but he followed her there. She said, "Am I still in the power of the demon? Did my deliverer never come?"

Jack struck her in the face, and said, "'Did your deliverer never come?' I am here, faithless as you are. Did I deserve such treatment from you?" And he removed the cloak, and was visible.

"How dare you strike me!" the Queen cried. "It is you! It is you! You swore to return in three days, and you have been gone a year! I thought you dead, or that you had forgotten me!"

Jack was ashamed, and told her of his brother's wife's treachery.

"Is it not as I said?" the Queen demanded. "Was not your journey a misfortune for us both? And now all the nobles in the land have gathered and demanded that I take one of them as my husband. I have not the power to be rid of them. If I

refuse, they will kill me and our son!"

Jack said, "Fear nothing, and stay within these rooms with the door closed."

Then he went into the hall, and cried, "The wedding is at an end. The true king has returned!"

The noblemen who were assembled there laughed him to scorn, but he did not trouble to answer them, and said, "Will you go away, or will you not?"

They rushed at him and tried to seize him, but he drew his sword and shouted, "All heads off but mine!"

Then all their heads fell to the ground, and he was then and forever more King of the Golden Mountain.

"I want that sword," said Brozca, "but only if I'm on my own. It would be really embarrassing to cut off all your friends' heads, too."

"It most certainly would," Bronwyn agreed sternly. "So don't anybody get any ideas about charming weapons that way."

Leliana thought it over. "That is a very good story. So he did make peace with his wife, did he not?"

Morrigan snickered, "As long as she did not become too curious, and open the door!"

Tara and Zevran were not so pleased. "It seems to me," Zevran pointed out, "that while everything worked out so very well for the hero of the tale, the Dalish elves did not exactly benefit by his mediation."

"He was a thieving shem," Tara muttered, glaring at Cullen.

"He didn't mean to be," he admitted sheepishly.

Astrid spoke up, surprising Bronwyn. "He allowed himself to be tricked by his brother. He should have been more cautious."

"Famous last words?" taunted Oghren, setting down his tankard and wiping foam from his mustache.

"Perhaps," Astrid granted sourly. "He underestimated the power of fraternal malice. That is a great mistake. He is fortunate to have survived."

Sten shook his head. "But the brother and his wife were fools. True, they might have obtained some money by the sale of the brother's clothes, but they might have gained more by having a brother who was a king, could they not? They could have asked for an estate in his kingdom and been rich. They were foolish and short-sighted and greedy, and thus, I must say, all too human. An instructive tale."

"It's no joke running through a forest in your smallclothes," Anders observed. He saw Alistair staring, and said, "What? It happens. I stole some clothes off a clothesline, too, once. A

mustard-yellow doublet and striped red pants. The Templars arrested me for bad taste within the day."

Notes: Ogre-sized thanks to all my kind reviewers! Happy holidays to Shakespira, khaos974, jen4306, JackOfBladesX, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Sarah1281, Katrina-Irene, Amhran Comhrac, Lehni, demonincargles, Angurvddel, Gene Dark, mutive, elf fan, Aoi24, JOdel, mille libri, Dante Alighieri1308, Have Socks Will Travel, kwintessa, Piceron, Byron'sQmatchie, almostinsane, Windchime68, Dimensionist, Enaid Aderyn, RandomWittering, Halm Vendrella, Costin, and miewings.

The story is adapted from Grimm, but I have altered it quite a bit and added some of the return of Ulysses.

25. Hands Across the Border

Victory at Ostagar

Notes: Major spoilers for The Calling below...

Chapter 25: Hands Across the Border

Wind whipped along the highest parapet of Gherlen's Halt. It was the perfect spot to see everything that moved across the border. As such, Bronwyn had assigned a rota of her companions to keep an eye on the road that led to Roc du Chevalier, and monitor any activity there.

"The Commander is of noble birth, then?" Astrid asked Tara, squinting against the strange, cold rush of air and the unnatural brightness of the surface.

"Very noble," Tara told her. "The Couslands are the most important family in Ferelden after the King. In fact, I heard that her father was nearly elected King himself. They say it doesn't matter, now that she's a Grey Warden, but I've noticed that often people treat us better because of her name. She knows lots of influential people. Of course, there was that time that some assassins tried to kill us because of a family feud, but we cut them down to size." She smothered her laughter with a hand. "But don't talk about that in front of

Zevran. He led the assassins. It might hurt his feelings to remind him about his failure."

"Zevran attempted to assassinate her, and yet lives?" Astrid said coolly. "He must have exchanged a great deal of useful information to buy his life."

"That, too," agreed Tara, "but I don't think Bronwyn likes to kill people in cold blood. Once he surrendered, she felt she either had to let him go or take him along, and he asked to be taken along. Alistair told Cullen that she thought it was better to keep an eye on him than to let him sneak up behind us."

Astrid snorted. "Cutting his throat would have been the simplest option of all."

Tara disliked any criticism of the woman who had saved her. "Well, Bronwyn isn't *simple*."

Hours passed, and the day wore on. The sun dropped from the heights of noon. All the dwarves took their turn on the windy parapet. It was another way to acclimatize them to surface life, and not the most unpleasant. If the empty sky became unbearable, one could admire the engineering of the Rock or turn one's eyes to the stony cliff faces supporting Gherlen's Halt. You could also, like Oghren, learn not to spit into the wind.

And further below, in a corner of the room the Wardens shared, Bronwyn and Alistair bickered over their plans.

"You *will* lead the second party, Alistair, and I know you'll do well. I can't be in two places at once, and I *must* track down this woman in Denerim. Now look," she said, thumping the map. "We will proceed together to the Gherlen Docks, *here*, and if there is a ship available, sail across Lake Calenhad. The ship will drop me off *here*, and I will make a dash for Denerim through the Bannorn. If no ship is available, we will take the Imperial Highway north to the village by the Lake Calenhad docks. Our party will separate there. You will go to the Deep Roads entrance *here*, and camp, awaiting the dwarven army. Once the underground forces have arrived and resupplied, you will continue south with the surface contingents above ground on the Lake Road down to Lake Belennas, where you will once again reunite with the balance of King Bhelen's army. They will ascend to the surface, and march overland to Ostagar. I will meet you between there—" she pointed to the source of the River Dane "—and there" her finger traveled south to the other side of Lake Belennas. "We can ford the Narrows and take the Imperial Highway to the Hinterland Road, which will cut two days off your journey to Ostagar. We will access the Imperial Highway *there*, and then, if the army is still at Ostagar, we will join them."

"What if the army *isn't* there?" Alistair asked sullenly. "What if the King's retreated?"

"Well, I'll keep my ears open in Denerim. You do likewise as you go south. There may be news at the Spoiled Princess and all along the Lake Road. Send a rider to Lothering for news. We can't take the whole dwarven army through there—they

would trample it flat—but we can get some supplies there and plenty of intelligence."

"I don't like it."

"I *know*."

A soldier popped his head through the door. "Warden! You've got visitors!"

Bronwyn stared at Alistair, who stared back. None of their lookouts had reported anyone crossing the border this morning.

Wondering if it might be a courier from King Bhelen, Bronwyn rose, and called back. "Who is it?"

"A man and an elf woman. Wouldn't give their names. They say you've got a 'mutual friend.'" The soldier snorted at the term. "Should we send them about their business?"

"No. I'll talk to them." She and Alistair looked at each other. If they were more assassins, they had picked the wrong killing ground.

Down the endless stairs, through the noisy sparring room, more stairs and then skirting the edge of the Great Hall. Quiet voices echoed off the lofty beamed ceiling. They walked out the wide doors. Down in the courtyard were their visitors, wrapped in anonymous grey cloaks.

Bronwyn's senses suddenly prickled. She stopped, and threw

a wild look at Alistair. He was grinning enormously.

"Wardens!" he whispered eagerly. "Come on!"

She had not seen another Warden in months. These beings seemed as implausible as griffins. Striding swiftly toward them, she looked them over. The man was tall and dark-bearded, in his middle years but brimming with vigor. He looked back at her with a roguish gleam in his eye.

The elven woman's hair was streaked with white and cropped short. She was carrying a staff. A *mage*? She was not smiling, but seemed instead anxious and strained. She had eyes for no one but Alistair.

Bronwyn extended her hand to the man. "Brother!" she said softly, "—and sister! You are most welcome!"

The man took her hand, and bowed over it. "Riordan of Jader, and this," he gestured to his companion, "is Senior Mage Warden Fiona. We are delighted to meet you."

"I am Bronwyn, of course," she said, feeling a bit awkward.

"—and I'm Alistair."

"We've been watching for you all day," Bronwyn told them, "but you seem to have eluded our scrutiny."

"And that of others," Riordan said easily. "We wished to make an somewhat less—how shall I say?—*conspicuous* entrance than the commander of the Rock had planned. There are

many paths through the Frostbacks."

"Well—" Bronwyn had rarely been so relieved. "Come and join us! Our accommodations are not the grandest, but you are welcome to all we have!"

"No," Fiona said, very sharp and quiet. Her eyes left Alistair long enough to give Bronwyn an odd, raking glance, her mouth pursed. She was beautiful, as elves generally were, and was possibly in her late thirties or early forties, but hers was a spare, ascetic beauty: to look at, and not to touch. Bronwyn sensed that for some reason the elf disapproved of her. She frowned in response, and Alistair hesitated, unsure of himself.

Riordan smiled at their expressions. "What my wise sister means to say is that the Commander here would not wish to admit two unknown Orlesians to his keep. And we do not wish to give our names, as Monseigneur de Guesclin is impatiently awaiting us at the Rock. His courier is resting quietly, with a most atrocious hangover, at the Compound in Jader, and will return with a message that both I and Warden Fiona were away. When we do arrive at the Rock in a few days, you will already, alas, have departed. Such a misfortune."

"Besides," Fiona added, her eyes still on Alistair, "you wish to hold a Joining, do you not? We cannot hold it in a castle, since there may be bodies to dispose of."

"I see," Bronwyn said slowly. Clearly these Wardens had expected trouble of some sort. "What do you propose?"

"There is an abandoned hunting lodge off the road, not far from here." He very quietly gave directions, while Bronwyn nodded, listening for the meaning beneath the words. "Meet us there. We shall have a long talk, and your friends shall have their Joining."

"Bring only those who have cast aside all doubt," Fiona added, her dark eyes burning.

"We're going to meet them and confer. Those of you who wish to become Wardens must come with us."

A rustle among the companions at the table. Oghren scratched his scalp.

"You don't think this is a trap or something, do you?" wondered Cullen.

Alistair huffed with annoyance. "No, it's not a *trap*. These are *Wardens*."

"I think it's clear that someone was planning *something*," Bronwyn temporized, "but Riordan and Fiona have evaded it, and wish us to evade it as well. We must go immediately, and we'll be gone all night. Pack up now if you're coming." She paused, and words of Duncan's, half-forgotten, came to her lips. "I will not lie. The Joining is dangerous. If you come with us, you cannot change your mind later on."

A silence. Then Tara got up, shoving her belongings into her

backpack. "Well," she said, "I was conscripted, so I *have* to join. See you all later."

"Tara—" Bronwyn began.

"No," the elf insisted. "I *have* to join. If I don't, I might as well go back to the Circle and let them do whatever they like to me, because I wouldn't deserve any better." She managed a bleak little smile. "Maybe someday I'll be a Senior Mage Warden, like that Fiona. I can't wait to meet her."

Morrigan said briskly, "Well, I am *not* going with you, and will instead spend a pleasant day reading while the rest of you risk your lives." To emphasize her words, she lifted the book in her hands until it covered her face.

"Really?" Anders murmured, as he buckled his pack. "Not going?"

"Absolutely not. If you do not return in three days, I shall send a message to that Circle of yours, telling them that the whole Grey Warden business was perhaps not your best move."

"Suit yourself."

"I am not going either," Zevran said, flashing white teeth at Morrigan, "I shall instead endeavor to amuse the fair Wilder mage."

"Climb to the topmost parapet and let us see how well you fly," Morrigan shrugged. "I should find that *most* amusing."

Oghren stared at the table. "Is this a one-time offer, or can I think about it?"

Bronwyn looked over and smiled briefly. "Of course you can think about it. If you decide you want to be a Warden someday, then you would be welcome. Take all the time you like. But for *today*," she said, "we need to get moving."

So there were Tara and Anders, and Cullen, silently preparing himself, whispering a prayer. There was eager Broasca and further off, aloof Astrid. Leliana was hesitating... then made up her mind to it, and came to Bronwyn's side.

Sten stood at the window, frowning. "I have wrestled with this decision. The Qunari people have no treaty with the Grey Wardens, and thus your conscription has no force with me. I am under orders from the Arishok, and it seems to me that someday your orders and theirs might conflict. I will gladly serve you while here in this land, but some day I must return to my people and give my report. Therefore, I cannot join your Order. Do you wish me to leave your company?"

She was a little disappointed, but could see the logic of his position. "No. You are right. If your Arishok has a prior claim, it is proper that you do your duty. I welcome you as a companion, even if not as a Warden."

"It is well," he nodded. He sat down again, and took out his whetstone. By the time their party left, he was absorbed in sharpening his eating knife.

Up a rocky, winding path and into the trees. The horses picked their way carefully as the light dimmed. The riders brooded over what was to come. Bronwyn thought of the jar of darkspawn blood, cushioned in her backpack by her linen shirts. She hoped it would be enough.

The vertical shapes of the trees yielded to strange angles. A high-pitched roof and heavy beams appeared, and then, slowly, the lodge as whole, as if it were reluctant to admit to its identity.

"That must be the place," Alistair said quietly. Scout trotted ahead, sniffing. It was old and on the verge of crumbling: the ground floor of stone and the rest of dark timber. Smoke puffed from the chimney. There appeared to be another, smaller building in back that Bronwyn hoped was a stable.

Riordan came out to greet them, arms wide in exuberant welcome. Bronwyn returned his infectious smile. He seemed all right. The elf, Fiona, emerged from the lodge, looking far more grave. Bronwyn was unsure what she thought of the woman. Not that it mattered very much. After tomorrow, it was likely that they would never meet again.

"Well met, brothers and sisters!" called Riordan. "There is room in the stable for your horses, and we left hot cider there to warm you. If the rest of you would be good enough to care for the animals, Fiona and I must speak to Alistair and Bronwyn inside."

Bronwyn jumped down and slung her backpack over one

shoulder, the vital darkspawn blood concealed inside like poison festering in a wound. Alistair raised his brows, and followed her and the Orlesians up the sagging steps and into the house.

As a shelter, it was not bad. Bronwyn resolved to note this place on her map. It would do well in foul weather, and there was plenty of room for everyone to spread out their blankets at night. A door led to a lean-to, where Fiona had laid out ingredients for the Joining potion on a small table. An ornate silver cup was pushed to the side, absurdly out of place in the rustic shelter.

"A dog?" The elf regarded Scout with no great surprise. "We are truly in Ferelden, aren't we?" She gestured at her work. "We brought Archdemon blood, and *some* darkspawn blood, though you should actually have brought your own. No one should undergo the Joining who has not slain darkspawn."

Bronwyn, stiffened at the woman's condescending tone. She found her intensely irritating, though it would be impolitic to say so at the moment. Swiftly, she unwrapped the heavy crockery jar and thumped it onto the work table. "Every one of my companions has killed darkspawn," Bronwyn replied. "*Lots* of darkspawn. We spent *weeks* in the Deep Roads. I collected this darkspawn blood at various battles, and one of our mages put a preservation spell on it for me."

"This should suffice," Riordan agreed, examining it, "though in future you will want to have each recruit collect a separate vial. It's tradition."

Bronwyn only nodded, not bothering to point out that they had had absolutely no idea when they were going to be able to initiate the Wardens. It would have been very peculiar to order each recruit to carry a vial of darkspawn blood in their packs for weeks or possibly months. In a perfect world, she *would* have had her recruits collect their own Joining blood.

"A drop of Archdemon blood, like so. And then the lyrium is added," said Fiona, showing her the procedure. "We brought a Joining chalice with us, as you see."

"Thank you," Bronwyn said, thinking of the handsome cup she had packed for the purpose. It was pointless to argue, and the Orlesians' goblet was bigger and grander, unsurprisingly. She struggled to tamp down a surge of resentment.

"Have you ever attended a Joining other than your own?" asked Fiona, as she worked.

"No," said Bronwyn.

"-Yes," said Alistair.

"Then Alistair should say the words of the Joining," Fiona decided. Riordan took a breath, but Alistair interrupted.

"I said the words at Bronwyn's Joining! It's her turn this time."

He sounded just like Fergus had, years ago, when they bickered over who would curry the horses or set up the tent. It made Bronwyn smile, and she responded in the way that

always drove her brother mad, when she used it in the presence of Mother and Father.

"If you like," she agreed amiably, with a virtuous air. "I don't mind."

Fiona, however, was not her mother. The elf set the potion aside and fixed her with cold eyes. "I am sure you do not! I am sure you do not mind usurping his authority in this or any other thing!" She took a step closer, unintimidated by Bronwyn's height. "I have heard of you, '*Girl Warden!*' Your birth may have been noble, but such things do not matter in the Wardens! It gives you no right to supplant those with more experience!"

Unprepared for such an attack, Bronwyn stared at the elf, only startled at first, then very offended. "I have never *usurped* anything of Alistair's that he wanted," she answered hotly. "I have never *supplanted* Alistair! You make it sound like I've plotted against him to seize the title of Warden-Commander... of all *two* of us! That's absurd!"

"Bronwyn's great!" Alistair objected, bewildered by the elf's anger. "She's a terrific leader, and I *hate* being in charge. So it's perfect!"

Riordan stepped between them. "Fiona," he murmured, lightly touching the elf mage's shoulder. "They know themselves best. We can help them with the Joining, and give them information, but we cannot order their lives for them."

"Quite so," Bronwyn agreed coldly, and turned away. "If we are done here, I shall fetch the others."

Riordan followed her outside. "Fiona had unpleasant dealings with nobles in her youth," he told Bronwyn. "It has made her suspicious of them. She came today because she truly wishes to help in the struggle against the Blight."

Bronwyn blew out a breath and tried to calm herself. "I lead because Alistair *will* not. I saw that in him right away. That does not mean I don't like and respect him. He's a splendid warrior and a loyal friend."

"I understand," Riordan said, his voice warm and soothing. "In the end, someone must be in charge, and it is no pleasure, but a burden that cannot be relinquished. I know this well. However, it is not of that I need to talk to you." He looked at her sadly. "Some of your recruits may flinch from the Joining. If that happens..."

"It happened at my Joining. Duncan killed the man. I know what to do, but I *trust* my people. No one will shirk."

He smiled then, and patted her arm. "May the Maker watch over them. Fetch them. I will deal with Fiona." He paused, and smirked at her. "You *do* remember the Joining words, do you not?"

A reluctant laugh burst forth. "I've thought about little else for days! Yes, I remember them, and I went over them with Alistair. I think I should be able to acquit myself without

causing us all undue embarrassment!"

"We're going to drink *blood*? Darkspawn *blood*?" Cullen stared at Bronwyn in consternation.

Riordan said, "As all Wardens have before you. This is the source of our power...and our victory."

"This is...Blood Magic?" Cullen stammered, completely out of his depth.

Riordan shifted slightly, one hand sliding discreetly to the dagger in his belt. Bronwyn gritted her teeth, and prayed for help to anyone who might be listening.

He must accept the cup. He must.

Anders, surprisingly, spoke up, quick and convincing. "It sounds more like how the Templars use the blood in mages' phylacteries for tracking, only we ingest it. That's right, isn't it?" he appealed to Bronwyn. "It's how Grey Wardens are able to track the darkspawn."

Bronwyn felt unspeakable gratitude to Anders, and gave Cullen an encouraging smile. "Yes, that's it exactly."

The ex-Templar shivered violently, stepped back, and gave a nod to say that he was all right. Bronwyn began again.

"Join us, brothers and sisters: join us in the shadows where

we stand vigilant..."

Bronwyn recited the ritual words, looking at each recruit in turn. Young faces glowed with purpose in the last rays of sunset. The shabbiness of their surroundings was softened by the gathering gloom. On a table stood the Joining chalice, brimful of death. and two wax candles in silver candlesticks added a touch of beauty. Soon the room would be lit only by the candles and by the cheerful blaze in the stone fireplace.

"You are called to submit yourself to the Taint for the greater good. Anders, come forward. From this moment you are a Grey Warden."

Bronwyn had decided to take the recruits in alphabetical order, partly because she was so very confident about Anders and Astrid. It was also a way that showed no favoritism.

Anders looked at the contents of the cup, and grimaced.
"Yum."

Bronwyn managed a smile, and took back the cup when he was done. His face distorted almost comically, his eyes rolling back in his head. Riordan motioned Alistair over to help him catch the young mage. Together they laid him down gently on the floor on the other side of the room.

"He lives," Fiona declared.

The others shuffled at that. Perhaps they had not fully realized until that very moment that the liquid in the cup was potentially

lethal.

So the test of courage was not Anders', but Astrid's. When Bronwyn called her forward, she did not hesitate. She boldly accepted the cup and said, "May the Stone accept it."

And she, too, survived. It was Cullen's turn.

He looked at the cup, and then looked again, uncertainty in his eyes.

"Is there no other way?" he pleaded.

Bronwyn shot a fiery glare at Riordan, and stepped forward, putting the cup firmly in Cullen's big hands. She caught his eyes with her own.

"Trust me."

He bit his lip, and nodded, and then quickly downed his share. His face twisted with disgust, and then he was falling backwards, and not, thank the Maker, coughing.

"He lives," Fiona confirmed.

Bronwyn sucked in a huge gulp of air, and then realized that she had been holding her breath. She gave them all a wry smile, and nodded to Brosca.

"Freydis, come forth. From this moment you are a Grey Warden."

"Freydis!" Brosca scoffed. "Aren't we all formal tonight!" She grinned at the contents of the goblet. "If I can drink lichen ale, I can drink this." And proceeded to do so.

"—She lives."

Four done, and safe. And now she called Leliana forth. This was the Joining she had the greatest reservations about, and she struggled to keep her voice steady.

"—you are a Grey Warden."

"Andraste smile upon me," Leliana whispered. A brief swaying, and Bronwyn dreaded with all her heart that the bard would fall forward, choking...

She did not. Alistair caught her, and carried her to where the others lay unconscious. Riordan's eyes gleamed with growing good cheer. Fiona's expression remained inscrutable.

"Tara..." Bronwyn smiled at the pretty elf. "Come forward. From this moment you are a Grey Warden."

The girl made a joke of it. "I hope you saved the best for last." A swallow. Bronwyn took the cup. A moment of exquisite anxiety...

"She lives."

Riordan caught her, and set her down among her comrades.

"Yes!" Alistair bellowed, punching the air in triumph. "Yes!" He

grabbed Bronwyn, hugged her, and dragged her into the first steps of the Remigold. "Yes! We are the best Grey Warden recruiters in all Thedas!"

Scout, who until now had sat as still as a mabari carved on a mantelpiece, began bounding around the room, barking loudly. He rushed over to the recruits, and licked their faces, his tail wagging. Fiona made a face at Riordan, who shrugged, still smiling.

Bronwyn felt like curling up on the floor beside the recruits. Instead she kissed Alistair's cheek and hugged him back. "They're alive! Thank the Maker!"

"It happens, now and then," Riordan confirmed, enjoying their relief.

"Don't expect it to happen *again*," Fiona snorted.

While the newly-Joined slept off their ordeal, Riordan poured cups of cider, and began telling Bronwyn and Alistair the things they most desperately needed to know. "Ordinarily, as Junior Wardens, no one would share this information with you. You are so new to the Order. We prefer that recruits be given time to adapt to this life. I understand that you, Bronwyn, Joined only a few days before the Battle of Ostagar."

Alistair laughed, "Actually, she Joined the day before!"

Fiona shook her head and rolled her eyes. Bronwyn laughed with Alistair and Riordan, and unrolled the recruits' blankets,

covering them up warmly.

"Most of them will sleep through the night," Fiona said. "Those on watch can talk to those who awaken early. They will be hungry. Did you bring provisions?"

"We did."

"We can make a big pot of porridge at dawn," Alistair suggested. "Porridge with sweetening. They'll like that. Even I can make porridge. Actually, now that you mention it..."

Fiona actually laughed. At least it resembled a laugh as much as did a sob or an angry gasp. "I shall make for us some *potée de chasse*-I suppose you would call it Hunter's Stew-with good Jader sausages," she told Alistair, "and you will help me, and learn."

They all lent a hand, in the end, and Riordan and Fiona continued their lessons while lifting or carrying or chopping or stirring. The recruits on the floor sometimes thrashed or moaned in their sleep.

"Who were you evading, in your overland trip?" Bronwyn asked bluntly.

Riordan did not look at her, but said quietly, "You have attracted a great deal of notice, you and Alistair. I was foolishly naïve to send you my invitation through official channels, and think that others would not seek to use this situation to their advantage. As the only Wardens in Ferelden

—the only thing standing between that country and its destruction by the Blight—you are important pieces in something certain people persist in regarding as a Game. You, Bronwyn, are known to be the daughter of Teyrn Cousland, a man who aroused such interest and admiration during his diplomatic missions—a man thought to be only a heartbeat away from the throne of Ferelden. Now that he is dead, his royal claim passes to his children."

"I am a Warden," Bronwyn said quietly. "Nothing 'passes' to me."

"Perhaps not, in ordinary circumstances, but with so few having a claim, exceptions might be made, even for a Warden."

"And Alistair—" whispered Fiona. She shook herself briskly, and said, "There are those in Orlais who do not share the concerns of the Wardens. It is possible that an attempt might be made to use this Blight to benefit one country at another's expense. That, we, as Wardens, cannot allow."

"Some such rumors were passed to us by friends," Riordan told them, with a wry smile. "We discovered that it would have been quite impossible for Monseigneur de Guesclin to have permitted me to cross the border. He would have, instead, graciously invited you to come to the Rock for the Joining. Once there, circumstances beyond your control would have prevented your return."

"They were going to kill us?" Alistair asked, wide-eyed.

"No—no—by no means. No expense would have been spared to make your stay pleasant. Secure, but extremely pleasant. A story would be told to Ferelden of wounds, or sickness, or some such plausible nonsense. Once it became clear that you would not be returning, the King of Ferelden would have no choice but to admit the Wardens of Orlais—on the Empress' terms."

"Which are?" Bronwyn asked, her voice steady.

"Two hundred Wardens, accompanied by four legions of chevaliers, all to be billeted and fed at Ferelden expense for the duration of the emergency—"

"—which will never be over," Bronwyn finished. "I'm sure the chevaliers would make themselves very much at home."

"You see that the Empress wishes to use the Wardens as a political weapon. Fiona and I cannot stomach that. Neither can others, hence the leaked information. No one will know of this meeting. We shall return to Jader, and you will complete your mission."

Bronwyn finished slicing the sausage, wiped her hands, and sat down for a moment to think. "That plot only holds if it is truly a Blight. Does the Empress believe it to be so? Teyrn Loghain—and even the King—were loath to credit it."

"*Loghain!*" muttered Fiona, with a very Orlesian gesture of disgust.

Riordan glanced at her and then said, "Naturally, the Empress knows it is a Blight. Heads of state are privy to certain Grey Warden secrets. It must be so, or we could not function during the centuries of peace. The Divine in Val Royaux and the Black Divine in Minrathous also know why we are essential to the survival of Thedas."

"That's...good, I suppose," said Alistair, carefully adding more wood to the fire. "I wish we did."

"Yes," Riordan said heavily. "You must be told, or all of this is vain. Duncan did not have time, I suppose, to tell you how an Archdemon is slain."

Bronwyn laughed lightly, "Or slain without the assistance of griffins!"

Riordan did not smile, but told her the truth in brief, pithy terms: how the Taint in the Grey Wardens attracted the essence of the Old God; how the Warden who struck the killing blow drew that essence into himself; how that resulted in the death both of the Old God-turned-Archdemon and of the Warden; how some thought that the very soul of the Warden was consumed by the event. He told them of the horror that would ensue if someone other than a Warden slew an Archdemon, for it would return again, and again, until a Warden put an end to it. Fiona said nothing while he spoke, and looked rather sickened.

Bronwyn's breath was taken away by the grim news. After some time, she pulled herself together, and spoke: "I'm not

sure that King Cailan knows this. He's incredibly callous about it if he does. He seemed to think he could take part in killing the Archdemon if it appeared. Do you think Duncan might have tried to spare him? Or are the Kings of Ferelden not privy to Grey Warden secrets?"

Fiona said sharply, "Maric knew *everything!* What he did not learn for himself, Duncan told him. As to King Cailan, I know that Duncan was fond of him, and considered him young for his age."

Alistair had been quiet since learning about the sacrifice required to kill the Archdemon. Now he smiled up at Fiona from the floor. "You were friends with Duncan?"

Fiona smiled back him. "For many, many years. He once did me a very great service. Pass me that box. No, the other one. It contains dried mushrooms."

"Are there any other secrets?" Bronwyn asked, letting Fiona take charge of the stewpot. The older woman seemed to like ordering Alistair about. "This may be our only chance to talk to Senior Wardens for some time."

"Well..." Riordan and Fiona exchanged a glance, and she nodded. "It is a rather long story, but there is something unusual about this Blight..."

Bronwyn ate her excellent Orlesian *potée* in silence, her head whirling with the Wardens' revelations. King Maric had gone

on an expedition to the Deep Roads with the newly readmitted Grey Wardens early in Dragon 9:10. Fiona had been one of the party, and knew all the details. Duncan, a young recruit in those days, had also been there. The Orlesian Warden-Commander, Bregan, had heard the Calling, had departed for the Deep Roads, and had been captured by a talking, thinking darkspawn emissary, who called himself the Architect. His sister, Genevieve, newly-appointed Commander of the Grey in Ferelden, was determined to rescue her brother. Bronwyn frowned over the name. Genevieve. When she had first arrived at Ostagar with Duncan, she had sought out Teyrn Loghain, who had mentioned the woman briefly.

"Don't let anyone tell you don't belong!" he had encouraged her. *"The first Warden Maric brought to Ferelden was a woman: the best warrior I've ever seen."*

This Architect creature had at least temporarily won the trust of Bregan, who had told him some of the most guarded secrets of the order: among them the various locations of the sleeping Old Gods.

"Oh, no!" Bronwyn groaned, putting her face in her hands. Scout came over to her, whining with concern.

"Oh, yes!" Fiona replied mercilessly. "It is entirely possible that the Architect *began* the current Blight with a misguided attempt to free the Old God."

While Bronwyn served Scout another bowl from the pot, she was told more: the Architect had proposed melding

darkspawn with all other races by forcing the Joining on every human, dwarf, and elf in Thedas. A monstrous proposal, for most would die, and the rest...

Bronwyn shuddered. It might establish a kind of peace, yes, but at what price? It was madness, absolute madness. It was shocking that some of the Wardens in the party had been convinced by the Architect's reasoning, and had joined forces with him. The Circle of Magi had been drawn into the plot, and the then-First Enchanter, the Orlesian Remille, had meant to make use of the Architect to destroy Ferelden. Bregan had shaken off the Architect's hold, and was killed just as Loghain appeared to rescue everyone. It had been for the best, for Bregan's secrets were the Wardens', and must be kept.

"No wonder Teyrn Loghain is so suspicious of Wardens!" Bronwyn finally said. "King Maric was nearly killed. And there was an Orlesian plot at the heart of it!"

"That was thwarted by mostly Orlesian Wardens!" Fiona pointed out tartly. "And by the courage of Maric." Her voice softened at the name.

Bronwyn glanced up at her. Fiona would have been quite a young woman twenty years ago, and beautiful... Queen Rowan would have been dead a few years before... King Maric was known to have a wandering eye, or at least *Bronwyn* knew it, for there was Alistair...

Who was twenty years old.

Bronwyn looked over at her brother Warden. He was wolfing down the good food, quietly thinking over the story himself. The mage was watching him: very discreetly, but watching every spoonful go into the healthy, handsome young man, with an expression of such tenderness...

Speaking into the quiet, Bronwyn said. "The Orlesians are very interested in Alistair, too, aren't they? In fact, he's the one they're *really* interested in. He's the one you're here to save."

Riordan blew out a breath.

Alistair looked up, even going so far as to set down his bowl. "Me? Nobody's interested in me." He reddened. "I mean...are you talking about what I think you're talking about?"

"That your secret isn't as secret as you might have thought?" Bronwyn said raising her brows. "I think our brother and sister know it. It would be very, very helpful if they would be frank with us."

Riordan cleared his throat. "It is known in some circles that Alistair is King Maric's son, yes. We were not sure that *he* knew it."

"Did Maric tell you?" Fiona asked, her eyes fixed on the young Warden. "Or Duncan?"

"King Maric?" Alistair asked, incredulous. "I never spoke to the man in my life. I always knew he was my father, though."

Arl Eamon told me, and he also told me it didn't matter, because I was a bastard and a commoner."

"The less said about Arl Eamon's treatment of you, the better," Bronwyn muttered. Fiona grew pale. Her lips thinned, and she looked at her hands.

Riordan said, "His wife, the Arlessa Isolde, shared this information in letters to her uncle in Val Chevin. From him, it went to the highest circles. If King Cailan were to die in battle, Alistair would have a strong claim to the throne, Warden or not. The two of you together..."

Alistair was both horrified and amused. "But I'm the bastard son of a serving maid!" he protested. "I never even learned to read until Arl Eamon pledged me to the Chantry and sent me away when I was ten. I mean," he laughed, "You've heard of people who were born in a barn? Well, I was raised in a stable and slept on straw. King's son or not, Arl Eamon thought it was good enough for me, and it *was* good enough for me. I had some happy times there..."

"That makes no difference to your claim," Fiona said fiercely, "and this Arl Eamon was a heartless fool!"

"He's dead now," Alistair said mildly, "so there's no point in criticizing him. Bronwyn gets angry enough for both of us. There's nothing that can be done about it, and here I am a Warden now. I'm fine. I'd just as soon not be locked away in Orlais when there are darkspawn to fight, though, so I really appreciate all you've done." He laughed, and said to Bronwyn,

"We're pretty popular, aren't we?"

Bronwyn told them, her voice smooth, "Alistair is referring to the regular attacks on us from darkspawn, bandits, and hirelings of Arl Rendon Howe, the man who murdered my parents." She looked at Alistair, willing him to say nothing of Marjolaine's mercenaries. That was an altogether different matter, and the Orlesian Wardens had no business interfering with it.

Anders groaned loudly, his head moving from side to side. The Wardens looked over at him.

"He will awaken soon," Riordan said. "Mages seem to be able to escape the Fade more readily than others."

"We have more experience there!" Fiona pointed out. With a touch more courtesy than she had previously shown, she said to Bronwyn, "You seem to have had your share of adventures. Tell us of them."

The story stopped for some time at the sighting of the Archdemon. Both Riordan and Fiona asked endless, minute questions about its appearance, its size, its ability to maneuver, its apparent intelligence.

"No one has seen an Archdemon in four hundred years!" Riordan laughed grimly. "Many thought that one would never be seen again."

Neither of the Orlesians had ever seen a Broodmother, either, though they had read of their existence.

"I wish to look at your eyes in the morning, when the light is good," Fiona said to Bronwyn. "That is an interesting phenomenon, and we need all the information we can get about such creatures."

Riordan shook his head in wonder, "I admit I was surprised that no one had spoken of your eyes before. Such a startling shade of green would ordinarily be reported as your most distinguishing feature!"

"I owe Anders my life, my sight, and my face," Bronwyn said frankly. She walked over to look at the young mage. Fiona had told her not to disturb any of them, but to let them reach consciousness on their own. "But all the recruits are remarkable."

"They must be," Riordan agreed. "I am surprised that the Circle allowed you two mages. Generally they hold to the 'one-at-a-time' rule."

"Bronwyn was *very* persuasive," Alistair said proudly. "And it wasn't as if the Circle had much use for either of them. Tara was locked up for helping someone escape, and Anders was considered a flight risk. Tara, especially, had been treated very badly. She didn't remember ever seeing the sun before we left the Tower. I don't think that's right."

Fiona's approval shone in her eyes. "I have some spells to

teach your mages that they might find helpful."

"They'll appreciate it," Bronwyn said. "Tara had a hard time adjusting at first, but now she's doing very well. She's extremely brave and powerful—a very aggressive fighter."

Anders coughed, struggling to sit up. "Arrrghh." He coughed again, and then said, "What was *that*? And what is that taste in my mouth? And how can I get rid of it?"

Alistair laughed, and brought him a cup of cider.

After Anders, then Tara, wild-eyed and shocked. Then Cullen, who had understood that he was in the Fade, and Leliana, who waxed poetic about the ghastly visions she had seen. Astrid and Broasca had never visited the Fade before—it was not a place for dwarves—and were struck dumb by it all.

Everyone was ravenous, and more food was prepared. Most went back to sleep after they had something to eat. The four Senior Wardens—for Riordan and Fiona agreed that Bronwyn and Alistair were, by default, Senior Wardens—took turns sleeping and standing watch. The hours of darkness crept by.

Never was a sunrise more welcome. The Wardens stirred and talked softly, scraped the stewpot for the last bits, gnawed on waybread. Cullen and Anders found the abandoned well, and hauled up water for everyone. Fiona showed Alistair the *correct* way to make porridge. Leliana joined them, and the two Orlesian women civilly debated which spices to use.

Others wandered outside to enjoy the dawn. "I like the pretty colors," said Brosca, pointing to the rosy streaks in the golden sky. "The colors underground are different."

Astrid shrugged. "That's why everyone loves jewels so much. I've heard that some of the surface vegetation is colorful. Flowers are ephemeral, though. Jewels last forever."

"When you can get them," Brosca scoffed. She had never heard the word "ephemeral," but it was easy enough to guess what Her Ladyship was talking about. "Though I have a gorgeous chunk of malachite." She pulled it from a pocket. "See? I like the swirls in the green."

"Nice," Astrid said, hoping there would be enough porridge for a second helping. "You could use that for the pommel of a knife."

Brosca beamed at the brightly colored stone. "That's a great idea."

Alistair and Riordan worked diligently, making Joining amulets for everyone. A bit of hollowed out crystal, the last drops of the Joining potion, some leather cords, and they were passed out to the new recruits.

"Amethyst!" cried Leliana, "How pretty! Are they always like this?"

"It's what we had," Riordan shrugged, smiling at her enthusiasm.

"Mine is clear quartz," Alistair said, pulling his own amulet out to show her.

"Mine is green fluorite," Bronwyn displayed hers.

Riordan's was also fluorite, but yellow. Fiona's, like Alistair's, was clear.

"I shall find a gold chain for mine," Leliana resolved. "And I shall never, ever take it off."

Fiona took the mages aside and they went back behind the stables to practice spells.

Alistair stood by Bronwyn watching everyone happily eating, washing, or playing with their new amulets. "They won't be so happy when we tell them the bad news."

"All the more reason for them to enjoy themselves now. Riordan and Fiona will have to leave soon. We'll call everyone together and have a talk before we ride back."

"Are you going to tell them about the Archdemon now? I mean—it's traditional to wait..."

"Of course I'm going to tell them. What if something happened to both of us? We can't risk disaster a second time. Everybody needs to know everything. And I'd better wheedle some Archdemon blood from Fiona. Maybe we can make more Wardens on our journey south."

"Bronwyn!" Riordan came down the steps, porridge bowl in

hand, a harried frown creasing his brow. "I forgot to tell you about the caches..."

While Alistair knew the Warden Compound well, he did not know about the secret cupboard in the cellar. Nor did he know about the hidden room in a warehouse in the Market District in Denerim. Riordan gave them some notes, and Bronwyn studied them, trying to commit the codes to memory.

The Orlesians were in a hurry to leave and ride for Jader, and there was a great bustle as they packed up their gear, with everyone's occasionally conflicting help.

"Fiona!" Bronwyn whispered in the midst of the rush. "Would it be possible for me to have some Archdemon blood—"

"Yes, yes, yes—" Fiona said impatiently, thrusting a vial at her. "This is for you. There is more at the Warden Compound in Denerim. Do you remember the formula?"

And then she forced Bronwyn to recite it back, her nagging reminding Bronwyn of Nan or even Mother at her worst. The memory softened her irritation at being treated like an idiot child, and she indulged the woman. Besides, it would not do to get it wrong...

"And teach it to your mages!" Fiona scolded. "No...I will..."

So she called Anders and Fiona again, and went over the formula, and told them how mages could speed the process when they added the lyrium. And they, too, were made to

repeat it back.

"And some last presents!" shouted Riordan. From a saddlebag, he pulled out some Warden tunics, and gleefully tossed them to the new recruits. There was laughter and confusion as the recruits tried to find the ones that would fit, more or less. And naturally, everyone had to put them on.

"This is really nice cloth!" enthused Brosca. "It's shiny!"

While everyone was enjoying their new finery, Bronwyn gently pulled Fiona aside for a last word.

"I know you're in a hurry," she murmured, "but will you go without telling Alistair the truth?"

The elf stared up at her warily. "I do not know what you mean."

"Will you really go without telling him that you are his mother?"

She thought for a moment that Fiona might curse her, or at least slap her. The mage said coldly, "You are wrong. Alistair does not have—or need—a mother who is a elf, a mage, an Orlesian, and a Warden."

"It is *you* who are wrong!" Bronwyn hissed. "Alistair would not care! He is a warm-hearted young man who would open his arms to his mother, no matter who or what she was! I think you should go to him *right now*, and tell him who you are and how much you care for him, and—if you can—explain where

you have been all these years—"

"It is very rare for female Grey Wardens to bear children," Fiona told her, her face taut, "and when we do, we are not permitted to keep them. Maric and I hoped to spare Alistair the kind of life he would have had as a bastard prince."

Bronwyn bit back what she thought of all that. Recriminations and second-guessing would do no good at the moment. She spoke with all the force and conviction in her. "He is a Warden, and happy with it. No one cares who the mother of a Warden is. This might be your only chance in life to speak to him as his mother. It would be *wrong* to let it pass you by." When Fiona hesitated, Bronwyn ground out, "Believe me when I tell you that I would do anything--*anything*--to speak to my mother one more time. Someday he may learn who you are and be deeply hurt. Don't *do* that to him."

And so, while the new recruits celebrated, Alistair and Fiona walked among the trees; and secrets, too long kept, were revealed. Bronwyn saw them emerge a little later, and it seemed that both of them had shed tears.

"Fiona!" Riordan shouted, "We must go!" He shook hands and slapped shoulders, and then grabbed Bronwyn in a bear hug.

"Maker watch over you, Warden-Commander of Ferelden!" He held her at arms-length, smiling at her, and then vaulted into his saddle. "You're a fine lass!"

Alistair, his face glowing, helped Fiona mount her horse.

"Thanks for everything," he choked out. His hand lingered on his mother's stirrup. Bronwyn went over to him and put an arm around his shoulders.

The Orlesians waved as they trotted down the path. Fiona looked back, her face illuminated by the the morning sun. "Farewell," she called. "Maker bless you!"

When they were out of sight, Bronwyn drew a deep breath, and readied herself to tell her companions about the darker side of duty.

Notes: Yes, they survived. Most of them have to survive because they are actually Wardens in canon. As for Cullen and Leliana, I tossed a coin. They won. Twice. They look tough enough to me, anyway.

Happy New Year, and thanks to my readers and reviewers: Nithu, Josie Lange, kart87, demonincargles, Eva Galana, Shakespeira, JackOfBladesX, Sarah1281, mille libri, Dante Alighieri1308, almostinsane, Amhran Comhrac, Aoi24, callalili, Lehni, Aaron W, Zute, mutive, Have Socks Will Travel, Windchime68, kwintessa, Amanda Weber, Gene Dark, and Piceron. Reviews are such a fun reward for writing!

On my profile page, I posted a little piece I call "Plots in Ferelden," in which I try to hammer out what I think might be going through the minds of the major players at the

beginning of DAO. There's a whole lot of shaking going on, I think, and I found it especially useful in considering Howe's motives. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more understandable his actions are (if nasty and awful). Some of you might not like the idea that Bryce Cousland might have had something of an agenda, too, but there's nothing "magical" about the Couslands. They are a warm and loving family, but it's ridiculous to imagine that the premier noble of Ferelden doesn't have plots of his own. The most interesting involve explaining why his nubile daughter is still unmarried...

26. A Typical Night in Denerim

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 26: A Typical Night in Denerim

"So you all return," Morrigan drawled. "I confess to a certain surprise."

"Yes, we're all here and all Wardens and all fine." Bronwyn assured her, a bit shortly. There was a great deal to do, and not much time to do it in.

Anders smirked. "You missed a terrific party, Morrigan. And presents."

Morrigan glanced at the griffon tunics and rolled her eyes.

In truth, the new Wardens had taken the bad news far better than Bronwyn had hoped. The increased appetite, the nightmares, even the infertility did not seem to particularly distress them. Bronwyn was surprised, as the last was the aspect of being a Grey Warden that she found most troubling. Perhaps because there were now eight of them, and more would presumably be recruited, the fact that one of them must die to kill the Archdemon did not seem so immediate and terrifying. Cullen, in fact, almost...*brightened*...at the news, speaking reverently of a such a noble sacrifice. Leliana, too,

had seemed very touched.

"It's like Andraste," she breathed, "giving her life for the whole world."

"We're only here for tonight," Bronwyn told her party. "We'll move out early tomorrow. I'll finish my letters, and the Commander has promised to send out a courier immediately. If anyone here has a letter for anyone in the army at Ostagar, get it to me immediately, and I'll include it with my own."

There followed visits to the quartermaster, to the farrier, to the smith, to the leather worker. Bronwyn's armor was in deplorable condition, and she had the armorer do what he could to repair it.

When she returned from her errands, Morrigan met her, obviously wanting a quiet word.

"Our party will divide, I understand. You are going to Denerim."

"I am, but I will not be gone long."

"That is perhaps wise of you. Were you planning to take a mage with you on your adventure?"

Bronwyn looked at her searchingly. "I was planning to take you."

"I do not wish to go," Morrigan informed her. "I am instructing Anders in shape-shifting, and his training ought not to be

interrupted. In his impatience, he may attempt a hazardous change, and without supervision, that could be fatal." She raised a black and perfect brow.

"I...see." Bronwyn thought she did. Morrigan and Anders were engaged in some sort of flirtation. If it included magical instruction, this was the first Bronwyn had heard of it. She had no power to command this woman to do something she obviously did not want to do, and her usefulness would be compromised if she went unwillingly.

She shrugged. "Very well, then. I shall take Tara with me, instead. You and Anders will be under Alistair's command." She smiled faintly at the witch's grimace, and turned away. In fact, she decided, her mind sorting through the changed scenario, Tara might actually be better for her purposes...

Their supplies had cost quite a bit. Riordan had been generous with his time and information—even with the new tunics—but Bronwyn would have appreciated an infusion of gold. However, that was another reason to go to Denerim. Trying to access the Warden Compound would not be prudent, if she wanted her mission to remain secret. However, there was the cache in the Market District, and Riordan had told her that there was some coin to be had there.

She sat down at the rough table and scratched out a cover note for her enormous letter to Fergus.

Dear brother—

I am well and safe. The massive amount of parchment enclosed is as much a journal of my daily adventures as it is a letter to you. Nonetheless, I offer it for what it is worth. No, I have not told you everything, for the Wardens will have their secrets, as winter will have snow, and the dwarves their ale. I have tasted dwarven ale, by the way, and do not recommend it.

The King will be pleased to know that the Grey Wardens of Ferelden are now eight in number...or nine if one includes Scout, who is probably the best of us! The dwarves had agreed to honor their treaty, and are moving south to join with our own army.

Orzammar was in absolute chaos when I arrived, with the factions cutting throats in the very streets. You will no doubt be horrified to know that it was left to your little sister to sort out the muddle. It involved falsified documents, cleaning out the sprawling lair of a criminal organization, and penetrating far into the Deep Roads to find a madwoman. I learned a great deal—more, I think, than I wanted to. At any rate, I returned with a crown made by a Paragon, with which I crowned the King of my choice before the assembled deshyrs. It was an astonishing scene, but I have written of it in greater detail in my journal. Bhelen may not be the best king for the dwarves, but he is the best ally for Ferelden.

I also saw the Archdemon. I will not say more of that

now. That, too, is in that bundle of parchment.

I think of you often, and pray that you, too, are well. I am doing all I can to raise Ferelden's allies against the Blight, and there is yet more to be done.

She decided to let him know a little of what concerned her, and wrote her next paragraphs in their private code.

Father always said that the Orlesians are always up to something, and he was absolutely right. You are not to tell the following to anyone but Teyrn Loghain, for good people would suffer were it to be known: I received a kind invitation from the Senior Warden of Jader to meet him at the border. I was to give my reply to the commander of Roc du Chevalier, which would be forwarded to this Senior Warden Riordan. As Alistair and I were ignorant of so much Warden lore, we could see no sense in rejecting the opportunity. For obvious reasons, I left Alistair behind, and went with one of my recruits across the border, where I was greeted in the grand style by the Chevalier du Guesclin. So I have seen the Rock, and it is very great and terrible, and I was glad to put it behind me within an hour.

The next day, I was surprised by the appearance—in disguise- of the Senior Warden and one of his command. They had come secretly over the border to warn us not to return to the Rock, for plans were afoot to abduct us and take us into Orlais, in order to force King Cailan to admit

the Orlesians. Senior Warden Riordan got wind of it, and being Ferelden-born—and a Warden faithful to his principles—disliked being made use of in that way, and forestalled a disaster. I learned from him a great deal of Warden lore—everything, in fact, that I hoped for, and know now what Wardens must do to defeat the Archdemon. Only Wardens can, they always said, and now I know why. It is a dark thing, but it will save us all. There are good reasons to consider Riordan and his companion truthful, but I will disclose those to you in person.

The quill's end was wearing down. She took a fresh one, trimmed the tip a little, and wrote the rest without code.

I hope to see you in three weeks or a little less, as the dwarven army makes its way southeast to Ostagar.

Your loving sister,

Bronwyn

She sat for a moment, deciding if that really was all she had to say. Then she blotted the letter, set it on top of the rest of the parchment, bound the whole together with a wrapping of heavier parchment and string, and marked it for "Teyrn Fergus Cousland."

There were others to apprise of her success. She took a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote carefully.

My lord Teyrn—

Bhelen is King in Orzammarr, and the dwarven army is on the march.

She paused, smiling to herself. After a moment, her quill resumed its scratching, giving numbers, dispositions, routes.

-with a contingent of the Legion of the Dead, a thousand in number, led by their Commander Kardol himself. These will travel by the Deep Roads to the Belannas entrance noted on the map enclosed.

We hope to reach Ostagar within three weeks, weather and darkspawn permitting.

My companions and I saw the Archdemon in that portion of the Deep Roads called Bownammarr, otherwise known as the Dead Trenches. The creature was at some distance, but there was no doubt as to what it was.

Our neighbors have been very busy. Suffice it to say that I have much to tell you that I cannot entrust to writing.

Bronwyn

Another, even shorter letter was written to the King, praising their dwarven allies, and referring to her letter to Teyrn Loghain for the details.

Tara and Cullen had letters for friends at Ostagar. Even

Anders had a note for his friend Niall. Morrigan, of course, laughed out loud at the idea of correspondence.

"You are not suggesting, I hope, that I should write to my *mother!*"

When everything was signed and sealed, Bronwyn took them to Commander Roark, who sent a courier out with them immediately. That much was done. She must make plans for her private quest.

Leliana, unsurprisingly, was ready and eager to go. When Bronwyn explained her idea to her, Leliana was delighted, and immediately came up with a half-dozen ways to improve the scheme.

"How lucky that I bought a new gown! But it would be best if I used the name of a real person..."

They worked on the details, and then Bronwyn approached Sten and Zevran, who were both willing to take part. And then...

"Tara," Bronwyn asked quietly. "Can you do magic without your staff?"

"Of course," the girl replied. "The staff is only focuses my magic...it makes it stronger, but it doesn't create it."

"Good." Bronwyn thought a moment. "You are going with me to Denerim, and since we are going in disguise, I want you to

leave your staff behind."

She saw no way around it. There was no way to hide a five-foot-long pole on horseback—or in one's clothes. Magic was too useful not to include a mage in the party, but the trappings of magic were to be avoided.

Next, she must speak again to Alistair. Naturally, he was not entirely satisfied with the scheme.

"You are leaving me *in charge. With Morrigan.*"

"It can't be helped. Everyone knows we're splitting up. Morrigan came to me and said flatly that she was not going to Denerim, if it meant leaving Anders. She serves voluntarily, and I can't force the issue. I want Anders with you. Ordinarily, Morrigan would be my first choice of mage, but I will take Tara instead. Besides, Tara knows a spell to make the horses go faster and longer, and her own riding is much improved. I cannot take any of the dwarves, for I must ride hard for Denerim. I am going with Tara, Leliana, Zevran, Sten, and Scout. That is all. You will be moving more slowly, marching at the army's pace."

"I still can't believe we're doing this." Alistair looked at her pleadingly. "You could put Cullen in charge."

"No, I cannot. You are in command, and we are all relying on you. Hold fast, and the surfacers will join you in a week. While you are waiting, have the dwarves practice riding, and keep up everyone's archery, just as we agreed." She lowered her

voice, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Your mother is very proud of you, Alistair. You know that. If you cannot do this for me, do it for her."

"Now that's just mean," he complained. Then, thinking about it, he smiled shyly, and gave her a little shrug. Bronwyn laughed, and swatted him on the arm.

They left Gherlen's Halt in good spirits. Rather to Alistair's dismay, there was a suitable boat at the Western Docks, which for a reasonable sum would take them across Lake Calenhad.

"It'll be nearly a week before the dwarves arrive at the Deep Roads entrance," he grumbled. "It's all hurry-up-and-wait!"

Bronwyn patiently explained, "That's a warrior's life for you. But it will shave two days off my own little detour to Denerim. I want to get there, find that bard, get back, and join forces with you before you get to Ostagar. Every day matters!"

Their horses were led carefully onto the boat. The dwarves marched as if to their doom: Astrid rigidly stoic, Oghren rumbling curses, and Brosca shooting wild looks over the side.

"First no stone over our heads, and now no stone under our feet!" she muttered rather desperately. "No stone at all!" The three of them huddled by a bulwark, looking as if they were under attack. It had not occurred to Bronwyn until then how alien and unpleasant travel over water would be to them. The

rest of the companions sprawled comfortably on deck, free of their duties for the moment. Morrigan and Anders quietly discussed a gull that had alighted on the rigging. Tara and Zevran whispered together. Tara giggled, and then burst out laughing. Cullen watched them, eyes shadowed. Alistair leaned over the rail, brooding.

"Alistair!" Bronwyn approached him, and then beckoned Cullen over. Quickly, she murmured to the two big men, "I've made something of a blunder. I really did not think about how distressing this would be for our dwarven companions. I've got to do some planning with my Denerim party, so could the two of you sit with the dwarves and try to distract them? There's that keg of ale we brought. How about a round of drinks and some talk? They look like cornered rabbits."

Being kindhearted men, they had no trouble doing as they were asked. Brosca looked more cheerful in no time. Cup of ale in her hand, she wriggled nearer to Cullen, sitting as close as she could without actually sitting on his lap. Cullen blushed, but did not push her away.

The ship scudded before the wind, making good time. Bronwyn briefed her chosen companions on their mission. She had already spoken to Leliana about their disguise, and knew that an experienced former bard would have no trouble at all in falling in with her plans.

Leliana said, "I shall take my Chantry robe along. I shall look very inconspicuous in it, just as I did in Lothering!"

Anders overheard that last, and laughed. "Now that's something I just can't see. I can't picture someone like you as a Chantry sister!"

Leliana turned indignant blue eyes on him. "What do you mean—someone like me?"

"Oh, I don't know..." Anders smirked. "Aside from the deadeye archer thing and the daggers, there's the fact that you're a beautiful young woman!"

Leliana came up to him, hands on hips, and stared him in the face. "As a matter of fact, there were many young and beautiful women at the Lothering Chantry!"

Zevran laughed. "It is true, my friend. You cannot win your argument by claiming that the Chantry is home only to the old and ugly. In Antiva, the beauty of Chantry sisters is fabled in song and story."

"What story?" Tara instantly demanded.

Zevran laughed and shrugged expressively, "Well..."

"Ha! Zevran wants to tell a story!" Tara called out, clapping her hands. "Story! Story!"

People were looking around in pleasure and interest.

The handsome elf smiled, flashing white teeth. "Well...if you insist...I do know a story about the Sisters of Antiva."

"I don't like the sound of this..." Alistair muttered.

"Oh, Alistair!" Bronwyn waved a hand. "How bad can it be? Besides, he can claim Minstrel's Privilege. We all need a diversion. Go on, Zevran, tell your tale."

The elf looked very amused. He rose, bowed elaborately, and began to speak.

Zevran's Story of Groundskeeper Mahal and the Chantry Sisters:

My friends, there are indeed people foolish enough to believe that, once a girl has assumed the robes of the Chantry, that she is no longer a woman. As though by taking a vow, she has turned to stone! And if those people hear anything contrary to this belief, they rage with fury, as if an unnatural sin had been committed, when indeed nothing could farther from the truth.

There is in Antiva the city of Treviso, famed for its wine, its abundant flowers, and its lovely women. Ah, Treviso! The veiled ladies lean over their balconies and sing to the lute in the twilight! All except, of course, the ladies of a famous Chantry on the outskirts of the city. I shall not tell you its name, lest I detract from its reputation for piety!

Some years ago, there were eight Sisters in this Chantry, ruled by their Revered Mother, and their magnificent garden was kept by an elf named Nuto. He had grown old in their

service, so old that he wished to retire to the alienage. His wages were paid, and he returned to his childhood home, where he fell in with his great-nephew, the sturdy and handsome Mahal.

"Where have you been all these years, Great-Uncle?" asked Mahal, as they sat on a bench in the sun, drinking wine.

"Oh, I was groundskeeper for the Chantry outside the walls, and used to tend the fine, big garden there. I would carry water, fetch wood, do odd jobs. But those women drove me crazy! The worst of it was that they were all young and full of mischief—even the Revered Mother, who is not even thirty! Nothing I did suited them. This one would say, 'Plant that rose here!' and another would grab the spade out of my hand, and shout, 'That's no good!' and another would say, 'Why have you not thinned the carrots, you stupid old elf?' By the Maker, I am too old for such tricks! I got sick of it and now I shall live in peace, far from the Maker's Brides."

"You just left them?" asked Mahal. "Left them to manage on their own?"

"That I did!" said Nuto with great satisfaction. "Even though they begged me to stay in the end, and the Revered Mother told me that I was always welcome to come back, or if I would not, to recommend someone else."

Mahal smiled, for a wonderful idea had come to him. He was filled with a tormenting desire to take care of those Sisters and cultivate their garden: to plow it, and water it, and fertilize

it as soon as he possibly could.

He was not without experience in such work, and yet he knew he might well be rejected, even with his great-uncle's recommendation, for he was young and handsome. He cudgeled his brains for a way to be accepted and then he hit on it. If he were a poor, mute, simple fellow, unable to speak, surely the Revered Mother would take pity on him and give him the post of groundskeeper.

"Why not?" he thought to himself. "No one knows me there. I shall write a recommendation for myself on my uncle's behalf—and he cannot read, so I can say anything I like!"

No sooner said than done. He wrote the saddest story ever put to parchment for the Revered Mother, and his great-uncle signed it without even asking Mahal to read it to him first, for the afternoon was warm and the wine was heavy. Mahal packed a bag with his linen and his tools, rolled up his recommendation, and went his way to seek his fortune.

He came to the famous Chantry with its walled garden and rang the little bell. The sister on duty came—a dark-eyed beauty with lustrous locks like clusters of grapes—and she asked the young elf his business. He, with a timid dumb-show, made gestures that he could not speak, and gave her the little parchment that sang his praises as a gardener and hard worker, and his virtues as a meek and modest servant. The sister was not sure what to do, but led him to the Revered Mother, who was busily at work in her office. She was a tall and beautiful young woman, of a noble household that had lost

its fortune and influence, and she had been sold to the Chantry at the age of twelve to pay the family's debts.

She asked the Sister who he was, and the sister replied, "Your Reverence, this is a poor mute boy, the great-nephew of dear old Nuto. He is an orphan and penniless, and Nuto prays that you will give him the post of groundskeeper here, for otherwise he shall surely starve."

Mahal looked very sad, and he thought so much about what a shame it would be if the Revered Mother did not let him stay, that tears filled his eyes, and the lady's heart was touched.

"Very well," she relented. "Show him the gardening shed with the quarters next door where old Nuto slept." She turned to Mahal, and spoke slowly and loudly, as if he were deaf and stupid as well as mute, saying, "I hope you will work as hard as your dear uncle!"

Mahal grinned and bobbed his head, thinking about how hard he hoped to work. He was shown his quarters and his work, and set to with a will. He thought, "I'll show them gardening like they've never seen!"

He worked very hard indeed, cutting wood, weeding in the garden, fetching water for the sisters: working tirelessly and without complaint. It was clear that he could work twice as hard for twice as long as his old great-uncle. The garden bloomed like never before, and the sisters felt they had done well in trading Nuto for Mahal.

They grew used to him, and then they began to tease him as he worked about the grounds. Sometimes they would address the wickedest little words to him, the way people do with deaf-mutes, confident that they were not understood.

One day, he was chopping wood. It was hot, and he had removed his shirt. Two young sisters stopped to admire his muscular frame, and began talking about him, thinking that he could not hear a word.

"I'll tell you a secret," said one, "if you promise never to breathe a word."

"Oh, I promise," said the other, "I love secrets."

"Well," said the first. "I have heard that there is no greater pleasure than what a woman feels when she lies with a man. I've often thought of that, and I've been thinking recently that there would be no better way to try it out than with Mute Mahal!"

"Oh, Sister!" cried her friend. "What are you saying? Have you forgotten that we have pledged our chastity to the Maker?"

The first girl said, "There are a thousand things promised to him all day long all over Thedas, and He doesn't get a single one. Besides, there are plenty of girls who will keep their word. Think of it! He's perfect! He can't possibly tell on us, and he's so very pretty. What do you say?"

At that hot time of afternoon, many of the other sisters were

taking their rest, and Mahal listened to the girls' discussion, trying not to laugh out loud. In the end, they took him by his hands, and led him back to his own little quarters, soothing and cajoling him with many gestures, while he grinned like a zany. Afterward, when the girls talked the matter over, they agreed it was indeed the delight they had heard of, and more!

From then on, they took every available moment to go frolicking with their deaf-mute groundskeeper. It happened one day that another sister spied on them from her narrow cell window, and called it to the attention of two others. They watched for some time, and whispered that it must be reported to the Revered Mother, but then, changing their mind, they came to an understanding with the first girls, and they too enjoyed their share of the groundskeeper's attentions.

As time went on, every sister in the Chantry was in on the secret. The Revered Mother wondered at the happy faces about her, fresh and pink as their climbing roses. At length one day, as she walked in their beautiful garden. Mahal was sleeping under an arbor, for between tending to the garden and tending to the girls he was often tired. He looked so young and handsome that the lonely Revered Mother's heart hurt for all that had been taken from her, and she was tempted beyond her resistance. She awakened him, and swept him away to her cell, and kept him there several days, to the consternation of the other sisters.

Finally she released him, but was not fully satisfied, and she became so demanding that Mahal became exhausted with the

efforts of the maintaining the garden and satisfying nine women. So one night, when he was with the Revered Mother, he suddenly spoke.

"My lady, I've heard that one cock is enough for ten hens, but that ten men could hardly toil hard enough to please a single woman. As for me, I have nine women to work for, and it's just too much. I give up. Let me go, for the Maker's sake."

The young woman's jaw dropped. "I thought you were mute!"

"So I was," Mahal assured her. "But no more. It must a miracle, wrought by living here in this holy place!"

The Revered Mother was silent a moment, thinking very fast, for all was now clear to her, and she knew she must be very wise to avoid disaster.

So Mahal was given a goodly sum of gold, and the sisters and their Revered Mother bid him farewell with tears in their eyes. He went home to the alienage, and used his capital wisely, and with some generosity. A fine public fountain was built in the center of the alienage, where all could go to for clean water. Mahal married well, and fathered many pretty children, and everyone agreed that his garden was the finest the alienage had ever seen. He himself attributed this to his useful experiences as a Chantry groundskeeper.

Zevran smirked at the various reactions. Cullen's face was red with rage. "I don't believe any such thing ever happened! You

slander the Chantry!"

Brosca caught him by the arm, and was dragged along a few feet. She said, "Well, it's a different country isn't it? Maybe they do things differently there!"

"That's right," Alistair agreed reluctantly, "It is *Antiva* he's talking about."

Leliana pointed out primly, "In Orlais and Ferelden, the Chantry is always careful to appoint Revered Mothers of mature years. And there are always Templars to protect them. And we all know that there are sometimes people who cannot keep their vows!"

The mages were still laughing. "That was great," sighed Anders, with heart-felt satisfaction.

Sten only grunted, his suspicions of Andrastean hypocrisy confirmed.

The dwarves had been amused by the story too, if only because it was dirty, and made human surfacers look like idiots. Bronwyn hid her own embarrassment, not wanting to appear the sheltered maiden from the backwoods she sometimes felt like. Perhaps she should check out the stories her people told, before they told them to everyone else...

In due course, they arrived at the other side of the lake, and Bronwyn kept their farewells brief and cheerful. Alistair was

still very uneasy at the prospect of his first command, and plagued her with his questions and concerns while she readied her own party for departure.

"Well," he sighed, running out of ways to delay the inevitable. "Don't get killed. That would be really disappointing. All right?"

She squeezed his arm. "All right."

They cantered off, and as they had previously agreed, stopped four miles away, near a stream marked on the map, not far from the River Dane Road. There, changes were made. No one in Denerim needed to know that the Wardens were in the city.

The River Dane Road was a green and mossy trail that led through the heart of the Bannorn, and on it they could gallop straight east to Denerim. The road was not a Tevinter masterwork, and so allowances would have to be made for bad weather; but on horseback, with good luck, they could get to Denerim far faster than on the North Road, where they might run afoul of Rendon Howe's forces.

Startled farmers backed away as the mounted party galloped past.

"Nobles," grumbled an old woman. "Always have to make a show of themselves."

"Fine horses, though," a red-haired plowman observed.

His brother grunted, "Too good for them knife ears!"

They were still worth watching, though: the black-haired noblewoman in the costly blue gown, big mabari hound running at her stirrup, her elf maidservant in a better dress than even the freeholder's wife dreamed of owning. An elf manservant, too, and two guards, one of them a giant of a man on a huge warhorse.

"Ought to have him down south in the Army. Looks like he could fight them darkspawn all by himself!"

The riders took the turn at Green Springs Road, and melted into the trees. The farmers went back to work.

"I am Lady Vera Porodolin," the self-assured aristocrat informed the admiring barkeep, "and I require lodging for myself and my retinue."

The Gnawed Noble, quite the finest establishment in Denerim, was completely at the lady's service and that of her plentiful gold coin. A large suite—on the ground floor—was available. The lady was from Ostwick, it transpired, which accounted for her pretty accent, and she had come to Ferelden to see after some private business. Taking the hint, she was promised the well-known discretion of the inn. A pair of servants, a pair of guards, and a fine hound were not too large a party to house. A bath was arranged, food was ordered, the horses were stabled, and life at the Gnawed Noble Tavern went on, in its expensively quiet way.

The dark-haired elf servants were good-looking, of course, but that was nothing remarkable. Neither were the two guards: a warrior in shabby chainmail whose visored leather helmet hid her eyes in a professionally threatening manner, and a big qunari. Qunari guards were becoming quite the fashion in aristocratic circles. Neither of them said much, which was the mark of reliable bodyguards. The dog was a real charmer. The lady liked to keep to herself. Plenty of ladies did.

The trays of food were brought, the door was shut, and the lady's party left to eat in peace.

Bronwyn removed her helmet, blowing out a breath. Nothing much was said while they inhaled their meal. Over the past few days, they had gone over the plans in detail.

"That was the house, all right," Leliana assured them. "I remember it well." She changed into her Chantry robe, and pulled the elaborate braids out of her hair. "No one notices a Chantry sister in the Market District. I will go along the street, apparently on errands of mercy, and watch the house. There is a corner on the opposite side where I can conceal myself."

"Right," Bronwyn rose, and peered out the window at the street. Now, just after blazing noon, the Market District teemed with life. "Zevran, Sten: position yourselves where we agreed. Listen for all the gossip you can. Tara, you're with me. I'll meet the rest of you opposite the house after sunset."

Leliana slipped out of the inn, avoiding the notice of the maids.

The rest of the party went about their business, just as a noble lady's servants ought to.

"This way," Bronwyn muttered to Tara, who nearly walked into the wall as she stepped into the street. The elf looked about in eager delight.

"It's enormous!" she whispered, eyes radiant. "I never imagined a city could be so big! Could we go to the alienage? Or is it too far? I'm sure I came from the Denerim alienage, but I don't remember anything about it! Let's go, Bronwyn!"

"Not today," Bronwyn whispered back. "And remember to call me 'Jennet!'" She was not sure she wanted to go there anyway, and deal with Tara's disappointment and horror. Considering what the elf had thought of Dust Town, it was likely that the alienage would seem far worse, since the inhabitants were her own people.

"What's that?" Tara whispered, pointing to a shop door.

Bronwyn smiled. "The Wonders of Thedas. It's a shop full of things made at the Circle. Amazing stuff, really. Books and magical artifacts..."

"I want to go there!"

"Shh... Maybe we will, but not now."

She had been told how to slip into the unguarded warehouse, and also how to unlock the door to the secret room. Now that

Tara was a Warden, it was fitting that she learn this as well.

The warehouse was a jumble of crates and barrels. Bronwyn moved softly, looking about for guards or merchants. Her luck held, and it was deserted. Moving to the back, into a small alcove, she tested the locking mechanism. A harrowing pause, and then the cupboard slid away, revealing a room lit only by a few tiny windowed holes, too small for anything other than a mouse or the sun's rays to penetrate.

"Scout," she ordered. "If anyone tries to open the front door, let me know and delay them until I can close the room up again."

A quick yip assured her that she was understood. Now, to see what they could find...

"All I have to do is bind my breasts down," Bronwyn told Tara, heady with success. "It's more than I hoped for. With the gold I took, I can go to Master Wade's and fix it up a bit. Wade is the best armorer in Denerim. My father and brother always go to him. I've never been there, so there's no chance he'll recognize me..."

New armor was a cure for low spirits, she discovered. Furthermore, there was far more in the cache—really a good-sized room—than armor and weapons: there were books and foodstuffs. There were cloaks and blankets and tents and scrolls and journals. There were armor stands and weapon stands, and chests filled with treasure and coin. She could

carry only little with her, but she took a great deal of the gold, a quiver of fine arrows, and some maps and books, as well as a set of heavy dragonbone chainmail that she was absolutely sure would fit her. In the privacy of their rooms at the Gnawed Noble, Tara helped her into it. There were a few dings, here and there, that needed to be hammered out. The straps needed to be fastened more tightly than on the previous owner, but that would be no trouble. It was decent armor—better than decent. It was infinitely better than the shabby practice armor that she had worn since the night of the attack on her home. She felt no sentimental attachment to *that* relic.

She dug an awl from her pack, and set about drilling new holes in the straps. Tara stepped out to the bar to ask after a reliable laundress. There was no reason they could not have their linen seen to while they were in Denerim.

Thus it was that Tara carried a basket of dirty shirts and smallclothes out of the Gnawed Noble, with Bronwyn, helmet concealing her identity, trailing along. The innkeeper had recommended the services of one Goldanna, a woman only steps from Master Wade's shop.

The laundress was sharp-tongued but business-like, and agreed to have the lot washed, dried, and ironed by sunset the next day. Tara did the talking, playing the part of the elf maidservant, while Bronwyn lounged by the door, every inch the bored guard.

The laundress said, "If you'd come much later, I couldn't have promised tomorrow, what with the to-do over the King coming

back to town, but I'll see you right."

Bronwyn was so surprised that she blurted out, "The King's in town?"

The laundress snorted. "Didn't think you had a tongue in your head. That's right. He's back and a good job for him, too. Got himself wounded down south, and he's come back so the Queen can give him a bit of cosseting. Not that he don't deserve it, poor soul. It's a hard thing, all this fighting and killing and all them darkspawn. Lucky we've got Teyrn Loghain to look after us."

They moved on to Master Wade's shop, which was as fascinating as she had always imagined. Wade and his shop assistant Herren, however, were not particularly fascinated by her. She was just another bodyguard of just another noble, and Denerim was swarming with them. Wade was only interested in his art, and second-hand heavy chainmail was not a sufficiently challenging project. Luckily, Herren was interested in ready cash, and within a few minutes, Wade gave his grumbling consent to make some adjustments to her new armor right away.

"It's worth every copper to me," she assured them. "I'm lucky to come into this. It's so superior to what I've been making do with!"

"Yes, yes, yes," sighed Wade, "Spare me your tale of woe. We've heard them all. Keep an eye on that mabari of yours. I'm not responsible if he sings his tail."

The forge sparked with Wade's hammer blows. Bronwyn watched in amazement at his skill, and Tara crept out of a corner to join her. The alterations Wade was willing to do would be complete by the morning.

"It would do more harm than good to tamper with it further. It is...adequate armor. I suggest you mold yourself to it, rather than demanding it mold itself to you."

"Thank you, Master. And do replace any straps and buckles that are unsound."

Wade and Herren rolled their eyes at each other, and Herren looked askance at the old chainmail that Bronwyn wanted to sell to him. He told her loftily that it was only good for scrap metal, but that he would take it off her hands when she picked up her new armor.

"Might I interest you in a helmet?" Herren ventured, regarding hers with contempt. "I have something quite superior in dragonwing..."

Bronwyn laughed. "I like this style."

"Ah." Wade and Herren exchanged another glance, this time one of complicity. Wade pointed out, "You haven't ask the price of the alterations." Herren tried to hush him.

Wade did mostly custom work, but there was a stock of excellent second-hand pieces. Herren liked her a little better when she found some dragonbone gauntlets that fit her. She

caught him discreetly eyeing her weapons, which she knew were uncommonly good for a mere bodyguard. She gave him a cheeky grin. Let him think her a scavenging mercenary, if he liked.

"As such a very good customer," Wade drawled, "I might add some advice. You seem to be new to Denerim. Am I right? Well...keep your little elf friend close. After all the unpleasantness at the alienage, tensions are running high in some quarters."

"The laundress next door had no problem..." Bronwyn began.

Wade sighed, his eyes to Heaven. "In *exalted* quarters. Bann Vaughan is always interested in pretty elf girls."

Herren tried to hush him again. "We don't want to get involved!" he hissed in Wade's direction. He gave Bronwyn a professional smile. "You didn't hear Wade. Sometimes he speaks indistinctly. I've warned him about it."

"I didn't hear a thing."

Bronwyn and Tara strolled around the Market District, looking and listening. They bought hot pasties from one street vendor, and a red apple each from another. Some people did not seem to see Tara, or want to sell to her, but they had no problem with a tall woman warrior. Bronwyn was munching her apple when she heard a high, nasal voice she recognized immediately.

It was her cousin, Lady Habren Bryland, with maid and bodyguard in tow, torturing a silk merchant with her shrill demands. Bronwyn had not seen Habren in years, but there was absolutely no doubt it was she. Bronwyn edged closer, admiring the yellow silk in her cousin's manicured hands. Her shadow fell on the cloth, and Habren looked up, displeased.

"Get away, churl! How dare you look at me? My father can have you sent south to fight darkspawn!"

Tara said, "Come away, Jenet!" and pulled at her arm. Bronwyn looked at her cousin, her lips twisted in a sour smile. Habren's bodyguard tensed, then relaxed as Bronwyn withdrew. Scout raised a leg and gave his opinion.

Well, Bronwyn had known that Habren was in Denerim. She wondered what had come of the matchmaking council between Cousin Leonas and Arl Urien. It would be a good marriage for Habren, in a material light. For the people of Denerim, who would some day have Habren as their Arlessa? Perhaps not so much.

Gossip they overheard confirmed that the King was back in Denerim. Nobody seemed to know much about it. Loghain was still with the army, so there had been no disaster on that front. Apparently the Arl of Denerim had come with the King. When questioned, no one appeared to think the King's wounds dangerous...rather, they were just serious enough to need some convalescence away from the fighting. Now and then, she heard some sarcastic remarks, but only a few. The King was a popular figure.

She caught sight of Zevran and Sten, early on. Eventually Zevran slipped away to their meeting place, and after sunset, so did Sten. Bronwyn, still pleased with herself about her new armor, strolled a bit more, buying some food and drink for Leliana. As the sun dropped below the horizon, the merchants closed their stalls for the day. Carts wheeled out of the Market place, and Bronwyn and Tara clung inconspicuously to the edges of the buildings, moving down the little dead-end street where Marjolaine lived. Scout padded ahead, shaking off the attentions of the last of the children playing in the dirt.

They found Leliana's hiding place. She once again described the interior of the house in detail, and told them what she had observed, while tearing hungrily into the food Bronwyn gave her.

"She has at least two qunari guards. As I said, there is no back entrance. I remember that well from when I used to live here. A man left the house and then returned, and I'm sure he's an apostate mage—the way he holds himself tells a lot. He also has a very large walking stick." She laughed softly. "Marjolaine lives there. I'm sure of it, but she almost never goes out during the day. At night, however..."

"If she goes out," Bronwyn whispered, "We go in. If nothing happens before midnight, we'll go in anyway."

Darkness fell over the city, and the stars glittered above. The usual noises came from the surrounding houses: a man and woman quarreling, a child wailing for attention, someone throwing dirty dishwater out into the street. Farther away,

there was a thread of sound from the Chantry, as the choir intoned the Chant of Light. Leliana sighed softly.

Boots crunched on the ground, turning the corner, and a cloaked figure strode into view. Behind him was a well-armed guard. Bronwyn put her hand out still her companions' eagerness.

The cloaked figure rapped three times and then once more on Marjolaine's door.

"Message for the Lady."

The door creaked open, and there was a muttered conference. The cloaked figure passed some parchment to someone within, and Bronwyn heard him hiss, "No—he wants to see her himself!" There was more talk, and after a moment, the door opened wider, and three people emerged from the door: a cloaked woman, a heavily armed qunari, and someone who might be..

Tara nudged her, and nodded. Yes, a mage, then... The door closed, and there was the sound of a bar sliding into place.

After the sound of their footsteps faded, Bronwyn made up her mind.

"We're going in, and we'll wait for her inside. Try to keep at least one of the guards alive."

Sten grunted acknowledgment, and Zevran chuckled softly.

"All right, let's go," Leliana murmured.

Bronwyn strode up to the door and knocked three times, and then once. "Message for the Lady."

Someone inside unbarred the door, and cracked it open, "What's going on—"

He froze in place, caught by Tara's spell. Bronwyn leaped into the room, and found herself attacked by one of the qunari guards. Leliana flanked the man, and snarled as she drove her dagger under his armpit. Scout charged him, and knocked him down. Behind them was a thud and gurgle, and Zevran's excited laugh. Another spell hissed, and the two guards were dead.

They were in an anteroom, dimly lit by a pair of candles. It was not an unattractive place. Another door accessed the rest of the house. The walls were plastered and whitewashed. The plank floor was covered by woven rugs. There were benches for visitors, and a big wardrobe for storage. Bronwyn bit her lip. Yes. It was big enough for her purposes.

"Bar the door, and put the qunari in the wardrobe," she ordered quietly. "And hide that other poor fellow in the big chest. Let's move this rug a bit to cover the bloodstains."

It was done. They drew a deep breath and eased the next door open.

Lightning popped at them, its sudden brightness burning dark

patches in Bronwyn's vision. Tara ran out, low and quiet, and shot a freezing spell into a doorway. A pair of warriors rushed out from the opposite side and Leliana and Zevran were on them. Sten did not roar a battle cry, but was the more terrifying for his silence. He sneered at the qunari who faced him, and knocked him backwards with a brutal slam of his sword pommel.

"Katara, Tal'Vashoth!" he growled, driving his blade through his opponent's neck.

A tell-tale sphere of blue light bloomed in a doorway, and Bronwyn rushed at it. She tripped, caught by a booby-trap, and fell head-long, but not before she could lash out of the mage's feet with her silverite blade. The man shrieked, ankles spurting blood. Scout was leaping past her, smashing the man back against a bench.

Tara cried out, but it sounded more like victory than distress. Bronwyn untangled herself from the tripwire, and dusted herself off.

What had been quite a nice house was now a shambles. The cozy sitting room floor was littered with bodies, and the furniture was splintered with blows and charred with spells. Blood smeared the wall by the door like a crude painting.

Zevran came out of the single bedroom, calling out, "Clear here!" On the other side, the open doorway appeared to lead to a kitchen and larder. There was a faint, smothered rustle. Scout growled and lowered his head. Bronwyn glanced at

Leliana, and they moved all cautiously to check it out.

There was an alcove to the right, where the noise had come from. Bronwyn stepped out to look into it, and saw a young girl crouching in the stone laundry basin.

"Please," she whimpered. "Please don't kill me." Trembling and young, her voice was sweetened by an Orlesian accent, and her eyes were large and blue. "Please," she sobbed, nodding at Scout. "Please, I'm afraid of big dogs."

"Put your hands up," Bronwyn ordered, "and come out of there slowly."

Leliana sighed deeply, looking the girl over. "Marjolaine has a new apprentice, I think."

"No!" the girl cried. "I am only the kitchenmaid. Madame brings me from Orlais. I cook, I clean, I serve Madame! I am never allowed to go out! Please, please save me! Madame is so cruel!"

Bronwyn was relaxing, about to lower her sword, when Leliana's voice sounded in the little room, hard and unyielding. "Marjolaine is never cruel to her tools," she contradicted, "until she is done with them—"

The sharp little dagger was spinning out of the girl's hand already, and a flask of acid was ready in the other. Bronwyn snarled as the dagger lodged in her leather helmet, and she lunged quickly, her sword extended. The flask of acid dropped

and broke, the fumes rising up, sharp and acrid. Scout barked, rearing back from the stink.

"Stupid girl!" Leliana said bitterly. "Dying in a laundry tub for the likes of Marjolaine." The girl sagged to her knees, coughed, and was dead. Leliana's voice rose. "Did you think she would die for *you*?"

They left her there, the acid eating away at her skin. One of the mages was badly wounded, but still alive, and they took away his staff and bound his hands. Zevran knelt over him, the point of his sword as the man's throat.

And then they had a talk. Tara would heal the man, which he needed if he wanted to live, but at a price. Sten and Scout guarded the front door, waiting for the return of the mistress of the house.

"You're not from the Chantry," the captive mage guessed. He was a bearded, rangy man, who looked like he had gone for long periods without enough to eat.

"No," Bronwyn said shortly. "We're not from the Chantry. I don't care if you're an apostate. I want to know all about Marjolaine and what she's up to. Where does she keep her papers? Who is she working with? Give me something I can use, and this lady will stop you from bleeding to death."

He was only hired help, and so was perfectly happy to tell them anything that would save his life. He was not allowed into the lady's private room, but he knew her papers were

there. He did not go with her to meet her clients, but he knew who some of them were. His testimony was written down, his bleeding stopped; and he was tied up and put under a sleep spell.

Leliana, of course, remembered all of Marjolaine's hiding places: even the secret drawer in her desk. Behind a bookcase were hidden files and something that Leliana called "dossiers," which contained lengthy information on every important person in Ferelden.

In easy reach were the bard's tools of forgery: model letters from individuals which were rewritten to suit her needs. Bronwyn flipped through them, and her stomach dropped at the sight of one of her father's, along with some drafts of the document that Marjolaine had transformed it into. It had taken some attempts, evidently, before she had made it something useful for her purposes. Knowing Father, it was clear to Bronwyn which was the original. It was quite bad enough. She read it through, and then read through it again with growing anguish.

"Oh, Father!" she whispered. "How could you *do* that to me?"

Two hours passed, while Bronwyn, Leliana, and Tara sorted through the papers. Bronwyn's misery had hardened into a cold, dark rage, which she grasped like a sword. She would be taking everything here, and the nobles of Ferelden would bear the consequences.

Zevran was watching at the window, and gave the quiet signal that Marjolaine was returning. The companions assembled in the anteroom to wait.

"I would like to talk to Marjolaine," Bronwyn murmured. "The others need to be eliminated instantly."

Sten unbarred and opened the door at the secret knock, his size and armor making him much like any other qunari in the gloom. Marjolaine and her guards did not realize the substitution until they were inside, and the door closed behind them.

The woman was stunned, and her surprised bodyguards disposed of with lethal dispatch.

"Bar the door," Bronwyn said, her voice icy and inhuman even to her own ears. "We don't want any surprise callers. Bring the woman into the sitting room and we'll have a talk."

"I'll tie her up," Leliana said fiercely. "You don't know how clever she is." She slipped her hand into the woman's bodice, and withdrew a thick packet of folded and sealed parchment. Moving over to a candle, she used heat and the tip of her dagger to expertly pop open the seal without damaging it. Bronwyn took the packet, paused as she recognized the seal, and began reading the contents, her brow darkening at every sentence.

Marjolaine's hands were tied behind her back, and her thumbs were bound together—a trick Leliana had learned from

Marjolaine herself—and she was moved to one of the settees. When Bronwyn had read enough, she gave a nod. Tara revived the prisoner, and the interrogation began. Bronwyn stood in a shadowed corner, not wanting to show her hand right away.

"Ah, Leliana," Marjolaine said softly, her Orlesian accent drawling out the words. "How lovely to see you! But what have you done to yourself? Your hair—short as a boy's! And such a color! You have not been taking care of yourself, I fear."

"Is that why you sent your men after us?" Leliana asked. "To 'take care of me?' They failed, as you see."

"You understood my invitation, then. And here you are," smiled the dark-haired woman, "come back to play the Great Game. I always knew you would, after you tired of your little holiday in the Chantry. We are not so different, you and I."

Tara cried, "Leliana is nothing like you!"

"Ah, a fierce little mage! And pretty, too! Always a useful servant—unless they are like that one," she sneered at the unconscious bound mage on the floor.

Leliana stood over her, eyes searching. "We killed your guards and found your correspondence. You have been very busy, here in Ferelden. I thought you would have gone home to Orlais after the last time we met."

Marjolaine laughed darkly. "And so I would, *ma petite*, but there is always so much to do here in Denerim. I would love to leave, but not until the Game is played to the finish. I hate Ferelden, as you know: the entire country smells of wet dog. The smell is in my hair, my clothes—bah! I cannot get it out."

Bronwyn glanced at Leliana, who understood, and ask, "And the Game itself? Or the endgame, I should say? It seems that you are playing for very high stakes. If you succeed, the Empress herself will reward you."

"Ha!" the woman shook her long dark hair, smirking. "Reward me? She might even give me one of these little dog provinces to rule! To win by marriage what her predecessors failed to win by war—now that is triumph! That is victory!" Her voice lowered to an insinuating purr. "And there will be riches enough for all. Enough even for you and your most efficient companions. If you have seen the documents I was carrying—and I must presume that you have—you know that I am on the winning side. To oppose me might even be called treason! You will never have a better opportunity, my dear. Untie my hands, and together we shall deliver this very good news to the Empress!"

Leliana paused, thinking it over. "Untie you so you can stab me in the back, you mean..."

"No, no! Not with all these swords pointing at me!" Marjolaine laughed. "If you have done so well, you deserve to be a partner in my success."

"And leave?" Leliana seemed off-balance, even hopeful. "Just leave? Go to Orlais, you mean?"

"But of course! We can leave this horrible place behind us. I have horses in the Market stables. We can take our letter and leave all else behind. Untie me, and we can be gone together, tonight!"

Tara took her cue from Leliana, looking at the red-haired girl with wide eyes. "Would we really go with her? What about him?" she asked, pointing at the mage on the floor.

Marjolaine shrugged. "Bring him or leave him. It is all one to me. A little fire will cover our departure."

"And your correspondence?" Leliana asked. "Do we take it or leave it, too?"

"Most should be burned: but the Empress might enjoy some of the dossiers. Not all—some are no longer of use..."

Bronwyn spoke, her words dropping like icicles into the conversation. "Not the dossier of Teyrn Bryce Cousland, for instance?" She stepped out, removed her helmet, and stared down at Marjolaine. "Not the dossiers of those who are already dead by your intrigues?"

"Ah!" Marjolaine looked up at her. Her eyes changed, then, and her voice softened. "You do not look much like your description, my dear. War is a hard master, is it not? The scar does nothing for you. And such eyes...very compelling,

very strange. They are new, yes?"

"Yes."

"I see. You must know, my dear, that it was nothing personal. That Arl Howe—how easy it was to make him believe what he wanted to believe. Your father was a charming man, and not unskilled, but he played the Game, and lost."

Bronwyn shivered under the stress of maintaining her calm. She took a deep breath, and hefted her dagger. "Be sure to tell my nephew Oren," she murmured in Marjolaine's ear, "that it was only a Game."

The dagger struck home and twisted. Marjolaine's eyes widened, and she ground her teeth, too proud to scream. Her feet kicked out, reflexively, and then she flopped back. Bronwyn was frozen in place, unable to withdraw her dagger. Scout whined, and rubbed against her side.

Zevran took charge of the aftermath. "Now, *bellissima*, let us move her quickly, yes? We must make the house look like she has gone on a long journey. We do not want her to bleed on the cushions!"

Bronwyn could not move. "And by the way," she snarled furiously at Marjolaine's corpse, "Ferelden does *not* smell like wet dog!"

Scout yipped comfortingly, while Zevran and Sten pulled Bronwyn away. The assassin and the qunari exchanged eye

rolls.

There was much to do, and Zevran was experienced in the art of concealing murders. There was a cellar beneath the kitchen, and Sten was put to work digging a grave, wide and deep enough for all the bodies. It was fortunate that there was a shovel down there—or not so fortunate as ironic, when digging quickly revealed that there were already bodies under the house.

"How well our hostess has provided for us," Zevran laughed. "Shovels, quicklime to consume the bodies! One might almost say she was our accomplice!"

The blood was scrubbed away, and the furniture rearranged. Bronwyn, still numb from the night's disclosures and events, was brought a cup of herbal tea. It was then she noticed that the captive mage was awake and looking at her, terror in his eyes.

"What shall we do with this one?" Zevran asked lightly. "It is a pity you have awakened, my friend. Better to die in one's sleep, feeling no pain."

Bronwyn croaked, "Let him go."

"*Bellissima*," Zevran said reproachfully, "you know it cannot be. The man knows little, true, but he knows too much."

"Let him go!" she cried out. "Look," she said to the man, a little desperately. "if you go blabbing to any of Marjolaine's old

friends, you'll just end up dead. Here...here's three sovereigns. I want you on a ship out of Ferelden tomorrow."

Zevran sighed. Leliana sat down by Bronwyn and took her hand, giving Zevran a look he understood perfectly. "It is your noble nature," she said softly. "I understand that. If that is what you really want, Bronwyn, we must take the man with us and put him on the boat ourselves to make sure of it."

"All right," Bronwyn subsided. "Let's do that."

Zevran told the mage, "I hope you appreciate this lady's generosity. Myself, I would kill you now and bury you in the cellar, but she is full of mercy, and I am her sworn man."

"What is that you have?" Bronwyn asked Tara, whose hands were full of something sparkling.

"Marjolaine's jewelry," Tara told her at once. "It would be silly to bury her with it."

Bronwyn took an angry breath, but Leliana cut in. "That is very sensible. Her jewelry is worth a lot of money. In fact, we should go through the house carefully. We should take everything of value, and what we cannot take we should bury with the bodies, to make it look like she packed up and left."

It was logical, and perfectly disgusting. Bronwyn pulled herself together and gathered all the papers she could find. They went into a backpack she found in a cupboard. Meanwhile, Leliana and Tara packed some of the best clothes, and a few

of the best weapons. Leliana lingered over Marjolaine's beautiful vanity set: brush, comb, hand mirror, and jewelry box of silver and ivory, and then packed them too.

The bodies and the unwanted equipment were consigned to the deep hole in the cellar. The nameless young girl fell backwards like a crushed flower, Marjolaine was thrown in next and her arms spread wide, one covering the girl's face. When all the bodies were in the grave, Leliana murmured a prayer:

"I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Fade, For there is no darkness, nor death either, in the Maker's Light, And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."

Zevran poured the bag of quicklime over all, and he and Sten quickly shoveled the earth back and tamped it down. The companions went back upstairs without speaking.

Murder, Bronwyn thought wearily. *That was murder, not war. I am a murderer, and I must live with it.* Scout sniffed at her, puzzled at her strange smell, and whined.

Leliana broke the silence. "Let us all wash ourselves carefully, and no one will guess what we have been up to."

She took her own advice, and after she was clean, she went into the bedchamber, looked at herself in the mirror briefly, and began changing into Marjolaine's richest silk gown. Bronwyn, wiping off her armor in the sitting room, listened to the bard's calm voice, soothing as a lullaby.

"I found the key to the front door. We shall lock the house, yes? If Marjolaine is expected to be delivering a letter in person, then no one will be coming here for at least a month. Even then, they might think she has had some misadventure, or has changed her mind. Now come, what's done cannot be undone, and we shall all sleep late tomorrow."

Edwina, the sleepy and irritated owner of the Gnawed Noble Tavern was awakened by knocking, and roused herself to let the foreign lady and her retinue back in. The lady was very pretty, very drunk, and very happy. Some sort of wild party, Edwina supposed. The guards were silent, and the servants half carried the lady back to her rooms.

Another typical night in Denerim, Edwina sighed to herself. She blew out the candle and slipped back into bed.

Note: Thanks to my readers, and especially to my reviewers: Elizabeth-chan, Lehni, Warrose, Josie Lange, Shakespeira, Amhran Comhrac, Sarah1281, Zute, demonincargles, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Nithu, dyslecksec, Aaron W, Persephone Chiara, CynderJenn, mille libri, JackOfBladesX, mutive, Aoi24, Dante Alighieri1308, Enaid Aderyn, derko5, Isaac A. Drake, WellspringCD, Windchime68, wayfaringpanda, almost insane, Gene Dark, Papillon, Piceron, jen4306, jubamischin, and undeadyeti.

Papillon asked about the serving maid's child, since I have

decided to write Alistair as Fiona's son. My theory for purposes of this story is as follows: There was indeed a serving maid at Redcliffe Castle who died in childbirth. Alistair was substituted for the dead baby. It would have taken some time and effort to put this over, and therefore there was all the more reason to drive Goldanna away. A few people must have known about the substitution, other than Eamon, who did not know the mother's identity-simply that this was a son of Maric. I daresay he imagined the worst-and perhaps, knowing something of where Maric had been, might even have hit on the truth. Because of the dates, I originally thought that the dead child could not be Maric's, but I am faced with Goldanna's belief that it was. Apparently she knew of her mother's relationship with the king. Presumably Alistair was older than the dead baby, which means that Maric had some sort of brief liaison before Fiona showed up with her child. Go Maric :(

Zevran's story is that of Masetto da Lamporecchio, the first novel from day three of the Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio.

27. Dark Waters

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 27: Dark Waters

Water lapped gently at the beached rowboat. Two ravens perched on the bow, sooty feathers gleaming with health. A brief dispute, and one of the birds pecked at the other, who fluttered up with a squawk. Anders flapped unsteadily back to the grassy shore, and transformed. "Ouch!" he complained. Morrigan followed, and resumed her human form in the blink of an eye.

"You must *practice*, Anders, if you wish to master this form. That means, if you do not comprehend it, that you must *fly*, and fly frequently, whether you find it odd or not!"

"I *am* practicing, and I *was* going to fly," he insisted. "I'm just not ready to fly that far!"

He pointed to the Circle Tower, clear and imposing in the morning sun. He added, "And I never thought I would voluntarily go there ever again!"

Morrigan stroked his hair with a light touch. He really was perfect in every way for her purposes, and not an unworthy

companion. "We must go, and we must go soon. In three days, 'twill will be too late. I may never have such a chance again!" She leaned in, breath warm and urgent on Anders' throat. "And what a rare jest—to plunder the Tower for treasures they do not even know they possess!"

Anders' face yielded a smile at last. "There is that," he laughed. "I'd risk a lot to put one over on that bastard Irving! I still think his study is the most likely place to find your book."

"You know the Tower, and I do not," Morrigan agreed, pleased that he was once more in a good humor. "We shall fly there, fly back, and none the wiser!"

Her mother had always kept her many secrets close. Yet there was that one time they had slipped her leash: after a long journey gathering herbs, they had returned to find Templars rifling the hut. A quick and ugly battle had dispatched the intruders, but Mother's wrath was boundless when she discovered that two Templars had already escaped through the marshes, bearing away ancient tomes, and, by chance, her personal grimoire. Rarely had her enemies so vexed her, and Flemeth had taken her revenge on the bodies of the Templars left behind. They had provided her with rare ingredients for some time, and what she had no use for had hung from nearby branches until the marsh birds had their fill. The rest was slowly absorbed by the looming sylvan trees themselves: bones, sinew, and all.

Where else would the Templars have taken books of magic, than back to the Tower where magic itself was imprisoned?

The fools who dwelt therein might embrace the chains that bound them, but Morrigan knew better. To his credit, Anders felt likewise, and had agreed to help her search for the lost item. The Black Grimoire, the object of her search, would tell her those things that Flemeth had not wished to share.

Anders' price was not high: a tumble or two on the soft moss of the forest, a kind word now and then, a smile. He was a comely man, and a gentle lover. He was educated and magically powerful, even by Morrigan's standards. He was refreshingly clean in his personal habits. He was, in fact, far and away superior to the rough-handed Chasinds Mother had lured in to initiate Morrigan in the ways of men and women, or the clumsy peasants Morrigan herself had chanced upon from time to time. His company was...agreeable...to her.

She remembered to grant him a smile then, the better to have her way.

"Let us fly now, to the bluff and back again...thrice. If you do well," she purred, "you shall be rewarded as you like!"

If this was command, Alistair decided, it wasn't so bad. At the moment, he really didn't have to do much of anything. He was lonely, though. He missed Bronwyn even more than he had expected. She was the alpha of their pack, he decided, chuckling over the image: the leader who defined them all and their relationships to one another. And she was very nice to look at.

They were staying at the Spoiled Princess for the next two days. At that point, they would have to move out and wait at the meeting place Bronwyn had so carefully marked on his map. Until then, they could take turns caring for the horses, practicing their marksmanship, trading, sparring a bit, or resting. It was a nice place: the innkeeper was a friendly sort, and the barmaids seemed to think that Grey Wardens were genuine heroes. The ale was good, too.

Bronwyn had suggested that he plan out a schedule, and Alistair had actually sat down at a table in the common room and written one out. He went outside, where Cullen was exercising his horse, and went over it. Cullen thought it was all right.

"I like it that you've put the dwarves on horse duty with an experienced partner," he said. "They need to get used to them, but we don't want any accidents or injuries."

Alistair snorted. "I wouldn't call Anders or Morrigan exactly *experienced* with horses."

Cullen laughed. "Well, they don't confuse them with brontos! Speaking of the mages, where are they?"

"I don't think I really want to know. Anders has been smirking more than usual lately."

The horse was reined in. Cullen dismounted, frowning. "Anders had something of a reputation in the Tower. Bronwyn won't like it if he breaks that witch's heart."

"It's more likely to be the other way around."

"I don't think she'd like that either. I have to tell you," Cullen said frankly, lowering his voice a little, "that I don't approve of those mages cavorting off by themselves. It's not decent. I don't want people to get the idea that Grey Wardens are... are...libertines, or something of that sort!"

Just at that moment, Brosca leaned out of an upstairs window, and called, "Cullen! I'm having trouble fastening my belt. Come upstairs and help me!"

Alistair's brows rose.

Cullen blushed, "She doesn't mean anything by it! She's a nice girl, and not some kind of temptress like that Morrigan. She's just being friendly."

"She likes you a lot," Alistair remarked, completely deadpan. "Don't worry about the horse. I'll lead it back."

Astrid emerged from the inn, just as Cullen was entering, and she granted him a grave nod as they passed. She saw Alistair walking out the horse, and strode over to him.

"Oghren said that you were making out a rota of our duties. May I see it?"

Surprised, Alistair handed it over to her at once.

The dwarf woman studied it frowning, and then nodded. "I might suggest more archery practice, but this is quite

acceptable. The horses require no more care for the moment?"

"No." Alistair grinned. "Cullen's very diligent with them. The point of the schedule is to make sure he doesn't have to do *all* the work with them!"

"Fair enough. We are an order of equals, I understand. It is proper that we share all the duties. I see that you have nothing planned at the moment. Would you care to spar?"

Alistair hesitated. It was a struggle to get used to the idea of sparring with dwarves—especially dwarf women. It seemed too much like attacking children. Astrid was still looking up at him coolly, brows raised. She was not a child, of course, and would be offended if she knew he thought of her as one. The keen blue eyes were not a child's, and no child's mouth had ever been marked with those faint lines of humor and irony.

"Sure," he said, aware he was staring. He had never realized that dwarf women could actually be...good-looking. "That would be great."

They sparred, and within five minutes she handed him his helmet, so to speak.

Alistair gasped, on his back, winded. His entire shield arm tingled from the force of Astrid's last blow. She stood over him, head cocked to one side.

"You were going easy on me," she remarked. "Don't."

"Sorry."

"Am I a Grey Warden, or not?" she asked.

He sat up, wincing. "You're a Grey Warden."

"Good. Because either I'm a Grey Warden, or I'm nothing; and I don't care to be nothing."

She put out a hand to help him up. Alistair was astonished at the strength of her grip. He shouldn't have been, of course. Wasn't that what people called the dwarves? "*The Stout Folk?*" Astrid was stouter than most, he guessed.

"What are you doing?"

Brosca and Cullen came out of the inn, tankards in hand.

Alistair dusted himself off, grinning wryly. "Trying to spar."

"Nuh-huh!" Brosca laughed, shaking her head. "*You were trying, Alistair: Astrid was succeeding.*"

"Well..." he dug the toe of his boot into the dust, embarrassed. "Let's go another round."

They took turns. Each of them had his or her own tricks. Some time later Oghren came out and joined in the practice. There were special tactics needed to deal with an axe man like the red-haired dwarf. Astrid knew quite a few, but Oghren knocked her flying more than once. Then Brosca took on Oghren, and showed what a pair of really fast practice

daggers could do to take down a stronger opponent when he was still winding up for a crushing blow.

"Or *would* be crushing, if he could land it!" Brosca laughed triumphantly.

"That was a good practice," Astrid admitted. "A decent workout. Perhaps the dreams will not be so bad tonight."

"Don't count on it," Alistair warned her, following her back into the cozy inn.

She actually laughed a little.

The mages did not return until the first stars came out.

A night, a day, a night. Two ravens followed the moonlight to the dark tower in the middle of Lake Calenhad.

Their arranged destination was a window ledge on the second floor. The first raven backwinged down; the second landed awkwardly, talons scrabbling on stone. The two ravens used their beaks to tug at the stiff, narrow window. After a moment, the hinges yielded, and the window creaked open. A small aperture: one that no human, elf, or dwarf could hope to enter. For the ravens, however, it was more than sufficient. Their dark plumage concealed them as they flapped down through the darkened chamber to the stone floor, fifteen feet below.

In a moment, a man and a woman stood there, eyes adjusting to the dim light from the hall beyond. The chamber had no door. Anders had led Morrigan to his old digs in the Senior Mage Quarters. The Templars allowed the mages no real privacy. There were partitions only, and Templars could peer at the sleeping mages as their duty—or fancy—took them: as they washed or dressed or relieved themselves. Mages must not be allowed any privacy, lest they go mad, ally with demons, become abominations, and destroy all life on Thedas before breakfast. The tiny windows let in minimal air and light, but were not a practicable exit—unless one could shape-shift, which the Chantry had decreed was a very improper magical discipline indeed.

It was long after midnight. Only the Templars on guard would be awake, and that not for long, when Anders cast *Somnium* on them.

The two of them peered around the edge of the wall at the figure in massive armor, leaning a little against the wall.

"Carroll," Anders whispered softly to Morrigan. "A complete moron, and generally lyrium-addled. No one will be surprised if *he's* asleep."

Morrigan chuckled, and the spell was launched: perhaps not as powerful as it would have been had Anders had his staff to focus it, but strong enough. The gawky Templar's knees buckled, and he slid down the wall slowly, with a series of quiet *clanks*.

"Now for the First Enchanter's Study. The door will probably be open. There's a Templar on duty at that end of the hall, too."

Morrigan looked about, yellow eyes taking it all in. These endless, circular halls, this maze of bookshelves and stonework might have been her home, in another life. Her home, or rather, her cage. Not even to have the right to a door! It did not surprise her that Anders had tried to escape.

They glided along the arc of the corridor, watching and listening. Anders gave Morrigan a nudge as they neared the First Enchanter's study. He looked beyond, to where the stairs led up to the next floor, recognized the Templar on duty, and a scowl darkened his face.

"That *bastard*," he hissed. "I'll never forget *him*."

Morrigan caught at his arm and quickly shook her head. Anders snarled soundlessly, but cast sleep over the man. They crossed the hall and tried the door. It was unlocked, of course, for even the First Enchanter could not be permitted a lock on his door.

They eased the door shut behind them, and Morrigan raised a light. Not wanting to seem a bumpkin from the Wilds, she refused to show her admiration for the wide and lofty room, for the fine, carved desk, for the beautiful windows of colored glass and the fascinating trinkets. Instead, she joined Anders as he opened chests and rifled the bookcases. She had described the Black Grimoire carefully to Anders, and they

could not miss it, once they laid eyes upon it.

A rustle among the parchment, and a mouse darted across the floor. Morrigan, fresh from her bird form, momentarily saw it as prey, and then noticed Anders' knowing grin. She huffed, and went on with their search.

There was only so much she could carry in her robes, and still successfully transform. They had devised a plan to carry the book, but there were other things in the study that caught their interest. Anders found some notes that he thrust into a pocket, and a thin volume joined them shortly thereafter.

Morrigan moved to a large chest in a corner, opening it, and quickly sorting through the jumble within. Parchments, letters...a parcel wrapped in more parchment...more letters.

She paused, and dug through to the parcel again. It was book-sized, and yes—it was indeed a book. Carefully, she pulled the parchment away from a corner, and thrilled with triumph to see the black-dyed leather cover. Flemeth had once claimed that her grimoire was bound in brain-cured human skin, but Morrigan suspected that that was one of her mother's tall tales. This leather looked and felt like oxhide to her. She distracted Anders from his own search, and tapped her finger on the book. He hurried over, smiling broadly.

"Put everything else away just as it was!" he whispered.
"Irving may never know it was gone. The library—"

"Anders, we have no time!" She soothed him with a light

touch. "The day may come when, as a Grey Warden, you can simply walk into the Tower and demand to use the library. We will never have another chance to loot the First Enchanter's study!"

Clutching her precious grimoire, she urged him to the door. She dimmed her witchlight, and the room fell into darkness once more. The door was carefully opened, and they were relieved to see that the nearby Templar was still sleeping. Anders sneered, but readied himself to creep out, and find the window they had entered through.

Then the door to the next floor opened, and their plans were changed for them.

"What is—*Kendrick!* Wake up, man!"

Anders clutched at Morrigan's arm. "Knight-Commander Greagoir!" he whispered, his blood turning to ice. Grey Warden or not, it would be fatal to be found poking about the First Enchanter's study after midnight. The door was shut, and the two of them backed away hastily, stumbling in the dark.

The Knight-Commander's angry rebuke lasted for some time. Then they heard heavy, metal shod footsteps stalk down the hall. A pause. The door opened.

Greagoir held a light crystal up and glanced about the room. Behind him stood a sheepish Templar. The two Templars saw only vague shadows, and nothing resembling mages. It would have taken a closer examination to reveal the two ravens

hiding behind the chest in the corner.

"We will do the inspection *together*," Greagoir was staying, "since you seem to have found your duties too great a burden tonight."

"Sorry, Knight-Commander," mumbled the Templar. "Won't happen again."

"It had better not!"

To Anders' horror, they left the door open when they moved away.

Morrigan stepped out into the shaft of light from the doorway and she murmured, "We can still do this."

They could open the small window—very gingerly—with the hooked pole kept for the purpose. Furniture had to be moved, quietly and carefully, but they could do that, too. Anders pulled out the square of fine silk and the long light cord they had brought, and Morrigan shifted again—to an owl—an strong, grey owl—strong enough to snatch up a sleeping lamb. The owl settled on the window frame, and Anders wrapped the grimoire in the silk and bound it to the owl's legs, grimacing.

"I still don't like this," he told Morrigan. "It's dangerous for you."

The owl pecked at him in exasperation. Anders finished the last knot, and stood back. "Good luck..."

Morrigan dove from the window into the chilly moonlight. There was a moment of terror as the book dropped the length of the cord and a leaden weight tugged at her.

She opened her wings, and the first downstroke was agony. All she had to do was make it to the broken end of the causeway...

Anders jumped down silently from the desk, and moved it back where it had been, rearranging the papers on it. If something were out of order, the First Enchanter would think it was the Templars, spying again. He took a breath, and transformed into a raven again, flapping up to the window ledge, and glancing with keen birdsight to see the big owl laboring with its burden.

Darting out, far more swiftly, Anders flew past with a "caw" of encouragement. The owl was finding it hard going, but there was no help for it now. The lake glittered beneath them, silver on black; the broken end of the causeway was marble-white. He flew faster, wanting to be ready when Morrigan arrived. She was coming, a growing silhouette against the moon.

A rush of dark feathers, the bump of an unbearable weight. Anders hissed as a talon caught his hand, drawing blood. He tore at the thin rope, and the knots came free. Between one breath and another, Morrigan lay stretched out on the cracked stones of the causeway, trembling with exhaustion.

He fetched his staff and cast a general rejuvenation spell, and then used his fingertips and a word to heal his own hand.

"I hope this bloody book is worth all that. I thought for a moment you might not make it," he told her, sweeping her up in his arms.

She did not push him away. "I am not so feeble in will as to let a mere book kill me, even though 'tis Flemeth's!"

Cold rain sheeted down, making the encampment at Ostagar even more inhospitable than usual. Smoke rose from damp fires in a white cloud, reducing visibility from the lookout posts.

Loghain, walking along the pickets, heard the challenge and the response. Reports from Gherlen's Halt? It was not Roarke's usual time. He must have something notable to say. He sent a man to fetch the courier, while he continued inspecting the improved defenses Voldrik had devised here on the north approach.

There were two young men, this time, worn out with hard riding.

"We made good time enough, my lord," one explained. "Arl Teagan gave us remounts when we went through Redcliffe."

"Did he?" Loghain considered it. "Sensible of him. I'll want to hear about Redcliffe later. Let's see what Roark has to say..."

Emboldened by his excitement, the other boy burst out, "It's not just the Commander, my lord! The Girl Warden was at Gherlen's Halt and she sent letters for you, and her brother

the Teyrn, and his Majesty!" He saw the panicked look on his friend's face, and lowered his voice. "I reckon it's good news, my lord," he mumbled, chastened.

"Indeed? Then let us have it..."

He would question the lads later. Right now, he wanted to read the letters in the privacy of his quarters at the Tower of Ishal. The heavy leather bag was deposited on his camp desk, and the riders sent off for rest and a meal.

"Stay, Cauthrien. The rest of you are dismissed."

They were too disciplined to show the disappointment they must be feeling. If the news was good, he would tell them himself, and in his own way.

There was thick parcel of parchment, directed to Fergus Cousland, and sealed with the Grey Warden griffon. There was a letter to Cailan—a thin folded parchment. And for Loghain himself...

"My lord Teyrn—

Bhelen is King in Orzammar, and the dwarven army is on the march."

He felt his lips curl upward. The smile could be indulged, for this was the best news he had had in weeks.

No. Months. Maybe longer.

He told Cauthrien, "It appears that Bronwyn has been successful in her appeal to the dwarves. They are coming."

He read the letter through, and hesitated over the references to their "neighbors." She must mean the Orlesians, and that was ominous.

He gave the letter to Cauthrien to study, while he pored over the nice little map Bronwyn had drawn for him. It was a useful thing, to know where the Deep Roads lay under the soil of Ferelden. Bronwyn had marked them in red ink, and then shown where the old entrances were situated. It was not complete, of course. Perhaps someday he could persuade her to give him a complete map of the Deep Roads, or at least one that showed where they wound underneath Orlais. Of course, an underground march would not be feasible, but it would be amusing to see if was even *possible*.

Meanwhile, his second remarked, "Based on this, she will be here with the dwarves in less than two weeks. Hardly an outcome that anyone expected."

Loghain snorted. "You mean it was unexpected by our King, with all his defeatist talk! I am *not* so surprised." He gave Cauthrien a grim smile. "I shall see to it that His Majesty gets the news just as fast as our couriers can reach Denerim! Perhaps he will be moved to rejoin us, in order to share in what he must describe as a 'glorious moment.'"

Cauthrien considered and said frankly. "It *is* rather a 'glorious moment.' The dwarves last came to Ferelden's aid in the days

of the Rebellion."

Loghain tried to resist the moment of nostalgia, but it swept over him nonetheless: sweet, painful, intoxicating...

"The Legion of the Dead. That name certainly brings back memories. Superb fighters, too. She's done well." He studied the Fergus' thick packet, and said, "So, Cauthrien, It seems that we'll have to reorganize the camp to accommodate our stout new allies."

After she had gone, he had decisions to make. Cousland was already in Denerim, and possibly in parts north. Loghain would have to forward this parcel to him tomorrow, but there must be untold amounts of intelligence within. No doubt both brother and sister would be furious if they knew what he intended, but he needed to know just how far the Cousland family was in with the Orlesians...

Over the years, he had learned skills that would have been useful in his younger days. It took time to remove the seal from the tangled string, but he had also learned patience. The lump of griffon-impressed wax was carefully set aside, and the string unbound. The heavy parchment was folded back, and the lengthy correspondence inside exposed. A note lay on top, and Loghain felt not even a moment's shame at reading it.

Eight Grey Wardens? That was impressive. Eight in such a short time. After twenty years, Duncan had commanded only two dozen. Bronwyn had been very busy.

So she had been in the Deep Roads. He did not envy her. He had spent time enough and to spare there himself. For some reason the dwarves had let her choose their king for them. That sounded so incredibly unlikely that it must be true. He liked the idea that she had chosen the king based on his value as a Ferelden ally. This was all very satisfactory, so far.

As to seeing the Archdemon... She had no doubt seen *something*...

Ah, yes, their little private code. Very sensible of them. How convenient it was to be Commander of the Armies and above suspicion: so much so that when Fergus Cousland was away from his quarters, Loghain could walk past the guard, tell the man that he would wait for Teyrn Fergus inside, and then go through his private papers and make a copy of the cipher. How convenient not to have been born a nobleman, and thus not to be repressed by one's own chivalry. Loghain was proud to say that he had not chivalric bone in his body.

He found the cipher and began decoding the mysterious paragraphs. In a few moments, he laughed aloud.

"...*You are not to tell the following to anyone but Teyrn Loghain...*"

Well. There was as pretty an invitation to read her correspondence as a man could ask for. He went back to work, quickly decoding the rest, and then sat back, scowling in alarm.

Bronwyn had been incredibly reckless to cross the border and put herself in du Guesclin's hands. Loghain had known the father—who had been killed at the Battle of River Dane—and a pompous, preening swine he had been.

"For obvious reasons, I left Alistair behind..."

Loghain paused, wondering which reasons had been uppermost in her mind. He returned to his reading. So the Orlesian Warden had lured her to the border? This all sounded very suspicious.

"...secretly over the border to warn us not to return to the Rock, for plans were afoot to abduct us and take us into Orlais, in order to force King Cailan to admit the Orlesians..."

Loghain sat up straight, eyes blazing. "Fool of a girl! Do you imagine that is the only use the Orlesians would have made of you?"

A son of the late king. A daughter of the deceased heir-presumptive. The latter was as dangerous as the former, for Ferelden inheritance laws being as fluid as they were, Bronwyn's claim to the throne was as good as her brother's—and as good as an unacknowledged bastard's. If Cailan died in battle, the two young Wardens would have made a pretty pair of puppet monarchs to dangle on Celene's strings. At least this note supported his own theory—and Howe's—that Bronwyn knew nothing of her family's treason. Or alleged treason, if Howe was lying.

This Riordan fellow had intervened for reasons of his own. It was touchingly naïve of Bronwyn to put it down to some sort of attachment to the land of his birth. Though very capable, she was young, after all. At any rate, the fellow *had* intervened and Ferelden still had its Wardens, and Cailan would have no excuse to go crawling to that bitch Celene.

"...and know now what Wardens must do to defeat the Archdemon. Only Wardens can, they always said, and now I know why. It is a dark thing, but it will save us all..."

Loghain blew out a long, long breath. Blood magic, probably. The room turned chilly, despite the good fire in the brazier. He had always suspected that the Wardens had some sort of dealings with Blood Magic. Why be so very secretive, after all? Why did so many of their recruits disappear? What power could they wield that was great enough to slay Gods?

Did the Chantry know? Or did they suspect? Or had the Wardens made an arrangement with them, long ago: an exception to the ban on Blood Magic, because the Wardens had confided their secrets to the Divine.

It made sense. He grimaced, regretting that the girl had gotten mixed up with anything so foul. Not her fault, of course, but very unfortunate.

Yes, the cunning Orlesians in the Chantry at Val Royeaux *must* know. They had no doubt passed it down, from Divine to Divine, since the days of Kordillius Drakon. The Chantry did

not interfere with the Wardens—much—and Loghain suspected that it was because they were busy holding their noses so very *hard*.

So Bronwyn believed that this secret Warden power would work, did she? It hadn't done much for Duncan. Did it only work on the Archdemon itself? If that was the case, putting the Wardens in the vanguard had been a foolish waste.

No more secrets. When the girl rode in with her dwarven friends, she and Loghain would have a very private talk, and she *would* tell him *everything*.

The captive mage's name was Betancourt. He had been trained in the Orlesian Circle, and then assigned to serve Marjolaine in Denerim a year ago. Zevran questioned him when they awakened, gritty-eyed and exhausted, the morning after the events at Marjolaine's house. He had been tied up and put under another sleep spell, and now he was frightened and thirsty and in desperate need of a chamberpot. Zevran saw to his comfort and allowed him a hearty breakfast. Sten watched him unblinkingly, sword drawn.

The women stumbled out of the inner bedchamber a little later, first Tara, then Leliana, and then Bronwyn, who looked quite awful. Dark smudges purpled the skin under her eyes: she was haggard and irritable. Leliana encouraged her to have a bowl of the inn's good porridge, which was enriched with apples and honey and a touch of nutmeg. Then there was a good strong cup of honeygrass tea, and then Leliana

insisted on giving Bronwyn's hair a good brushing.

While she brushed, she told Bronwyn her plan. "You said you must go fetch your armor. While you are there, Zevran and I will take the mage to the docks and put him on a ship. We cannot leave until tomorrow, so why don't we see a bit of the town...do some shopping,...have some fun? I thought I would grieve over Marjolaine, but I feel as if a heavy weight has been lifted from me."

With more prodding, Betancourt could tell them quite a bit about Marjolaine's operations: even things he did not know that he knew. They learned the procedure for delivering messages to the Palace, and he told them that messages to various nobles went through the barkeep right here at the Gnawed Noble, who was paid a regular fee for the service. Bronwyn nodded, and filed the information away for future use.

"We have to pick up the laundry this afternoon," Tara reminded her. "I want to go to that Wonders of Thedas place...and maybe see the alienage...if there's time," she added.

"Come with me to Master Wade's," Bronwyn said gruffly. "After I get my new armor, we can go to the alienage. I don't think you'll like it, but you can see it."

"What are you going to do, Sten?" Tara asked.

"I shall guard the mage as well," Sten answered instantly.

"We cannot be too careful."

Leliana and Zevran caught each other's eye, and then shrugged.

"All right then," Bronwyn considered, her voice still a little gravelly. "We'll run our errands this morning. Let's meet back here for the noon meal, and then we shall go to the Wonders of Thedas and perhaps some other shops. I also wanted to call on Brother Genetivi, and see if he's come home from that quest of his yet. Someone at the Cathedral should be able to direct me to his house."

"Do you think he might have already returned?" Leliana wondered.

Bronwyn shrugged. "If he survived at all, possibly. That village he was going to was only on the other side of Lake Calenhad, and a day's travel into the hills. I wonder if he actually heard anything about the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

She asked the frightened Betancourt, "Do you still have your three sovereigns? Good. I don't care where you go, as long as it's not Ferelden. Good luck to you, and I hope you find better friends at the end of your journey."

"Thank you! thank you! Maker bless you for your mercy!" the man replied, head bowed. Bronwyn nodded to him, and left with Tara and Scout.

The Gnawed Noble itself was sleepy in the early morning. A

few chambermaids were at work, silent and efficient, mopping floors and sweeping carpets, polishing the long, shining bar before the rest of the inn was up and doing. Outside, it was a fair and sunny day. Bronwyn inhaled the usual smells of Denerim: fresh bread and rotting garbage; oiled metal and stale urine. She bit back a wry smile, acknowledging that there was more than a hint of dog in the air, but perhaps that was just the proximity of Scout.

They strolled through the market, watching the endless parade of people, listening to the merchants crying their wares. It was, luckily, not too early to be admitted to Master Wade's workshop. Wade himself was not out of bed, but Herren gave her the armor, took her old suit in trade, and spoke with professional civility. Bronwyn felt better, simply for being in decent armor. After last night, she never wanted to see her old chainmail again. She paid for the repairs and for the new gauntlets, fended off another attempt to sell her a better helmet, and left.

"You look very impressive," Tara told her. "So that is dragonbone. What a strange color. I think your other helmet will look nice with this. Could we go to the alienage now?"

"We could."

They could not. They arrived at the alienage gates to find that they were locked. The bored guard on duty informed him that at Bann Vaughan's command, the alienage was closed. No one could go in, and no one could leave without his express permission.

"Them knife-ears have been causing trouble for months," the man told Bronwyn. He eyed Tara as he would a mangy stray cat. "Move along, now! There's nothing to see here."

"Sorry," Bronwyn said to the disappointed Tara, as they walked away.

"Why would they lock them in like prisoners?" the elf protested. "That sounds as bad as the Circle! Who does this Bann Vaughan think he is, anyway?"

"He is the son and heir of the Arl of Denerim," Bronwyn explained. "The Arl rules the city, and since Arl Urien was in Ostagar with the King, he deputized his authority to his son. Vaughan is a rather unpleasant man."

"Evidently!" Tara bit out, and then stalked along beside her, sulking. Scout whined at her consolingly

They went next to the Cathedral, Tara shrinking fearfully from the big Templars at either side of the open door. Bronwyn felt like a boor, wearing her helmet inside the sacred precinct, and slipped it off, taking care to remain in the shadows, as far as possible. The light from the stained glass windows was fairly dim, and glancing about, Bronwyn saw no one she knew, and no one likely to know her in return.

"Behave yourself, Scout!" she whispered. "We have to put on our best manners here!" The dog whuffed a dismissal, unimpressed by his surroundings.

Bronwyn spoke to the priest on duty, mentioning that she had met Brother Genetivi on her recent travels, and was concerned that he had returned home safely. The woman raised an inquisitive brow, and told Bronwyn to wait. She moved off to a side chapel, and spoke to another priest. Bronwyn scowled as she distinctly heard the word "crackpot."

After a moment, the other priest came forward, smiling pleasantly: a nice-looking woman in her late thirties with coils of fair hair.

"I am Sister Justine. You know Brother Genetivi?"

"We met out by Lake Calenhad some months ago. He told me he was looking for the Urn of Sacred Ashes. He seemed a very decent fellow. I told him that this was perhaps not the best time to be traveling. I wanted to see if he made it safely home."

"He's a brilliant man," Sister Justine told Bronwyn, her voice very low, "but he isn't...well...*politically-minded*, if you understand me. Sometimes he writes things because the evidence supports them, and they're quite contrary to established doctrine. I agreed with him that the Urn of Sacred Ashes was certainly real, but I found it hard to believe that it could still exist after all these ages. He found a reference to an obscure village and was convinced he would find a clue there. I have not heard from him since, but sometimes he gets so involved in a project..." She bit her lip, and said, "He lives opposite the Gnawed Noble, in the downstairs flat. I couldn't go there alone, you understand. If he's home, do tell him to

pop 'round to see me?"

"I shall." Bronwyn turned to go, and Tara was away, eager to be out of the Chantry, when the Sister's voice stopped them.

"Wait! I don't know your name!"

Bronwyn gave her a polite nod, and said, "No, you don't."

They walked on, and stepped out into the sunlight. Tara took a deep breath, and then saw the Templars. She hurried away, and Bronwyn laughed, lengthening her own strides to catch up. Scout bounded along with a happy yip. The Templars admired him, not even noticing the woman the dog accompanied.

Bronwyn said, "We'll go to the house. We can knock, at least."

Tara nodded, and then glanced back discreetly, to make sure the Templars were out of sight. "I was so scared. I was scared that I would do magic accidentally and then they'd catch me."

"You're a Grey Warden," Bronwyn assured her. "I would have had to identify myself, and that would have been inconvenient, but not disastrous. You're fine. The Templars only have power over you if you give it to them."

Tara shrugged, feeling a little skeptical. She was still an elf, and still a mage, and if she were alone and tried to tell a

Templar that she was really a Grey Warden, she wondered what would happen. Probably nothing she would like.

They found Brother Genetivi's lodgings without trouble, and knocked. And knocked again. Scout snuffled, and then growled.

"What's wrong?" Bronwyn asked. "Is there..." She leaned closer to the door, and her nose wrinkled at the smell. "That's not good," she muttered. She pounded the door, and gave it a kick. To her surprise, the door cracked open, and a young man peered out at her.

"Is Brother Genetivi at home?" Bronwyn demanded. The stink washed out over her, sickly-sweet and all too familiar. The young man was shuffling and ill at ease.

"He's not here. Brother Genetivi went west to do some research. Shall I tell him you called...? What are you doing?" he squeaked, at Bronwyn shoved hard at the door, forcing him back. Scout leaped in, teeth bared. Tara came last, and at a gesture from Bronwyn, closed the door behind them.

"Who's dead here?" Bronwyn demanded, tall and terrible.

They got very little information out of the young man. At first he denied everything, and claimed to be Genetivi's secretary Weylon. Scout raced across the long room and scrabbled at a door. At that point, the farce was over, and the stranger attempted to curse them. Tara brought him down, and he was killed in the scuffle. Bronwyn opened the door that Scout had

growled at, and found the remains of another young man under a blanket. He had been dead at least a week. They searched the body of their assailant, and found only the front door key and some copper coins. The other young man was too decayed for either Bronwyn or Tara to stomach putting their hands inside his clothing.

Given their situation, it was quite impossible to simply call the City Guard to their assistance. Nor was there a convenient cellar where they could store the bodies. Their assailant was put in a wardrobe, and the rotting corpse was eased into an emptied trunk. The jumble of items cleared from said trunk included some of Brother Genetivi's notes, which Bronwyn appropriated. Around the house were some curious volumes: books on Dragon Cults, histories of Andraste and the fate of her remains.

"That...fellow...was looking for something," Tara said. "Maybe Brother Genetivi ran into trouble out west."

"I think that's more than likely," Bronwyn agreed. "Let's find anything pertinent to his travels. We can store it in the Warden's cache, and if he ever returns, we'll give it back to him then."

Not long after, they locked the front door behind them and strolled casually away, down the street toward the warehouse.

The walk to the docks was a silent one. Leliana confidently

took the lead. Betancourt, the bindings on his hands discreetly hidden by his long sleeves, followed. Zevran walked at his side, a companionable arm on his back, and a ready dagger out of sight. Sten was last, and if the mage attempted either fight or flight, the qunari appeared quite capable of tearing the man in two.

Zevran suggested the north end of the dockyards, telling them of a ship he knew: *The Siren's Call*. The owner and captain, a Rivaini named Isabela, was a friend of his, and Zevran foresaw no difficulty in obtaining passage for Betancourt. Isabela might even have a use for a mage among her crew.

They talked quietly, of inconsequential things. Leliana hoped the good weather would hold for their journey south. Sten scoffed at the possibility, and predicted disaster on their way. Zevran hoped that a street vendor by the docks still made that fish stew he liked.

What they all agreed on, was their own homelands' infinite superiority to chilly, misty, inhospitable Ferelden. And even Betancourt agreed that the entire country did, indeed, smell like wet dog.

"Of course, there are far worse smells," Leliana pointed out. "And Scout is such a brave and clever dog. Bronwyn is very fond of him, and naturally she does not mind his smell—in fact she probably likes it because it is associated with her canine friend."

"The dog smell is bearable," Sten allowed, "for the beast is a

true warrior, and worthy of respect. The smell of rotting garbage, however, is inexcusable. The Ferelden people have not yet grasped the concepts of proper drainage and sewage treatment."

This was so, they all agreed.

"And the city could also be much improved with some public gardens," Zevran remarked. "Statuary, other than the usual votive images of Andraste, would be attractive. Some planters with greenery and a few flowers would cover the odors."

"An excellent idea," said Sten. "It has been proven that the presence of green plants purifies the air. Thus, public gardens are not merely ornamental: among the qunari we recognize their functionality."

"Well, I like them because they are pretty," Leliana declared. "Oh, there is the sea! How sharp the east wind is!"

They moved along a narrow alley, twisting through a maze of warehouses and tradesmen's shops. Sailmakers, netmakers, caulkers, ironmongers. The smell of rotting garbage and wet dog gave way to salt air and tar. Around the corner was a deserted pier.

"Is this the place you meant, Zevran?" Leliana asked.

"Yes. This will do, I think. The current is right here," answered the elf. Like a striking snake, he stabbed up into the mage's ribcage and pierced his heart. Betancourt could not even

scream. His eyes widened with shock and betrayal and disappointment. Zevran twisted the dagger, and the mage slumped to the ground.

"Sorry, my friend," Zevran said kindly. "You knew too much, and did not offer your services to our leader." He squatted down, and deftly retrieved the three sovereigns Bronwyn had given the man. "We have arranged a passage for you that is entirely free of charge."

Leliana sighed, and whispered a prayer. Sten gathered up the dead man, and slipped him into the water.

"You do not look surprised," Zevran said to the qunari, as he distributed the coins.

"Hardly. It was the logical thing to do."

The mage's limp body sank into the dark water, and began its slow journey out of Denerim Harbor toward the deep blue of the Amaranthine Ocean. The three companions turned, and made their way back to the Gnawed Noble Tavern.

Notes- Thank to my readers, and especially to those who have reviewed: Eva Galana, mutive, Amhran Comhrac, Supaslim, Josie Lange, What Ithacas Mean, derko5, Shakespeira, demonichargles, Enaid Aderyn, Aoi24, Zute, callalili, Judy, wayfaringpanda, Notnahtanha, White Ivy, almostinsane, Sash'Rahaal, WellspringCD, Lehni, Gene Dark, JackOfBladesX, Nithu, Halm Vendrella,

*chocolatebrownie12, Piceron, Dante Alighieri1308, mille libri,
Menamebephil, Windchime68, Have Socks Will Travel,
Galdor123, and NuitNuit.*

28. House Cousland Against the World

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 28: House Cousland against the World

The Queen's private sitting room was in disarray, but it was always in disarray when the King was in Denerim. He *would* move the chairs from their carefully arranged positions; he lounged and put his boots on the low table; he threw cushions out of his way and onto the floor. The brocade draperies fluttered, their ends trailing out the windows like banners, because the King always threw open the windows and sat on the sills. And, of course, he demanded something more substantial than cucumber sandwiches for tea-time with the Queen. He liked those, too, and it was necessary to make extra when he visited, but along with them were a number of the high-heaped roast beef-smoked cheese-and-mustard sandwiches he particularly favored. At the moment, crusts decorated the little table, and crumbs dotted the silk carpet beneath the settee. The plate of honey cakes, marchepane horns, and oatmeal cookies was as yet untouched, forgotten in the confusion of the unexpected news.

"No, Your Majesties. It's absolutely certain," the guardsman told them breathlessly. "The Girl Warden chose a king for the dwarves, and he agreed to honor their treaty. There are

dwarves marching south to Ostagar! Thousands of them!"

Anora interrogated the man a little further, dismissed him, and considered this matter in silence, while her royal husband jumped to his feet and started pacing. The afternoon light was just starting to soften to old gold. She ate her cucumber sandwich with disciplined relish, and watched Cailan wear out the silk carpet.

"I thought she might have gone to Orlais to make some sort of deal," Cailan burst out, when the messenger was gone. "Since you showed me Howe's letters, I thought it had all fallen into place."

"If you will remember," Anora said patiently, "I said at the time that those letters *might* be forgeries. I find it hard to believe that Bryce and Eleanor were plotting with the Orlesians. And I can't see why Bronwyn would *want* to marry an Imperial Prince."

"Well, Bryce and Eleanor are dead!" Cailan pointed out. "And she could be looking for the crown for herself! It all makes sense! Leaving the army when it needed Grey Wardens! Taking so long to enforce the treaties—"

"I hardly think three months is a *long* time. In fact—"

"—It looked to me like she was after the crown! And Fergus would be Teyrn of Highever, and that would put them in a very, very strong position. And if she did marry Prince Florestan, then the Orlesians would be bound to support her!"

Anora took a deep breath. "But she did not do those things. Instead, it seems that a large dwarven army is coming to our aid, making the Orlesians superfluous. Father thinks very highly of Bronwyn Cousland, and he'll think even more highly of her now."

Cailan threw himself into his chair, sulking. He hated it when he thought he had found out something amazing and secret, and was proved wrong. And it was all so very inconvenient, anyway. Bronwyn had taken so long that he had presumed her mission to the dwarves a failure. Once that was clearly established, no one would be able to protest when he gave Celene permission to send her troops over the border. At least it didn't look like Bronwyn was after his crown. Yet. He *could* tell Anora that Bryce had been trying to persuade him to set Anora aside and marry Bronwyn, but that would hurt Anora's feelings, and give her a hint that something of the sort was in the works.

As if he would set Anora aside for just another nobleman's daughter!

This was such a bother! He had really wanted this opportunity to prove that Ferelden and Orlesians were entering a new era of friendship and cooperation, and now Bronwyn Cousland had spoiled it all with her meddling. Of course Anora did not understand, since he had not shared his plans with her. She would play only a limited part in them, which was sad in a way, but she would be handsomely provided for, and would understand, in the end. They would always be friends.

Duncan would have understood, and *not* got in his way. Cailan missed Duncan a great deal. *Duncan* would not have deserted the army in its hour of need. Bronwyn should have stayed, and sent Alistair to enforce the treaties, or she should have gone by herself, and left Alistair. His own wounds had been due to her selfishness.

He sniped, "I know exactly what your father thinks of Bronwyn Cousland! He *fancies* her! I never thought I would see the day when the Hero of River Dane's judgment was impaired by a pretty face."

Anora took a deep breath, not sure if she was comfortable with the idea that her father fancied anybody. "I am sure my father's judgment is *not* impaired. Bronwyn has done wonders in a very short time—"

Cailan offered an irritated grunt, still pacing. Anora went on, quietly and persuasively. "And much of this will be resolved if Arl Howe comes before the Landsmeet. He must have received your summons by now. If he has proper evidence—and not these copies, which could be written by anybody—let him present it. It cannot affect Bronwyn, since she is now a Grey Warden, and I hope that Fergus will not be implicated..."

"If he is," Cailan said with inexorable virtue, "he must still bear the burden of his family's treason. Very sad, but there you are. I shall have to think about whether Howe can keep both Highever and Amaranthine."

"I think giving nearly the whole of the north of Ferelden to one

man is an *extremely* bad idea," Anora declared.

"Not if he's truly loyal. It simplifies things, really."

"Will you go south to greet the dwarves?"

Cailan pursed his mouth. It *would* be rather historical, but...

"No. There's too much for me to do here, with the Landsmeet and whatnot. I can't let the Cousland and Howe feud go unresolved. I need to be here when Howe arrives with his evidence."

"And if Howe does not arrive within the week," Anora insisted, "you must allow Fergus Cousland to march on Amaranthine." She saw the look on Cailan's face and repeated herself. "Yes. You *must*. If he does not come, then that's proof positive that his evidence is rubbish, and only a pretext for a power grab. One way or another, this situation must be resolved, and *soon*."

"You need to keep your heels down, Astrid," Cullen said gently. "You have better control that way."

"You're doing awfully well," Alistair encouraged her.

Astrid, once Gytha, Lady Aeducan, gave him a serious nod. If she was going to be a surfacer, then by the Stone, she was going to be good at it. It had not escaped her that riding a horse was a sign of power and prestige here on the surface.

She cast an eye on the supply train they were guarding, and smiled grimly. Now that she was a Grey Warden, her fellow dwarves were forced to admit her existence once more. It had been awkward for them, but sod that.

With luck, Bronwyn would return in a few days from her mysterious mission to the Fereldan capital. When she arrived, Astrid believed she would be pleased with the situation. Alistair was a shy young man, unused to command. With Astrid's guidance however, he had kept the convoy moving along well.

The contingents of dwarven warriors needed time to get used to the surface. Astrid had detailed her fellow dwarves, Oghren and Brosca, to mentor and encourage them. This was a great undertaking, worthy of an Aeducan, and Astrid intended for it to be a success. Surfacers maps were a bit unusual, but she was becoming accustomed to them, too.

The mage Anders was coming back up the line, a grin on his handsome face.

"I've made more of that ointment, Astrid! Tell everyone to slather it on any exposed skin. Here, you too. Lean over and let me put it on you. Your nose is looking a bit pink."

She cautiously leaned out of the saddle, and permitted the mage the liberty of anointing her distinguished Aeducan nose with his concoction. It was a disturbing notion that the sun could actually burn one's skin when one stood out in it too long. Supposedly, after a time, one simply turned brown, but

Astrid had not turned brown yet. It was considerate of Anders to think of easing her discomfort.

He was a fellow Grey Warden, after all, like Alistair and Cullen. Like the casteless girl Brosca, too. While it was easier to accept warriors like Alistair and Cullen—and even the talented mage Anders, too—as equals, the casteless girl had something in her, too.

It only made sense that there were differences among the casteless. She had seen for herself that many casteless served reliably in the Legion of the Dead. Brosca was an excellent fighter and a cheerful companion. There was something in her blood that had raised her above the level of mere Duster trash. Her sister, too, must have unusual qualities to have ensnared Bhelen. That she was beautiful was undoubted, but Bhelen would have wanted something more.

Of course, Astrid considered, one never spoke of it, but something must happen to the girl babies of noble-hunters. They remained at the bottom of society with their mothers, but they really did have the blood of their father in their veins. It was not considered nice to talk about, but it was certainly true. The Brosca girls' father might have been from a noble family. In fact, Astrid decided, there was nothing more likely.

Satisfied with that explanation, she continued her exploration of the art of horsemanship. Being on a horse was an excellent idea for an officer, here on the surface. One had wide vistas to study, and from horseback one could overcome the limitation of one's height. When she had accumulated enough

coin, she would buy a horse. Cullen and Alistair could teach her how to choose a good one. Riding had more dignity, certainly than riding in the back of a trader's wagon, the way the mage Morrigan chose to. However, if Morrigan wished to sit and read, Astrid would be quite happy to ride her horse in her stead.

Brosca and Oghren marched with the dwarves, which was very sensible and proper. She could hardly look at Oghren without wishing for Gorim instead. Her former second would have the Stone's Blessing, and would certainly have Joined the Wardens with her. Every time she heard Oghren's raucous, ale-sodden voice voice, she remembered another voice: deep, reassuring, and musical. Her loyal and sensible Gorim. He had been exiled to the surface, from what she could gather. It was always possible that they might meet again, someday, but she had learned that the surface was a very big place indeed.

Anders trotted by the Feddics' trading wagon to have a word with Morrigan. She was still immersed in her mother's grimoire, and hardly had said a word to him since she open the covers. He thought he was looking quite dashing—mage on horseback, and all that, and wanted her to notice him.

"Good morning, Bodahn!" he called out. "And to you, too, Sandal! Lovely weather we're having!"

"A fair morning to you, Warden!" the tradesmen granted.

"Enchantment!" Sandal seconded happily.

"My words, exactly!" agreed Anders. He slowed his horse to get behind the wagon, and peered in at Morrigan, sitting on a crate in the shade of the canvas cover.

"My lady! Coming out for a bit of sunshine eventually?"

She pursed her lips, and did not look up from the book.

"Eventually, perhaps. This is most engrossing...and disturbing."

Anders' smile faded. "Disturbing?"

"My mother had many secrets..." Morrigan regarded him gravely. Would he help her in this? Perhaps, if she continued to be civil to him. It was worth the effort, and it was not so difficult to be civil to Anders as to some others she could name.

"This is not the time," she told him in a low voice. "I must finish this, and then we shall talk. What I found here is unexpected. This is not the book I believed it to be, but it is nonetheless something my mother would not want me to know. I promise that I shall come out later and we shall...fly...together, but for now I must read this to the end."

"Vaughan's not happy with me. Not happy at all. No help for it though," Arl Urien told Fergus Cousland. "A few months more in the chill of the south will finish me off for good. I asked the

boy outright if that was what he had in mind! Told him he should be looking to you as an example, instead those parasites he surrounds himself with. Slack and soft-handed, the lot of them!"

Fergus sighed, and made himself listen with only sympathy on his face. The Common Room of the Gnawed Noble was not the place to be going on and on about the shortcomings of the future Arl of Denerim, though the entire city knew them already. He finished his wine, and glanced about, hoping that Bann Ceorlic had not yet arrived. The man was known to spend a good part of his afternoons here everyday, and if Ceorlic saw him, he would want to corner Fergus and complain about Bronwyn and his bloody horses one more time.

He resented having to spend yet another day in Denerim, anyway. Everything was in readiness for the march north against Howe, and yet the King, for reasons of his own, had Fergus cooling his heels at Court functions. It was odious and unpleasant to accept the empty sympathy of people who had hardly known his parents, and painful to acknowledge the sentiments of those who had.

The Queen, however, had been notably considerate and tactful. She had called him in for a private audience and spoke very kindly of his family.

"Eleanor, especially, was dear to me..."

He accepted her words more easily than those of others, and

was glad to meet with her. The Queen knew what was going on in Denerim better than most, and Fergus had an uneasy feeling that there were things going on behind the scenes about which he was completely in the dark.

Urien drew his attention again, having more to say about The Degenerate Youth of Today-always, of course, excepting Fergus.

A shadow fell on him. He looked up to see a pretty, well-dressed elf girl—probably some sort of upper servant—standing shyly by his settee, a sealed note extended in his direction.

"My lords," she said softly, and dropped a little bob of a curtsy.

Urien was eyeing her with more than grandfatherly interest. Fergus grimaced and unsealed the note. Probably some sort of petition...

Fergus—

Do not say anything, or even look surprised. Yes, it is your only sister, and not a prank! I'm here in Denerim, and I'm down the hall in the second suite to the right. No one can know that I'm here. No one.

One of our party is pretending to be our cousin Vera Porodolin, here from Ostwick, and I'm playing the part of a bodyguard. The bearer of this message is a fellow Grey

Warden, so be polite. I have so much to tell you. Get away from Arl Urien as soon as you can!

Bronwyn

Fergus controlled his face with an effort, and looked up at the pretty elf with a smile.

"Yes, I'll see to it directly."

The elf backed away politely—completing the picture of the well-trained servant—and vanished down the hall, her light footfalls muffled to silence by the rich green carpets.

"Good news?" asked Urien, full of curiosity.

"More teyrnir business. I'm afraid I have to leave our pleasant corner here and get back to work. I'm sure Vaughan will do very well, once he's put to it, Urien. Perhaps all he's needed is a real challenge. I shall see you at the Palace tonight, I trust?"

"Indeed you shall."

Second suite to the right. Excitement quickened his step. What was Bronwyn up to this time? Hiding from Bann Ceorlic, most likely, and he could hardly blame her. But why was she in Denerim, at all? A niggling worry that this might be a trap crossed his mind, just before he heard the muffled "woof!"

The door cracked open, and Scout was pushing out past the pretty elf, panting eagerly, stubby tail vibrating.

"Hello to you, old fellow!"

There were others in the handsome, paneled room: another elf, a tall Qunari, a beautiful black-haired lady, and...

"Get in here!" Bronwyn whispered. She gave him a hard tug, and threw his arms around him, while the others shut the door quickly and quietly.

"Bronwyn!" he gasped, "Your eyes!"

Her hand jerked to cover them, and then she forced herself to laugh about it. "They're fine! I see perfectly well. It was a fluke, but no lasting harm was done, other than changing the color." She saw his eyes drift to her scarred face, concerned and grieved, and she said, more firmly, "I'm fine. Let me introduce you to my companions."

She gestured around the room. "These are our friends Sten of the Beresaad, and Zevran Aranai from Antiva..."

"Antiva!" Fergus' eyes lit with memory

"...and these are my fellow Grey Wardens, Tara Surana from of the Circle of Magi, and Leliana, formerly of the Lothering Chantry. She's been using the name and identity of our cousin Vera Porodolin..."

Fergus laughed. "You're much better looking than our cousin from Ostwick!"

Leliana beamed in response. "You are too kind, my lord. It is

easier to pretend to be a real person than to invent an identity."

"Please excuse us, all of you," Bronwyn said, putting a hand on Fergus' arm. "I must speak to my brother in private."

They moved into the inner bedchamber, and Bronwyn gestured at a chair. She poured him some wine, and then sat down opposite him.

"Nice armor," he commented.

A half-smile. "I found it in a Grey Warden cache here in Denerim. The wretched stuff I was wearing was ready to disintegrate. Now tell me: why is the King in Denerim, and why are you with him? Is the war in the south going that well?"

Fergus grimaced, and knew there was no time to be anything other than frank. "We're doing well enough. The fact is that the King suffered a minor wound, and it was the tipping point for him. He's sick of fighting darkspawn and bored with the lack of amusement. He was also..." he voice slowed "...disappointed in his hopes of the Grey Wardens riding in to save the day. He's been complaining of you, pup."

"*Has he, now?*"

Fergus looked at his sister, startled. He had never heard such a snarl issue from her throat.

Bronwyn said, "Well, as it happens, the Grey Wardens are

even now riding to his bloody rescue! I secured the dwarven alliance, and they're sending five thousand warriors to Ostagar right now, along with most of the Legion of the Dead, which makes another thousand. Now that I've taken care of my business in Denerim, I'm riding back to join the rest of the Wardens and the dwarves as they travel down to Ostagar." She rose, and began pacing, seething with anger. "So he's *disappointed*, is he? Not nearly so disappointed as I am in him!"

"You've got the dwarves?" Fergus looked up at her in amazement. "That's bloody marvelous! I heard they were engaged in some sort of succession crisis."

"I sent you a huge letter with the whole story, and I haven't time to recount it today. I resolved the crisis, chose the king, and the king agreed to honor the treaty." Her voice softened. "Plenty happened to me in Orzammar, Fergus, and even more in the Deep Roads. That's where I got this..." she gave a look of distaste, and gestured at her face, "...this altered appearance. I met a new kind of darkspawn—don't worry, it never comes to the surface—and it spat poison in my eyes and then tried to claw my face off. Believe it or not, I was lucky. But that's not why I'm so relieved to see you, Fergus. I've found some things out: things you have to know. People are plotting behind the scenes, and you are going to end up dead or exiled unless we make some wise choices."

"What do you mean?"

"It's complicated. It involves some really devious Orlesian

plotting, and the reason why Howe attacked us. You're not going to like what I'm going to tell you, but I have the papers to prove it. It came to my attention when a very well-armed band of mercenaries tried to kill me near the border..."

She told that part of the nasty little story fairly quickly, and then added the Orlesian plan to kidnap Alistair and herself.

Fergus nodded. "I can see why the Orlesians would want to browbeat the King into giving leave for their Wardens and chevaliers to enter Ferelden. I asked the King in fact, if we could get the Wardens without the chevaliers, and he says not."

Bronwyn sprawled in her own chair, snorting. "The King would have loved the opportunity. Complaining about me is a way of setting the stage for the admission of the Orlesians. I'm not saying he was in the plot to kidnap us himself, but he wouldn't regret it for a minute—and I'll tell you more about that later."

"You're not just a Warden, pup. And if you're right about Alistair, the Orlesians could have used you other ways. They could even try to present you as a client king and queen!"

She nodded slowly, frowning. In the light slanting through the shutters, she looked vaguely menacing. "Believe it or not, that had occurred to me, but I didn't want to put that in writing. Even writing it down might be construed by a stranger as a secret desire to put myself forward for the throne. Except I don't think that's what the Orlesians had in mind at all. Based on what I've learned, I believe they wanted not only to deprive

Ferelden of its Wardens, but of possible alternatives to Cailan, if things started going wrong."

"You mean...if he were killed?"

"Well, that could certainly happen, but I'm thinking more in another direction. If Cailan were to do something..." she sighed deeply, and started up again. "...something profoundly offensive to the majority of Fereldans, it would be easier for him if there were no other viable candidates for the throne. Among other things, brother, I am urging you to be very, very careful. Howe sent a party of Crows after me, and it's likely he'll do the same for you. Watch what you eat and drink. And don't try to disagree with me. You know I'm right."

He grunted. "I do. And I am. I try to be inconspicuous about it. Crows, you say? They're supposed to be tough."

She shrugged. "I didn't give them a chance to show how tough they were. Maybe they had an off day. Keep you loyal men close. And now I'm going to get to the dark heart of the matter, Fergus, and you will like this even less. We discovered the name of the woman who sent the assassins at the border. She was an Orlesian bard, by name Marjolaine, who had dealings with most of the nobility of Ferelden and worked out of Denerim. Many letters went through her hands: letters to the King, letters to the Empress, letters from one noble to another. Some letters she transmitted, and other were...altered...to suit her purposes."

She leaned forward, unnervingly green eyes intense. Fergus

tried not to look away and pain her by his discomfort. They were like the eyes of a serpent, full of mysterious light. She steepled her fingers, and said, "Do you know that there is plotting afoot for the King to divorce the Queen and replace her with another?"

"One hears things, of course. How could he? Loghain commands the Army, and wouldn't tolerate it! You'd have to be mad to get involved in that."

"I regret to tell you then, that Father was involved in it. Up to his neck. He was not only talking with his peers—notably Eamon Guerrin and Urien Kendalls—but he was in negotiations with the King."

"He had written to the King?" Fergus sat up straight, horrified at what he might hear next.

"He had, and I think you can guess whom he suggested as a worthy replacement for Queen Anora."

Fergus was silent a moment. "Oh, pup. Don't be angry, but I can see why..."

"Yes, certainly. And if it hadn't been for the Blight, it might not have been so horribly dangerous. I'm sure he felt it would be for the best, and that I would understand that it was my duty, but I can't say I'm happy to know that he never had the least intention of keeping his word to me."

"Pup, whatever he did, he did because he loved you and

wanted the best for you..."

She hissed at him, her eyes more snake-like than ever. "I *know!* I will forgive him someday, but I wonder if you will, for that little plot is what led to Howe's attack on our castle."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been through the bard's correspondence...there's a bit more to go, but I've seen the balance of it. Cailan was not in the least interested in me, I'm sure. He was only stringing Father along. I killed that bard last night, you see, and one of my finds was a present he intended for the Empress."

A chill up his spine. Fergus tried to make light of it. "And what is he giving her? A wheel of cheese? A mabari music box?"

Bronwyn smiled coldly. "He was giving her Ferelden."

Then he too had to read the letters and the clever forgeries, and the fulsome letter in which Cailan declared his previously unknown passion for a distant monarch whom he had never met in the flesh. He had had help, for spelled out in it was the complete arrangement: Orlais and Ferelden united as equal partners in a great Empire; Cailan to be Emperor or both; Celene to receive the title of Queen of Ferelden when in that country; the child of the union to be heir to the united Empire. In the event of either party's death without issue, the remaining spouse would continue to reign over the Empire, with the succession of the two nations to be decided separately.

Fergus threw the papers aside at that point. "As if it would have any meaning at that point! I can see from this that the Landsmeet would become a mere ceremonial body, with no power at all! It's a barefaced land grab to win by marriage what they lost by war!"

"Look at some of the other items, too. They're lovely. Within a generation Ferelden freeholders would be enserfed and bound to their liege lord's estates, just as they are in Orlais. This is just appalling, Fergus. This cannot stand."

"Loghain won't let it stand," Fergus agreed, dreading the moment that the Teyrn of Gwaren learned of this. "If he knew..." He paused, and said quietly. "If he knew, he would kill the King himself."

"Just as we're going to have to kill Howe." She tossed another packet of papers down. "For this is what the bard Marjolaine made of Father's letters. She sent the forgery to Rendon Howe. She succeeded in making Father out to be after the throne, under the patronage of the Empress. If Howe believed this—and I'm sure he did, for it's quite a good forgery—he probably thought he was doing the patriotic thing, killing Father." She snorted a bitter laugh. "Marjolaine's mission in Ferelden has been quite the success. Act as a provocateur to create division and chaos among the nobility. Seduce the King into an alliance that will swallow Ferelden up like a snake swallows a goat. It was quite clever of Marjolaine to get rid of Father. Howe will be under a cloud that will prevent Delilah being a viable candidate for Queen, and I'm a Grey Warden. The only other nobleman's daughter of any stature is Habren

Bryland, and even Cousin Leonas couldn't imagine that Cailan would marry her. "

"Do you think Howe has written about this to anyone?" Fergus asked.

"I'm quite sure he has," Bronwyn said grimly. "I'll bet serious money that he has sent copies of these letters to Teyrn Loghain and to the Queen. Possibly not to the King. Howe despises the King. If it came to it, I have no doubt that Howe would take Loghain's part, because he hates Orlais like poison."

"And whose part shall we take?" Fergus whispered. "Either way reeks of treason. Even if I were to agree with Howe about this great matter of the King's marriage, he is still the man who killed our family."

"Just so." Bronwyn rose and walked over the fireplace, leaning against the wall, while she thought. "Howe has to go. You're here about that, I take it?"

"The King is going to call Howe to a Landsmeet to answer for the murder of our family." He looked at Bronwyn, horror dawning in his eyes.

"—Where Howe will present the evidence of our family's treason. You'll be lucky to leave the Chamber alive. Even were you to duel him...even were you to kill him, the stain of those forgeries will never be erased. We can't even show the originals, because that would antagonize the Queen and

Loghain. No. Howe has to die, and he has to die soon, and he has to die *privately*. He cannot be allowed a public forum to use to smear the Couslands. He was duped into murdering his friend, but he *did* murder him. I think," she said, with a hint of her old mischief, "I'll do my bit to muddy the waters. My friend Leliana has a few bard's skills of her own, and we learned how Marjolaine was distributing her messages. A letter will be sent to the Arl of Amaranthine, warning him that the King's invitation is a cheat, and that if he values his life he will fortify his castle of Vigil's Keep strongly, and remain there, until Fergus Cousland is arrested for treason."

They talked a long time while day eased into twilight. It was agreed that if Cailan openly moved to divorce Anora, they would have to throw their support behind the Queen and her father. They ordered food, and Fergus ate an early supper with them all, by turns amused and horrified by their adventures. Sten and Tara went out to collect their laundry, and the companions began organizing themselves for their ride west.

Fergus was expected at the Palace very soon, and Bronwyn would not let her brother walk alone after sunset to the Palace.

"I'm not going alone," he promised her. "I'm going back to Highever House to collect my guard. I'll have them with me all the way there and back. I don't intend to make it easy for anybody."

"I'll come with you to the house. You're a target, Fergus: I'm serious about that. You need to have people with you from now on."

"I'll come along too," Tara offered. In fact, everyone was willing to go, but Bronwyn took Tara, Sten, and Scout. She did not want to leave Leliana alone, and she did not want to leave their belongings—and their precious correspondence—unattended. Leliana and Zevran would stay and guard their quarters, while Bronwyn and the rest saw Fergus safely on his way.

"All right, then, I'll have to keep my helmet on, Fergus," Bronwyn said, "I can't afford for anyone to recognize me."

Outside, night had fallen on Denerim: a black night pierced only by a few lanterns glowing dimly over doorways. Their party was not far from Alienage gates, so Tara indignantly whispered the story of how they had been turned away.

"And look!" she hissed, gesturing out at the deserted Market District. "They *are* opening the gates for *those* people!"

Two canvas-covered wagons were drawn up in front of the gates. Very quietly, amid muttered orders, a line of elves was climbing into the back of the wagons and huddling out of sight. The guards in charge of the little party were wearing the colors of the Arl of Denerim.

The silence was broken by the cry of a young girl from the shadows.

"Don't go, Nessa! You can't trust Vaughan! We haven't heard from any of the others!"

A male elf hissed out, "Shut your stupid face, Shianni! Don't spoil things for the rest of us!"

"Typical," grumbled a woman. "There's no other way for us to get out of the alienage and find work, and she comes along to make trouble—as *usual!*"

Another girl spoke from the shadows, her low voice curiously hoarse. "Come on, Shianni. You can't save people who don't want to be saved."

"Let go of me!" shouted the girl. "Wake up, you people! Andraste's ass, don't you see what they're doing?"

A guard nearly threw the last of the elves into the wagon, and his officer stalked back toward the gate.

"Shut that noise, there! Who are you, creeping around in the dark? You'd better come out."

"Maybe she'd like to come along for the ride!" gibed a guard.

"Good idea! Quick, close the gates!" the officer barked.

"That'll teach her to make trouble! Come along now and get in the wagon. You and your friend, too!"

The half-dozen guards moved in, drawing their weapons. Four of them lunged into the dark maw of the Alienage gateway as the barrier creaked shut.

"I told you this was stupid!" snarled the hoarse-voiced girl.
"Run, Shianni!"

A scuffle in the shadows, a faint cry and running feet. More scrapes and thuds, and a faint spark of metal on metal.

"The bitch cut me!" roared a guard. "I'll fucking *kill* her!"

It had all happened very quickly. Just as quickly, Fergus had changed direction, his step heavy and determined.

"What's going on here!" he demanded.

The officer turned toward him, angry face yellow in the lantern light, and then paused, seeing Fergus' fine clothes. He peered closer, and his face became a mask of subservience.

"Nothing, my lord Teyrn. Just trying to do our duty. Some elf whore was interfering with Bann Vaughan's work crew."

"If she doesn't want to go with you, release her," Fergus ordered. The thought of armed men attacking helpless women made his stomach roil; made him think of things he kept as far as possible from his conscious mind.

A guard swore again, dragging the girl toward them. "Stinking little knife-ear *cut* me! She's got a knife. 'Tisn't *legal* for elves to have weapons!"

"Shut up, Greer!" one of the guards muttered at him. "It's the Teyrn of Highever!"

They could see the girl now: a small, hunched form in the grasp of two large men. Fergus walked over to have a look. Bronwyn sighed and followed, gesturing at Sten to hold the lantern so her brother could see better.

The girl was scrawny, like most Alienage elves, but with a sinewy, wiry look to her. Her short-cropped hair was matted and filthy. Her clothing consisted of a ragged, shapeless gown over a coarse shift, and both she and the garments smelled unclean. Her eyes were black burnt holes of fear and defiance. One guard indignantly held out the little knife.

"See, my lord? Carrying a *weapon!*"

Fergus turned it over in his hands. It was double-bladed dagger, razor-sharp, and of no metal that Bronwyn recognized.

It was not unknown to Fergus, however, who had traveled further in the southern forests. "This is Dalish ironbark! Where did you get this?"

The girl growled back in her hoarse voice, "I didn't *steal* it, if that's what you mean!"

The officer cuffed her quickly. "Speak properly to his lordship!"

"My mother gave it to me, my *lord*," the girl croaked sullenly. "It's *mine*."

"It's a fine knife," Fergus said, studying the markings in the dim light. "What's your name, girl?"

A pause. "Adaia."

A false name, clearly.

"Well, Captain," Fergus said to the officer in his mildest tones, "it seems to me that even elves need knives to eat with."

"That's as may be, my lord," The officer replied stiffly, "but she'll have to come with us now. The Bann's orders were to open the gates only for the work crews, and to keep the Alienage locked up tight otherwise."

"She can come with me," Fergus said, carefully casual. "I need another kitchenmaid anyway. As for you," he said coldly to the wounded man, "You wouldn't get cut if you didn't run at young girls with your sword out. Sometimes they get the idea that you mean to hurt them." He turned his back on the Bann's men and said, "Let's go."

Tara slipped to Adaia's side, and whispered, "Come on! Let's get away from here!"

Adaia looked around: at the looming soldiers, at the covered wagons, silent but for the breathing and whispers of the elves, at the big nobleman who had her knife, at his huge dog and the two tall bodyguards, and finally at the pretty elf girl who was whispering to her. She was clean and well-dressed, and so was probably the lord's doxy, but she didn't seem

frightened or beaten-down. There was no choice. She fell into step with the nobleman's party, and followed them to an unknown fate.

Bronwyn wondered what they could do with the elf girl. She sympathized with Fergus' generous impulse, but the dirty, sullen creature was obviously unfit to be anybody's kitchenmaid. She looked more like a beggar, or...well, of course Brosca had looked worse when they had rescued her. This girl had something of the same desperate air about her.

"What's this about 'work crews' taken out at dead of night?" Bronwyn asked Fergus quietly. "What is Vaughan up to?"

"No idea. It's the first I've heard of it." He frowned to himself, thinking. They were nearing the King's Bridge when he stopped and asked the elf girl. "What kind of work? Where are they going?"

She shrank back, but Tara pushed her forward, giving her a nod.

"Don't know," Adaia croaked. "It doesn't sound right, though. That's why Shianni was worried. She's scared of everything that involves the Bann, of course, but this was different. The Bann's men say there's work that pays well north of town. If you volunteer, you're told to bring a change of clothes and three days' food and to keep your trap shut and be at the Market gate after dark. Nobody's come back yet, and it's been going on for a couple months. They even let people bring

their children. A lot of people have gone."

"Three days' food," Bronwyn muttered. "North." She and Fergus looked at each other. "Amaranthine?"

"Where else? So it could be that Vaughan is sending laborers to Howe. What are they up to? Maybe working on the fortifications of Vigil's Keep or Amaranthine City?" He turned to Adaia. "Did Vaughan or his men say anything about Arl Howe?"

She stepped back, alarmed, and shook her head. "I haven't seen Bann Vaughan since...I don't go out much. I just hear what people say. I wasn't going to go with them! I was only out because I was trying to take care of Shianni."

Tara said, looking at the girl's neck, "Is your throat hurt? Did they grab you there?"

Adaia shrugged her off. "It happened months ago. My voice has been like this ever since."

Bronwyn asked her outright, "Are you in trouble with the Bann?"

The girl studied the ground. "Might be. My name is on a paper they put up on the gates, so I stay in the cellar, mostly."

Fergus asked, "What did you do?"

She wanted her knife, very badly. Looking away, her hoarse voice thick with misery, she said, "I was stupid. I washed

myself and dressed in my best, and I went outside where shems could see me. If you're dirty they don't look at you as much."

"What did you *do*?" he repeated impatiently.

She whispered, "I said '*no*.'" She flicked a glance up at Fergus and then looked away. "My cousin killed a guard and I got away. He didn't. I can't let the guardsmen know who I am."

Bronwyn turned to Fergus, "So Adaia is certainly not her real name. I think having her in your kitchens would be a *very* bad idea. You know how servants talk. If Vaughan is involved with Howe in some way, you don't need this sort of complication."

Tara spoke up. "She can come with us!"

Sten broke his silence. "We must ride fast. This girl will slow us down."

"No, she won't!" Tara said fiercely. "The two of us won't weigh as much as you...or even as much as Bronwyn in all her armor!" She whirled on Adaia, "Can you cook and sew?"

"Of course..."

"Can you do laundry?"

"Yes."

"Well, then!" Tara pleaded with Bronwyn, "Let her come with us! There's work for her with the army, and she'll be safe!"

"Tara..." Bronwyn sighed, recognizing her own pity come back to bite her. She had rescued Tara out of pity, and now Tara was moved in the same way. On the other hand, Tara had proved a brave and useful companion... She sighed again, and addressed Adaia. "All right then. You'll have to come with us. We're going south to the army. You'll work and you'll be paid, and no one will meddle with you. In return, you will keep silent about us being here in Denerim."

"I don't want anybody to know I'm from Denerim!" the girl said quickly. "I'm not a whore, though. I won't do that!"

Bronwyn snapped, "Nobody's asking you! Now be quiet and come along."

After a long and weary walk, Adaia had the courage to whisper back to Tara, "Where are they taking us now?"

"The teyrn is going to his house to find his his guardsmen. Then he's going to the Palace. We'll return to our inn afterward, I suppose."

"Will he give me my knife back?"

"Probably. You'll want it where we're going."

Emboldened, Adaia croaked out, "Can I have my knife back, my lord?"

Fergus snorted, and pulled it from his belt. "Here," he grunted. "Be careful where you stick it. You said it was your mother's."

Was she Dalish?"

The girl growled, "Grandmother. My lord," she added hastily.

Ahead, the King's Bridge threw out its ancient stone span over the River Drakon. A dim lantern guttered on a pillar at their end. The other end was dark. Bronwyn felt the slightest prickling...

A deep musical hum through the air, and Bronwyn shoved Fergus to the side, out of the way of a sudden volley of arrows.

"Stay behind me!" she shouted.

"Sod that!" Fergus shouted back, drawing his long daggers from his fine tall boots.

Scout growled, barreling down the length of the bridge at the dim figures there. Sten lifted Asala, and roared a challenge, the arrows deflecting from his plate armor with a series of disappointed thunks.

Tara shouted, too. Lightning sputtered from her hands, leaping ahead of her companions, sizzling up the attackers from head to toe. Cries of pain and shock shattered the night. She ran forward, gathering herself for another burst of magic. Beside her, the girl who called herself Adaia jumped away, fearfully startled. Magic! The friendly elf girl was a *mage!*

While she hesitated, trying to balance "*friendly*" and "*elf*"

against the dreadful word "*mage*," an arrow cracked against the stone rail of the bridge, only a foot to her left. Whoever was attacking them did not care that she had just met these people. For a terrible instant, she thought it might be Bann Vaughan himself, come to finish what he had started. She could run, and maybe get an arrow between her shoulder blades, or she could stay with her new companions, and hope to escape from Vaughan altogether.

So she followed them, crouching low, clinging to the shadowy side of the bridge. Fang was in her hand again, and felt good there.

Bronwyn saw a tripwire and jumped over it, yelling, "Trap!" Fergus stumbled briefly, and Sten tore through it, unhindered. Ahead were more traps: leghold traps, camouflaged by piles of trash and straw. Fergus avoided them easily, not inclined to walk in filth while wearing fine boots. Sten was caught by one and dragged it along, snarling until he could kick it away. More arrows came their way, and Tara shouted again. An archer froze in place, and another moved slowly, as if caught in tar.

A swordsman leaped out at them, quick and silent, his white teeth flashing in a fierce grin. Bronwyn crossed blades with him, and he parried quickly, the dagger in his left hand darting out like a serpent's tongue. It scraped along her side, defeated by dragonbone and Master Wade's skill. Scout flanked him, and tore at him with teeth and claw. Another attacker burst from the shadows, sword lifted to cut Scout in two. Fergus lunged, and wrapped an elbow around the man neck, dragging him backward. He gritted his teeth and

plunged a dagger exactly into the spot his father had circled on a diagram a lifetime ago. He threw the dead man aside and went after one of the archers.

There was another archer, up on a roof overlooking the bridge. Tara hissed in anger at the arrow sticking in the skirt of her fine dress. It could be mended, but it would always show. The archer turned to ice, and toppled into the black current of the Drakon with a heavy splash. Another man rushed at her, and was struck by a bolt of lightning. He spun around and fell hard, and Adaia crept quickly from the side of the bridge, and buried Fang in his chest.

A pair of assassins tried to break away and retreat back into the alleyways. They could not hide from Scout, and Bronwyn raced along with him, her sword arcing out to catch one along the back of the neck, severing his spine, and dropping him with a single sharp cry. Scout leaped on the other, a fearsome sight on his hind legs, as tall as the man himself as he bit down on the man's head and shook it. The horrified screams were muffled, and then silenced.

"Come on!" Bronwyn ordered, and raced back to find Fergus.

His velvet sleeve was torn, and his pale skin glistened with blood. Nonetheless, he was toe-to-toe with one of the assassins, and had knocked the sword from the man's hands. He was now grappling for his dagger. Sten, who had just killed his man, turned to hack at Fergus' opponent, when Bronwyn shouted, "We want to talk to that one!"

Sten reversed his sword, and rapped the man's head smartly with the pommel. Stunned, the assassin staggered, and was thrown to the ground.

Bronwyn pounced on him like a mabari herself, while Sten held Asala to the man's throat. "Are you a Crow?" Bronwyn demanded.

The man grinned up at her, defiant in the face of certain death. One of his handsome white teeth had been knocked out, and blood trickled over his lips.

Bronwyn grinned back, and asked, "Were you paid for silence?"

The assassin snorted, and shrugged as best he could with a warrior on his chest. "I was not paid to answer your questions."

Fergus asked, clutching his wounded arm, "Who hired you?"

The assassin shut his mouth, and looked stubborn. Bronwyn pressed her dagger to the man's face. "That's three questions you have not answered. This can be a great deal more unpleasant than it needs to be. Let us start again. Are you a Crow?"

No answer. Bronwyn hissed, and flicked the dagger tip up, slicing the man's nostril up to the bridge of his nose. He cried out, shocked. Fergus gasped, but forced himself to let his sister do as she saw fit. He had no use for the man himself.

Even if the assassin were taken before the Landsmeet and testified openly that Howe had hired him, who would care? Everyone already knew that Howe had murdered his family.

The man winced, and sniffed away some of the blood in his nose. He ground out. "Yes. I am a Crow. The contract on Fergus Cousland was paid for by the Arl of Amaranthine."

"As was the contract on Bronwyn Cousland," Bronwyn told him, smirking. "That failed, too, by the way." The man's eyes opened wide, just for a moment, and he sighed. Bronwyn asked, "I understand that your master here in Denerim is a man named Ignacio. Does he still live at the House of White Flowers? In the Market District?"

"You are well informed. Yes. He lives there still."

"Really? How convenient." She looked at him a moment more, thinking of Zevran, and then decided she had shown all the mercy in her for one evening. Still, she asked, "What is your name?"

He smiled then, perfectly calm. "Taliesin. My name is Taliesin."

Bronwyn rose from his chest, and nodded to Sten. "That's all, then."

Sten stabbed down with his huge blade, and the assassin writhed briefly. He lay still, and they walked on. Tara hung back to go through the fallen assassins' pockets. Adaia crept

up beside her, her eyes wide at the quick glint of gold pieces disappearing into the mage's purse.

"Here," Tara whispered, giving the girl a coin. "You helped." She hurried ahead to heal the teyrn's arm. She was nowhere as skilled as Anders, but she could do that much. He was as nice and polite as his sister.

"Thank you," he said, marveling at how quickly she healed his wound. Then he regarded his torn sleeve with annoyance. "So much for this doublet," he said, "Their Majesties will simply have to wait until I change."

"Fergus..." Bronwyn thought a little more as they walked, and then said, "I am going to write to the Warden-Commander in Antiva, and inform him that the Crows have been interfering with the Grey Wardens during a Blight. Considering how hard Antiva was hit in the past, I'm sure such behavior is quite unacceptable. I don't think the Crows want to have the Grey Wardens declaring blood feud on them. I shall send it before I leave in the morning. My friend Zevran tells me that a ship named the *Siren's Call* is leaving for Antiva City the day after tomorrow. Perhaps you should write to Oriana's family, and tell them what has happened."

He stopped dead, and suddenly had a very good idea. "I'll write." He smiled grimly. "Certainly. Oriana's family was...connected, so to speak. All the great merchant families are. I shall let them know what Arl Rendon Howe did to their daughter and to her child. I shall tell them that Howe has hired Crows to finish off the rest of their family, but that they might

be amenable to the pressure of a higher bid. It would be extremely convenient if Rendon Howe were to die of natural causes as soon as possible. It would be most satisfactory if those natural causes were extremely painful."

Bronwyn smiled darkly and nodded, very pleased. However great a satisfaction it would be to kill Rendon Howe in a fair, public fight, it was more important simply that he be dead. If he died of what appeared to be natural causes, it might not even be necessary to pursue the feud with the rest of the family. She only suggested, "Whomever they send should take Howe's private papers as well, and forward them on to you."

Highever House loomed ahead at last, tall and black above the other roofs of Denerim. Lanterns burned in the courtyard. Bronwyn looked at it longingly, thinking of her room and her bed and her things stored in her own chests. Fergus clapped her on the shoulder.

"I wish you could come in."

"I wish I could, too. I hate leaving you here in this pit of vipers, but our day will come." She whispered, "Be *careful*, Fergus. Go armed and armored *everywhere* from now on. There are hands raised against you in secret. Beware of the Kendalls, since they have some sort of alliance with a traitor. Beware of the King, whose mood shifts with every passing breeze. Above all, beware of Howe." She embraced him, hoping it was not for the last time. "Maker watch over you, brother."

He squeezed her hard, heedless of the stout chainmail.

"Maker watch over us all."

They dragged themselves to the Gnawed Noble, bloody and sweaty and filthy. Leliana had managed to wheedle a great deal of hot water from the innkeeper Edwina, thinking that baths their last night in Denerim would be pleasant. They were essential, as it happened.

Their new addition was greeted with bemusement, and Leliana and Tara threw her into the bath to plane off the crust of filth, heedless of her protests. Adaia's hair proved to be a fine dark gold, and not dirt brown, as they first thought. Leliana produced some scissors, and cut it a little more neatly. The girl's clothing was fit for nothing but rags. Tara thought she had seen something in the cache that would fit her. It involved going out again, since there would be no time in the morning, so the light hunting leathers were gathered up and brought back, and Tara gave the girl clean smallclothes of her own. The armor was designed for a man. Luckily, Adaia had almost no breasts, and it fit well enough. Some pillows and a blanket were arranged on the floor of the bedchamber for her, and she curled up by the fire and was asleep instantly. Scout went over to sniff at her, and then *whuffed* and lay down at her side.

"Think she's all right, do you, boy?"

He blinked calmly, and his eyes closed, too.

There was still work to be done. Leliana could imitate

Marjolaine's handwriting very well, and wrote a message to Rendon Howe, warning him to stay in Amaranthine. Bronwyn wrote her own indignant letter to the Antivan Warden-Commander.

With first light, they had reclaimed their horses from the stable, packed their gear, gave the first letter to the barkeep of the Gnawed Noble, and delivered the second to Captain Isabela. After that they made their way through the Great Gate, and were soon riding hard on the West Road, on the first leg of their journey that would lead them back to Ostagar, and war.

Notes: Yes, I know I said that the Tabris Origin was dead, but I thought again. If Bann Vaughan wants a dead girl's body to display as an example, he already has one: Nola, who was killed begging for mercy. Duncan was not in Denerim to provide Soris with a sword for her, so his rescue was only of limited effectiveness. He was able to get Tabris out, but no one else, and they were insufficiently armed to fight their way through the Arl's estate. You'll get the rest of the story eventually.

Thanks to all who have read, favorited, and alerted. I am very happy at the response to this alternate universe of mine. Special thanks to my reviewers, who have such interesting and thoughtful things to say: NuitNuit, mutive, Sash'Rahaal, Lehni, Zute, Shakespira, Amhran Comhrac, demonichnargles, Notnahtanha, Josie Lange, Judy, Halm Vendrella, White Ivy,

JackOfBladesX, Dante Alighieri1308, Enaid Adery, cowerd22, almostinsane, What Ithacas Mean, Piceron, Aoi24, Sarah1281, Windchime68, Gene Dark, fifespice, chocolatebrownie12, Paladin of Farore, derko5, mille libri, Epiphany sola Gratia, Quair, sinpareil, Jenna53, and Have Socks Will Travel.

29. The Way of Three Trees

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 29: The Way of Three Trees

As the Warden-led dwarven army marched south, they began attracting attention. While most of the dwarven army was fighting and chiseling its way through long-deserted Deep Roads, enough of their forces were above ground to make them an attractive target for those who always followed armies. Traders, gamblers, thieves, would-be and has-been soldiers, minstrels, scavengers and whores: all them were drawn to the troops on the march south.

It was at the last camp before Lake Belenas where Alistair heard the full details of the disaster at Redcliffe. The sun was low in the sky, and the tents were being pitched by a group of dwarven servitors. It was a good campsite, on fairly high ground: dry, but with water not too far; defensible, and just off the road.

Granted, the shifty trader who told Alistair the tale did not seem a particularly credible witness, but even if a fraction of the news was true, it was shocking and dreadful.

"...And the old Arl's son was a mage! A mage! Think of it. Possessed by a demon, he was. Killed his own mother! It

took the King and Teyrn Loghain himself to sort it all out. The King stabbed that abomination right through the heart, and that was the end of it!"

Alistair tried to take it all in, and wished he could call the man a liar. "The King killed Connor?" He asked, heartsick. How old was the boy? Nine? Ten?

"Well...he had to, didn't he?" the grubby little man shot back. "An abomination and all. Nearly the whole town of Redcliffe dead. The new Arl will be put to it, cleaning up that mess."

Alistair regarded the messenger of evil tidings with loathing, and turned away, sitting in silence in front of the Wardens' campfire. The man shrugged, and left to share the thrilling gossip with someone more receptive.

Morrigan was curled up with a book, as far from Alistair as possible. Oghren, Broasca, and Anders were playing cards. Since Oghren was fairly sober, he was winning handily. Anders threw down his hand in disgust, and left to join Morrigan. Cullen noticed the look on Alistair's face, and sat down by him.

"I'm sorry," Cullen said quietly. "I heard that you're from Redcliffe. You must know some of those people."

"The old Arl was my guardian," Alistair told him. "He sent me to the Chantry when I was ten, but I spent my earlier years in Redcliffe. I knew the Arlessa. I saw Connor, that poor little boy, when he was a baby. I know Arl Teagan. He's a good

man. I just wish there was something I could do."

Astrid sat down with them, nursing a mug of ale. "You are from a noble house?"

Alistair hesitated, torn between the desire for her to think well of him, and the habitual rejection of his birth. He temporized. "I'm no relation to the Arl. I was just fostered there."

Astrid frowned. It was not unheard of for noble houses to foster one another's children: it was a way of cementing alliances by providing mutual hostages as surety. Why would a nobleman be guardian to a lower-caste child? The fact that Alistair appeared reluctant to speak of his paternity indicated that there was a secret there.

"Ha!" bellowed Oghren. "Oghren wins again!"

"You cheated!" Brosca shouted back over Oghren's booming laughter.

"Wardens!" called a young dwarf, on guard outside the camp. "Horsemen approaching! They've got a wagon, too."

Astrid rose. "Someone has to speak to them." She gave Alistair a hard nudge.

"Ow!"

"That means *you*, Senior Warden."

"Oh." He had not been doing so badly, he felt. He had maps

and orders, and had followed them pretty faithfully. Strange men on horseback were not in Bronwyn's plans. He hoped they were *nice* horsemen.

He walked out to where the guards were calling to the small party to identify themselves.

"-the Arl of Redcliffe..."

Alistair paused, and thought for a moment of Arl Eamon. Who was dead. Then he smiled, and pushed past the gathering dwarven warriors. The newcomer was surrounded by a half-dozen knights, and was asking to meet with the Warden-Commander.

"Arl Teagan!"

He looked older and more careworn than he had at Ostagar, but his smile was as wide as ever. Teagan Guerrin swung down from his horse, and came forward, arms out. Alistair grinned, happier than he had been in weeks. He was caught up in a fierce hug.

"How are you?" Alistair asked at once. "I've heard such terrible stories!"

Teagan's face creased briefly with anguish. "All true, I expect. I heard the Wardens were leading the dwarves to Ostagar. I had to come to see it for myself. Redcliffe is in grim shape, but I put together a wagon of supplies for you. It's the least I can do."

There was no doubt that the supplies were welcome. Alistair laughed. "Since you've brought supper, you might as well share it. You and your men are most welcome."

"And where is the beautiful Girl Warden?" Teagan asked, looking about. "I expected to see her at the head of the army."

"Oh," Alistair chuckled ruefully. "She'll be along soon enough. There was a problem she had to sort out. She took two of the new Wardens with her and some others, and actually left me in charge! I'm expecting to see her in the next day or two. Disappointed?"

"Unspeakably!"

"Well, too bad, because you'll just have to make do with me. But we've added to the glad throng." He gestured at the rest of his party, now approaching to have a look at the nobleman. "Arl Teagan of Redcliffe, let me present my fellow Wardens and my good friends: Warden Cullen, Warden Astrid, Warden Freydis-

Brosca growled, "I hate that name! Stick to Brosca!"

"Brosca, then! I don't see Warden Anders, who is no doubt chasing after Morrigan..."

"He's probably *caught* Morrigan!" cackled Oghren.

"Yes, well...he probably has. This is our friend and comrade

Oghren, who's come all the way from Orzammar with us to fight the darkspawn. A motley crew, you might say, but we do pretty well."

Teagan studied all the faces. They seemed a decent group to him. Perhaps they would be good friends to Alistair: better friends than he had been himself...and better than his brother. He repeated the names, feeling he owed Alistair the courtesy of knowing his associates. Cullen was a tall and strong young man, with a knightly but modest air. A suitable companion. The dwarves were all very different from one another: Astrid was a dignified young woman, with keen, knowing eyes. Brosca had a turned-up nose, a huge grin, and a loud voice. Oghren seemed the most like the other dwarves Teagan had met: brash, bearded, and boisterous. Of course, if he really was like most dwarves, he would be a doughty warrior, which is what was wanted at the moment.

After the exchange of pleasantries, Teagan clapped a hand on Alistair's shoulder. "If you have a moment, I'd like to speak to you."

They took a walk together by a quick-flowing brook. Water tumbled whitely over boulders in the stream bed. The noise would cover the sound of his words quite effectively, since Teagan had things to say that he wanted no one but Alistair to hear.

"Alistair, my brother did you wrong. No. Don't disagree with me. Just hear me out for now. Why he did what he did will always be a mystery to me. When I was young I accepted it,

but as time went on I could see that it could not be at all what the King your father had intended for you. I should have taken you into my own household, but Eamon wouldn't have it, and he was my liege lord as well as my brother. I've come to the opinion that he thought he was protecting our nephew Cailan, by making sure you could never be a rival to him. Perhaps he felt he was avenging our sister Rowan as well. I'm not sure. Then, later, when Isolde was so jealous, he felt that sending you to the Chantry was the perfect solution. He was fond of you in his way, but it was the way of a powerful lord with an eye to his own advantage. I know that he told you that your birth would never matter, because you were a bastard, but you and I know that that is not how the world is. Your birth *does* matter, and there are those who might seek to make use of you because of it. I just wanted to let you know how sorry I am at how it all turned out, and hwo sorry I am that I did not do more to help you."

Alistair shook his head. With a grin, he said, "There's nothing to be sorry about. I hated the Chantry, sure, but I love being a Grey Warden. Hardly anybody knows who my father was. It's not something I go blabbing about."

Teagan looked at him searchingly. "Does Bronwyn Cousland know about it?"

A sheepish blush. "She figured it out on her own. Hey! It was the King's fault! He called me 'brother' when we were leaving Ostagar and she heard him. She agrees that it's something to keep quiet about."

"I am glad to hear it," Teagan said, though his uneasy expression belied his words. "Unfortunately, I know that other people—people who may not have your best interests in mind—also know about it. Since Eamon and Isolde died, I have been going through their papers. Isolde must have written to her family in Orlais about your birth, based on something in some of the letters I've looked at. It could be dangerous for you." He frowned, and grasped Alistair by the forearm. "My brother was involved in all sorts of plots. Some of them were his own affair. Some of them involved the King. Some could cause a great deal of upheaval in this country. Alistair: I want you to promise me that you will never let yourself be put forward as King. Never: no matter what happens. You must not oppose your brother, and you must not let people use you in order to oppose him. It would be your death." He leaned forward, blue eyes intense. "Promise me!"

Alistair almost mentioned the failed Orlesian plot, but decided against it. It would only worry this decent man. He had escaped the Orlesians, and who else would try to pass him off as anything resembling a Crown Prince? A Clown Prince seemed the best he could manage. He smiled and agreed.

"All right, all right! I promise not to pretend to be King. I promise not to let anybody put a crown on my head...again. Actually, there was this time in Orzammar...well, come on back to the campfire, and we'll have some supper, and I'll tell you all about it!"

Bronwyn's party rode fast on the West Road. Adaia clung to

Tara, refusing to show her growing misery and discomfort. She had never been outside the walls of Denerim before. She had never slept on the ground, or in a tent. She had never searched for firewood. She had never seen so many trees. This was supposedly the heritage of the elves, but it seemed odd and alien to her.

Only a few months ago, she had had the wild idea of running away from the Alienage and trying to find the Dalish elves. It would have been hopeless. This world beyond the Alienage was vast and incomprehensible. If she and her cousin Soris had made it through the city gates, they would have died of hunger and thirst and cold in this terrible wilderness. She was learning, but it was hard. She missed her father. She missed Shianni and all the people of the Alienage who had been her world her entire life long. If it were not for Tara and Zevran, it would be unbearable.

They made camp after a long day's ride. Adaia was led about, first by Zevran, and then by Leliana, but she had no idea what she was doing. The giant growled at her, and the noble lady was patient in the way people were when their patience was sorely tried.

Water was found, a fire was built, and some oats were measured out for porridge. Adaia knew how to make porridge, and tried to make herself useful to Tara.

"Don't people hunt when they live out of doors?" she whispered to Tara. "I mean, isn't that how they find food?"

"Hunting takes a lot of time," Tara explained, feeling like a very experienced adventurer, in comparison to this young neophyte. "We brought food with us so we could find the rest of the Wardens fast."

Adaia had discovered that she was traveling with Grey Wardens. It was like traveling with storybook heroes. At home in the alienage, their hahren, Valendrian, always spoke well of the Grey Wardens. Adaia had not quite realized that Grey Wardens still existed. Tara was a Grey Warden too, and very nice, even though she was a mage. She was kind enough to share a tent with Adaia and to arrange the blankets so Adaia would not be cold.

"Since you're new, you get to sleep all night." Tara said, leaving the tent to take her turn standing watch. Adaia sighed, knowing that it was probably because she did not know how to stand watch, and had only a little knife to protect herself with if she saw something dangerous. She hoped she would be useful someday for something other than making porridge.

Night yielded slowly to day. A clear light rose in the east, the first faint glimmer before the dawn. Bronwyn was building up the fire for their breakfast when Scout lifted his head from his paws and rose to his feet, staring into the woods. Bronwyn paused, sifting through her senses. No darkspawn, but there was certainly something moving out of the trees.

"Grey Warden."

She stood up at the low voice. Sten was patrolling the camp, and moved quickly toward the voice, loosening his sword.

The figures moved closer, hands out in the common gesture of peace. Shorter than human, and slender: a man and a woman.

"Everybody up!" Bronwyn ordered quietly.

Leliana emerged from her tent, and look at the newcomers, blue eyes widening.

"Dalish elves!" she murmured, astonished. "I have never met any before."

More rustles. Adaia crept out of Tara's tent, and Zevran stepped out of his, bare-chested, lacing his breeches with an elaborate show of disregard.

Tara stumbled out, dark hair tousled, looking eager. "This is so exciting!"

Zevran only shrugged and laughed to himself. Adaia whispered to him. "They're all right, aren't they? I mean, we're all elves, aren't we?"

He murmured, "You will soon find that that there are elves, and then there are elves, *carina*."

"Have you ever met Dalish elves before?" she asked, watching the two strangely dressed figures come forward.

"Long ago," Zevran admitted, with a little half-smile, "I tried to join them. They called me 'flat ears,' and condescended to try to teach me their ways. I discovered that I missed a comfortable bed, a glass of wine, and the familiar stink of city life. Dalish are very proud and very fierce, and terribly, terribly *boring*."

"Shh!" Tara hushed them, trying not to grin. "They look very dignified."

Zevran's smile faded completely. "They are savages with delusions of grandeur."

Savages or not, they greeted Bronwyn with chilly dignity. The woman spoke first.

"I am Ineria, and my companion—" she gestured to the male archer at her side—"is Junar. The Keeper of our clan sent us to find you, Grey Warden. Word has come through the southern forests that you are calling on the ancient allies of your order."

"That is so," Bronwyn assented. "I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn. I was planning on searching for you as soon as the dwarven army arrived at Ostagar. I expected it to be a long and difficult search."

The woman asked harshly. "And why is that? Do you think that the elves would not honor their oaths? Do you deem us of little worth?"

Bronwyn had always heard that the Dalish were difficult and stiff-necked. She would have to tread carefully.

"Not at all," she replied. "However, I have heard of the consummate woodcraft of the Dalish. While the Circle of Magi and the dwarven city are on every map, the Dalish can disappear into the landscape. I could not know if you had heard of my search, or not. That you have found me makes my task far easier. Is it possible to speak to your Keeper?"

"It is," the male archer replied. "She has sent us to bring you to her. She is not far: but one league's journey into the forest."

It was too good an opportunity to miss. The newcomers were invited to join them for breakfast, and Leliana and Sten put together a meal. Bronwyn sensed that it was extremely important that the Dalish not see her treating any elves in her party as servants. The introductions were briefly made:

"My sister Wardens, Tara and Leliana. My friends and companions, Sten, Zevran, and Adaia."

Ineria's eyes narrowed. "Adaia! That is a Dalish name!"

"My grandmother was Dalish," Adaia said shyly. "She passed this down to me..." The girl displayed her little knife of ironbark. The archer raised his brows, and Ineria scowled. She gave Adaia a stern look, as if finding her unworthy of such a weapon, and then turned to Bronwyn without further words to the Alienage elf. Adaia blushed, but could not take her eyes from them...especially from their strange and

elaborate facial tattoos.

"We thank you for your courtesy," said the more civil Junar. They sat down, and a stiff and oddly formal breakfast was shared around the campfire. The camp was then rapidly packed up, and they followed the Dalish into the trees, leading their horses.

A short, careful walk, and they saw signs of the Dalish camp.

"Do you see those wagons with the sail-like structures?" Zevran asked the Tara and Adaia, discreetly pointing. "They are called aravels: some people call them landships. Those are the homes of the Dalish as they travel through the world. As you might imagine, most of their lives are spent outdoors."

They emerged into a clearing, where a large camp lay before them, complete with aravels arranged in a defensive array.

"You may leave your horses here," Ineria told Bronwyn brusquely, with a hint of scorn. She turned suspicious eyes on Scout, who stayed close to Bronwyn's side, and gazed up at the elf with winsome innocence.

The Dalish did not keep dogs or use horses, Bronwyn had once read, but instead domesticated the halla, a strong but delicate-looking white deer. Halla were revered, and while they pulled the aravels, no elf would describe them as a beast of burden. In addition, they provided the elves with milk and cheese. Not meat, of course. No elf would eat the flesh of a halla, and elves were known to kill humans who were so

reckless or arrogant as to do so. Bronwyn hoped they would be allowed to see the halla.

Possibly: possibly not. First she would see the Keeper of the Clan, who was an elderly female mage named Marethari. This important personage awaited them by her aravel. The sides were carved with strange shapes and inhuman heads. Perhaps some of their gods. The Dalish clung to their ancient beliefs, in spite of the Chantry and the Exalted Marches that had driven them from their homeland in the Dales.

Keeper Marethari welcomed them with quiet courtesy. "*Andaran atish'an*, Grey Wardens,"

She wanted something, of course, and told them so directly.

The story was a strange one: of two young elves exploring haunted ruins; monsters; a mysterious mirror. One of the young elves had vanished, the other had been found later, badly injured.

"After some time, it was clear that Danith had somehow been exposed to the Taint. I had been expecting my old friend Duncan to return for some time. He came through in the spring, talking of the massing of the darkspawn. He would be recruiting, he told me, and I knew he wished to take some of our young people. Time passed, and he did not come. When Danith was found, so damaged, I wished every day for him. Then I heard of the battle in the south, and that he was dead. I almost lost all hope. I believe there is something you can do for Danith, if you will. Come." She paused. "And bring the

mage with you. What is your name, cousin?" she inquired of Tara.

Surprised at being addressed, Tara blinked and answered, "Tara, Keeper. Tara Surana, formerly of the Circle of Magi."

"I know of your Circle," the Keeper said with a hint of disapproval. "I am glad to see one of our kin free of it."

Tara's smile bloomed. "Not nearly so glad as I am to be free of it."

Marethari's expression softened. "It is well, then."

The Keeper invited them to enter her aravel. Bronwyn stooped as she climbed into the covered wagon. There was a wide, gauzy curtain at the back. Marethari pulled the curtain aside, revealing a young girl lying immobile on a narrow bed. Her skin was faintly tinged with grey. Watching over her was another Dalish girl, who stared at the Warden with huge green eyes.

"Atishan!" she whispered. "You are a Warden! I've never seen one before..."

Marethari said, "This is Merrill, my First. And here is our hunter. I have kept her in a deep sleep for quite some time. It has slowed the progress of the disease, but not cured her."

Bronwyn studied the unconscious girl, feeling the faintest thrum in her own blood. Tara must have felt it, too, and she

touched Bronwyn's arm, and nodded.

"Yes," Bronwyn said to Marethari, "this is Taint. I have seen it." She had seen it indeed, in the Deep Roads. Ruck's Taint had been more advanced, of course, but it was in this girl as well. She was a very slender, athletic-looking young elf woman. Her limbs were long and muscular, her head shaved for cleanliness. The tattoos on her face traced a butterfly-like shape, refined and delicate.

"Her name is Danith Mahariel, and she is one of our most promising young hunters. Is it too late for her?" Marethari asked, her gaze intense.

Bronwyn paused. What could she say? What did this elf know? More than most, it would seem. Had Duncan told her, or was this lore something known to the Keepers of the Dalish?

She chose her words carefully. "She may still die. And if she does not die, she must leave your people and join us."

Marethari smiled sadly. "I think Duncan would have taken her anyway. If you can save her life, it will be yours, and you will have the gratitude of my clan and all its allies."

Good enough. They could attempt a Joining. If the girl died, Bronwyn would have to talk seriously about the treaties, which did not allow the elves any conditions regarding the life of a single elf.

Tara knelt down to examine the Dalish girl more carefully.

"This is an amazing sleep spell."

Marethari regarded the Circle mage with interest. "It is old magic. A shadow only of the Eternal Dream of ancient Arlathan."

Merrill whispered, "*Uthenera...*" the word shivered in the air, until the spell was broken by the Keeper.

Marethari turned to Bronwyn. "So you will do it? Shall I awaken her, then?"

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "We will need to go somewhere private, however. I shall send Warden Leliana to fetch the proper supplies from my pack."

The Keeper seemed willing enough for Bronwyn to go. She asked Tara to stay, however, to see how the girl Danith was awakened from her enchanted sleep.

Bronwyn found Leliana, sitting in a circle with the others, listening to a Dalish elf recounting a long story of the wicked treachery of humans. Interrupting the elf would only cause trouble. She nearly leaned against a tree, and then wondered if that would be offensive to Dalish customs in some weird way. Instead, she waited politely, inwardly fuming, until the tale was done. Leliana dealt with the accusatory questions that followed the story with great tact, and then saw Bronwyn standing nearby.

"Excuse me," she said to the storyteller. "My commander wishes to speak to me."

Bronwyn led her away a little, and spoke softly. "Emergency Joining. One of the elves is Tainted. I don't know if it will work, but if it does, we'll have the clan's support. If she dies, they may be angry, but if we refuse, they would be angry anyway. Get the supplies from my pack, and find the nicest silver cup we've got."

Leliana smiled impishly. "I don't think Tara will mind sharing her loot for such an occasion."

Adaia sat in the circle beside Zevran, listening to the hahren tell the story, completely fascinated. These strange elves lived in another world, one that frightened but excited her. How could Zevran think so little of them? She did not mind their pitying looks. Her life in the Alienage was pretty horrible at times. These people did not bow to a monster like Vaughan. They did not beg for coppers, or grub for scraps. Their life was hard, obviously, but they were independent, and beholden to no one.

The hahren actually spoke to her, which made her blush.

"I am told that your grandmother was Dalish. From which clan was she?"

Adaia stammered, "Please, ser, I don't know. My mother died before she could pass on all my grandmother had told her."

From south of Denerim, from what I know. Her name was Talanni. I do know that."

"Do not call me 'ser,' the elderly hahren mildly rebuked her. "That is a shemlen title. The name sounds like one in Zathrian's clan. Perhaps your grandmother came from there. And you, cousin," he asked Zevran. "Have you near relations among the Dalish?"

Zevran smiled tightly. "My mother was Dalish. She died when I was a small child. She fell in love with a city elf in Antiva and went to live with him. Things went badly for her."

There were many sage nods around the campfire. The hahren declared, "As they do when elves live among humans."

Adaia glanced around nervously. She did not want to tell these elves her real name, which was not Dalish at all. She wondered if Lady Bronwyn would be offended by the things the elves were saying. She was talking quietly to Leliana. Sten, the huge qunari, was sitting at some distance, apparently meditating on his Qun, or something of the sort. Zevran was carefully expressionless, and she sensed, being very alive to the feelings of those around her, that he disapproved of these people.

"Warden Bronwyn," Zevran declared, "is...an honorable woman, and treats her companions equally and fairly. All elves are not the same. All dwarves, I have found, are not the same. It is unreasonable to hold that all humans are the same."

"Did she invite you to join the Wardens?" one elf woman asked sharply.

"She did," Zevran answered shortly. "I refused. It is not for me."

Adaia watched them, to see if the elves would be angry. They did not seem to be. Zevran, she knew, thought a lot of Lady Bronwyn, and it was true that she was a fair-spoken noblewoman, and had treated Adaia herself very well. Still, how could she really trust her, Grey Warden or not? Shems always had their own reasons for doing things, and generally they were unpleasant reasons.

Bronwyn and Leliana were directed to the west of the camp, where they would be sheltered by overhanging vines. Very carefully, since not just a life, but a great alliance depended on it, Bronwyn mixed the ingredients of the Joining potion. This was the time-consuming procedure that Riordan had shown her. It would be nice to have Tara hurry it along with her magic, but Keeper Marethari wanted to talk to Tara. Anything that would sweeten these difficult people should be encouraged. She had seen Adaia and Zevran sitting with some elves, apparently exchanging stories. That too, was very nice. Anything to improve relations was desirable.

Her own feelings and prejudices mattered not. Father had had no end of trouble with the Dalish up in Highever. A clan lived in the Coast Mountains, and sometimes migrated across Amaranthine down through the Wending Wood and into the

Blackmarsh. They used all their skill to hide when doing so, and for good reason. Rendon Howe considered Dalish Elves to be useless vagrants and no better than thieves, since they hunted and gathered wherever they traveled. He treated them as vermin: raiding them when he could; breaking up their camps and killing those who resisted.

Father had phrased his views more moderately, but had essentially felt the same. There was no doubt that the elves had been dispossessed by humans, and they certainly had been treated unjustly. However, their refusal to assimilate into normal society—to convert to Andrastianism and to surrender their mages to the Chantry—made dealings with them fraught with tension. They disregarded property boundaries; they killed game on noble preserves; they were infernally quick to take offense.

Now that she had seen how children were treated at the Circle, Bronwyn could not quite blame the Dalish for hiding their own. If a child of hers were a mage, she might well try to find a way to save them from such a fate. That the Dalish insisted on worshipping their silly heathen gods seemed foolish, since it appeared that those gods did nothing to help them. To be honest, though, the Chantry itself admitted that the Maker had turned his face from his creation and did nothing for anyone either, and would not: not until the Chant of Light was sung in every corner of the world. Considering how satisfied the Qunari seemed to be with their own religion, it did not appear to Bronwyn that the Maker's stipulation would be met any time soon. She decided to concentrate on her

potion.

A drop of Archdemon blood. It mixed greasily with that of the darkspawn: black on darkest red, filth on filth. Now, to add the lyrium...

A whiff of the substance rose with the insistent breeze, briefly tingling through all her senses. She stirred with the dragonthorn twig that would afterward be burned or buried. She swirled the substance in the cup carefully, remembering her own Joining.

"Shall I call Tara and the new recruit to join us?" whispered Leliana.

"Yes. I have almost finished the potion. Nice cup, by the way."

The bard laughed. "I thought you would like it. Such pretty designs. With the deer chasing each other around the rim, I thought it suitable for a Dalish Warden's Joining."

"I hope we'll have a Dalish Warden when it's all over."

"I shall pray to Our Lady Andraste and to the Maker." Leliana stepped out to look for Tara, and then gave her a wave. Tara nodded and waved back. Very gently, the Dalish girl was led to her fate in the little glade among the trees.

"So, we have another Warden," said Tara. "That is something to celebrate."

"And we have the word of Keep Marethari to provide three hundred archers from her clan and her clan's allies," Bronwyn agreed. "That's the real reason we're here, after all."

A new Warden, of course, was a good thing: even if the new Warden had been summarily Joined without much chance to express her own opinion of the matter. Bronwyn had barely been introduced to her before she had been put through the ritual. The girl had survived, which was something of a surprise, considering how sick from the Taint she had been. Perhaps her Keeper was as wise as she made herself out to be. At any rate, they had the beginnings of an alliance with the Dalish, and another Warden.

Danith Mahariel, like the best of the Dalish, had a reputation as an archer. She was also considered to have considerable skill with a pair of daggers. Bronwyn studied the fine-boned face as the young woman struggled with the horror of her Joining nightmares.

Leliana asked, "Will you go north to find the clan of this Zathrian? From what Keeper Marethari says, his word carries a lot of weight among the Dalish in Ferelden."

"Not yet. We must meet Alistair and the dwarves. Merrill will lead Marethari's clansmen to Ostagar. It's not like I expect her to lose her way."

She needed to get back to Ostagar. Things were happening there that she needed to know about. More to the point, she needed to retain the good will of Teyrn Loghain in her struggle

to defend her brother and herself against the Howes and their secret supporters. Should she show him the King's letter? It might enrage him. It might cause a public rift that Ferelden could ill afford in this time of crisis. On the other hand, keeping secret the King's intention to set aside Loghain's daughter in order to marry the Empress of Orlais would certainly be regarded as disloyal on a deeply personal level. She would have to keep her wits about her.

At length, the new Warden's eyes opened: dark blue as a midsummer night. If Danith thought Bronwyn's face an improvement over seeing the Archdemon in the Fade, she did not show it. She accepted her fate with calm stoicism, like a noble girl accepting an arranged marriage.

The Dalish wanted them to stay, but Bronwyn had to say no to them. Yes, it would be better for their new Warden Danith to have a day or two to bid farewell to her clan, but there was no time. They had already lost a day dealing with the elves. They would resume their journey, riding hard to find Alistair.

For the first time in her life, Danith Mahariel rode on a horse, clinging to the waist of the city elf named Zevran. She had seen horses in passing, but had never dreamed she would actually travel on one herself. The horse was a heavy, slow-witted creature compared to a halla, but it carried them willingly and faithfully. She must learn more about these animals. Her light pack was tied to the horse, and her fine new bow and daggers were strapped to her back. Her clan had been generous with loving farewell gifts.

Zevran's manner of speech was foreign, and he had an insouciant air like that of no elf she had ever met; but his strong and compact body was that of a true elf, and she felt more comfortable holding onto him than she would have been touching the giant who traveled with them, or the tall shemlen women. One, the leader, was quite tall indeed, with eerie green eyes that sized Danith up very coolly.

At first, Danith had thought the woman's face was marked like an elf's with vallaslin: the blood writing of the Dalish. Looking closer, she realized it was a long pale scar. She was a warrior, certainly: and a Grey Warden. The Keeper had a good opinion of the Grey Wardens. They were an order that did not discriminate among human, elf, or dwarf. In fact, the Keeper had been friends with their former leader, a shemlen male named Duncan. Duncan had died in battle against the darkspawn, and this young woman had assumed command.

There were other elves in their party, which was a pleasant surprise. Not only was there the young mage Tara who had spoken to her kindly, and the handsome, foreign Zevran, but there was also another young girl of the city elves. Adaia was a good name, rolling off the tongue in a pleasantly familiar way. The girl, however, was as helpless and clumsy as a little child. She had lived all her life among shemlens, and did not know how to take care of herself.

The girl, in her strange croaking voice, had shyly told Danith of the beautiful tree in her quarter of the city. A great vhenadahl grew there, which was well and proper, but as she talked of it, it became apparent that that was the only tree she had

known there. The thought of a single tree, alone, surrounded by the ugly dwellings of the shemlen and the poor ignorant flat ears, made Danith a little queasy. Adaia was not a Warden, but was traveling with them for her own protection, since she had found herself in trouble with some shemlen bullies in the city.

Tara, the mage, had lived her whole life until recently in the Tower of the Circle of Magi, imprisoned by the shemlen Chantry. There, she said, elves and humans were treated as equals: but equal in that they were prisoners all alike. Tara had many friends who were shemlens, and did not like to hear the term used of them. One of Tara's good shemlen friends had left the Tower with her. He was a not a lover, she told Danith, but more a brother of the spirit, and now her brother in the Wardens. Tara also thought highly of Bronwyn, their leader, who had saved her from some unspecified danger at the Circle.

Danith did not like the idea of these elves revering a shemlen woman as a protector, since they should be able to protect themselves. However, the world being what it was, it was understandable that they preferred to be patronized by a better sort of shemlen to being killed or even ill-treated by the worst of them. They believed this Bronwyn to be well-meaning, and the Keeper had also believed her to be so. Time would tell. The shemlen woman Andraste had clearly meant well when she had befriended Thane Shartan and freed the elven slaves, but her followers had suppressed that part of her story, and had used her name to destroy the elven

homeland and scatter the survivors all over Thedas. Danger could wear many masks, and none more dangerous than the mask of friendship.

The other shemlen female, Leliana, had some redeeming qualities, too. She sang well, in a sweet voice that not even an elf could despise, and she was polite to everyone. She was supposed to be something of an archer, though Danith would believe that when she saw it for herself.

They stopped to camp at last. The Warden leader set Danith her first task. She was to teach Adaia the ways of the forest: of earth, tree, and stream. She advised Danith to teach the girl Adaia as she would a child of the Dalish, beginning at the very beginning, with skills like finding firewood, and moving quietly through the trees.

Danith took the city girl in hand, and began her lessons at once, showing her the proper way to collect fallen wood, in a way that did not result in poisonous bites from serpents or spiders. Adaia did not know better than to break twigs as she walked, so that had to be addressed. While they worked, Danith spoke: old words, words meant more to comfort herself than to educate such an unpromising pupil.

"The Way of the Dalish is *Vir Tanadahl*, meaning 'Way of Three Trees.' It is made of three parts, which are: *Vir Assan*, The Way of the Arrow, *Vir Bor'Assan*, The Way of the Bow, and *Vir Adahlen*, The Way of the Forest. Repeat those words," she ordered. Adaia stared at her in confusion. With a deep sigh, Danith said, "Vir Tanadahl."

A slight hesitation, "Vir Tanadahl."

"What does it mean?"

"The Way...of the People?"

"No! The Way of Three Trees. Say it, and say what it means."

"Vir Tanadahl. The Way of Three Trees."

"What are the three parts?"

"Er...The Way of the Bow is one, I know..."

It took some time for Adaia to learn those few words, and then they had to go on to the meaning of the three parts:

The Way of the Arrow- *Fly straight and do not waver.*

The Way of the Bow-*Bend but never break.*

The Way of the Forest-*Together we are stronger than the one.*

Tara came up and listened in silence to the lesson. Afterward, she said, "Those aren't bad precepts for Grey Wardens, either."

"Perhaps not," Danith replied coolly. "However, there are other words that are only for our people. This is the Oath of the Dales, from the time when our people were hunted from their second homeland. Listen well, Adaia, and learn it by heart:

"We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last elvhen. Never again shall we submit."

The West Road followed the River Drakon as it stretched to the southwest. They had swung wide, avoiding South Reach, since Bronwyn did not want people gossiping about having seen the Girl Warden on the road from Denerim. Likewise, she wished to avoid Lothing and its time-consuming well-wishers.

Half a day's ride from Lothing, however, they found themselves in battle.

They were moving fast, trying to make up time, when Bronwyn shuddered with the familiar tingle of nearby darkspawn. She lifted her hand, and they halted, while they all swept the horizon for signs of the enemy. It seemed that it was a fairly strong band.

"They have an emissary with them," Tara judged. "Maybe two."

"I agree." Bronwyn bit her lip, wanting to press on, but they had no choice. If there were darkspawn nearby, they had to be dealt with. They found the nearest ramp and left the road, picking their way toward the Southron Hills. They had not gone far when they heard the screams.

They were not soldiers, the mob they saw running for their

lives. There were tiny figures among the terrified people, being dragged along or carried or simply knocked aside in the rush. About two dozen refugees were making a break for the West Road. A few among the crowd were armed, and some of these were running back to engage the darkspawn. Further on, half-hidden in the trees and scrub, there were bursts of magic, brilliant and fearsome. The rasping sensation of *Darkspawn! Darkspawn!* Intensified as Bronwyn headed toward the refugees at a gallop.

"Out of my way!" she shouted, hand flung out to direct the scrambling human tide. "The ramp's over there! Get up to the road and turn left. Lothering's not ten miles away!"

She pulled on her reins, and kicked the horse toward the trees, ducking under a low-hanging branch. "Come on!"

"Hold tight, *carina!*" Zevran called out to Danith. "Grip the horse with your legs!"

"What he said!" yelled Tara. She decided that as soon as she saw the darkspawn, she would have to get off the horse and fight on foot. She could not wield her staff and hold the reins at the same time. There was no time to let Adaia slide off the horse, and no guarantee she would be safer if she did.

Leliana shrieked a war cry, her bow already in her hands. Sten was thundering past on Trampler, a raging mountain of defiance. He, too, must dismount when he found the enemy, for it was impossible to wield a blade the size of Asala from horseback.

Danith had ridden hallas often enough to know how to stay on. How to fight when mounted was not a skill she possessed. As soon the darkspawn were in sight, she jumped from the horse, landing lightly on booted feet, and threw herself behind some cover. In another second an arrow was nocked and aimed, and she was shooting into the mob of darkspawn.

The horses screamed protests, alarmed at the darkspawn stink. Trampler was not as frightened as the others, and reared up, brandishing heavy hooves in the creatures' faces. One hurlock screamed in agony, and went down, the left side of its skull caved in. The horse landed on its front hooves, and Sten grabbed another of the darkspawn, snapping its neck with his gauntleted hands.

Tara shouted to Adaia. "I've got to get off the horse! Slide down and hide!"

It seemed good advice, and Adaia stumbled from the horse, clutching frantically at her little knife. An arrow hummed past her. She shrank down behind a tree. Twenty feet behind her was the Dalish girl, her eyes bright and fixed on the darkspawn. Her bow twanged again.

Everyone but Adaia seemed to know what to do. She felt scared and useless, her insides shrinking up very small at the sight of these unbelievable monsters: nightmare creatures from a cruel fairy-tale. She crouched down behind the tree, her breath coming quick and shallow. Zevran was yelling something, and she glimpsed a bright flash of his sword, and a head bouncing to the ground and rolling.

Ahead of her, Tara's staff was lifted high, and she was shouting strange words. Frost sparkled from the monsters, slowing them down. Another shout and the air rippled with a sudden blow, knocking two of them off their feet.

Leliana was shooting from horseback, not even touching the reins. Somehow her horse also knew what to do, and was circling the darkspawn, curvetting out of their way, dodging and biting, while her rider twisted in the saddle and shot the darkspawn with long, steel-tipped arrows. Adaia wondered if something was on the tips, for the darkspawn stuck by Leliana's missiles suddenly clutched at themselves, and jerked until they fell thrashing to the ground.

Even the big dog knew what to do. He was running beside Bronwyn's horse on the left side, knocking down darkspawn who attacked her there, ripping at them with horrible growls. Adaia could not believe that this was the same dog who had wagged his tail when she had tossed him a piece of jerky that morning.

Some of the refugees were lying dead on the ground. Some were wounded and bleeding, and calling pitifully for help. Abandoned wagons were tipped on their sides, and wounded oxen lowed dismally. A tiny boy tottered past a dead woman, face red and tear-stained, howling with fear.

Bronwyn saw Adaia and shouted, "Stay down!" She galloped past, leaning out of the saddle, slicing at one of the strangest of the creatures, one who wore a bizarre headdress and carried a mage's staff. A nasty green mist spurting from the

staff. Bronwyn spurred her horse out of its path, and then her sword cut the staff in two. The darkspawn uttered a baffled roar, and tried to chase after her. Her horse spun round and her sword sheared through the creature. It coughed blackly, suddenly sat down, and then collapsed to the side, dead. Bronwyn galloped on, and then reached down and plucked the little boy from the ground.

In a flash, the horse was headed toward Adaia's way, and the screaming toddler was dropped next to her. "Look after him!" Bronwyn shouted, and then galloped away, seeing Sten chasing a pair of darkspawn who were dragging a woman behind them.

Adaia stared at the little boy, nonplussed. He whimpered at the sight of her, and she managed a weak smile, pulling him into her arms. "Shhh! We're going to hide from the monsters, and let the heroes save us!"

Bronwyn charged down a shallow hill, sword dripping. Sten was ahead of her, running with astonishingly speed for all his size and heavy armor. One of the genlocks turned to face the qunari, and was knocked down and pinned to the ground by the point of Sten's greatsword.

The other genlock was doggedly dragging the woman by a leg. She was bruised and bloody, and appeared to be dead or unconscious: her arms lax, her long dark hair trailing through the dust. Bronwyn picked up speed, judged her moment carefully, and brought her sword down, cutting through the tough left arm of the darkspawn. Tainted blood spurted from

the stump, and the mortally wounded creature actually attempted to cross swords with her. Sten smashed it down. He snarled, as he tried to brush the dead hand from the woman's leg, and found the grip too tight. Painstakingly, he broke the darkspawn's fingers, and threw the hand behind him. By now, the darkspawn was dead. The woman did not move. Sten studied her more closely.

"She is alive," he declared. With two fingers to his lips, he blew a shrill whistle. Trampler appeared, and loped after them, stamping briefly as it stopped at his master's side. Sten put the woman over the saddle, and led the horse back toward the road. Bronwyn gave him a nod and turned back to see how the rest of her party had fared.

Another burst of magic to her left. Tara took off on foot, shouting a paralysis spell at a hurlock in her way. The ground sloped off, and she stumbled, nearly falling. More fighting was going on here. Another emissary was spewing his primitive spells at a black-haired mage. A pile of darkspawn lay dead between them.

"I'm stronger than I look!" shouted the mage. Another spell sucked life from the darkspawn, and a spurt of fire followed, setting the emissary's crude garb on fire.

Tara sent a bolt of lightning at the monster, and ran up to support the other mage. The darkspawn swayed on its feet, uttering a last weak gobble. Tara reversed her staff and knocked the creature down, giving it a kick for good measure.

The mage turned, relieved to be rescued, and then yelled when Tara's fist connected with his nose.

"Bloody hell! What was that for?" He wiped the blood from his face, and looked up, just in time to be hit again. "Wait! *Tara!*"

"Jowan, you bastard!" Tara screamed. "I'm going to kill you!"

"Ow!"

Bronwyn rode back toward the hill to find Tara beating not on a darkspawn, but a human mage. He was not fighting back either, but had put up his hands to protect his head. Tara shouted as she clouted him again.

"Do you *know* what I went through because of you? Do you know what the Templars *did* to me? And you just ran away. Just ran away and saved yourself!" She hit him again. "And now I'm a Grey Warden, and guess what? You're conscripted. Conscripted! Conscripted! *Conscripted!*" she shrieked. "Don't try to run away this time or I'll hunt you down myself, and our very tall commander will chop you into mincemeat!"

"Tara!" shouted Bronwyn. "Stop larking about with that mage and do what you can to heal the wounded. You!" she called to the stranger. She kicked her horse closer, and stared down at the quailing Jowan. "Whoever you are, this Warden has conscripted you. You will help her in her efforts. You will assist us in rounding up the refugees and protecting them on their way to Lothing, and then you will Join the Wardens."

Tara made a face at Jowan and stalked away, slapping him on the back of the head. "So there! Bastard."

They hurried to heal whom they could, though some were already beyond help. Tara saw Sten walking toward them, leading Trampler, and she began casting spells on the woman draped over the saddle.

"Leliana!" Bronwyn called. "Ride after those people and tell them the darkspawn are dead. They might have wounded or belongings back here. Or a child," she snorted, seeing Adaia comforting the little boy in her arms.

Danith began methodically collecting her arrows. These were not her people, and she had done her duty in slaying darkspawn. It was more important that she not lose her excellent arrows through her own carelessness. Zevran had tied up his horse, and was helping the qunari right a shemlen wagon. One of the beasts that had pulled it was dead, and the other was living but bloody. A stranger mage healed the beast quickly, and its dead mate was unbuckled from the harness and the wagon pulled away from it. Another beast—an ox—she remembered it was called, was found alive, and was harnessed in place of the dead one.

What a lot of rubbish the shemlens carried with them! The ground was littered with their possessions. Some of them were already on their feet, picking through the trash, moaning about the things they had lost, while other humans lay dead or injured.

Leliana was leading some the refugees back to help their clansmen. The red-haired Warden was indeed something of an archer, and the feat of shooting from a moving horse was to be respected. Whether the shemlen woman was Danith's equal in a straight match of skill was yet to be determined.

A shemlen male shouted, and rushed down from the road, arms out. He ran at Adaia, and snatched the child from her.

"Lorcan! Give him to me!"

He clutched the child, weeping, and without a word of thanks to Adaia for sheltering his son, he walked away. He was looking for his wife, it appeared, and was distraught, but it was still discourteous and ungrateful. Danith grimaced, and resumed her search for the lost arrows.

Bronwyn's temper was beyond frayed by the time the bedraggled little caravan reached the safety of Lothering. She had been hard put to it, resolving the disputes over ownership of the surviving oxen, over what should be carried in the usable wagons, and over who was to ride in them. The mages burned the dead, humans and darkspawn both, and it was time to be gone, if they were to reach Lothering before dark.

Bronwyn led them out, with Leliana and Tara on either side. Scout trotted happily along, sniffing the air for more of the Tainted ones. Adaia and Jowan walked with them.

"I want him where I can see him," Tara said fiercely, pointing

at Jowan. "If he tries to run, I swear I'll paralyze him." She leaned over and spoke to Scout. "You watch him, too. All right?"

Scout agreed with a yip. He did not know the black-haired mage very well yet. He smelled of blood and regret.

"I'm not going to run," Jowan protested wearily. "I've been trying to make up for all I've done. If being a Grey Warden is what you think I should do, I'll do it."

"Enough talk about Warden business," Bronwyn admonished them quietly. "Let's get these people to Lothing, and then be on our way. I don't even want to camp there tonight. They'll find a way to slow us down, and we are out of time."

"No baths at the Manor, then," sighed Leliana.

Bronwyn laughed. "Certainly not! I can't imagine that poor seneschal being happy at the sight of me. Baths at Bann Ceorlic's manor must henceforth be enjoyed only in memory."

"A very nice memory it is. Perhaps the bathing facilities at the Wardens' compound will require similar improvements."

"That sounds like a good idea," Bronwyn agreed. "From what Alistair told me, they seem a bit primitive."

Sten mounted Trampler, and formed a rear guard with Zevran and Danith. They kept an eye on the landscape on either side of the road, especially where the forest crept up very close.

Danith insisted on walking, keeping her bow at the ready. Her clan rarely journeyed on shemlen roads, but they certainly made travel quicker.

The people of Lothering would have made a celebration for them if Bronwyn had let them. Some of the refugees had arrived before the Wardens, and had spread scare stories of the darkspawn horde advancing on Lothering from the east. When the lookouts saw instead a caravan of humans with a rider wearing a winged helmet in the lead, there was an outpouring of relief and gratitude.

Bronwyn refused to stop, telling Ser Bryant that they were in a hurry to rejoin the army marching south to Ostagar. People forced presents on them as they made their triumphal way through the town. Danal rushed out with a tray of tankards from Dane's Refuge, and all the party was refreshed by the ale. Even Danith allowed that this shemlen drink was not bad. Loaves of bread and bags of apples were thrust at them. Flowers strewed their path, and Bronwyn was hit in the face with a thorny bouquet of roses. She caught it and smiled gamely, thanking the giver with a wave. Leliana was delighted by a bunch of fragrant white flowers, given to her from a Chantry sister she knew.

"Thank you! Thank you!" she called. "You remembered! Sister Beatrice, tell the Revered Mother I am a Warden now, and ask her to pray for me. Pray for us all!"

She shouted to Bronwyn over the noise. "Andraste's Grace!

These were my mother's favorite flowers. When I smell them, I can almost remember what she looked like!" She pressed the cool white petals to her face, and then smiled radiantly.

The Revered Mother herself appeared on the porch of the Chantry, but Bronwyn only bowed respectfully from horseback as she passed. The refugees they had shepherded joined the crowd in the Commons, and the Wardens climbed the far ramp back to the road.

"Everybody on horseback now," Bronwyn ordered. "Jowan, get up behind Sten. Trampler is strong enough to carry you both. We can't get where we need to be at walking speed. Yes, Danith, I mean you, too. Tara, you said you knew a spell to make horses go faster. We'll need it now."

"You mean Haste?" Jowan asked. "I know that one. I can help."

"Then do it," Bronwyn snapped. "Now."

Notes: One of my reviewers asked if Leliana should recognize the name Adaia, since in the DLC Leliana's Song, (SPOILERS) Leliana rescues Tabris' mother Adaia from the dungeons of the Arl of Denerim during her own escape. I think not. While the figure is identified as Adaia, she does not converse in a cut scene with Leliana, and there is no reason to think that names were exchanged. It does, however, put the date of the death of Tabris' mother a little later than I previously imagined.

Another reviewer could not imagine Anora obediently stepping down as Queen, if Cailan arranged a grand alliance with the Empress of Orlais. I can't imagine her doing so either, but the question is: would Cailan expect it? I think he would. As I told some of you, I am basing my Cailan somewhat on young Henry VIII: handsome, charming, athletic, popular, immensely vain, and utterly egocentric. Like many monarchs who came to the throne very young, he really believes that people want to do whatever makes him happy. Henry VIII was genuinely shocked and outraged that Catherine of Aragon did not obey him meekly and admit that their marriage was incestuous and invalid. As George Bernard Shaw once wrote: "Kings are not born: they are made by artificial hallucination. When the process is interrupted, as in the case of Charles II, the subject becomes sane, and never recovers his kingliness."

I picture Maric more as our Charles II: a monarch ascending the throne after a childhood and youth of war, dispossession, and deadly danger. His charm, bonhomie, and to some extent his promiscuousness disguised his deep disillusionment and abiding melancholy.

Thanks to my reviewers: Lehni, Shakespira, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Josie Lange, Sunnydale-High-Class-of-95, Notnahtanha, Aoi24, demonincargles, butterflygrrl, almostinsane, Judy, Sarah1281, JackOfBladesX, Zute, Eva Galana, Menamebephil, Jenna53, chocolatebrownie12, mille libri, Halm Vendrella, Amhran Comhrac, wayfaringpanda,

Enaid Aderyn, Piceron, mutive, Kira Kyuuketsuki, Dragon's Tongue, The Moidart, fraught, swisschocolate, millahnna, cjonbloodletter, Windchime68, BucklesintheSun, Costin, NuitNuit, BlackCherryWhiskey, EmbertoInferno, What Ithacas Mean, and Have Socks Will Travel.

Thanks to all my readers. I'm glad you're enjoying this adventure. I'm looking forward to the release of DA2, and it will be interesting to see how I need to alter or retrofit the story to fit canon.

30. Legends of the Stone

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 30: Legends of the Stone

Jowan had survived. Bronwyn wondered if there was something about mages and the Joining. Tara might be angry at her old friend, but Bronwyn sensed that "old friend" trumped "angry." Tara might want to punish him, but she did not want him to die, and she certainly did not want to turn him over to the Templars for summary execution.

He was a mystery to Bronwyn: nothing like the Blood Mages in Mother Mallol's sermons-those powerful, half-demonic beings who had stormed the Golden City and brought sin and suffering to the world. Jowan was gentle-eyed and biddable. His voice was soft, and when stressed he became whiny rather than threatening. Above all, he was a useful mage, and was now a brother Grey Warden.

"The Circle only lets us recruit one mage at a time," Duncan had told her. Due to the Blight, the Knight-Commander and the First-Enchanter had allowed her to walk out of the door of the Circle Tower with two mages in tow. About Morrigan they knew nothing at all. Now there would be a fourth mage among her companions, and Bronwyn was extremely pleased. Having

seen and experienced for herself how immensely useful mages were in battle, she wished she could recruit a dozen more.

Of course, he would only be useful if the resistance to his presence were not too great. She must not flaunt him in the face of the Chantry. Cullen would be a problem. So, too, to some extent, would be Alistair. She would have to find a way to mitigate the tension. Before she could make any decisions, she needed to get back to her people and assess the current situation.

And then she would have to equip Jowan a little more respectably. The sutlers with the army must have a better backpack, and a pair of boots without holes. The mage had a curiously fragile appearance, as if he had not had enough to eat in a long, long time. Bronwyn knew little about the lives of apostates on the run, but she suspected that such was the case. He accepted the bowl of oat porridge cooked with dried fruit from Adaia with fervent thanks—and without even looking at what it was. Any food was a blessing to one who had gone without.

Zevran was being a good sport about sharing a tent. They must get Jowan a tent of his own, too, as soon as possible. With the money she had taken from the Wardens' cache, Bronwyn could provide more fittingly for her people. That would be good for morale.

Tara took her own bowl of porridge and sat down by Jowan.

"How are you dealing with the nightmares?"

Bronwyn listened carefully, not looking their way.

"They're not so bad." Jowan dug into his porridge, and shrugged. "Not as bad as I thought the Harrowing would be. I suppose that's what made me scared enough to run away."

"Not just your dream of spending your life in a country cottage with Lily?" Tara asked, with a sharp edge to her voice.

Jowan kept eating, not looking at anyone. "What happened to her?" he asked softly.

"Taken off to the Aeonar. At least that's what the Knight-Commander said. Whether she was or wasn't I don't know. I was tossed in the dungeon a few minutes later, and I never heard anything about anybody after that." Her face tightened, and she hit him over the head with her silver spoon. "Why did you run off like that, Jowan? Why didn't you take me with you, at least?"

"I thought you were dead!" Jowan burst out. "I thought I'd killed everybody. The spell was more powerful than I imagined. I saw you all fall, and I thought I'd killed you. I was afraid! I ran out the door and I kept running."

"You thought I was dead?"

"I did," he said, his face wretched. "I found out later that I was wrong. There was talk on the roads about an escape and I

found out that everybody survived. But at the time I panicked. There was so much blood..."

Bronwyn spoke up. "About the Blood Magic thing. I don't want to see that going on."

"Of course, Warden-Commander," Jowan hurriedly assured her.

"Call me Bronwyn. You're a Warden. I repeat: I do not want to see that going on, unless we're all about to be slaughtered by the darkspawn. Then, if someone were to pull off an impressive feat of magic in order to save our lives, I'd be absolutely fine with it."

Zevran snickered. Leliana was a little shocked, but resigned.

"Intention is very important. That is so true."

Sten was stoically indifferent. "It makes little difference to me. All magic is perilous." He flicked ominous lavender eyes in Jowan's direction.

Jowan nodded, and wolfed down more porridge, glancing up now and then through his lashes to see people's expressions. No one was paying any attention to him at all, which actually was a great relief. Except for the dog. Scout panted happily in his direction, wagging his tail.

"I'll throw the stick some more, I promise," Jowan sighed. "Just as soon as I finish my porridge."

Bronwyn and her companions rode in to camp on a rainy afternoon, just before the last of the dwarven troops. These last were expected soon, and everyone enjoyed some much-needed rest before the final push south. Bronwyn made her introductions brief. The additions to the fellowship were met with varying degrees of surprise, interest, and dismay, before they were dismissed to pitch tents and find the mess wagon. Cullen glared at Jowan, and turned and stalked off, radiating fury.

"You've already got the Dalish to agree to join us?" Alistair looked beyond Bronwyn, blushing a little at the ensnaring vision of Danith in her midriff-baring Dalish armor. "That's... wow...I'm impressed..."

"She *is* quite beautiful," Bronwyn agreed, good-naturedly. "A fine archer, too. A chance encounter with some darkspawn exposed her to Blight disease. Saving her life with the Joining was all it took to get the agreement of her clan."

Alistair ducked his head. "I wasn't really looking...all right, I was. But I'm really impressed that you got the Dalish to join us so quickly. That should please the King. You said he was interested the Dalish alliance."

"That would be nice," Bronwyn shrugged. She had decided not to tell Alistair all the details of his brother's courtship of Orlais. As few people as possible should know of that. "It was just one clan, really, and their close allies. I've been told of a more important clan to the north. Their Keeper is very

influential. At some point we should try to parley with him. Nonetheless, we've got ourselves a sizable force of Dalish scouts and archers, and I'm sure their aid will be welcome."

She needed to say something about the Denerim affair. "We found that Orlesian bard who made trouble for us. She's dead now, but some of her plots might linger on. We should keep our eyes and ears open. I saw my brother in Denerim, too, and warned him. It looks like the woman was feeding false information to Arl Howe to make it look like my father was a traitor. It doesn't excuse him, of course, but it does explain what he did. Anyway, the woman isn't in the picture anymore. Don't tell anyone that I was in Denerim. All they have to know is that I met with the Dalish."

"I won't say a word," he said earnestly.

She put a hand on his arm. "You've certainly handled the march well. How are the dwarves doing?"

Alistair grinned, lowering his voice. He jerked his head at a dismal-looking group of dwarven soldiery, huddled by their smoky fire, rain dripping from their helmets and beards. "They do better at night than during the day. The sky isn't so empty-looking then, they tell me."

A dwarf sergeant glanced up and saw the cloud-heads looking at him.

"Nobody told us," he growled, "that that Stone-forsaken Maker of yours was going to *piss* on us!"

Love in the afternoon in her private tent was something Morrigan was learning to enjoy. Anders lazed at her side, fingers running through her dark hair. Morrigan was still considering the new arrivals. "That timid fellow is a blood mage?" Morrigan queried, amused and astonished. "I find that hard to credit."

"True, though," Anders assured her. "He's the one who broke out of the Circle with a spell powerful enough to knock down the Knight-Commander, the First Enchanter, and all the Templars within fifty yards, and it kept them down while he ran out of the door, commandeered the boat, and rowed to shore. He got away clean. I've never heard of anything like it."

"He doesn't *look* like a powerful blood mage," Morrigan remarked, peering through the tent opening at the black-haired mage, who was being scolded by Tara, as usual, for some deficiency. "He looks like a clerk."

"That's just his sneaky mageness manifesting itself. He disguises himself as a mild-mannered clerk, and then works his wicked wiles." He gave Morrigan a squeeze. "Have a care for your small clothes!"

They were not the only ones speculating about Jowan. Cullen was appalled that he had been made a Warden, and it took all his ingrained discipline not to smite him on the spot. Every time he saw him.

Alistair saw him glaring, and came over to talk. "I know it's hard, but Bronwyn really thinks he should make up for the wrongs he's done by helping us."

Cullen growled, "He should make up for the wrongs he's done with a sword separating his head from his shoulders! Or in the Aeonar, at the very least!" He shook his head as Alistair opened his mouth. "Yes, I heard Bronwyn. He wouldn't be so useful in the Aeonar. But he's dangerous. Bronwyn is a wonderful leader, but she simply doesn't have experience dealing with Jowan's sort!"

Alistair advised him, "We'll keep an eye on him, all right? If he puts a toe out of line, we'll be waiting."

Cullen nodded, casting a dark look at Jowan, who was diligently pitching Tara's tent for her. "I'll be waiting."

"Tara conscripted him publicly. Bronwyn didn't want her to lose face in front of everyone else by refusing. Of course, he's not all that our fearless leader brought back from her trip for us. What do you think of Danith? Isn't she *strange*?"

Cullen really wanted to watch Jowan, but he answered readily enough. "Strange? Yes, of course. I've never met a Dalish elf before. Naturally Bronwyn allowed her to Join in order to save her life, because she's generous that way, but the woman is a heathen savage."

"Well," Alistair temporized with a smile, "She's Dalish. That's what they are. If she had to let her Join to get the Dalish

alliance, then that's understandable. I'm still trying to figure out that other little elf girl she brought along."

Cullen said stiffly, "I sometimes fear that Bronwyn's noble generosity will be her undoing. She trusts too easily. The girl admits she is wanted by the City Guard in Denerim. Tara says —"

"Cullen!" cried Brosca. "I was looking for you! I found a better whetstone..."

Tara called Adaia to join her at mess wagon, and said, "Hurry up and eat! We've got some training planned for you!"

"It's already started," Adaia complaining, rubbing sore thighs. "My legs *really* hurt from riding."

"Anders can do something for that. He's brilliant. Come on, I'm starving!"

"You're always starving."

After a hearty meal—and Adaia had never seen so much food in one place—there were chores to be done. Everyone joined in, even the shems—even the haughty Dalish elf.

Then Zevran came over, beckoned by Tara. He gave Adaia an elaborate bow, and said, "Carina, the beauteous Tara is concerned that you know how to take care of yourself in the situations that—" he grinned at Tara—"adventurers such as

ourselves sometimes cannot avoid." He handed her two short sticks. "Before darkness falls, I am to teach you something of the art of fighting. Come."

He had found a clear space that he thought good for the purpose, and began with showing her some stances and simple moves. Thinking her an absolute beginner, he was surprised that she even knew how to hold the practice daggers correctly.

Studying her with more interest, he smirked. "Someone has taught you a little of this before, yes? You are not so helpless as you think."

Adaia smiled shyly. "My mother taught me a little. I was supposed to keep it secret, so it would not be so hard for my father to find a husband for me."

Zevran laughed aloud, white teeth gleaming. "Foolish fathers! They do not realize that a weapon in a beautiful woman's hand makes her irresistible!"

Leliana found Bronwyn, and said, "Come and see! Zevran is teaching little Adaia to fight with daggers, and she is learning so quickly!"

They strolled over and saw Zevran teaching her how to block. The girl was painfully thin, but wiry and quick. She had obviously not had much practice, but was at least willing to learn.

The camp was well organized, but the dwarven newcomers had the usual difficulty with adjusting to the open sky. Alistair had been right: as night fell, the problems lessened. The dark blue vault at twilight was not so bewildering. As the stars shone forth, the dwarves enjoyed looking at them, as at jewels glittering in the high roof of a great cavern. Evidently feeling more at ease, one of the dwarven commanders came forward to meet Bronwyn, as she sat with her friends around the Wardens' campfire.

"Lord Ronus Dace, Warden," the dwarf nobleman introduced himself. "A strange place, this surface of yours."

"Well met, Lord Ronus," Bronwyn smiled. She found a bottle of good wine and offered some to him and his officers. This smoothed the way for a pleasant talk by the fire. Scout, at last bored with scrounging treats from the camp followers, trotted over to Bronwyn and put his head on her knee, demanding to have his ears scratched.

Oghren and Brosca came back from a knot of dwarves, laughing. Brosca plumped herself down by Cullen and squeezed his arm. Bronwyn smiled to herself, as she wiped an imaginary speck of dust from her armor. She was absurdly proud of this armor. Even Fergus did not own something so fine, though she supposed that would change, in time. Indeed, he would probably go to Master Wade for a new set of plate as soon as possible—though not soon enough for any possible advance on Amaranthine.

"It's so long since we've all been together!" Brosca cried. "I'm

so glad you're back, Bronwyn. We all missed you, especially Alistair."

Alistair ducked his head, embarrassed. He caught Astrid's eye, and she gave him an amused look. Encouraged, he grinned back.

"I certainly did!" he admitted frankly. "I was expecting any minute for disaster to strike, and at the very least to lead everyone straight into the Waking Sea!"

"But you didn't," Astrid pointed out, "We're all here, and all well, and so far we've been unopposed. You must have cleared out all the darkspawn when you came through here last. As for bandits-well, not even bandits are fools enough to tangle with a force of this size!"

Bronwyn eyed Astrid with reserved approval. It was clear who had stepped up to assist Alistair in her absence. The dwarf noble was an intelligent person, though she as yet knew little about the surface. Perhaps, in time, she would be someone Bronwyn could rely on more and more.

"And I wanted to tell you my story!" Brosca told her, diverting her attention. "I thought of a good one."

"Oh, how nice!" Leliana said, "An entertainment!"

More dwarves gathered round at the prospect, and not just Lord Ronus and his honor guard. Brosca's status as a Warden made her a person in their eyes: otherwise they

would have turned from her in disgust.

"Well, go on," Bronwyn laughed, gesturing at Brosca to stand. "We're waiting!"

Made a little nervous by such august auditors. Brosca began her story quietly, but then gathered her courage and went on her usual brash, cheerful way.

"Back before she was drunk all the time, my ma used to like stories. She told me a lot of them, and most of them had a moral. That's funny, when you think about it, because Ma has no morals at all! Anyway, I remembered this story, and I thought you'd all like it."

Brosca's Story of the Nug and the Deepstalker

A long time ago, in the great days before the darkspawn overran the dwarven realm, there was a Nug who lived a cozy little pocket of stone in the walls of Kobaliman Thaig. She was an excellent housekeeper, and kept her little lair so tidy that all the other nugs agreed that someday she'd be a wonderful wife and mother.

All the boy nugs wanted to mate with her, but our nug had dreams and imagination, and she wanted something different. As it happened, she fell in love with a Deepstalker.

The Deepstalker was lean and muscular, unlike the nug boys in the neighborhood, and he had a dangerous air that was

very exciting. And he was so sensitive. He brought the Nug presents: sparkling rocks and tasty lichen.

"Stick to your own kind!" wailed her mother. Her aunts and cousins said, "He's no good! Did you see the gang he runs with? Don't you remember what happened to Cousin Fulbi?"

But the Nug cried, "He's different from the rest! You don't know him, so you shouldn't judge him. He's not bad. He's just...misunderstood."

"Listen to your heart, baby," crooned the Deepstalker, when he came to call. "What do those fat old slags know about love?"

So the Nug didn't listen to her mother or her aunts or her cousins. She listened to her heart, and soon she and the Deepstalker were living together in her cozy little nug-hole.

The Nug wanted to cook for him like a good wife should, but the Deepstalker didn't like lichen bread or lichen pudding. He was gone quite a lot, "on business," and he ate out with his gang. For, sad to say, while he was very affectionate with the Nug, he still ran with his old pals.

"They're my *friends*, baby," said the Deepstalker. "You can't expect me to dump them just like that."

"You don't like my mother to visit," sulked the Nug. "It's not fair."

"Hey, I never said you couldn't go see your mother! I don't bring my pals home, do I? It *is* fair. This place is just for us. I've never even told my pals where it is."

So things went, and the Nug was happy most of the time, and thought the Deepstalker was, too.

But over time, things changed. The Deepstalker was gone for longer and longer at a time. "Game's getting thin, baby," he told her. "Look like this thaig's just about hunted out."

She was lonely, and went to visit her mother, but when she looked in her mother's lair, it was deserted. She couldn't find her aunts or her cousins, either, and she went home, very sad.

Finally, the Deepstalker returned, and the Nug was so happy.

"Glad to see you, too, baby," the Deepstalker said. "I'm starving!"

"I've made a lovely lichen salad," she told him, "I'm sure you'd like it if you tried it."

"I was thinking more about fat, juicy nug. You're looking pretty good, baby."

At first she could not understand what he was saying. Horrified, she backed away. "You told me you *loved* me!"

Some time later, after the screaming had stopped, he licked his chops and said, "I do, baby. I've always loved nug."

"Yup!" laughed Oghren, "I saw that one coming!"

Lord Ronus unbent sufficiently to say, "My nurse told me that story. Sometimes the simple tales are the best."

"It's...horrible," Cullen finally managed. Brosca's face fell.

Leliana saw it, and defended her. "I think it is a clever fable. Using animals in stories makes them timeless."

Sten approved greatly of the story. "It is a wise lesson in the dangers of moving out of one's appointed sphere. The foolish nug should have remained in the environment appropriate to her. To mate without regard for her people's customs and laws invited the retribution of Fate."

The dwarves listening generally agreed with the qunari, since nothing seemed more natural than for castes to remain set in Stone.

Jowan said nothing, but miserably wondered if he had been the Deepstalker to poor Lily's Nug.

"The nug and the deepstalker really had nothing in common," Bronwyn pointed out, "and so their relationship was bound to fail, even if hunger had not precipitated quite such a radical... divorce..."

Alistair and Anders laughed. Even Morrigan smirked.

"Anyway," Bronwyn continued. "it seems to me like one of those situations in which young women are determined to love someone in spite of family disapproval, or even because of it, in order to prove their independence. That often ends badly."

Zevran smiled oddly. "There are all sorts of ways a story like that can end. I knew a man in Antiva who preyed on young girls who came from the country, looking for work. He would flatter them, gain their love and their trust, and before they knew it, they were working in a brothel, addicted to Black Lotus. You might say that he did, in a sense, eat them. Not many survived long there."

"It's a wicked world," Adaia whispered to herself. Jowan, sitting silently on the edge of the firelight, gave her a brief, sad look of understanding. She smiled timidly back.

"Still," Brosca said cheerfully, "My sister is living with the King, and they seem to be getting on."

Astrid smiled thinly, "I gather that your sister has a clearer idea of who is in charge than the Nug in your story did."

Brosca chuckled and shrugged. "Maybe so."

"It is true that Bhelen may shake things up in Orzammar," Lord Ronus admitted. "He has new ideas. Some of them I agree with, some of them I'll need time to adjust to. But the King's the King."

Grunts of agreement. Bronwyn had her own opinion on that

matter, but kept her counsel.

Oghren belched and stretched. "Good story..." He sat up a little straighter. "My turn next."

"Already?" Alistair was surprised. "You've already thought of a story?"

"Haw!" cackled the dwarf. "I got a million of 'em! I could tell you the one about the twin sisters of King Darran—heh-heh—" he saw Bronwyn's raised brows, and hastily added, "...or maybe not. Or the one about the warrior who taught the noblewoman how to make Stone Soup—heh-heh—or maybe not." He tugged on his beard, grinning, and slowly swayed to his feet.

"Yeah, I can stand. See me standing? Got a story for you. There was these three Templars —uh—" He glanced over to see Cullen's narrowed eyes, and Leliana's wary expression. "...or maybe not...Right."

He squared his shoulders. "Political story, then. And historical. Yeah, it's historical. I didn't make it up to insult anybody. Every word of this is true. And when Lord Ronus says the King's the King, think about it."

Oghren's Story of the Justice of King Valtor

King Valtor was a evil bastard: everyone knows that. You've heard yourselves how he condemned dwarves to be

transformed into golems, cooked alive inside stone casings, white-hot lyrium cascading over their heads. He stole men's wives and daughters, and he stole property and wealth. After years of this, he was so used to having his own way that he couldn't tolerate anyone disobeying his orders, no matter how crazy they were.

And it was not a good idea to criticize him for his drinking, not that it has ever been wise to criticize kings.

Once, when he was so drunk that he vomited into his own soup bowl, one of his warriors told him he needed to stop drinking so much.

"You majesty," said he, "Strong drink is the joy of a dwarf, but too much makes the hand clumsy and the wits befuddled."

These words made the king so angry that he had the warrior tied to a chair, and then he called for the warrior's young son to be brought forth.

"Think I'm clumsy, do you? Think I'm befuddled?" he roared. He snatched a bow from a guardsman, and put arrow right into the boy's eye. The boy fell down screaming, and died there in front of the king's table.

Valtor turned to the warrior and laughed. "I think I'm doing pretty well." With that he shot the warrior in the throat, and let him die slowly. After that, no one ever told King Valtor that he drank too much.

Another time, it happened that a patrol was in the Deep Roads, and one of the warriors did not return to the city. King Valtor accused one of the other dwarves of killing him and hiding the body.

To the captain of the patrol, he ordered: "Take this man out to the Deep Roads entrance and cut off his head! He's a murderer!"

The captain bowed, and the accused was chained up and dragged out to be executed. When they were at the Deep Roads entrance, who should come limping up but the lost warrior!

The captain was glad that he had survived, and took both men back with him to the Palace, eager to give the King the good news.

The King greeted the men, and then looked at them, while the captain started to get just a little uneasy.

Finally, the King said, "You ought to be dead."

He pointed at the chained warrior, "I condemned you to death, and my orders must always be carried out." Then he pointed at the warrior who had been lost. "And your friend is going to die because of you, so you're a murderer, and thus I condemn you likewise."

Then he turned to the captain, "And you! You refused a direct command! Guards!"

The three men were cut down on the spot. And that was the justice of King Valtor.

There was a stir at the story.

Lord Ronus was carefully unoffended. "We have all heard of King Valtor. It is a lesson to the dwarven people about the importance of choosing our leaders wisely."

"A lesson," Bronwyn said smoothly, "that is important to all peoples, and not just the dwarves. Humans have borne—and thrown off- their share of tyants."

Lord Ronus, bowed his head, appreciating her tact.

"I can't believe..." Alistair paused, wondering if he was about to say something undiplomatic. He thought again, and asked. "Did he die of old age?"

General laughter from the dwarves. Oghren laughed loudest, but Astrid smiled grimly, and even Lord Ronus was amused.

"No indeed, Warden," Lord Ronus assured him. "He was assassinated by members of those families whom he had wronged. And his end is a lesson to tyrants about how much a warlike people will stand."

Brosca muttered to Cullen, "It sounds to me like they stood for quite a bit."

Astrid came forward, and looked Lord Ronus in the eye. He

gave her a slight nod. She was technically non-existent as a dwarf, but she was also a Warden, and therefore deserving of the courtesy shown a distinguished foreigner.

She said, "It's really all a matter of who suffers and who does not. If King Valtor had directed his cruelty only at the casteless, the poor and the uninfluential, he might well have died in his bed. He grew bold, and he grew careless. No deshyr cared when he forced servitors and warriors from poor houses to be made golems. When he threatened the wealth and power of the noble houses, it was then that his day was done."

"And that is why the deshyrs are the guardians of the dwarven kingdom," Lord Ronus agreed mildly.

"Such as they are," Astrid stood. "I wish to tell a story. It, too, is true."

Astrid's Story of Signy Varen

Long, long ago, in the days of the Paragon Bemot, Lord Falkor Varen was a powerful deshyr, and few dared cross him. His wife, of the noble house Lantena, had been the most beautiful woman in Orzammar, and Falkor swore he would not settle for less in his second. His children lived in fear of him. The elder was a son, Orm, and the younger was a daughter, Signy.

After his wife's death, Lord Varen paid little attention to his

daughter, and allowed her to grow up unheeded by him, cared for by servitors, and guarded by the warriors sworn to his House. This changed when she turned sixteen, when he saw that she was becoming very beautiful: as beautiful as her mother.

It occurred to him that she was the only woman in Orzammar fair enough to be his wife. He decided to take her as his wife, and celebrate the event with a great feast, to which all the deshyrs of Orzammar were invited. He commanded that the women of his house devise garments of the finest surface silks for his daughter, but she was to be told nothing of his plans.

To his son, Orm, he did confide his intentions, first telling his son that he should soon have a new mother, and then telling him who that mother would be.

"You cannot mean to do this, Father!" his son protested. "When was it ever heard of in the dwarven kingdom, that a father would take his daughter to wife!"

But Lord Varen struck him, and shouted, "Well, now you have heard of it! Cannot a Head of House do as he wills with those under his hand?"

Orm went to the Shaper of Memories for counsel, but there he found no comfort. No law specifically forbade the marriage of father and daughter, for no one had ever imagined such a thing. Additionally, the law was quite clear about the absolute power of a Head of House. Orm went to the King, hoping for

a royal edict that would prevent the marriage, but the King owed money to Lord Varen, and did not think it prudent to offend him.

Thinking his father mad, and this marriage a disgrace, Orm went to his sister, and told her all.

"And you will stand aside while I endure this?" she cried, horrified. "You are a coward!"

"Are you asking me to kill my own father?" Orm burst out in anger. "That I will not do, for such a deed is Stone-cursed. If you want him dead, you must arrange this yourself. Find some loyal man to help you, if you must. I do not want to know about it."

He left Signy to her fear and sorrow. No longer could she take pleasure in her new garments, for they were to her like the silken web of the spider. She brooded, thinking over what she could do, wondering if when the time came, she would have the courage to use her dagger on her father, or failing that, on herself.

The day before the celebration, a young warrior named Haldan came to her secretly. He told her he pitied her, and if she would pledge herself to him, he would do all he could to save her. He would not have been her first choice, but now he was her only hope. She agreed, and promised herself to him.

Haldan found a cunning apothecary, and from him he purchased a poison of great power. It was a powder made

from lyrium sand ground very fine, then mixed with firestone and dried deathroot leaves.

"Sprinkle this on the food of your enemy," said the apothecary, "and it will shred his belly and bowels in short order."

Haldan paid for the poison with a bar of fine gold, and thought it a good bargain. He arranged that he would be the guard standing behind Lord Varen's high seat at the feast. The food would pass by him, and he would poison it then.

The next day, Signy was dressed in her new robes. They shone with the colors of deep-delved jewels: red as ruby, blue as sapphire, purple as the amethyst of the finest water. The hems were embroidered with gold a handspan wide. She was led out to the high-pillared hall of House Varen, where all the deshyrs of Orzammar were gathered, even to the king himself. Beside her father, the Shaper of Memories stood ready to record the marriage.

A rush of whispers and chatter greeted her arrival, for her beauty was indeed remarkable. As her father was her Head of House, he merely declared that he was taking her as wife, and the Shaper in his turn declared that it would be recorded in the memories.

"But I do not consent!" Signy cried, pretending shock and surprise. "This is a great evil, and a dishonor to our house! Surely this can not be."

But it was as if she had said nothing. The whispers and chatter continued, like an draught of foul air in the Deep Roads. She was forced into a chair by her father, and dishes both sweet and savory were brought forth to feast the happy couple. There were great tuns of ale, and precious wines from the sky-lands. Signy touched nothing, saying that she was ill.

Lord Varen, however, ate heartily and well, not noticing the subtle dusting of poisoning on the costly roast boar—or perhaps, as the dish was rare in Orzammar, he merely thought that it was the way it was supposed to taste. Fair women sang and danced and played the string harp, and the feast lasted many hours.

After the feast would come the bedding, but as time passed, Lord Varen felt unwell. He called for more ale to quiet his belly, and held up his gold cup to the beautiful bride, who shrank from him as if he were a hurlock.

"To my lady wife, Signy Varen, the fairest jewel of Orzammar!" He drank, and suddenly screamed out. Blood dripped from his nose, and trickled from his mouth. It spurted from his bowels, dyeing his fine breeches crimson.

Instantly the hall was in an uproar. Those who had said nothing, or merely gossiped at the wedding were horrified at the sight of at the sight of a deshyr bleeding to death before them. His guards rushed to his aid, but in minutes Lord Falkor Varen had breathed his last.

"Poison! Poison!" cried the guests, and everyone turned

accusing eyes on Lady Varen, but the warrior Haldan suddenly shouted, "It was my doing! Mine alone!"

The deshyrs cried out in anger as such treachery, but Haldan declared, "I wished to save the lady his daughter. She knew nothing of my deed. I procured the poison. I sprinkled it on Lord Varen's food. I, and I alone, have done this!"

The king commanded, "Let the traitor be sent to the Deep Roads, weaponless and unarmored, and thus be given to the darkspawn!" And the deshyrs roared their agreement.

A procession of the greatest in Orzammar descended to the barrier doors to the Deep Roads. Vast and heavy, they opened slowly, revealing the dim and dreary halls. The guards tore Haldan's armor from him and cast his weapons aside. Just as they readied themselves to push Haldan through the entrance, Signy Varen, clothed in her silken garments, came to the warrior's side, and spoke.

"This man has done what he has done to protect me! No one else in Orzammar lifted a finger to save me from my father's perverse desire! I pledged myself to Haldan if he would save me from rape and incest. He has kept his word. Now I shall keep mine."

She took Haldan's hand in hers, and together they walked away, into the Deep Roads. Slowly the barrier doors closed behind them, and neither Haldan nor Signy Varen were ever seen again.

Lord Ronus looked at her, frowning. Not angry, clearly, but sad and thoughtful. "A noble tale, and well told."

Astrid bowed, "I thank you, Lord Ronus."

"Very noble for the lady to keep her word," Leliana agreed. "The descriptions of the lady's dress give the story vivid detail, essential to good storytelling. There is a similar story in Orlais—or it at least it begins in a similar way. It is called "Donkey Skin," and it is about a princess whose father wishes to marry her. She, however, puts on a disguise and escapes from him..."

Astrid granted her a dry chuckle. "There is no escape from Orzammar, save by way of the Deep Roads."

"Unless you brave the surface!" Brosca lifted her cup of ale in salute. "Like us!"

"Everybody dies in your stories!" Tara complained to Astrid. "Every one of your stories ended with somebody dying!"

"Of course they do," Astrid looked at her strangely. "Everybody dies. That's life."

"That's true," Oghren agreed. "Death is the only proper way for a story to end."

Alistair protested, "What about 'happily ever after?'"

Morrigan burst out laughing—startlingly like a witch's cackle. "And what comes after the 'happily ever after' is done?" she

scuffed. "When the princess is a wrinkled hag, and the hero grey and toothless? Everyone's story ends like everyone else's."

Bronwyn disagreed. "Everyone dies, that's true, but each person dies his or her own death. Each is different. Death is the end, but it can be met with courage or cowardice, with strength or weakness, in venomous hatred or in loving sacrifice. Death comes to us all, but we can grovel before it, or rise to meet it."

"That is so true!" Cullen cried. He blushed then at his own outburst, and Brosca punched his arm, grinning.

One of guardsmen had been quite struck by the stories, and having had more to drink than he should have, wished to join in.

"Hell, I know a story. 'S a good story. Appropriate, like."

"Shut up, Banak," a comrade said, putting a hand on his arm. "It's time for you to turn in."

"No!"

"Let him tell his story," Bronwyn agreed, hoping it was something more light-hearted than the others.

"It's not fair," Brosca complained. "It's not his turn. It's what's-her-name...Adaia's turn to tell a story."

Adaia, on the edge of the campfire, was struck dumb with

horror at the prospect.

"I don't know any stories!"

Tara laughed at her, and patted her back. "It's not as bad as you think," she whispered. "We've been taking turns. You don't have to until you're ready."

"Did you already tell your story?" Adaia whispered back.

"Yes, but I don't mind telling it again. After we turn in, I'll tell you, I promise."

Danith had been repairing arrows, half hidden in the shadows, but she was listening very carefully to all that had gone on before. Would she, too, be expected to tell a tale? It was not a bad way to entertain the company of an evening. What could she tell them that would not cheapen the Dalish? Surely she could do better than this drunkard who was demanding a turn.

The dwarf, ale trickling through his black beard, staggered to the campfire, and then briefly into it.

"Hey!" he protested, half in a stupor, "My boots are getting hot!"

His friend dragged him out of the fire. Lord Ronus' expression promised the man nothing good.

"Get on with it. The Warden-Commander is permitting you the liberty. I advise you not to abuse it."

The nameless warrior's tale

Anyway, these two warrior caste types were captured by a rival family, and condemned to die. They were chained to a huge granite boulder by their feet, and there was no way to get loose. Trapped, they were. Utterly doomed.

So they knew they were going to die and they started talking, you know, to keep their spirits up before the executioner showed.

"I wish I could be sure we're returned to the Stone when we die," said the first fellow.

"Of course, we're going to be returned to the Stone, you gravel-brained half-prick," said his friend.

"Well, I don't know. Do you know? Maybe there's nothing. Maybe we just rot and the darkspawn come and eat us and that's that."

"Look," said the first guy. "They said they were going to kill me first, so I'll tell you what: I'll take this cloak pin of mine, and if I know anything after they whack my head off, I'll stick you with it. Then you'll know what to expect."

Well, the executioner came with an axe damned near as big as mine, and he whacked the first guy's head off. Clean off. It flew off and landed in a barrel of mead. Haw! The second guy waited to see if his friend would stick him with the cloak pin,

but it just sort of tumbled out of the first guy's hand, so the second guy didn't know what happens after you die until he lost his own head about two minutes later.

So I don't claim to know what happens when you die, and I'll bet my stones none of you know either. And that's the story. Where's my drink?

The dwarf was hustled away by his friends, and there was some scattered laughter.

Cullen was annoyed. "None of that proves that there is nothing after death: only that the body is insensible, and everyone knows that already."

"I liked the part with the head flying into the barrel of mead," Oghren mused. "That's pretty funny."

Zevran nodded, "*A vivid detail, essential to good storytelling!*" He smirked at Leliana, who sighed loudly.

The final dwarven company arrived, led by the commander of the combined dwarven forces. Lord Piotin Aeducan was a proud warrior, and a cousin of the King. Astrid gave Bronwyn some background information on him.

"My brother Trian called him, 'the horns of the army.' His prowess as a warrior is renowned, and he's nearing the record for decapitations within the Proving Grounds."

"Impressive," Bronwyn said, wondering if an ability as a headsman would translate into a talent for command. Astrid seemed to think well of him, at least.

Kardol and Legion arrived with Lord Piotin. There were cheerful greetings—as cheerful as possible for the Legion of the Dead—and the united dwarven army readied itself to face the darkspawn with its allies.

They moved out, heading southeast. They avoided the bottleneck at Lothing by following an old Chasind hunting trail until they rejoined the Imperial Highway, five miles south of Lothing,

There they were met by a band of horsemen: knights of South Reach, who had been sent out to make contact with them.

"Teyrn Loghain didn't really expect you until the day after tomorrow, my lady," their leader said, "but he's had us out for the past three days, just in case."

Bronwyn gestured at the long parade of dwarves marching in her train. "I hope the Teyrn has a place to put all the reinforcements!"

"He has, my lady," the knight assured her, "A camp has been arranged for them on the north of Ostagar. If it pleases you, we can lead you there directly."

"That it does."

There was no great need for haste. Dwarven marching speed covered sufficient ground. Brosca and Oghren were happy to walk. So too was Danith, striding along proudly, ignoring the curious stares.

Ostagar had changed in the months since she left, Bronwyn realized. Cunning minds and deft hands had been at work strengthening the defenses. A deep ditch, lined with abbatiss, protected the north approach to the camp. Someone had constructed a strong gate where the Imperial Road entered the site.

And the fortress—for that it now was, beyond question—had been used hard. The ancient stone was pitted and scarred from attack. Remains of pyres old and new blackened the landscape. The most distant must be for the darkspawn, but distant or not, there was a faint reek of them tingling in the air.

Soldiers began crowded along the way, pointing and shouting. A shout went up:

"The Girl Warden!"

Bronwyn smiled, accepting their joy, and making it her own.

"My lord! The dwarven army is not a half-hour distant! The Warden is—"

"I can see them for myself, Sergeant," Loghain grunted.

He had been keeping a desultory watch here for the last few days, hoping for the spectacle that now unfolded before him. The Tower of Ishal commanded a view of several miles in all directions. Due north on the Imperial Highway, a little dark serpent crept toward Ostagar. As it moved down from the low hills toward the Ostagar Valley, the snake grew longer and longer, as the thousands of dwarves coming to reinforce them became visible.

At the head of the snake were bright glints of metal. With time, the glints resolved into little moving shapes, and then more clearly into horses and riders leading the dwarven footsoldiers.

From a soft leather case, Loghain produced one of his chief treasures, a little spyglass of qunari make: a rare wonder that permitted one to see distant things as if they were much closer. The collapsible tube of polished silverite held two pieces of specially ground glass. Loghain held the narrower end to his eye, and looked down at the approaching army. He recognized one small shape near the front as Alistair, remembering the splint mail. The leader must be the girl, from the winged helmet and the casual excellence of the horsemanship. She had found herself some new armor. The little figure by her horse would be her dog, of course. Loghain smiled faintly. That was a good dog.

There was noise in the Tower: shouts and gossip, and booted feet on the stone stairs, as everyone began rushing out to greet their allies. Loghain caught Bryland's enthusiastic voice, echoed by Wulffe's deep rumble. Vaughan, newly arrived from

Denerim, was calling out indignantly, loudly wanting to know what was happening. Loghain rolled his eyes. The only way to work with a useless prick like Vaughan was to step on him: early and often. Loghain had already begun that task with some relish.

He must go down now, if he wished to meet the girl on her arrival. He had not felt so stirred in years: his heart thudded with pleasurable excitement. Bronwyn's mission had been a brilliant success. In raising the dwarves alone, she had done more to aid him than anyone had in...

His thoughts halted as he hurried down the long and twisting stairs, his guards clearing the way. Their engineers and masons had repaired and furnished the lower chambers of Ishal for the dwarven leaders, and set aside quarters for the Wardens themselves, including a private room for the Warden-Commander. A great deal had been done to make the campsite to the north livable. Loghain believed their allies would not be displeased.

The ground floor was in chaos, the great door open to the tentative sun. Loghain walked through, breathing deeply, hoping the scattered patches of blue among the lowering clouds was a portent of better days.

Bryland saw him, and waved genially. "A great occasion for us!"

"It is."

"Too bad the King isn't here."

Loghain managed a slight, false smile. The King *ought* to be here. That he was not was something of a relief.

Wulffe joined them, more sedately, and Vaughan puffed up behind, annoyed at being last. Together they strode out to the ramp that would lead the dwarves out to the field set aside for their camp.

Loghain could hardly blame the men for behaving as if it were a holiday. The cheers and clamor increased as the girl in the winged helmet drew near. Soldiers lined the way, waving. She waved back. Most of the Warden were waving and smiling as well, but for a huge, scowling figure who must be the qunari; and walking nearby, a slender Dalish archer, who paid no more heed to the cheering human soldiers than she would to tall grass blowing in the wind.

A hawk soared overhead, and fluttered down, backwinging, to light on Bronwyn's shoulder. Another cheer went up, and the girl truly smiled then: smiled as if she would light up all the world with her smiling. She and Alistair looked at each other, a look pregnant with friendship and understanding, and Loghain experienced a sharp, shocking, utterly disgraceful pang of jealousy. It was ridiculous, and he would put it from his mind immediately. Whatever the girl had done on her travels in the past few months was her own business.

Bryland was waving like a madman. Bronwyn looked their way and smiled at her cousin. She saw Loghain, and the smile did

not fade, but softened a little, and her hand lifted in a grave salute. What he felt then was far more than any man of his age had any right to feel.

Rather than making an ass of himself, he simply stepped forward to greet her.

"Welcome back to Ostagar, Warden-Commander. I see you've brought some few thousand of your closest friends with you."

Notes- Thanks so much to my reviewers: JackOfBladesX, Judy, derko5, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Lehni, Remenant, UmbertoInferno, Gene Dark, Menamebephil, demonincargles, Teutonic Knight 92, Jenna53, KCousland, Shakespira, Aoi24, Sash'Rahaal, Dante Alighieri1308, callalili, dyslecksec, The Moidart, mutive, Dragon's Tongue, fifespice, Zute, Josie Lange, Anon, mille libri, Kira Kyuuketsuki, chocolatebrownie12, almostinsane, butterflygrrl, Halm Vendrella, wayfaringpanda, Enaid Aderyn, Have Socks Will Travel, What Ithacas Mean, Eva Galana, PhoenixDownAt20, cowerd22, and Piceron.

Brosca's story was inspired by The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership, collected by the Brothers Grimm.

Oghren's story was adapted from a story within the Summoner's Tale by Chaucer.

Astrid's story is partly based on the gruesome fate of Beatrix

Cenci, who was executed for the murder of her father after a lurid murder trial in 14th century Rome. Her father didn't attempt to marry her, but he did rape her.

31. Secrets Laid Bare

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 31: Secrets Laid Bare

The girl had changed. Months of hardship and command had lent her a new toughness. Loghain might say that her experiences had aged her. Yes. She did seem older, and that was not necessarily a bad thing. The soft edges were gone, and she was fined down to the essentials.

She seemed aware of it, too: aware of all the changes. There was that brief, stiff moment when he had seen her scarred and altered face, and she had seen his reaction. There followed a sudden hardening of her expression; a defiant lift of her chin; a level stare from those startling green eyes. She bore the marks of her adventures proudly, as she ought to.

Not that any of it made her less desirable. After all, Rowan had borne a scar on her face: a cut on her forehead that had been put there by Loghain himself during a sparring match.

No, Bronwyn might not be the dewy fresh maiden from Highever that Duncan had brought to Ostagar, but she was still herself...only, perhaps, more so. Perhaps...even better. At least he no longer felt as if he were contemplating robbing the cradle. She was a very engaging young woman, and so

many people seemed convinced that she actually wanted him...

The introductions were handled well. The dwarven lords seemed to know their business, and with this influx of soldiers, the army could extend its defensive line. Loghain was concerned that bands of roving darkspawn were flanking them, and pushing past them to the soft underbelly of the Southron Hills. They had much to discuss.

Nor were the dwarven lords been particularly surprised or offended at the absence of Ferelden's king. After all, their own king was far away in Orzammar, consolidating his grip on the throne.

"My lords of Orzammar," Loghain said, "Grey Wardens: you are most welcome. You will be escorted to your quarters, and when you are refreshed, we can talk. I invite you to join us in a feast tonight."

Bronwyn was slightly surprised by this, but caught Loghain's intent look, meant for her eyes only.

He added quietly, "After the feast, Warden-Commander, we shall speak privately."

"My lord."

She was glad enough of a chance to settle in and wash the dust of travel from her face. The Wardens were quickly shown

to their quarters in the Tower of Ishal. Space was at a premium, so these amounted to two fairly spacious rooms, equipped with cots and blankets. In the larger room was a long table, flanked with benches, and with a chair at head and foot. A few folding screens and blankets stretched on ropes would lend some the companions a modicum of privacy. Many now had a chest or footlocker, where they stowed keepsakes or booty. The sutlers who had accompanied the army brought these up the endless stairs for them.

Bronwyn herself did not have such item. Traveling light was essential, in her opinion. The old traveling chest she had claimed had been shipped off to the Wardens' Compound months ago. Everything she currently owned fit into two saddlebags and a backpack.

"This isn't bad, Boss!" Brosca exclaimed, happily arranging her little space to her liking. Danith made a face, finding the surroundings cramped, stony, and evil-smelling. How would the shemlens dispose of waste here, or would they have to live in the stink of that, too?

Alistair looked around, shaking his head. "The last time I was here, I was killing darkspawn. I think there were traps in these rooms. Sleeping here is just...weird."

Bronwyn slapped him on the shoulder and laughed. Alistair was still following her around, but his eyes drifted from time to time: now and then to Danith, who was so incredibly exotic; and occasionally to Astrid, who was so sensible and seemed somewhat interested in him. Bronwyn herself had no intention

of encouraging him. He was too much like a brother—and a younger brother at that. It simply felt *wrong* to her.

She glimpsed Jowan, quietly arranging his new belongings. She gave him a brief, encouraging smile, and went into the adjoining room to remind another of her people of something extremely important.

"Cullen!" she said, urging him over to a private corner. "I know you're unhappy with this, but it's very important that you not mention Jowan to anyone outside our own group."

He did look unhappy, but not rebellious. "I know you're confident in your abilities, Bronwyn, but Jowan, even if he means well, is a danger to us all."

"Jowan is a Warden, Cullen. He is *our* responsibility, not the Chantry's."

That he did accept. "I know that telling the Revered Mother about him would make all sorts of trouble for you, Bronwyn. I don't want to do that. I just want us to be safe...or as safe as we can be. We already face such terrible danger, and it's just going to get worse. We don't need all the horrible things a maleficar-turned-abomination could do to us!"

"Jowan is trying to atone, Cullen. You saw for yourself how he put himself in danger, protecting those refugees. Many would have died if it weren't for him."

He nodded, thinking it over seriously. "It's sad, when

otherwise decent people give in to temptation. Blood Magic will always tempt him now: always. I'll do my best to see that he doesn't go astray again. And I promise," he said patiently, "not to talk about him. Are you satisfied?"

He looked so anxious that Bronwyn felt guilty about causing him such conflict. She squeezed his arm. "Yes, I'm satisfied. You're a wonderful Warden, Cullen, and a good friend. It was a lucky day that you joined our company."

That brought a smile to his lips, and he stood a little straighter. As Bronwyn went back to her room, she saw him diligently making up his cot, stretching out the blanket smoothly, tucking in the ends in perfect right-angles. There was something to be said for the disciple of the Templars. Oghren's cot was already a mess, and it had yet to be slept in.

Anders, accustomed to the lack of doors in the Circle, knew a handy enchantment for muting the sound in the little screened cubicle he would share with Morrigan. Whatever went on in there would be inaudible to everyone else. Bronwyn was very pleased about that, and was not the only one. Tara had learned the same charm, and Bronwyn guessed that Zevran might become a frequent visitor to the cot she had chosen in the corner, shielded with blankets. The young elf girl had not entirely recovered from her experiences in the Circle Tower, but was not averse to some gallant attentions, as long as they did not become too pressing.

Other romances were blooming, or failing to bloom. Brosca

was still trying to get Cullen to understand how interested she was in him. The ex-Templar had eyes only for Tara, and Tara showed not the slightest interest in him. Bronwyn hoped it did not all end in grief.

She chose the empty cot between Leliana and Danith. Scout, close at her side, stretched out by the cot, panting, interested in the curious odors that lingered in the room. The only thing Bronwyn had to wear to council and feast that was not armor were the spare clothes in her backpack: her shirt, breeches, boots, and Grey Warden tunic. She would take down her hair, brush it thoroughly, and rearrange it. Alistair's gift, the Silver Sword of Mercy, she could wear on the outside of her tunic, rather than under her shirt, as usually did. There was Belarion's emerald ring, which she kept in a little pouch inside her coin purse. It even fit her. That was the extent of Lady Bronwyn Cousland's finery. It hardly mattered. She was not engaging in the blood sport of husband-hunting, anyway.

Leliana was pulling her fine blue gown out of her trunk, and fussing over which of her looted jewels she would wear with it. She was very fond of silver. A dwarven smith had hammered a silver ring into a new shape that could be used to bind the end of the single braid she wore on the left side of her head. She had a silver chain with an ancient silver amulet as a pendant, and another ring, set with a blue topaz. Completing her ensemble was an elegant belt, dyed dark blue. She would be quite the fashionable lady, but Bronwyn supposed there was no rule against female Wardens dressing well. If there was, she planned to ignore it. If she had possessed a gown,

she would be slipping into right now. Perhaps she would find some green silk, now that her eyes were that color...

Danith was staring at Leliana, but Bronwyn did not know either the Dalish, or this woman in particular, well enough to guess at what she was thinking. Perhaps she was embarrassed at her own lack of finery, or perhaps she thought Leliana absurd. Bronwyn slipped her Warden tunic over her head. She had given one to Danith on the way to Ostagar, but had no idea what the elf had done with it. After a time, the elf quietly donned shirt, hose, and boots of soft doeskin, and then produced the Warden tunic and put it on. It did not look at all bad.

Astrid, too, was watching Leliana, and her feelings Bronwyn could more easily guess at. The dwarf woman followed Bronwyn's lead, asking gruffly for help getting out of her armor, and then she too wore her best shirt, some rather worn breeches, and her Warden Tunic. She asked if she might use Bronwyn's hand mirror, and looked at herself for some time, her face bleak.

She remarked quietly to Bronwyn, "I believe I shall take looting more seriously in future."

Adaia hung back, standing in the shadows, thinking it unwise to wear anything other than her light armor ever again. In armor, sitting with the Wardens-for she knew that Tara would not send her to the servants' table-she might even be taken for a Warden.

Tara had her very pretty dress and bright red shoes; Morrigan, of course, had the splendid green gown Bronwyn had bought for her. They would have to be the grand ladies, and represent their fellowship with honor.

Meanwhile... "Come on, Scout!" Bronwyn called brightly "We'll leave them to it." On the way, she grabbed Alistair, forced him to put on his Warden tunic, and dragged him away to the tortures of a council of war.

The council table was fairly full. There were more faces here than at the council before Bronwyn's maiden battle. Fortunately, all of them were known to her.

Loghain and the arls, of course: gruff Wulffe and cheerful Bryland. Bann Vaughan was here, too, as representative of his father the Arl of Denerim. Bronwyn granted him a nod and a polite smile, but could not forget an awkward encounter many years before, when Vaughan-six years older than she-had grabbed her and kissed her after a salon in Denerim. It was not her first kiss, fortunately, or it might have been her last. He had stuck his tongue in her mouth, and Bronwyn still shuddered, remembering how it had wriggled like a fat worm. She had slapped his face, and Vaughan kept his hands and mouth to himself thereafter.

The dwarven lords and Kardol, the commander of the Legion of the dead, sat together, along with their seconds. Other dwarves were there as well: surface engineers, apparently, whom Loghain respected. Senior Enchanters Uldred and

Torrin represented the mages. To Bronwyn's annoyance, Revered Mother Clarine was at this council, accompanied by two smug-faced priests and a pair of Templars. Clarine was the Grand Cleric's right-hand woman, and no doubt anything that went on here would be reported to the Cathedral in Denerim. The number of Chantry personnel at this council was out of all proportion to their numbers in the army, which Bronwyn found particularly galling. She had heard that Loghain, at the beginning of the war, had asked the Grand Cleric for a contingent of her plentiful Templars to fight the darkspawn, and had been refused. Fighting darkspawn was not the mission of the Chantry, he was told. Apparently, telling everyone else how to fight them was.

To her relief, the Chantry group said very little, except among themselves. The meeting was mainly Loghain's exposition of their current situation, the reported movements of the darkspawn, and his planned expanded reconnaissance. No one knew exactly where the darkspawn were coming from, but he had some ideas about that. The dwarves asked some intelligent questions, and the mages reported that their people were all fit and willing.

Bronwyn, when asked, was glad she was able to reply in kind.

"Since leaving Ostagar, my lord, I have succeeded in recruiting additional Wardens. There are now ten Wardens in Ferelden. In addition to the generous help of our dwarven friends-" here she nodded gravely to the dwarves, who returned the nod graciously, "-I have made contact with a clan of Dalish elves. They have promised to spread the word

among their allied clans. We may expect between two hundred fifty and three hundred Dalish archers to make their way to Ostagar within the next two weeks."

This raised a stir of interest and amazement.

Leonas Bryland asked, "You found the Dalish?"

She smiled. "They found me, my lord. They are quite willing to fulfill their obligation to the Wardens. They should prove of use in the scouting operations Teyrn Loghain has outlined. One of my new Wardens, in fact, is Dalish."

The reaction seemed generally quite positive, though the Revered Mother and one of her priests muttered remarks to each other, glancing occasionally at Bronwyn. She thought it incredibly rude, but there was little she could do about it.

By the time everyone had had his or her say, it was growing dark, and Loghain's camp seneschal appeared, with the welcome news that dinner was ready and waiting. A plentiful welcoming feast was laid out in the huge chamber on the second floor of the Tower of Ishal. Lord Piotin and Lord Ronus seemed pleased at the variety of surface delicacies. Not everyone was satisfied with the seating arrangements, but with a minimum of grumbling, dinner was served.

Bronwyn found her arm taken by Loghain, and was steered to the chair to his left. It was quite the honor, but she was the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, after all, and ancient tradition granted her status equal to great lords, most

especially during the Blight. It was rather exciting, too. She was close enough to Loghain to feel his warmth and smell his distracting scent of oiled leather, polished metal, high-quality soap, and vigorous male. It was pleasant: very pleasant, but she must not sniff at him like a mabari. The Revered Mother was trying to catch her eye, but Bronwyn looked determinedly at her plate and winecup. It seemed ages since she had had a meal. The Revered Mother probably only wanted to know how many of the Wardens were mages. Very fortunately, she saw, only Anders was wearing robes. Jowan had been dressed in the plain clothes of a countryman when she had met him. Now those were covered by a Warden Tunic, and his staff was nowhere in sight.

There was a great deal of ale and wine available. Loghain suspected that most of the dwarves would be revoltingly drunk by the end of the evening, but undoubtedly they would not be the only ones.

To his left, the girl was enjoying her dinner. Her manners were too good for her to snatch at the food like a wolf—or like her fellow Wardens, sitting together and laughing uproariously. *They* were certainly as gluttonous as all the Wardens Loghain had ever known. Bronwyn simply seemed glad of the food, and was paying it due attention. He wondered if she had gone hungry on her travels. It was a good thing for nobles to know what it was to be hungry: it taught them all sorts of lessons.

Bryland and Wulffe were chatting up the dwarves. Wulffe was getting on particularly well with them, for his bluff manner was

very like their own. Vaughan seemed to find it a strain to accept anyone not human as his equal. He had bloody well better get over that. Most of the other banns were doing well enough.

More uproarious laughter from the Wardens' table. Some mages and soldiers had turned on the benches to exchange quips and lies. A few of the banns, too. It was an interesting, rather eclectic mix that Bronwyn had brought back with her. He had not missed the polite demeanour of the dwarven lords toward that good-looking dwarf woman who sat next to Alistair. She was a Warden, yes, but obviously Somebody to them.

Loghain asked Bronwyn, "The dwarven Warden with the unmarked face...what is her name?"

Bronwyn glanced over and then spoke, very softly in his ear. Her warmth breath tickled him pleasantly. "She goes by the name Astrid, but she is actually Gytha Aeducan, the King's sister. From what I can gather, she was the late King's favorite child, but was outmaneuvered and exiled to the Deep Roads without a trial. She made her way to the Legion of the Dead, and thus is legally dead in Orzammar. She is Lord Piotin's cousin, and he has known her all his life, though he scrupulously addresses her as 'Warden.' She's very competent."

Loghain grunted, glad that she had someone reliable in her party. And who had no ties to Orlais at all, which was excellent. This was no place to discuss anything confidential,

but there was no harm in asking her about the rest of those rowdies she called Wardens.

"The male dwarf?"

"Not actually a Warden yet. He's still thinking it over. His name is Oghren Kondrat, and he's a tremendous warrior."

Loghain regarded her pityingly. "He's a drunk." It was obvious to the meanest intelligence.

Bronwyn frowned at him, and answered him a bit impatiently. "I am perfectly aware of that. In the Deep Roads he had no access to liquor, and he is a *tremendous* warrior. That's all that mattered there. He suffered some personal losses, which led to his drinking; and he feels there's nothing much left for him in Orzammar. I value his service."

This was said so coolly that Loghain dropped the subject, and moved on. "And the loud girl with the tattoos?"

Bronwyn smiled. Brosca saw her looking her way and grinned back, saluting her with an overflowing tankard of ale. "Hey, Boss!"

"That is Freydis Brosca. As you can see, the tattoos indicate that she is one of the casteless. When I found her, she was the prisoner of a vicious criminal. Even weak from starvation she fought brilliantly. She's a cheerful soul, too, and very loyal. Also," Bronwyn lowered her voice again, "Her sister is King Bhelen's favorite concubine...the one who gave him his heir.

Thus, she has some royal connections, though on the wrong side of the blanket."

"Is that why you chose to support Bhelen?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "No."

There was obviously more to the story, but he would learn it in due time. "So..." he thought about it. "You were in the Deep Roads. Any particular reason?"

"In order to enforce the treaty with the dwarves, there had to be a king. I had to jump through all sorts of hoops to crown one." She murmured, nodding at the nearby dwarf lords, "Let's not talk about this now." She gestured to a servant for more of the roast venison.

"I see you've learned to eat like a Warden, if nothing else."

She gave him a quick, bitter smile, her strange green eyes glinting oddly. "Wardens are always hungry. I'm no exception."

"Hungry, or simply gluttonous?"

"Hungry," she answered, pointedly taking three more slices of venison. Her smile faded. "Always."

Well, that was one more thing to ask her about when they could speak in private. He leaned in to ask. "Is the red-headed girl the Orlesian?"

"Her mother was Ferelden," Bronwyn said softly, "but yes."

She's quite a good archer, and she is now a Warden. However, I do have quite a bit to discuss with you that relates to her. We became a bit...entangled...with her past. You'll find it interesting." She decided to tell him about her other companions. "We can't see all of them, but you know Morrigan, of course, and the mage sitting beside her is Anders, our Healer."

Loghain frowned at the tall, blond young man who bore a startling resemblance to Alistair, and also to another tall blond man he had known. He scowled, then noticed Bronwyn smiling slyly at him.

"Well, is he?" he asked roughly. "Does he know?"

"He does not. His mother hinted at some secret to his birth but died without divulging it. Besides, he pointed out that since he is a mage, it can mean nothing to him, anyway. He's a brilliant Healer, and we're incredibly lucky to have him in the Wardens."

Loghain glanced briefly at the long silver scar extending to her jaw, wondering how she could call him brilliant, if that was the kind of healing he practiced. She laughed a bit wildly. Perhaps the wine was affecting her a little

"You don't care for my scar? I think he did a extraordinary job, considering that he had to work in the dark of the Deep Roads, and that most of my face was gone at the time. I'm lucky to have a face—or eyes—at all. It was disgusting. I don't care to discuss it while I'm eating."

"As you wish." He knew himself that not much good could come of traveling the Deep Roads. "There is another mage, too, I understand."

She looked down the table. The Revered Mother was chatting with Bryland. "I have two more, actually. We recruited Tara at the Tower. She looks like a dainty little elf, but is actually a ferocious battlemage. I pity the man who tries to bully her. I also recruited an old friend of hers that we met on the way. He was defending a band of refugees at the time, very competently; despite a timid manner that hangs over him like a pestilential vapor."

The description made Loghain chuckle. "I've seen it in some of the mages you sent us, though one or two have bloomed a bit. There is this ridiculous little girl named Keili, who's constantly casting healing and rejuvenation spells my way..."

Bronwyn laughed out loud, which pleased Loghain a great deal. He said, "You've certainly recruited a great many elves. Is that young woman your Dalish Warden?"

"Yes!" she beamed. "Her name is Danith, and she's also a splendid archer. Her clan was extremely helpful. In addition to their own archers, I also was given the name and location of another Keeper, whom they told me was very influential."

Loghain shook his head, amused. "Perhaps the King might return to see the elves arrive." He saw a curious darkening of Bronwyn's expression as he mentioned the King, and immediately asked, "What? Have you had word of the King?"

You have. What is it?"

She stared at her plate. "Not now. Really. Not now, my lord." She looked up, assuming a sunny smile to deceive any casual observer. "And that enormous fellow is Sten of the Beresaad, our qunari ally, who is an army in himself. That is Cullen, a former Templar from the Circle, and you can just see our handsome friend Zevran..." she whispered in his ear, "who is an Antivan Crow hired by Rendon Howe to assassinate me!"

He whirled on her, wondering if she had lost her mind. She burst out laughing again. "He is! Really and truly! But he decided that he liked me better!"

Bryland looked their way, hearing Bronwyn's laughter. He smirked at Loghain with almost paternal pride, and began sharing a thrilling bit of gossip with the Revered Mother. Bronwyn laughed all the harder, knowing she had already had too much to drink.

She was tired and tipsy, and wanted nothing so much as a good sleep before facing Loghain and his questions, but Bronwyn knew there was no way out of the looming conversation, short of pretending to faint, or drinking herself into incoherence. Neither was likely to do much for her reputation, so she resigned herself to the inevitable.

Most annoying were the grins and raised brows or frowns and scandalized expressions on the faces of her own people, as she accompanied Loghain to his quarters after dinner. The

eager whispers made her want to knock some heads together. Loghain, unsurprisingly, was utterly indifferent to gossip, probably because everything that could be said about him had already been said, at some time or other. They climbed the stairs in silence.

"Come in." At least this was simply an office, with no bed in sight. That would have reduced her to gibbering idiocy. The intense awareness of him as a man had not receded. Her heart was pounding. Her belly warmed with excitement—a most improper excitement. She must keep her mind on her report, and not make a fool of herself.

"Sit." He waved vaguely at a hard wooden chair by the writing table, but did not sit himself. He seemed restless, and in an odd humor.

Loghain, for his part, was in rather an odd humor. He had not missed the general interest in their departure, or the smirks, or the significant looks, or the wide-eyed amazement. What was the matter with people? If Duncan had still been alive and had been told to make a report to him in private, no one would have batted an eyelash.

But of course, Bronwyn was not Duncan: she was the glamorous Girl Warden, and the object of many a young fool's fantasies. And, if he were honest, of many an old fool's as well...

Was Alistair her lover? He had imagined so, but the boy's expression was not that of a jealous rival, but of a shocked

and innocent admirer.

He poured wine for them both, and gave her a goblet. He wanted her tongue as loose as possible. Restlessly, he paced back and forth, paying little heed to the cup in his hand.

Bronwyn, for her part, thought that yet another cup of wine was the last thing she needed. She felt odd and nervous, and rather off-balance. In fact, she had not felt so awkward since that ghastly conversation with her mother about men and women and babies. Then she thought about having that conversation with Teyrn Loghain instead of Mother, and nearly laughed aloud. She hid the treacherous smile behind the cup, and pretended to sip.

The room was no temporary dwelling, as his tent had been. This room spoke of the man: uncluttered and male. Weapons were neatly stored in racks. Armor was oiled, polished, and hung on stands of the correct size. Dominating the room was a big writing table, arranged by a methodical hand, displaying items of good but not garish quality: a pitcher of wine, and goblets of chased silver, probably a gift; maps and notebooks; a small carved chest for private papers; fine writing and drawing tools, including a splendid bronze inkstand. The chair behind the table looked comfortable. The chairs in front of the table were markedly less so: discouraging idle visitors from lingering.

He paused in his pacing, and fixed her with a probing stare. "You've been a busy girl, Warden. Mages, Dwarves, and now the Dalish. You've done well."

She tried to think of an answer that was witty, or at least not insipid, and failed. He made her too nervous. "Thank you, my lord," she simply said. She hoped she would not spill her wine or drop the cup.

"I was astonished that in the midst of your journeys, you yet found time to visit Orlais."

Of course he would know. The commander of Gherlen's Halt must have told him.

"Yes," she answered easily. "I crossed the border to send a message to the Senior Warden of Jader, who had offered his assistance to me. Warden Riordan answered all my questions, and greatly aided my mission."

He pounced. "And why would you need an Orlesian to enforce the treaties with the allies that you assured me would be anything but Orlesian?"

She should have known that the first word out of his mouth would be "Orlais." She took care to make her response as reasoned and calm as possible.

"I did not, my lord. Enforcing the treaties is not my only mission. Rebuilding the Grey Wardens in Ferelden was not possible without the assistance of a Senior Warden, well-versed in all the lore and secrets of the Order."

"But you've been recruiting so very energetically," he said, the faintest hint of mockery in his voice. "A pair of mages here, a

trio—forgive me—another pair of dwarves there. Elves and ex-Templars and Orlesian bards. Such an interesting company, loyal to you, I daresay."

"They have given me every proof of such loyalty," she answered, wondering where this was going. Was he going to accuse her of building a private army? If so, she was going to laugh in his face at the idea of such a paltry force being any threat to Ferelden—or to him personally. She added, "I needed information from the Senior Warden. Simply calling a recruit a Warden does not make him one."

There it was, the first Warden secret, dropped for him to pick up and examine, if he wished.

He did. "The Wardens have always guarded their secrets closely."

He was trying to catch her out, which annoyed her. She had already chosen her course, and had not the least desire to play silly games.

"You do not need to trick or cozen the secrets from me, my lord. I came to Ostagar with every intention of sharing them with you."

That stopped him. He paused, startled and wary. This was too easy. "Just like that?"

"Yes. Just like that, my lord. There are things you ought to know. And I have it on good authority that heads of state are

routinely entrusted with the Wardens' secrets. As you have been the de facto ruler of Ferelden for thirty years, I think it's time you were told these things. And they are nothing that the Empress of Orlais does not already know. I am not sure Duncan told King Cailan all of them, based on some of the things the King has said and done. Perhaps Duncan was shielding him on account of his youth."

There was a certain flatness to her voice. Duncan might have wished to shield the King, but no one had shielded her.

"The Empress...knows..."

"She knows everything, my lord. She knows about the Wardens. How they are made, about their special abilities, about the things they sacrifice to be Wardens. Above all, she knows why only Wardens can slay the Archdemon. That was perhaps why she has not been particularly generous with the Wardens of her own country while Ferelden is threatened by a Blight."

"Do you believe what this Riordan told you? Might he not be trying to deceive you for purposes of his own?"

Bronwyn thought it over. It would not do to be credulous.

"I do believe him, my lord, and not just because he seemed trustworthy. The Wardens, whatever you might think, are not an Orlesian order. There are Wardens in every country in Thedas. If Riordan were to give me false information, that would be all too easily revealed by the Antivan Wardens, or

the Wardens of Ostwick. Furthermore, the historical record, if examined, supports Riordan's claims. Yes, I believe what he told me, if only because it is so extremely unpleasant."

Loghain nodded. She had thought it through, at least. Was she in contact with Antiva and Ostwick? She had family connections in both places.

"At any rate, my lord, on to the Warden 'secrets.' I shall begin at the beginning." She took another sip of wine. "I am not certain that you noticed, as you were extremely busy just before the Battle of Ostagar—"

"—The *first* Battle of Ostagar," he put in, rather dryly. There had been a dozen more battles since she left.

"—As you say, my lord. I am not certain you noticed at that time that I was not Duncan's only recruit."

He frowned. "I knew there were others. I presumed them killed in the battle." She was staring at him with those strange green eyes. They were quite distracting. Not unattractive, mind you, but *different*.

"Not so, my lord. They did not live long enough to see it. They perished during the Joining ritual. Many do. I am told it is often fatal."

He really had had no idea. Duncan had recruited so few... "An ordeal of some sort? A duel to prove your worth?"

"Not a duel. I suppose you could call it an ordeal, but it is the thing that transforms us into Wardens. A great many words are spoken, but what it really comes down to," she took a deep breath—"is drinking a potion, of which the principal ingredient is darkspawn blood."

A silence. Loghain's eyes widened, and he began hastily to rearrange some opinions. "Darkspawn blood is deadly poison, even to the touch. To drink it—"

"The potion has some other essential ingredients. It took thousands of lives before a compound was discovered that did not simply kill or turn those who drank it into mindless ghouls. But yes, it is indeed deadly poison. The Joining potion kills many who drink it outright, hence Duncan's wariness about recruiting people whose loved ones might wish to come looking for them later."

"But you survived."

"For now. Darkspawn blood is always fatal. Always. Either one dies immediately and horribly, or one becomes a Warden. After some decades, I am told—thirty years on average—the poison finally takes hold, and the Warden begins to deteriorate. We experience something known as the Calling. We go off to the Deep Roads to die in a last battle against the darkspawn—and also to spare the surface the distressing sight of Wardens turning into ghouls."

Loghain stared at her, utterly horrified. It was a form of Blood Magic: a cruel, shocking form. How was such a horror

permitted to exist? Other Heads of State knew of this?

"If the Divine knew about this—"

Bronwyn smiled sourly. "She knows. So does the Black Divine in Minrathous. They know it and they tolerate it because of the reasons that this is done. The First Blight destroyed the Tevinter Empire: shattered it so thoroughly that an invasions of barbarians led by the Prophet Andraste could sweep up to the gates of the imperial city itself. The Tevinter legions were vast, and had seemed irresistible: their magisters had magic of inconceivable power. All of it was vain against the Blight."

"Until the coming of the Wardens."

"Until then," she agreed, firelight glinting into her green eyes. "although you might as well say, until the *creation* of the Wardens." She took another sip of wine. Speaking all this aloud, so long held within her like a lump of unworked lead, was tiring. "Make no mistake, my lord: we were created. Thousands of people died hideously in failed experiments to created a being that could kill the Archdemon. The formula of the Joining potion is generally not entrusted to Junior Wardens. Neither Alistair nor I knew how to make more Wardens until Riordan taught us the formula and supervised the Joining of our first new recruits. And that is the matter—the great matter—that I am coming to."

He sat down, facing her, fingers interlaced, his blue gaze intent on her green one.

"Then let us have it."

"Very well," She paused, looking for right words, the clear, eloquent words that would satisfy this man.

"The Archdemon," she began, "is not simply a dragon. If it were a simply a dragon, it could be killed like any other beast, however powerful. After all, the Nevarran dragon hunters nearly drove such creatures to extinction only a few generations ago. No. The Archdemon is a god. And Old God, perhaps, but a god all the same." She laughed bitterly. "If the Revered Mother were eavesdropping on us now, no doubt she would squawk in outrage, and correct me, saying that the creatures the Tevinters worshiped were false gods, and no better than demons, but we are not children, my lord, and no one is listening. The Chantry itself teaches that the Maker has turned his face from us, and has no interest in our doings. I can assure you that the Archdemon is quite godlike enough to threaten us, and it is very interested in us indeed."

"You claimed to have seen it in the Deep Roads."

Offended, she stared at him a little longer. "I saw it in the Deep Roads—and elsewhere. Even were it a mindless beast, it would be very, very dangerous, and very hard to kill. Which brings me back, once again, to the Wardens, and why we are no so irrelevant as you might believe us to be."

She took a moment to fight down the rising anger. It irritated her beyond words that this man should be questioning her like a criminal. After all she had done—after nearly *dying* in the

filthy Deep Roads—she felt she deserved better.

But of course he knew nothing about that. She bit her lip, forced herself to stay on task, and continued. "The Joining makes Wardens immune to the Taint. Perhaps you know this—or something of it. It also gives us other powers. The Taint in us gives us a link to the darkspawn. We can sense them. And they can sense us."

He straightened, making a connection. "That is how the darkspawn were able to target the Grey Wardens so quickly."

She nodded, not saying anything for a moment, remembering the horror of that battle. Finally, she sighed, and said, "As you say. It is a double-edged sword. I have heard that some older Wardens, after long experience, claim that they can hear the darkspawn, after a fashion, or at least comprehend the commands the Archdemon is giving to its mindless minions. I have sensed nothing from the Archdemon other than raw emotions, such as rage and hatred, but it may be so. I have not been a Warden all that long."

He watched her carefully. She believed what she was saying, he was certain. Some of it might even be true. The Warden lore made sense.

She went on: "The crux of the issue, of course, is our ability to slay the Archdemon. The Tevinters could slay the Old God in its dragon form, but the spirit of the Old God lived on, and followed the pull of the Taint to the body of one of the other darkspawn, and when that was slain, into yet another, and so

on, and so on... After a time, the Archdemon simply rose again. And again. It is hard to imagine the terror those ancient folk must have experienced."

She sipped from her cup, and thought for a moment. "Here it is: because of the Taint in us, when a Warden slays the Archdemon, it stays dead. The essence of the Archdemon, freed from its dragon form, follows the Taint into the Warden. Since a Warden is not a soulless vessel—unlike the darkspawn—the Old God's essence collides with the soul of the Warden, destroying them both. That is why, if you make a study of the matter, you will find that every Warden who slew an Archdemon died in the act of doing so."

"The Grey Warden who slays the Archdemon...dies?"

"Exactly so. There is no other way. It also explains why the Wardens closed in on the Archdemon, not allowing others an opportunity to bring disaster down upon everyone by making a 'lucky' shot, for example. Others joined in the fight, but at the end, it needed to be Wardens, and only Wardens, lest the Archdemon rise again."

Loghain was still wrapping his head around the sentence of death that the girl was under. Either immediate death—and complete destruction, if she were to be the one to strike the killing blow; or to have only thirty years before a miserable, lonely death. She would never live to see his own age. It was cruel and unfair, but mortal life was like that. Still, thirty years was thirty years, and many did not live that long anyway. What mattered was to make the most of the time one had.

He said, "I will indeed make a study of this. There should be some sort of loophole in this. There always seems to be. I can see why you would want to have quite a few Wardens, certainly."

"I am hoping to learn more from the Grey Warden texts about killing dragons. There don't seem to be a great many live ones to practice upon."

He frowned, shaking his head. "I remember seeing one in the Wilds at the end of the war, It was the only one, though. And they fly, of course. Have you given thought to how you will fight a flying creature, now that the Wardens no longer have griffons? Or am I mistaken in that? Do the Wardens have a secret paddock of griffons hidden away in the Anderfels?"

Bronwyn scowled at him. "If they do, they are not inclined to share them. I shall have to rely on the fact that the Archdemon will be drawn to us by the Taint. The problem, as I see it, is not so much bringing it down upon us, as it is *keeping* it down."

"Ballistae could be used to damage or cripple it. I've had some dwarven engineers working on the problem."

She looked up at that, interested. "Have you indeed, my lord? I should like to talk to them at length."

He nodded, his mind already on the next issue. "What about the King? Do you plan to share your secrets with him?"

She really was unsure about that. Could the King be trusted? She temporized.

"The King is not here, my lord. He is in Denerim, recovering from wounds, as I understand it."

Loghain snorted. "I had thought he might return for your triumphal procession with the dwarves, but there are political concerns that keep him in the capital. He has called for a Landsmeet. Did you know?"

"I had heard that, my lord," Bronwyn said carefully. "In order to call Arl Howe to account for his crimes."

"Yes. Well." He opened his box of correspondence and held the accusatory letters in a moment of contemplation.

Why not? Let us see if the Girl Warden, who has an answer for everything else, has an answer for this.

"Arl Howe feels that he was more than justified in his actions. He has sent me documents supporting his claim that the Teyrn of Highever and his wife were guilty of treason and espionage." He slapped letters down on the polished writing table, and gave her a level, challenging stare.

Bronwyn stared back, utterly taken aback at the accusation. She had imagined they were getting on, that they were talking as equals—or nearly. She had imagined that he returned her feelings for him...a little. She had imagined that he respected her for her achievements, and was grateful for her sacrifice.

She had entrusted him with her deepest secrets. The magnitude of her folly was before her, and rage rose up to choke her, like an inky black wave of Taint.

Unable to speak at first, she rose slowly from her chair, her eyes on Loghain. She would not lose control before this man, self-satisfied in his power, throwing her confidence in him back in her face with this studied insult. She would not—

Anger slipped its leash. She hissed in rage and threw her goblet in Loghain's face, the wine spattering the room like blood.

"How *dare* you!" she shouted.

Startled, he knocked the cup aside with his arm, and took an angry breath himself. With a scrape and a silvery clang, the cup felt to the stone floor, spinning crazily. Before Loghain could say a word, Bronwyn was in his face, all her terrors and miseries pouring out in a scalding torrent.

"I have gone to the limits of the Deep Roads for this country, and you repay me with suspicion and contempt! Let your *friend* Arl Howe find troops for you, if you find me so unworthy!"

"I did not say I found you unworthy!" He shouted back. "Don't put words in my mouth!"

Unheeding, she stalked to the table, and furiously swept off everything on it, letters, maps, parchment, ink stand, and all.

The ink ran over the floor and the parchment swirled down, settling gently. Loghain, furious himself, grabbed her by her shoulder, and whirled her around. She twisted out of his grasp, and stepped back, her fists clenched to fight.

"Don't you dare to put your hands on me!" she snarled. "I won't endure such insults from you or any man! And Arl Howe is a fool, and a coward, and a bastard, and a snake, and the dupe of the Orlesians! And he hides in his castle like a filthy spider in his web while the rest of Ferelden fights for its life! I am personally going to rip his tongue from his lying mouth, and I cannot believe that you would credit his feeble, half-witted slanders, but for the fact that I know that all he had to do was write the word 'Orlesian' and you would believe the worst of *anyone!*"

He slammed his own cup down on the table, and roared, "Hold your tongue!"

She should, she should, she really should, but it felt so good to release all this pent-up wrath...

"I will not! You dare to call my parents traitors, knowing them dead and unable to defend themselves! You call them traitors to my very face—"

"I never called your parents traitors!" he shot back. "I said that *Arl Howe* said he had evidence, which he sent me!"

The door creaked open, and a trio of guards peered in nervously. "My lord," one ventured, "is everything all—"

"*Get out!*" Loghain bellowed. The door slammed shut.

Trying to pull the pieces of herself together, Bronwyn lowered her voice and growled, "His evidence is rubbish: a forgery concocted to make him believe what he wished to believe. I'm willing to wager what coin I have left that he only sent you copies."

He loomed over her, eyes narrowed. Bronwyn gulped, remembering at whom she was ranting. She would not flinch, not even were he Korth the Mountain Father himself.

"It is understandable," he ground out, "that you would defend your family, regardless of their innocence...or guilt. These papers contain a letter in which your father offers his allegiance to Empress Celene in exchange for the name of King of Ferelden."

"Rubbish!" she exploded. "Absolute rubbish! How dare you accuse my family of treason! I suggest you look to your own, before you speak against the Couslands!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice lashing her like a whip.

Too angry for half-measures, she shouted. "You want to see something treasonous? I'll show *you* who's a traitor to Ferelden! You wait here! Wait right here and I'll show you something to make the blood freeze in your veins. Don't move a muscle!"

She rushed from the room, slamming the door open. The unfortunate guards, trying to eavesdrop, were knocked down. She roared, "Out of my way!" nearly tripping over them.

Loghain followed her to the doorway, seeing the back of her as she raced for the stairs, and ran up them still raving to herself.

His blood was up. The girl had behaved inexcusably. Who did the chit think she was?

He glared at the unfortunate guards. "Idiots," he muttered.

"Sorry, my lord," they muttered sheepishly.

That could have gone better, he admitted to himself. It was not at all the reaction he had expected.

I suppose I thought that she would protest their innocence with wide and wounded eyes. Perhaps even cry. Possibly that I would have to comfort her. I really had no idea she had such a temper. I've haven't been shouted at like that since Anora was a teenager.

More gapers were arriving to witness the drama, but the girl was ahead of them, pounding down the stairs, parchment in her hand, green eyes blazing. She saw him waiting, and stalked toward him, shaking the parchment like a deadly weapon. Perhaps it was. It must be something he was not going to like.

She strode through the doorway, slamming the door behind her, and proceeded to slap the parchment onto the table, just as he had done.

"All right! Read that! And *that's* the original and no forgery, for I took it from the courier herself!"

Warily, with a glance at the girl to ascertain whether she meant to throw anything else at him, he picked up the parchment. And then he recognized the broken seal, dread pooling in his gut.

Cailan, what have you done?

"This is royal correspondence," he growled ominously. "What are you doing interfering with it?"

"Go on, read it!" she insisted. "I *dare* you to tell me afterwards that you're sorry it was intercepted!"

He did read it, his rage and fear growing with every paragraph; for each sentence was a knife in his back, a betrayal of Anora, and a mortal blow to Ferelden. He had known that there were treacherous leeches among the Bannorn who wanted to replace Anora with a queen of their choice...but this...

It was not a forgery. He knew the hand of Cailan's private secretary too well. And he knew Cailan's hand from the day the boy had started learning his letters. Not only his signature was there, but little notes to some of the paragraphs. This

was real: Cailan meant to turn his country over to the Empress in exchange for the name of Emperor. It was the most genuinely horrifying document that Loghain had ever read.

He read it again, standing by the window. He moved to his chair and read it again. Bronwyn leaned against the wall, watching him, her blood calming, her temper cooling, regrets and shame surfacing.

She had not meant to give him this. Or at least not the way she had: out of anger and spite. It must alarm and horrify him. On a human level, it must grieve him deeply. This was his best friend's son: the husband of his only child.

"How did you lay your hands on this?" he growled at her, more suspicious than ever.

"How?" she exhaled deeply, and told him. "Six days ago I was in Denerim."

Loghain was quite the master of the frown. Bronwyn reminded herself that she had looked darkspawn in the eye. Loghain was only a man. A powerful man, certainly, but he was not as terrible as a Broodmother, or as dangerous as a demon.

"Why were you there?" he asked in a hard, cold voice.

"Because the Crows and Arl Howe weren't the only people trying to kill me. Between Orzammar and Gherlen's Halt, my party was set upon by some very skilled and professional

people. We discovered they were after us due to Leliana—the half-Orlesian archer. Her old associates were afraid she would reveal what she knew about them."

"And had she?"

Bronwyn snorted, "No. I wish! She had spent the last two years atoning for her sins in the Lothering Chantry, and had largely put them out of her mind. They had not forgotten her, however, so I discovered that she had been quite the naughty girl prior to serving Andraste." She was breathing more slowly now, though she was still angry and disappointed. "She was the cast-off apprentice of an Orlesian bard who lived in Denerim." She smirked at the look of anger and alarm on Loghain's face. "I say 'lived,' because six days ago I killed that bitch and all her henchmen. Her name was Marjolaine, and it was she who was the King's secret contact with Orlais. Of even greater personal interest to me, it was she who turned the Arl of Amaranthine's wits the seamy side without, and made him think his best friend was a traitor!"

Naturally, Loghain wanted to hear every detail about the woman. Bronwyn looked at him a moment, and thought about what she cared to tell him. An hour ago, she would have told him all.

That her own father had approached the King about a Cousland marriage, Bronwyn decided was simply none of Loghain's business. She possessed the original of that letter, and would take care that no one else ever saw it. She had kept it, indeed, because she had nothing else of her father's

at the moment, and because he spoke so lovingly of her in it. Loghain would never touch it, or scoff at it, or scowl over it. She continued with her carefully edited tale.

"After Leliana identified that the men sent to kill us had come from this woman Marjolaine, I knew I would have to do something about her. She had attempted to interfere with Wardens in the course of a Blight, and that could not stand. In addition, Leliana told me that this Marjolaine had been a confederate of the late Harwen Raleigh—"

Loghain glanced up at this, very interested and intent. "I suspected that Raleigh was disaffected. Maric should not have cast him off so completely, but that's all blood under the bridge now."

"As you say," Bronwyn agreed. "At any rate, Raleigh was one of Marjolaine's useful sources of intelligence about Ferelden, but she had obviously been very active for some time. If someone wished to communicate with the Empress through other than the approved diplomatic channels, she was the person to see."

"And Cailan...saw her."

"Leliana knew where she lived in Denerim. We disguised ourselves and watched the house. Late one night, a messenger claiming to be from the Palace knocked on the door and demanded that she accompany him there. After she and some of her guards had left, we gained access to the house and awaited her return. When she came back, we had

a talk. She had just obtained the document before you."

"Was it absolutely necessary to kill her?" he asked, irritated. "Surely it would have been better to turn her over to more experienced interrogators."

"As I was in Denerim incognito, and was in a hurry to return to the main party—yes, it was necessary to kill her. I am hoping that since she had that remarkable document, no one will be concerned about her absence for weeks—perhaps months. The King no doubt thinks her on her way to Val Royeaux. The Empress might not be expecting her any time very soon."

"No one's going to find the body?"

She regarded him grimly. "No."

He grunted at that, looking at her sharply. She was a very different girl now than the one who had left Ostagar a few months ago. "Did she say she had dealings with Howe?"

Bronwyn looked strained. "She was so very smug about how easy it was to make Arl Howe believe what he wanted to believe, She recognized me, and assured me that the murder of my family was not a personal matter for her, but merely part of the Great Game. Yes, at that moment I found it necessary to kill her."

"How do you intend to disprove Arl Howe's evidence?"

"What evidence?" she asked, her voice rich with contempt.

"Those papers of yours could be written by anyone. I see no reason even to read them, since I know them to be invented out of whole cloth by that vicious bard. Marjolaine was something of a forger, but let Arl Howe come forward with his falsehoods. Either I or my brother stand ready to prove him a liar in trial by combat. He knows this, which gives him even more reason to send the Crows after us. They attacked Fergus when I was in Denerim, but luckily I was there at the time. We killed them all. Fergus knows to take serious precautions now."

Loghain brooded a little longer, and shook his head. "No doubt Rendon Howe seems important to you, but you must see that I look upon the King's treachery as a far greater danger to the nation. He is planning to cast my daughter—his wife—aside, and unite us with our ancient enemy." His voice grew sarcastic. "How he plans to do that is a matter of some concern to me, if you will forgive me for saying so."

She answered sharply. "Obviously it is a dire matter, which is why it is before you right now. But it is not simply a matter of the King's say-so. The Queen was married by the Chantry and publicly crowned. The King cannot undo that with a proclamation. And the Landsmeet would not ratify it if he did."

His eyes bored into hers. "You think not?"

"Well," she considered. "He obviously won't have the support of Gwaren and the banns sworn to you. Nor, I can assure you, will he have the support of Highever and our vassals. To do him justice, if Rendon Howe were to attend a Landsmeet,

he would not support the King in this either. My cousin Bryland's loyalty to Ferelden I am certain of. Arl Wulffe, agree to recognize the Empress as Queen of Ferelden? I don't believe it for an instant."

"You say nothing of the Arl of Denerim."

She bit her lip. "I don't know him well enough to say. It's possible that he had dealing through Marjolaine, but to say he is a traitor—no, I can't support that with serious evidence. Arl Eamon does seem to have been an intermediary, but..."

"Eamon is no longer a problem."

"Indeed. I heard dreadful things of the events at Redcliffe."

"Whatever you heard was paler than reality. Teagan seems honest enough, and his arling is too weakened to be a threat. However, that might be an incentive to seek help from over the border. And the Bannorn is a wayward animal."

She sat down again, thinking. With a half smile, he pulled his chair closer, and sat down facing her. He said, "I would offer you another cup of wine, but you might shy it at my head again."

That got an angry, embarrassed scowl from her. "If it makes you feel better, you can throw your own cup at me, and call us even."

A grim laugh escaped him. "Perhaps I shall, someday, if you

make me angry enough." He sat back thinking. "What a time to instigate a civil war! For civil war we shall have, if Cailan follows through with this scheme of his. And with what army does he expect to enforce it?"

"Well," she said slowly, a quite horrible thought occurring to her. "The Empress knows it is a Blight. Her own Wardens will have told her so. She knows the bulk of the Ferelden army is pinned down here in the south. She may not wish to involve herself openly, but there is something that must be done before she can marry the King, and only the Divine in Val Royeaux can do it for her. The Divine could annul the marriage of Cailan and Anora, and the Grand Cleric in Ferelden would proclaim it. You have always been so concerned about the Grey Wardens being a private army under foreign control. May I direct your attention to a much larger armed force, also under foreign control, whose commander is indisputably Orlesian?"

It had already occurred to Loghain. The bloody Templars. They were indeed under Chantry control, and they were everywhere. In a low voice, he ground out, "How I hate the bloody Chantry."

Bronwyn nodded. She was quite fond of their own priest, Mother Mallol, back in Highever. She hoped that she had escaped the massacre. For all that, Father and Mother had told her stories of how the Chantry had collaborated in the invasion: how the Grand Cleric, Mother Bronach, had declared it the will of the Maker, and those who rebelled against the usurper Meghren, to be rebels against divine authority. Most

of the priests and Templars had been loyal to the Grand Cleric, and had formed a network of informers: educated and literate, collecting intelligence in every town and village.

"They've been traitors to Ferelden in the past. Father explained that King Maric could not sever ties with the Divine, for fear of her calling an Exalted March against Ferelden. They've always been the dagger poised to strike against us. Even now, they are doing nothing to defend this country. It's all completely business as usual. The Grand Cleric even has her right hand, Revered Mother Clarine, here, spying and interfering. I don't suppose you can get rid of her?"

"Short of feeding her to the darkspawn, I think not," Loghain said acidly. He thought a little more. "Anora is in danger, but I cannot leave the army."

"I really don't think the King would harm her."

He raised his brows at her.

"I mean," Bronwyn clarified, "that I don't think he would physically hurt her. Here's a thought..." she considered. "I have to go north-a little north of South Reach, I understand, to find that other Dalish clan. I'll go to Denerim and warn her personally. I could take her a letter from you, and no one else would need to know."

"And what about the darkspawn?"

"I'll leave most of the Wardens behind...including..." she made

her decision. "Including Alistair. He's Senior Warden, anyway, so it would seem reasonable. If things get very bad, you'd want him with you, anyway."

He scoffed. "Are you proposing that I ultimately replace Cailan with another son of Maric, even more deplorably unprepared to be King?"

"I am not proposing anything of the sort. However, it might be more prudent for him to be under your command than under the King's. Alistair is a very fine warrior, and a very decent and modest young man."

"It is my understanding that he has a great deal to be modest about."

She did not find that funny. "I see you find it easy to despise someone who was abandoned by his own father, and brought up as a stableboy by a malicious noble, who wanted his nephew to have no rivals!"

"Come," he said tiredly. "let us not quarrel over trifles. I promise not to be unkind to your faithful Alistair, but he'll have to pull his weight with me."

"And he will. He knows nothing about my intent to lay bare the cherished secrets of the Wardens, so please don't gloat about it to him. It's enough that you know the facts and can plan accordingly."

"Enough about him," Loghain said roughly. "We have more

important things to consider. I want you to meet with my engineers tomorrow, and hear what they have planned for the Archdemon-if the beast ever deigns to make an appearance. I'll write a letter to Anora, warning her of Cailan's plans. Meet that Dalish Keeper if you must, but then we must consider the army complete. Try not to get distracted by blood feuds when you're in Denerim."

"Howe may not attend the Landsmeet. If he does not, Fergus will want the King's leave to attack him."

Loghain used a word Bronwyn had not expected to hear from him. "And so we *shall* have civil war of some sort. Was that the bard's plan all along?"

"One of them certainly. I think it's clear that Orlais has more than one string to its bow. Even the attempt to abduct Alistair and me I regard less as an attempt to create puppet monarchs than to remove possible alternatives to Cailan. Fergus, too, is in danger for that reason, hence the attempt to discredit the Couslands. The Empress will do everything to smooth his way."

"And hers. You do realize, don't you, that if Cailan renounces Anora and betroths himself to Celene, I *will* march on him."

She nodded gravely. "I would expect nothing else. And I will march with you, if the darkspawn let me."

He thought himself too old to be touched by gallant gestures, but so he was. "Even though I shall be declared a traitor to

Ferelden?"

She thought a little longer, and said, "Ferelden is not the King; and the King is not Ferelden. This is our country as much as Cailan's. It is not his to barter away like a drunken woman selling her children's clothes for more ale."

He studied her face. "I thought the Wardens were loyal to no country."

Her wry smile reached to her brilliantly green eyes. "I've never claimed to be a very *good* Warden, my lord."

He reached out to her, and they shook hands on their alliance with conscious gravity, wondering what would come of it.

This chapter has been growing, and growing, and growing... I finally said all that I thought needed saying for the moment.

Thanks to my reviewers: Zeeji, JackOfBladesX, Rosabell, Sah'Rahaal, Remenants, Kira Kyuuketsuki, Menmebephil, Josie Lange, butterflygrrl, Aoi24, Dante Alighieri1308, The Moidart, derko5, Have Socks Will Travel, demonicnargles, LovingSanity, mutive, What Ithacas Mean, almostinsane, chocolatebrownie12, Lehni, wayfaringpanda, mille libri, Jenna53, Amhran Comhrac, Gene Dark, .x, Death Knight's Crowbar, and Enaid Aderyn. You are really coming up with some amazing ideas!

Yes, I do promise to incorporate material from DA2 into this

story, but the time is not yet ripe. Bronwyn and Loghain had too much to discuss in this chapter.

32. Shadow of the Empire

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 32: Shadow of the Empire

If Bronwyn thought she would be permitted to go to bed in peace after her stormy interview with Teyrn Loghain, she was much mistaken.

Her companions were waiting for her in the Wardens' quarters. Every eye was on her, and the moment she came through the door, they gathered around her like a clutch of hens, squawking and clucking at her, full of questions, and the men as bad as the women. Questions, suppositions, utterly bizarre scenarios poured from their mouths.

Bronwyn shook her head. "I'm going to bed!"

She slipped off her Warden's tunic and folded it neatly, then sat down on the edge of her cot, struggling out of her boots. Tara knelt down and helped her, while still carrying on about the excitement of the day.

"...so we wondered what had happened, of course, when you went upstairs with him and *shut the door...*"

With the mob around her, a thorough wash was impossible.

Bronwyn decided she would get up very early in the morning—before anyone else—and clean up properly then. She lay back wearily on the hard and narrow cot, trying to ignore her comrades standing around her, staring down at her. She shut her eyes.

No one moved. They simply carried on their conversation, surrounding her on all sides. Bronwyn blew out a breath and opened her eyes.

They were still staring at her, only now they had been joined by Scout, who was staring at her as well. And panting in her face. And everyone started clacking away at her again.

True, not all of them. Adaia hung back from the mob, not daring to ask questions, but attentive to any shred of gossip. She had sat at the end of the Wardens, hidden behind Zevran, and had hardly dared to glance at the table where Lady Bronwyn sat with Teyrn Loghain and the other nobles. Next time—perhaps tonight!—she would be bolder.

Two of the others were less interested. Sten oiled the straps of his armor, impervious to the fascinations of human politics. Danith had moved away to a bench and looked at the rest of the companions as if they were speaking Tevinter.

"All right. I surrender." Bronwyn groaned and sat up, knowing she had to tell them something. She found it was it too annoying to sit when they were all still staring down at her, so she forced herself to her feet, and moved to the center of the room, so everyone could hear what she had to say.

Briefly, she gave them the bare bones of the discussion, without, alas, the gory details they were hoping for.

"Teyrn Loghain and I discussed our mission, and I told him about our adventures in Orzammar. I told him about our meeting with the Dalish at some length. We agreed that I should go north and find that other clan we were told of. Some of you will go with me, and some of you will stay here to assist the army, which will now expand its operations and extend its defensive line."

"But you were arguing," Anders said. "Everyone could hear you!"

"That's right," Alistair agreed. "We thought you might be having a fight." He looked very hopeful, which did not improve Bronwyn's temper, already in a fragile state. She was still irritated with the Teyrn for seeming to lend credence to Arl Howe's lies, but she did not want to spread the word that there had been dissension between the two of them.

Cullen put in, "We were alarmed that he might even attack you. We were deciding what to do in such a case, but then you stopped shouting at each other..."

"Teyrn Loghain told me of some letters received by him from Arl Howe, detailing his reasons for his treacherous murder of my family. The lies were so egregious that I became upset. It hardly matters. We resolved our differences, and we're all right now."

"How all right?" Broasca asked baldly. "I think he's interested in you. I could see him giving you the eye at dinner, when you weren't looking."

"That's true!" Tara seconded her. "Everybody could see it! He thinks you're very pretty. I can tell."

Oghren chuckled, "After the all the yelling, we thought maybe you two were having some hot make-up sex. Sometimes that's the best kind—"

Bronwyn was on the verge of explosion. She gritted her teeth, and very carefully did not shout. "I have never had sex with that man! And I would appreciate it if my own friends did not spread such horrible rumors!"

Leliana said kindly, "There's nothing horrible about romance. If you and Teyrn Loghain found each other desirable, then we would never stand in the way of your happiness."

Most of the women nodded solemnly, except for Morrigan who laughed at her, yellow eyes bright and noticing; and Astrid, who raised a questioning brow.

Most of the men, however, had their own and very different opinion about the idea of sex involving Bronwyn and Teyrn Loghain. She could see the looks exchanged between Alistair and Cullen (aghast), Anders and Jowan (concerned), and Oghren and Zevran (amused, but clearly thinking it a very bad thing).

She was their commander, and there was a limit to how much impertinence she was prepared to put up with.

"The Teyrn and I do not have a personal relationship. If that changes in the future—"

"Aha!" cackled Oghren.

Bronwyn frowned, "If that were to *change* in the future, I would be sure to tell my friends. In the meantime, I shall keep you informed of the *military* situation. Now. No more questions or I'll set Scout on you. I am going to get some sleep. I suggest you all do the same."

A few discontented murmurs trailed after her. Bronwyn shut her eyes, lay down again, and was soon, unpleasantly but necessarily, in the Fade.

While her companions were silenced—at least as far as speaking to her directly—Bronwyn could see, to her exasperation, that she was Ostagar's favorite object of gossip. When they came down to breakfast the next morning, grabbing an empty table to share, Bronwyn found herself the cynosure of all eyes in the mess hall. A bowl of porridge was put before her, and she ate ravenously, trying to ignore the stares—hungry stares and envious stares and shocked stares- and the eager whispers. Apparently, her conversation with the Teyrn was the talk of the camp.

Everyone grabbed at her comrades, dragging them away to

corners, trying to get the whole story out them. Leliana was a favorite: she was young and pretty and *human*, and the women thought she'd be a good source of gossip. The men thought the same, and thought that even if she weren't, she was well worth chatting up.

She smiled and shook her head, and sometimes added a few words. Her listeners were disappointed, and went away. Bronwyn tried to busy herself with her porridge.

They learned not to try it with Alistair or Cullen. Alistair was a terrible gossip himself, but was displeased with the kind of questions people were asking. Cullen looked like he was about to go for his sword. A man backed away, smiling, hands up in a peaceful gesture. Cullen snarled something in a low voice.

There were dwarves in the hall, and they were gossiping too: more frankly, and with no emotional stake in the matter. Some were approaching her people. Brosca and Oghren would laugh and shake their heads, making some sort of quip or other. Astrid was quieter, but absolutely firm with the busybodies.

After awhile, her friends came back to the table, and sat there, watching her with bright, alert eyes. It was terribly annoying, but better than being stared at when she was trying to sleep.

Bronwyn finished her bowl, wishing there was more, and then abruptly asked, "What?"

Tara announced, "Everyone's talking about you, Bronwyn. You want to know why?"

"Somehow," Bronwyn grimaced, "I think I really, really don't."

Brosca grinned, and leaned in, "Well, we're going to tell you, anyway. Everybody heard you and the big guy yelling at each other last night. And then they heard things get quiet. And then you came out of his quarters, looking relaxed and with messy hair. And his servants said that somebody had pushed everything off his desk onto the floor—like they were in a *big hurry*."

"You didn't tell us that Teyrn Loghain pushed everything off his desk," Leliana said reprovingly.

"That's because he didn't," Bronwyn said frankly. "I did." Seeing their shocked, incredulous faces, she shrugged, rather embarrassed in retrospect. "I did it in a fit of temper. I told you that he brought up Arl Howe's accusation. I threw a wine goblet at him and I swept everything off his writing table. Please don't spread that around. It makes me sound like a naughty child."

"So..." Oghren leered. "You didn't clear the desk in order to... how shall I put this delicately...?"

"*You couldn't!*" laughed Brosca.

Bronwyn tried to follow the conversation, more and more bewildered and exasperated.

Astrid cut the misery short. "They are implying that you and Teyrn Loghain cleared off the desk in order to have sex there."

"*What?*" Bronwyn shot to her feet, eyes blazing. Like waves in an ebb tide, everyone else at the table leaned away from her. She glared at them, and lowered her voice. "*Nothing* of that sort happened, and I will thank you not to make up scandalous stories about me. Sex on a desk, indeed!"

Her face must be red. It felt hot enough.

"I told you so!" Alistair declared triumphantly. "Bronwyn would never do something like that!"

She could hardly hear him. She did not want to look at any of them at the moment. Enraged and humiliated, she stalked from the mess hall, and strode down the stairs, needing some fresh air to cool her burning embarrassment. Scout placidly trotted after her, wanting a run outside. Soldiers watched her, wide-eyed, and nudged each other, talking in low voices.

To complete her morning, she was almost immediately joined by Loghain, looking infuriatingly well-rested and freshly-shaved. He was, of course, already out and about, and wanted to show her something. Scout, the traitor, wagged his tail at him.

"And look at this one, Warden!" A pop and a slam, and the bolts were soaring out over the bone-riddled Ostagar Valley.

Smoke drifted back in a wake of black and grey. The bolts slammed into the ground, and a second later, an explosion shook the stones. A sullen blaze licked at the dead, dry grass in the distance.

"Pretty neat, huh?" asked Dworkin, leering at her, unintimidated by the looming presence of Teyrn Loghain.

"I'm impressed!" Bronwyn granted freely. "I'd love to see what they do to an ogre!"

"I can describe it for you, if you like," Loghain offered, his smile sardonic. "It's very interesting seeing something that large burning while disemboweled."

"Ew, thanks all the same!" Bronwyn laughed. She waved a hand at another of the prototypes. "I like that design with the multiple bolts."

"Look at this!" Dworkin said excitedly, winding a crank, which caused the aim of the bolts to spread out, fan-like. "I can focus on a target, or we can go for wide-spread damage."

"And that's not all, Warden," Dworkin's brother Voldrik assured her, in a calmer, smoother tone. "We can load the trebuchet with explosives too, and put them in a container with trash—stones, broken metal, bits of chain. When the container explodes, all that metal causes catastrophic damage to the enemy."

Bronwyn nodded, appreciating the image that conveyed.

"I can certainly see why you've been holding the Horde back so well. Isn't that something of the effect that qunari cannon are supposed to have?"

"Why don't you ask your pet qunari?" Loghain wondered.

Bronwyn made a face. "It's impossible to get him to talk about that. It's a deep, dark secret of his race. For all I know, he's not in on it, and it embarrasses him. We're not likely to get the secret of cannons out of Sten."

"No," Loghain said crisply. "Instead, he is gathering useful intelligence about Ferelden and its military capabilities."

Bronwyn gave him a tight smile, not wanting to argue with him so early in the morning. He really was a very difficult man, just as Mother had always warned her. It was so vexing to have her every decision second-guessed after the fact. She took a firm grip on her temper and changed the subject.

"I suppose accurate aim is difficult to achieve...?"

Voldrik and Dworkin were off: telling the lengthy and rather boring tale of how they had created sighting devices that permitted them to nail a target at long range within a few feet. While she could hardly follow the technical details, the result was clear enough and very satisfactory. She asked to be given a chance to aim and fire one of the improved ballistae herself, and the three men were only too happy to accommodate her.

Loghain, truth be told, was as enthusiastic as any dwarven engineer. Bronwyn had not known that he was interested in machines, but she should have guessed that war machines—or anything that would give him an edge over an enemy—would have his undivided attention. More than that, though: he actually seemed to understand what the dwarves were talking about when they went on about "trajectory" and "payload."

The dwarves withdrew, debating an arcane issue between themselves, hands sketching the argument in the air.

Loghain put a hand on the mount of one of the ballistae, admiring it as he would a good horse.

"Something worthwhile will have come out of this, if Ferelden has new weapons to defend itself."

"If their accuracy is as good as the dwarves claim, perhaps similar devices need to be installed to defend fortresses and harbors throughout Ferelden."

Loghain nodded. The Orlesians had invaded by sea, and had swept over Ferelden like a storm. If the ships could have been destroyed before the chevaliers had landed...

But this time, if the ships came, it would be at the invitation of Ferelden's own King. Gherlen's Halt would admit the chevaliers at the border, the mountain passes open to them like any trollop at the Pearl. How much time did they have to prevent this? Could they defend a divided Ferelden against the darkspawn, the Orlesians, *and* its own King?

The girl felt the Blight had to be the first priority, which was no great surprise. Loghain admitted to himself that she had made good arguments for it. Ferelden had risen from the ashes of the Orlesian occupation, and it could do so again. If, however, the country were laid waste, polluted, and depopulated by the darkspawn, it might be too weakened to constitute a viable nation ever again.

After sleeping on it, it was clear to Loghain that they could not give up the fight at Ostagar, without consigning half of Ferelden to the darkspawn. That did not mean that there were not other priorities.

Cailan. Loghain had to find a way to neutralize the threat Cailan posed to Ferelden. He needed to get him back under his eye. And there were ways to do that...

"When you take the letter to Anora," he said to Bronwyn, "Ask for an audience with the King. You need to report to him, anyway. Be sure to take your Dalish girl with you. Have her wear that scanty Dalish armor. Perhaps His Majesty will not wish to miss the glorious moment when the Elves arrive to fight once more at the side of Men."

The shadow of the Orlesian Empire was creeping closer, but it would not fall on Ferelden again while Loghain Mac Tir lived.

Adaia needed to find something to do. She had listened attentively to Danith's daily lesson of elven lore. Zevran was kind enough to give her an hour of training time, but then he

wanted to see more of the camp. She decided to tag after him. People had broken up into groups, since Lady Bronwyn went off to consult with Teyrn Loghain. Adaia was supposed to find work at Ostagar, and might as well see what was available. Before...*everything*...happened, she might have sung songs like Leliana, but Bann Vaughan and his men had ended her singing forever.

Sten was sitting in a position that ought to be impossible, his eyes shut. Tara told her it was called 'meditating,' and it was something qunari did, when they were thinking about their Qun thing. It did not look very comfortable to Adaia.

Brosca was fun and friendly, but she had gone with Oghren to visit some dwarves they knew. They were talking about setting up a proper brewery here. Dwarves were good at brewing ale out of nearly anything. If it was drinkable, they would probably make their fortune.

Tara was busy, talking in low tones with the other mages. They did not seem to want anyone to hear what they were saying. That yellow-eyed witch, the woman named Morrigan, had a book she was showing them. They all were looking worried, especially the witch's lover, the tall blond mage. It was some sort of magical business, and while Adaia was growing used to mages, she knew she wanted to do nothing to annoy them. The two men always spoke pleasantly to her, but Adaia was afraid of Morrigan.

Alistair and Cullen and Leliana were visiting people they knew, important people like knights and templars and captains. They

were going on a patrol tomorrow, and wanted to find out what other people knew about the nearby darkspawn. Astrid, the serious dwarf Warden, had gone with them. She was important, too. Tara had told her she was a princess in exile, driven from her home by her brother. Adaia did not think Astrid looked much like a princess ought to look, but maybe that was just because she was a dwarf. Or maybe because she needed to do something with her hair. Adaia had seen Queen Anora once, and her hair had been *lovely*.

"Danith!" she called shyly. She was becoming less self-conscious about her voice. The Dalish girl looked up. "Zevran and I are going for a walk around the camp. Would you like to come with us?"

"That is very courteous of you," Danith answered, feeling some hesitation in accepting. Still, it was very dull in this stone tower... "Yes, I should see the camp and understand the ways of these shemlens."

Again she hesitated. Her armor was safe and familiar, but the shemlens stared at her so. After a moment, she snatched up her Warden tunic and dropped it over her head, covering herself with it. Perhaps it would be best if the shemlens saw a Warden, and not an *asha* of the *elvhen*. There was no shame in a being a Grey Warden, though the separation from her clan and the hideous dreams made it a burden. She remembered she had some coin, too, and a few items shared out to her from darkspawn loot. Perhaps the shemlens might have useful items for trade...

The air outside was foul, but not as foul as the air inside. The camp stank of shemlen and durgen'len and their beasts, but there was at least a breeze. Far away, Danith could catch the deeper foulness of darkspawn, and sense a faint, unwelcome presence in her blood. Bronwyn had told her that eventually she would be able to sense fellow Wardens as well, which would be useful, she supposed.

And since they were together, she could continue Adaia's lessons.

"Who is the Great Protector?" she asked.

"Mythal," Zevran answered instantly, grinning at her. Danith frowned at him.

"The question was for Adaia."

"Mythal," Adaia croaked out, a moment later. "I know that one. I really do."

"And who, *Adaia*," Danith continued, glaring at Zevran, "Is the Goddess of the Hunt, and the creator of the *Vir Tanadahl*?"

"I know that one, too!" Adaia said, excited. "That's Andruil: Sister of the Moon, Mother of Hares, Lady of the Hunt. Andruil."

"Well done. And who is her sister?"

They talked, happily oblivious to the admiring stares, all the way to the quartermaster, and then all the way to an equally

interesting place...

"They let us stay and see everything," Adaia croaked happily to Tara, enjoying her midday meal. "And then they let me help!"

Zevran shrugged. "I know few craftsmen whether human, dwarf, or elf, who will refuse free labor. Nonetheless, I agree that it was interesting. I have some small skill with poisons myself, but I found much to learn there."

Danith said nothing, but nodded. In the crafthouse, all three races had worked together, and the dwarven craftmasters had not spoken slightly to anyone. What mattered there was not race, but skill and diligence. She herself was familiar enough with what could be done with deathroot and blood lotus, but the craftmasters had studied the matter, and were not only creating stronger poisons, but 'bombs.' These were mixtures held in flasks, which when thrown would make a firestorm, or freeze any enemy (or friend) upon whom the mixture splashed. Some contained lyrium sand, and would explode with a great noise. The blast from these bombs struck the enemy like a great fist. Small bombs were made for soldiers to carry, and large ones were being built, to be loaded into the great war machines, to rain death upon the darkspawn.

It was worthwhile to learn stronger poisons for arrows and blades, but the bombs made her a little uneasy. It would be so easy to harm innocents if they were cast carelessly. Nor

did using them take any more skill than a strong throwing arm. They seemed...impersonal...to her.

But Adaia was eager to make herself useful, and the dwarves, seeing her in the company of a Warden, were well-disposed toward her, and had offered her employment. Zevran stepped in, seeming to think the amount of coin offered was insufficient. After some strange talk and much complaining, Adaia was offered a larger sum, and seemed very pleased.

"I'll be earning more than I ever did when I was in the alienage, and I'll be doing my part for the war effort! I have a real job!" She was very happy, and her curious croaking voice was not as harsh as usual. Danith could not grudge her the chance to be of use. Nonetheless, she would see that the girl continued her lessons in the ways of their people.

The news of Adaia's good fortune was passed up and down the Wardens' table, and everyone had kind words for her. Sten was particularly approving.

"For a woman to work as an artisan is appropriate, and in accordance with the Qun. Very suitable."

Adaia looked at the door to the mess hall, hoping that Lady Bronwyn would arrive soon. She was particularly anxious to tell the noblewoman that she had found something to do besides cook porridge and sponge on the Wardens. Making poisons and bombs was something the Warden-Commander was bound to approve of.

A quick hand snatched a piece of bread off her plate. Brosca grinned at her teasingly. "Too slow, newbie! Anyway, good luck with the poisons! Before you know it, you'll be a respectable tax-paying member of society! Too bad."

Oghren modestly agreed, "Aye. You *could* have learned to brew ale from an expert. Oh, well, we can't all be lucky..."

They were talking and laughing so much that Adaia never heard the footsteps behind her. Not until he was nearly on her did she see the look on the faces of her friends across the table.

Loghain remembered that Grey Wardens were always hungry. His morning meeting with Bronwyn had gone extremely well, with no goblet-throwing or other acts of violence toward him. Truth be told, he did not hold last night's explosion against her. So many people were afraid of him: afraid to disagree, afraid to tell him their true opinions, afraid of losing their privileges or offices.

Cailan had no problem shouting at him, of course, but Cailan was invariably *wrong*. Bronwyn was young and inexperienced; but she was a brave and clever girl, and had learned a great deal from her adventures, and knew she had yet more to learn. She was capable of opposing him with sound arguments, and in that she was rather like Anora. It was very pleasant, spending a morning with her, seeing her interest in the new machines, sharing ideas and making plans. He regretted that she would be leaving the day after tomorrow.

He had almost suggested that she send one of her Wardens instead, but that was simply a moment of weakness on his part. She must go. No one else could manage the business as well.

"I imagine you're ready for a midday meal after all that," he said, walking back to the Tower with her. "Perhaps you wouldn't object to sharing mine. I want to go over some maps of the Wilds with you..."

There was noise ahead. Loghain quickened his step. Bronwyn flicked him a concerned glance, matching her stride to his. The doors were open, and there was excited shouting coming from the mess hall. For a moment Bronwyn was rather pleased. It appeared that the army would have something to talk about, other than the imaginary romance between Teyrn Loghain and herself.

She felt very differently when they entered the mess hall, and found Bann Vaughan, face purple with rage, facing off against a furious, indignant Alistair. He was too fit to turn purple, but was a rather handsome shade of reddish bronze.

"Enough!" Loghain bellowed. His voice cut through the catcalls and shouts, and a path opened up as soldiers shrank back to make way for the Teyrn and the Girl Warden. The atmosphere of the room changed slightly, as everyone hoped for a different but equally entertaining spectacle from that of a nobleman and a Warden fighting over an elf girl.

Vaughan's bodyguard had their hands on their swords: a

dozen of them were eyeing the motley band of Wardens. Rather dubiously eyeing them, actually, for the motley band looked uncommonly menacing. Brosca ducked under Alistair's arm and stuck her tongue out at Vaughan, then grinned ferociously. The mages had slowly risen to their feet, and they were not smiling, but looking very calm and deliberate. Alistair and Cullen were bigger than any of Vaughan's men. And then there was Sten.

For a moment Loghain was tempted to let them have at it, just to see how quickly the Wardens could annihilate Vaughan and his men. That was a bad idea, of course.

"Bann Vaughan," he growled, with a semblance of calm. "If there is a dispute, let us take it somewhere private."

"That little whore is a wanted criminal!" Vaughan snarled, pointing at Adaia. She did not cringe, but bared her teeth, crouching defensively. To Loghain she looked like a starved kitten, readying herself to fight to the last. With a start, he recognized one of the mages. It was that apostate...Jowan... the one he had set on Eamon. The fellow flinched as Loghain's gaze fell on him, and he stared fixedly at the floor.

Alistair yelled back at Vaughan, "She's a Warden recruit! She was conscripted, and there's *nothing* you can do to her!"

Bronwyn nearly hissed in surprise, but managed to control her face. Alistair had put her in quite the predicament, laying her credibility as Warden-Commander on the line. He was her second, and she could not make a fool of him in front of these

men. Not in front of Vaughan, whom she despised. Not in front of Teyrn Loghain, who would be glad to have an excuse to think meanly of Maric's bastard. Alistair trusted her, and she would not betray him.

"The Senior Warden is correct," she said clearly, in a calm and neutral tone. "This young woman has been conscripted, and is therefore no longer under the authority of the Arl of Denerim. Or his son."

Vaughan looked ready to burst. "Outrageous!" he sputtered.

"Come," Loghain said sharply. "My lord, we will discuss this *privately*. Warden-Commander, bring your Second and the recruit with you."

Scout was growling at Vaughan, which would not improve matters. Bronwyn whispered, "Stay!" and Sten obliging caught the dog by the collar. Leliana distracted him with a bit of smoked venison.

A very uncomfortable walk to Loghain's quarters followed. Bronwyn pretended to have little personal stake in the matter, though she was enraged that Vaughan would insult any follower of hers in such a way. She kept her face pleasantly neutral, and walked beside Vaughan, looking at him seriously, with a show of respect for his status and his anger.

The door was shut, and Loghain said curtly, "Bann Vaughan, if you please, tell us...*quietly*...what claim you have on this girl."

Vaughan sneered. "She's a thief, a whore, and a murderer from the Denerim alienage."

Alistair and Adaia each took a breath, ready to counter the accusation. Bronwyn shook her head, just a little at Alistair. He calmed himself, and put his hand protectively on Adaia's shoulder. Tears of despair and helplessness were pooling in the girl's eyes.

Vaughan stared down at her from his greater height, but did not come within Alistair's reach. "She was one of the instigators of the riot in which I was attacked and wounded." He fingered the fading scar on his jaw, recalling the utter shock of a pack of knife-eared wenches daring to turn on him. "Members of my personal guard were murdered, and the estate was looted of treasure over the felonious amount of one sovereign. As the attack was made on the household of her rightful lord, we can add Petty Treason to the charges of murder, riot, and grand theft. As such, she won't just hang: she'll be drawn and quartered as well."

Adaia was crying now. "But *he* was the one—"

Bronwyn put a hand on her other shoulder, and turned to Vaughan, using every ounce of control. It was easier than last night. She had not had too much wine. She expected nothing better of a man like Vaughan. She would deal with this, and she would win.

"I am sorry that situation is so grievous to you, my lord," she said quietly. "I deeply regret that you were injured. I, certainly,

can imagine the pain you must have endured."

Those words, uttered in a soothing tone and with a sad smile, drained the worst of Vaughan's rage. He glanced at the long white scar marring her face—a *great pity, that*, he thought—and nodded brusquely. He had no great desire to start a feud with a Cousland. Fergus was close to the King, and everyone had heard the rumors about Bronwyn and Teyrn Loghain.

"...That said," she continued, "law and custom are perfectly clear on the matter. Adaia here—"

"That's not her name," Vaughan interrupted nastily. "The little strumpet has lied to you even about that. She's Melian Tabris, daughter of Cyrion Tabris the ragpicker."

Bronwyn raised her brows at Adaia.

The girl croaked out, "Adaia was my mother's name, my lady. I like it."

Loghain frowned at the sound of the girl's voice. Had she been injured? He looked at her neck for bruises, but saw none. He had never met an elf with a voice like that.

Bronwyn shrugged. "She wouldn't be the first lad or lass who went for a soldier under an assumed name. In fact, her having a Dalish-sounding name disposed the Dalish to be friendlier toward us than they might otherwise have been. No, my lord," she smiled, pleasantly self-deprecating, at Vaughan. "Her name means little or nothing. As I said, law and custom are

quite clear. No matter how grave her offences, they were committed prior to her conscription. She is now under the aegis of the Grey Wardens, and is as dead to her old life as if she *had* been executed."

Before Vaughan could finish taking another breath, Loghain cut in. "Vaughan, the girl is now beyond your authority. You must accept it, as indeed must we all. As for you, Warden-Commander, choose your recruits with greater care in future."

Bronwyn bowed her head in nicely-judged submission.

Loghain was not finished. "- and I do not want to see this girl flaunting her impunity in the face of a Ferelden lord." He frowned at the little elf, and his gaze shifted to Alistair, who grimaced. "And while I understand that your Senior Warden was doing his duty in defending a recruit, he must also remember the respect owed to members of the Landsmeet."

"Yes, my lord," Alistair muttered. "Sorry, my lord." He saw Bronwyn raise her brows again, and he turned to Vaughan. "Sorry, my lord. Just doing my duty."

Vaughan preened, somewhat mollified, and smirked at Alistair. His sense of superiority was finding solid ground once more. "Quite all right, Senior Warden," he said, flicking his fingers at him as if dismissing a clumsy servant.

Bronwyn suggested, "Perhaps the Senior Warden and my recruit could return to their duties now, my lord?"

Loghain waved them away. Alistair gave him a very shallow bow and the girl a frantic bob of curtsy. They were gone, and the door shut behind them.

Vaughan growled, "I can't believe you'd defend that little knife-ears!"

Bronwyn had been expecting something of the sort, and maintained her composure.

"What I cannot believe, my lord, is that you would wish to quarrel with me over an *elf girl!*" she smiled warmly at Vaughan, deceit curdling in her belly. "Really, we came across her on the road and conscripted her. The Wardens are always looking for people whose families won't be crying after them. Her punishment, which you are so eager for, is to come south and fight the darkspawn! How long do you think she'll live, raw and untrained as she is?"

Vaughan was still indignant and thwarted, but huffed a contemptuous snort at that. "Her head will be on a stick within the week!"

With a show of sad resignation, Bronwyn agreed with him. "Very likely. The Maker metes out his justice in mysterious ways. Let us not quarrel over trifles, my lord. Of course you are angry at the abnegation of your usual authority. I *understand* that. It is very vexing, but these things happen. Had I known her background, of course I would have left her to your justice, but what's done is done. I *cannot* release her to you. She is a Warden, and therefore *my* problem. I *will*

fulfill all my duties. That means that I shall allot her tasks, punish her fairly, and protect her to the best of my ability."

"It's the *principle* of the thing, Bronwyn," Vaughan whined, very aggrieved, but on the way to accepting the current situation.

"I know," she agreed sympathetically. "These are strange times."

"You can't discharge her from the Wardens into my custody?" he asked, a little slyly.

"No, Vaughan," she assured him, perfectly polite but perfectly firm. "Once a Warden, always a Warden. Besides, I was conscripted myself. If *I* have to serve, then that girl *certainly* does!"

He nodded. "Father told me all about it. An absolute scandal, that fellow Duncan taking advantage of the Highever crisis like that."

"We *must* be united," Loghain broke in sharply, annoyed at how easily the girl was winding Vaughan around her little finger. The temper she had shown him last night had been all Eleanor. This was Bryce at his most subtly engaging. She had better not try such tricks with him.

However, if she could do something to keep Vaughan from becoming disaffected, and prevent him from colluding with Cailan and his puppeteers in Orlais, Loghain acknowledged

that he would have to put up with witnessing this kind of shoddy spectacle. He continued, "To that end, I want you, Bann Vaughan, to sit beside the Warden-Commander at dinner tonight, and to make plain there are no hard feelings."

"What a good idea!" Bronwyn said, managing a cheerful smile.

Vaughan gave her what he imagined to be a gallant bow. "I would be honored...and charmed."

Anora was not a fool. That was the quality in herself she clung to. She was not a fool. Her intelligence was her sword and shield, and she could use it as effectively as her father wielded a blade.

Cailan was up to something. He thought himself very clever, but there was a boastfulness in him, a childish vainglory that prevented any real disguise. He went about the Palace smiling, even smug. His expression practically shouted, "Something is coming, though you do not know about it."

Erlina had been watching him, but was herself baffled. Somehow, Cailan must be receiving secret communications from somewhere. It was genuinely alarming.

He had been particularly friendly with Fergus Cousland of late. Genial...even generous. He had given Fergus some fine gifts, and had invited him to sit at his side at dinner. For all that, there was something in his manner that rang false. Was he plotting against the Teyrn of Highever?

The true Teyrn of Highever, of course. Rendon Howe was calling himself Teyrn of Highever, but Anora did not write to him using that title. At the very least, the Landsmeet would have to ratify it, and Anora did not see that happening any time soon.

Rendon Howe was in serious trouble, anyway. A week had passed, and he had not arrived in Denerim to make his case before the Landsmeet. Letters had come, explaining his delays very plausibly, wanting assurances and offering fulsome flattery. It annoyed Anora beyond words that Cailan gave any weight to the man's excuses. While a true politician kept all his options open, it seemed too egregiously two-faced to act as if Fergus Cousland were his blood brother, while also indulging the disobedience of Rendon Howe. It was clumsy: it was not subtle, but the very opposite. The Arl of Amaranthine had refused to obey his King's command to attend him, and that, Anora thought, should be that.

But the week was over, and there could be no more delays. The young Teyrn had readied his forces, recruited yet more, hired some dwarven engineers, and was ready to march on Amaranthine.

She had spoken to Cailan about it. She had spoken to him repeatedly, and he had put her off: treating it as a great joke. She could not make him see that every day he permitted Rendon Howe to ignore royal commands resulted in a further diminishment of royal authority. What were the rest of the nobility to think, when they saw that Arl Howe could disobey the King with impunity?

The dwarves were joining the army in the south, but Cailan did not seem interested in the war anymore. He spoke slightly of Bronwyn Cousland's diplomacy—though never to her brother's face—as if *anyone* could have managed it. From the rumors that were coming out of the Orzammar, Anora suspected that it had taken quite a bit of doing to persuade the dwarves to commit to the fight on the surface. Cailan seemed to feel that the Girl Warden had inconvenienced him in some way. Anora did not know what to make of it.

The Grand Cleric had come to see him yesterday, and Anora had known nothing about it until the woman was gone. Worse still, she still did not know what the two of them had talked about, closeted together for two hours in the mid-afternoon, while Anora had her tea break. Cailan had chuckled, and patted her head, and told her that it was nothing for her to worry about. He felt it was only right to take on some of the burden of those tiresome, routine visits, especially when she was unwell.

Unwell? Yes—it was true. She had not been particularly well of late. She tired easily, and was often oddly thirsty. It was hard to concentrate sometimes. When it was particularly bad, her thoughts circled in her head like startled magpies. Her afternoon tea soothed her. She was looking forward to it very much today.

"Majesty?" Erlina called softly. "Are you awake?"

That was another thing. Perhaps she was overtired, for she found herself falling asleep in the afternoons. It was absurd.

She was no child, to be taking naps. The strain of the past few months had been great, but her father was certainly under even greater stress, and no one told tales of him weakening. Quite the contrary. It would be dreadful if word came to him that his daughter was growing slack and slothful...

"Yes, I am quite awake," Anora said clearly, after taking a moment to clear the cobwebs from her mind. "You may fetch the tea now, Erlina."

The maid took a moment in the anteroom to arrange the tray. The Queen was fond of roses, and the gardener had gathered some lovely white ones today. Erlina had chosen the most perfect of them for the Queen's tray. Poor thing, it was the least she could do.

The tea was just as it should be. The King was not taking tea here today, being busy in the sparring yard this afternoon. The tea, therefore, could be brewed more effectively.

Erlina finished stirring in the powder, and sighed.

It was such a shame. Such a pleasant life she had, here in the Palace, serving charming Queen Anora. It was very unfortunate that the Empress and the King were planning to marry, and thus make said charming Queen Anora entirely redundant. The King imagined that plans were in motion to annul his marriage, and it was true that all the proper people had been informed.

However, the Empress was far too shrewd and—really, it must be said—had too much moral delicacy to marry a divorced man. His marriage must be dissolved indeed: dissolved so completely that no one would ever be able to claim that there was any impediment to their union. Charming Queen Anora must fall sick, and then go into a decline, and then die peacefully in her bed, surrounded by her grieving servants. It was a sad thing, but completely indispensable for the legitimacy of the new order. The poison the Orlesians called "inheritance powder" was tasteless, odorless, and undetectable, save for those few who knew about it.

What could seem more natural? The King would certainly accept it. That ladies sometimes went into irreversible, incomprehensible declines was a fact of life. His own mother, that doughty warrior woman Queen Rowan, had herself faded away into death when the King was only a young child. Of course, it was known to a few in Orlais that the Queen's death was a last, exquisite piece of spite on the part of Emperor Florian. King Maric could not be assassinated, for in those days Ferelden was in such upheaval that the death of the King might have resulted in the elevation of Loghain Mac Tir. And that hard man was notoriously difficult to kill.

No, it was the Queen, the brave, heroic, strong-hearted Queen, the other power propping up an essentially weak man, who was the target. Her death plunged Maric into depression and apathy. For a great deal of his reign he had neglected both his kingdom and his son and heir.

He had completely abandoned his other son, the bastard

Alistair. The Empress could hardly believe such stupidity. The boy could have been so useful to his father and brother—a support for the rightful king, a serviceable pawn in the marriage market. To throw him away in a stable!

If nothing else, a younger brother would have presented Cailan with a challenge. He would have had a rival to keep him up to the mark. He might not have been the shallow, foolish young man who believed that the world was his to play with: The Empress had divined Cailan's character early, and had sent Erlina to Ferelden as soon as there was a Queen to spy upon.

It sometimes took decades for Shadows of the Empire to position themselves effectively. Erlina had managed it in five years. Other nations barely knew of their existence. She had seen a missive from the late Teyrn Cousland, warning the King of 'sleeper agents.' The Teyrn of Highever had been a clever man, she admitted, a charming, amiable, *clever* man, and he had uncovered something of the truth. Too much, indeed, for him to be allowed to live.

That arrogant, bard had transmitted the order for the Queen's death- the order that Erlina had hoped would never come- the last time she visited the Palace. Nothing was to be left to chance. Marjolaine, afterwards, had left Denerim to convey the King's signed marriage contract to the Empress. Even with the country in turmoil, she should be in Val Royeaux within three weeks. In another three, she should be back with the Empress' agreement. And by then, the King would conveniently be a widower. After a respectful—but brief—

period of mourning, the King would make the announcement, and the Chantry would declare its support for the union.

Who would resist them? The Queen's father, of course, would be angry, but there were ways to deal with him. Nothing was easier to arrange than death in battle. Plans were in motion for that. An honorable death, too. Erlina did not much like Teyrn Loghain: a hard-bitten, dour man who always scowled at her. He was, however, the devoted father of her kind mistress the Queen, and he would be devastated by her loss. Erlina herself thought it would be wise—even compassionate—if his heroic death took place before the Queen's passing, but that matter was out of her hands.

Arl Teagan of Redcliffe would be loyal to his nephew. The Arl of Denerim, too, would stand by the King. Erlina made a little face, thinking of his odious son Vaughan. The things one had to endure in her position!

The Arls of West Hill and South Reach had not the wealth or power to stand alone against the coming changes. Rendon Howe was a fierce enemy of Orlais, but he was already discredited, and would soon be eliminated, allowing the King to choose a less opinionated man in his stead.

The Couslands were dead, all but the brave and pleasant son, and the daughter who no longer mattered politically. A rumor had come to Erlina that the Crows had tried to assassinate Fergus Cousland. He had fought them off, and now the Crows were reassessing the feasibility of the contract. In a Ferelden weakened by Blight and by the loss of so many leaders at

once, the young teyrn might be persuaded to accept the union of Orlais and Ferelden. Erlina hoped so. She rather liked him. Perhaps the Empress, in order to encourage his submission, would marry him to a charming lady of high birth, great wealth, and undoubted loyalty. Soft diplomacy was sometimes the most effective.

She poured a cup of the poisoned tea for the Queen, who was looking quite ill, poor thing: face drawn, grey smudges under the eyes. She had lost appetite, and regarded her sandwich and cookies with no interest whatever. Erlina was sorry that the Queen's suffering must be prolonged to make the story of natural death plausible.

"Thank you, Erlina," Anora said, sipping her tea thirstily. "This is delicious."

Erlina smiled, and discreetly smoothed the Queen's hair. "Be sure to drink it all, Majesty. It is the best thing for you."

Thanks to all who have read, alerted or favorited. Special thanks to my wonderful reviewers: Menamebaphil, Dante Alighieri1308, mutive, EmbertoInferno, Josie Lange, xJanelex, JackOfBladesX, Kira Kyuusetsuki, almostinsane, Judy, chocolatebrown12, Gene Dark, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Dragon's Tongue, Enaid Aderyn, Jenna53, Morwen33, mille libri, Eva Galana, The Moidart, derko5, Grey Jackett, Anime-Star Wars-Fan-zach, Shakespira, ally, Aoi24, Have Socks Will Travel, What Ithacas Mean,

demonicnargles, Zute, wayfaringpanda, Lehni, Costin, Lord of Murder, Persephone Chiara, Amhran Comhrac, Alpha Cucumber, Windchime68, Ereneviana, and euromellows.

Petty treason, in medieval law, was defined as an act of rebellion (including murder) against one's superior: for example, a wife who murdered (or planned to murder) a husband, a servant who rebelled against a master, a vassal who rebelled against an overlord. High treason is the betrayal of one's sovereign (or national government). Those who committed petty treason were liable to the same hideous punishments as those who committed high treason. Actually, in medieval England, women were almost never hanged, drawn, and quartered. Up until the time of Oliver Cromwell, the standard form of execution for a woman was burning alive (or beheading, for noblewomen). This changed with Cromwell and the Puritans, who changed the law to permit women the more humane death by hanging.

If you're upset that Bronwyn didn't give Adaia a chance to defend or explain herself, don't be. Defense or excuses would be equally pointless addressed to Vaughan. All that matters, really, is that a Grey Warden conscript is not liable for crimes committed prior to the conscription. Bronwyn will hear Adaia out in private, and let her tell her side of the story.

Ally asked if I intended to pair up all my Wardens, and made a reference to Shakespearean comedy. The thought made

me smile, and is actually very tempting, but no. I don't see a lot of relationships, whether permanent or fleeting, arising from the current crisis. One or two at most.

A few days ago, I was at the Field Museum in Chicago, contemplating the bones of the TRex Sue. She is one-third the size of the Archdemon, and could neither fly nor spout purple flames. Still, when I thought about taking her down with swords and daggers, I thought...Uh-uh. I'll try to get real about the dragonslaying issue. Hunting wild boars or bears with spears is dangerous enough! Magic may make up some of the difference, but...honestly...

As to the Shadows of the Empire: they are canon. You must buy the Shadow of the Empire armor from Legnar in the Orzammar Commons to unlock the codex.

33. The Mourning Bride

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 33: The Mourning Bride

There was simply too much to do, and not enough time. Not enough time. Bronwyn needed to go north, and would likely be on her way the day after tomorrow. The party she was choosing to accompany her was something of a headache. She sat down at the work table with Alistair, and went over her list with him.

First things first. "Find Danith, and give her a riding lesson. If there is time for a rest break, give her two. I must take her with me to the other Dalish camp, and I need to be able to move quickly."

"I wish I could go," Alistair sighed. "Teyrn Loghain won't be all butterflies and rainbows to deal with."

She laughed then, at the image of dainty butterflies winging around Loghain's stony face. "I think it will be good for you, Alistair. You're a fine Warden and a splendid warrior. You know what the Wardens can do, and how we can be useful. We have enough Wardens now to take turns scouting. Stand up for yourself and tell him the truth. Believe it or not, that's

what he likes best."

"Maybe he likes it from *you*," Alistair muttered, scratching his head. "Me, on the other hand..."

Bronwyn gave it some thought. "Obviously, I'm not telling you to contradict him in public, standing in the middle of the camp, and speaking as loudly as possible. However, when he asks your opinion, or when he *should* be asking your opinion, don't tell him what you think he wants to hear. Tell him the truth, even if he glares. That's his default expression, anyway. It doesn't mean he's angry. It could mean that he's thinking, or that you've surprised him, or that he wishes you weren't right, or even that it's his special time of day to glare."

Alistair chuckled a little, and blew out a breath, a little overwhelmed. Knight-Commander Killian had glared all the time, too. Alistair had become rather good at interpreting the man's repertory of glares. Maybe he could manage the same feat with Teyrn Loghain.

"Who are you taking with you besides Danith?" he asked, resigned to his dreadful fate.

"Tara. She did very well on the last mission. I think...Jowan, too. It might be better to get him away from Cullen."

"Me, too," Alistair growled. "Watch him, Bronwyn. He's no good. And speaking of no good, are you going to take Zevran again?"

"I think so. He heard that I was going north, and reminded me that he is *my* sworn man, not the Grey Wardens."

"Well...watch him, too!"

She laughed, and squeezed his arm, making him blush a little. "I'll be the soul of prudence and discretion!" She leaned in and spoke softly. "I'm not just going to the Dalish, Alistair. I'm going to Denerim first, with a private message from the Teyrn to the Queen. Don't tell anyone else, but *you* need to know. I'll see the King of course, and try to persuade him to come and greet the elves. It might raise morale if he were here."

"Maybe," he agreed. A brief silence, followed by a sly smile. "I have some news for you, too. I think I've found us another Warden!"

"Someone who *wants* to be a Warden?" Her tone made clear how peculiar she thought that aspiration.

Alistair was a little offended. "Lots of people want to be Wardens!" He added lamely, "Not a lot of people *here*, I know, but still..."

"Is he any good?"

"Not bad at all," Alistair said more cheerfully. "Cullen tried him out on greatsword, which is the lad's chosen weapon. He's from Lothing, and saw us the first time we went through. That's what gave him the idea. He's got some skills."

"He's from Lothing? Why didn't we see him there at the muster?"

"Well, he's pretty young. His mother kept him out of it, he said. It sounds like there's a sickly sister at home. He got fed up and came south to join the King's Army. Even if his mother comes after him, she won't be able to do anything about it. His sergeant thinks a lot of him. There was even talk about transferring him into Maric's Shield. He's that good."

Bronwyn frowned at the idea of recruiting a young boy with his whole life ahead of him into the Wardens. A nice, *normal* boy, with a mother, too: not a spy or a condemned criminal, not someone out of options, with all other doors closed to him.

"I want you to understand, Alistair, that if there weren't a Blight to be dealt with, I would never accept him. It seems so cruel."

"Being a Warden is great!"

He would never understand her, and she would never understand him.

"Being a Warden is a great *sacrifice*. He could *die*, Alistair! We've been very lucky so far with Joinings, but that's bound to end some time. Even if he survives, it means giving up his family and his land and his future children and spending his comparatively short life fighting monsters. And he can't change his mind later, when he knows better."

Alistair shrugged. "I never had a family anyway, so I don't miss it. They tried to make me a Templar, and believe me, that's a lot worse!" He looked at her with brown puppy-dog eyes. "He'd really like to meet you."

"I daresay." Bronwyn rubbed the back of her neck, feeling a headache coming on. "I'll speak to the lad. What's his name?"

"Carver Hawke."

"I suppose I'd better talk to him."

"Er—he's here. I told him to wait outside."

When Bronwyn repeated her reservations to young Hawke, he was unmoved. He was everything she had feared: young, good-looking, innocent, in teenage rebellion against a loving family, and blind to the awful truth about the Wardens.

"I'm *sick* of my family!" he stormed. "I've given up *everything* for them. I've done enough!"

"And just how old are you?" Bronwyn asked, a hint of frost in her voice, "and what exactly have you given up?"

He scuffed on the stones with the toe of his boot, frowning. He did not want to tell her, or could not. Finally, he said, "We had to protect my sister. She's...not like other girls. She stays home a lot. I could never bring my friends there."

Bronwyn asked mildly, "Your sister has recovered, then? She no longer requires your protection?"

Carver Hawke gestured a quick, hot, denial. "She'll *never* be all right! Why should I have to give up my whole life because of *her* problems?"

"I assure you," Bronwyn said grimly, "that if you become a Warden, you will be giving up a great deal more than not being able to invite your friends to your house!"

"I *want* to be a Grey Warden!" young Hawke sulked. "A Grey Warden is *somebody!*"

There was no doubt that they needed more Wardens. How were they to kill that monstrous Archdemon otherwise? Her nightmares were acute, frustrating: populated with the irresistible Horde and a pathetically small force of Wardens.

"Very well," Bronwyn considered. "I will speak to your commander. If he is amenable, we will take you on as a recruit. You will accompany us on some missions, and we shall see how you shape up."

He had a beautiful smile. He was absolutely radiant, poor boy, at the idea of Joining them. She sent him on his way, and then talked it over with Alistair.

"If he turns out all right, have him Join when out in the Wilds on a mission with only Wardens. If he dies, it will be easier to cover it up."

"Right." Alistair saw the sense in that. Bringing the necessary items for a Joining was not that difficult, after all. They went

on with the day's business. Bronwyn ticked off yet another item on her list.

"I don't want Adaia going back and forth to the workshop alone," she said. "Now that she really is a recruit, we owe it to her to see to her safety. I don't trust Vaughan to leave her alone, but you never heard me say that."

Alistair frowned and fidgeted, looking over her shoulder at her notes. Bronwyn had suspected he was unhappy with the situation. "I don't see how you could coddle that—that—man," he complained. "How could you let him call Adaia those filthy names?"

Exasperated, Bronwyn threw up her hands. "What would you have me do? Draw my sword and run him through in front of Teyrn Loghain and the entire army? That would certainly win friends for the Grey Wardens! Shout him down and permanently antagonize not only him, but his father, the Arl of Denerim? We have to work with him, Alistair! We have to work with all sorts of people we may not like. We can't simply take our toys and walk away because some of the powerful nobles of Ferelden are not the nicest people!"

"I've heard *rumors* about Bann Vaughan," Alistair muttered. "Adaia should have had a chance to defend herself."

"I *defended* Adaia!" Bronwyn said impatiently. "Has she been imprisoned, or executed, or rendered over to Vaughan for rape? No. Nothing she could have said would have made a particle of difference to that man. Alistair, he has the *law* on

his side! It doesn't matter if it's a bad law, or an unfair one. All I could do is trump Ferelden law with the ancient rights of the Wardens, which made any crime of hers irrelevant."

"It's not irrelevant to *Adaia*," Alistair pointed out. "She should have a chance to defend herself to you."

Bronwyn frowned, thinking. It truly did not much matter to her what Adaia had done. She could well imagine that the odious Vaughan had provoked the girl in some way, and she had tried to defend herself. Unfortunately, while common Fereldans had the right of self-defense *in theory*, it could be a very murky matter when defending themselves against their rightful lord...or the lord's son and heir.

Still, she admitted to herself, if she were accused of serious crimes and there were mitigating circumstances, she would want to clear the air, so her comrades would not think so ill of her.

"You're right," she decided. "Fetch Adaia from the workshop yourself, and bring her here to me before supper tonight. Tell her I want to hear her side of the story, and that she can have anyone else here she wishes. Or no one else, if she prefers. And if she really doesn't want to tell me, that's her decision, and I won't hold it against her."

Adaia did indeed want to tell her what happened in her own words, with Tara on one side and Danith on the other. She muttered permission for Alistair to stay and hear as well.

Bronwyn did not want this to seem like a trial, and so invited the girl to sit down at the table with her. Nonetheless, there was tension in the air, and the girl sat on the opposite side, seemingly afraid to look her in the eye.

"I just want to give you the opportunity to defend yourself against Bann Vaughan's accusations, Adaia," Bronwyn said mildly. "But it's not a matter for punishment. Alistair has declared you a recruit, and that will not change, no matter what you say today. You are one of us. We thought you would feel better, though, if we made clear that we do not necessarily believe everything Bann Vaughan said."

Adaia mumbled something. Tara whispered to her to speak up. Danith regarded her gravely. Adaia cleared her throat, and croaked, "I'm not a whore. He called me that, but I'm not. I'm not a whore."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?" Tara suggested, "Tell Bronwyn what happened the day Vaughan came to the alienage."

"It wasn't the first time," Adaia said bitterly. "He comes there a lot, and usually we run and hide. I couldn't run that day, because I was getting married."

"Married?" Bronwyn sat up straight, and exchanged surprised glances with Alistair. "You are *married*?"

"Almost," Adaia muttered. Tara gave her an encouraging look. "It was my wedding day. I was all dressed up, 'cos it was my

wedding day. Washed my hair and everything. Put on perfume. Pretty stupid, huh? All it did was make me a target."

Bronwyn began to realize that this was going to be much worse than anything she had imagined.

"Go on, please," she managed.

"I'd never seen my groom before that day, of course," Adaia went on. "It was an arranged marriage, like most in the alienage. The hahren and the rest of the elders try to keep the bloodline going, though Maker knows why. My cousin Soris was getting married, too, and neither of us was happy about it." She gave Danith a wry smile. "We even talked about running away to find the Dalish."

"I wish you had," Danith said, scowling at Bronwyn.

"We probably would have died in the forest, but it wouldn't have been worse than what actually happened. Anyway, Soris met his bride and wasn't pleased, because she wasn't really much to look at. In fact, she was the plainest elf I ever met. Not that that saved her. I feel bad about saying anything about her looks, because she was all right. Better than me, in the end. I was a lot luckier. My groom's name was Nelaros, and he was from the Highever alienage. He was handsome, and he seemed kind, and had a nice way of speaking. I did too, then. Would you believe that I used to be famous in the alienage for my singing? Thought not. Anyway, Nelaros was nice, and I thought that maybe this marriage thing wouldn't be so bad. See, in the alienage you have to be married to be

considered an adult. So we got up on the platform where we have weddings and ceremonies, and the priest showed up with her Templars to protect her from scum like us—"

"Do you remember the priest's name?" Alistair asked.

"It was Mother Boann," Adaia answered instantly. "It's always Mother Boann. She's a do-gooder."

Bronwyn took note of the name, and decided to see if she could find her in Denerim.

"Anyway, we were up on the platform, so everybody in the alienage could witness our marriages, and who should show up but Bann Vaughan and his friends, along with his guard. Mother Boann tries to tell him it's a wedding, and he says that she could dress up her pets however she liked, but it makes no difference to him. He and his friends are having a party, see, so he tells them to grab some whores for the entertainment.

"And that's what happened. Me and Soris' bride Valora, and my cousin Shianni and Nola and Lyris. I begged him just to take me and leave the others alone, but Vaughan laughed, and said that 'wouldn't be much of a party!'"

Bronwyn couldn't believe Vaughan's brazen effrontery. "He did this in front of your *father*—and all the other elves?" She found it hard to believe that a father would not defend his own daughter.

"What were they supposed to do?" Adaia challenged her. "They begged for mercy, of course, but if they had so much as raised a hand, Vaughan would have had his men slaughter everybody, and then the good people of Denerim would be proud of their Bann for keeping the peace and saving them from the vicious, rioting elves!" She added bitterly, "It's easy for Vaughan and his guards to be brave, when they've made it a crime for an elf to own a weapon!"

That was too true for debate, so Bronwyn nodded at her, wanting her to go on.

"So we were dragged away. Someone knocked me in the head, so I don't remember anything until I woke up in a locked room with the other girls. We were all really scared, and Lyris said we would just have to let them do whatever they liked. With luck, they'd let us go afterward, and then we'd go home and never, ever talk about it again."

Bronwyn was still shocked. "Has Vaughan done things like this before?"

Adaia looked at her as if she were insane. "All the time. What's to stop him?"

Bronwyn was silent. Alistair remembered how Arlessa Isolde had treated her elven maids.

Adaia shrugged. "He's something you have to look out for. There's only one law that matters in the Alienage: a human can do anything he likes to you, if you don't run fast enough.

And if you resist, you and all your family will die." She thought a little more. "Lots of nobles and rich men look for girls in the Alienage, but Vaughan started early. Some men will take care of their bastards, but Vaughan won't. Elva was the first, and she tried to go to him and ask for help after he got her with child, but he threw her out, after he turned her over to the men in the guardhouse first."

"Did she...lose...the child?" Bronwyn asked.

Adaia shook her head. "That was probably what he wanted, but no, she wasn't that lucky. She had the baby all right, and her family made her do the sensible thing. She left it at the Chantry door. When humans and elves produce a child, the child always comes out human—shemlen. That means 'quickling' in the old Elvish tongue, because in ancient times elves were immortal, and humans so short-lived. It would be insane to raise a human-looking child in the Alienage, and the elders wouldn't put up with it, anyway. So Elva gave her child to the Chantry to raise, and her family found an older man who was looking for a second wife. She's pretty bitter."

Danith frowned, nodding. It made perfect sense to give shemlen children to the shemlens. Keeping them in the Alienage would simply further thin to nothing what little remained of elven blood there. That the shemlen lord was a tyrant was nothing more than she expected, but she could see that the Commander was disturbed by this: being a young woman, it was possible that she had been sheltered from such things, by whatever sense of decency shemlen males could command.

Tara fidgeted in her chair, growing ever more angry. Either it was the Chantry persecuting mages, or it was some bullying human noble persecuting elves. Bronwyn clearly had no idea how bad it was in an Alienage. She had mentioned that there was an Alienage in her own town of Highever, but she probably never went there. On the other hand, it was impossible to believe that Bronwyn's brother, the handsome and gallant Teyrn Fergus, who had spoken to them all so politely, could ever behave like that monster Vaughan. He had defended Adaia, after all, and had asked nothing of her in return. It would not be fair to judge all humans to be the same, when Tara's own experience showed her that it was simply not so.

"So you were knocked out and dragged away..." Tara prompted Adaia, wanting to get back to the girl's story.

"Right." Adaia was still a moment, reliving the memory. "So Shianni told me we were at the Arl of Denerim's estate, locked up in a room near the kitchen. Vaughan was hardly going to drag us in through the front door, after all. Even as prisoners, we were only good enough for the servants' entrance." She managed a brief, halfhearted chuckle. Alistair understood exactly how she felt.

Adaia said, "Nola was babbling prayers to the Maker. Like *that* was going to help... Anyway, some guards showed up to take us to the 'party.' Nola started crying, and told them they couldn't do this to us. So they killed her."

Bronwyn stared. "Killed her? For crying and praying?"

"Yup. Cut her open like a pig. They told us that was what happened to knife-eared whores who didn't shut up. After the first few screams, it shut us up, all right. We were too scared to make a sound."

"None of you were armed?" Danith broke in. "You could not fight these shemlens?"

Adaia rolled her eyes. "Of course we weren't armed! It's illegal for elves to have weapons. You can be killed on sight for carrying a sword or a bow. Besides, we were dressed up for a wedding. A *wedding!* That meant fancy dresses, and no place to hide a knife. We weren't expecting to have to go into battle!"

Bronwyn said quietly, "But you did fight, eventually."

"I had to!" Adaia burst out hoarsely. "When someone's trying to kill you, you fight! You have to! Even an animal fights when someone comes to kill it."

Scout looked up at her quizzically, from where he was sprawled on the floor.

Adaia looked right back at him. "I *know*," she said, "everybody knows about mabaris. I mean regular animals like cats and mice, not warrior animals like you. I wish you'd been there. You'd have shown them," she muttered. "We've got dogs in the Alienage, but they're nothing like Scout. Of course, we couldn't have afforded to feed a dog as big as him either."

That was probably true, Scout allowed. He subsided, and lay back down at Bronwyn's feet.

"So they took Shianni and Valora and Lyris. They left me for later, they said. Bann's orders. I guess he had something special planned for me. A couple of the guards stayed behind, looking Nola over. One of them said she was still warm, and asked the other how particular he was. But they left and followed the others, so I guess they were just making a sick joke. They locked me in again, just me and Nola, and I sat there while time passed, and the flies buzzed. I wanted to cover Nola with something, but there was nothing in the room to do it with. I had to move away from her, because there was a lot of blood, and it got black and sticky after a while. I closed her eyes, anyway."

She fidgeted on the bench, unsure how much to tell. It would be terrible if the elven servants who had helped her got into trouble. Looking stupid and saying *"I don't know, master,"* only got you so far.

"Then I heard the door being unlocked. It was my cousin Soris. He had friends who worked in the kitchens, and they let him in through the servants' entrance. He told me that Nelaros was with him, and had gone ahead to check things out. Soris had knives, and gave me one. We wanted to see if we could get to Shianni and the others and help them escape. I was so scared, but I couldn't just run away. The cook—he was a human—saw us and started shouting. So we killed him." She glared defiantly at Bronwyn, and ducked her head.

She went on: "The servants—the other elves—made themselves scarce. We could get as far as we did because there weren't as many guards as usual. The old Arl had taken a bunch of them when he went south. We didn't know where to go, so we just went from room to room, with our heads down, trying not to be seen. Sometimes that worked. We were just elves, after all, and most people thought we were servants."

She was not going to tell Bronwyn and Alistair about the sleeping, off-duty guardsmen she had killed on impulse. It had felt right, but humans might not see it that way. She had taken everything they had, too, and it had made her feel a little bit better.

"We got to a big room where the guardsmen had their meals—the mess hall—" she said, using the term she had learned here at Ostagar. "Some guards had spotted Nelaros, and knew he didn't belong, and I guess he said something they didn't like, because one of them ran him through. Soris and I rushed at them, and I stabbed one in the back, before he even knew I was there. There were only three of them, and I was so angry that they were dead before I knew it. All I could see was Nelaros, bleeding to death. He was there to save me, and he'd never even seen me before that morning."

She wiped her nose. "He was dying. There wasn't anything I could do. He smiled at me, sort of—he was gritting his teeth against the pain, too. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a ring. It was my wedding ring. He wanted me to have it." She put out her hand, and showed them a thin silver band. "Then

blood came out of his mouth and he was dead."

There was a long silence. Bronwyn waited for the girl to go on. After a few moments of thought, she did.

"It seemed stupid to go so far and for Nelaros to be killed, and then run away. So we went on. We had blood on us, and I felt like everybody could see me. We found a long hall, and opened all the doors. Sometimes we had to fight. At the end," she sighed, remembering that awful moment, "we opened the wrong door. Or the right door. I don't know. This big guardsmen in armor rushed out at us. We had picked up some better weapons by then, but of course all the armor we found was too big. The guard knocked me down and hacked at Soris—" another pause. "and I jumped on his back, and cut his throat. But it was too late."

"Soris died?" Tara asked softly.

"His head was almost off," Adaia whispered, hardly daring to believe it. "Almost off. And after all that, I couldn't go any farther. I got into the room he was guarding. Through the door to the next room I could hear Shianni screaming and the men laughing. I don't think they even heard the fight outside, they were making so much noise. And the door was locked. I tried to open it, but it was locked. I sat on the stone floor and cried. I could have pounded on the door, and they might have opened, but there were four of them and just one of me, and Soris was dead."

Tara put an arm around her. Danith was silent, thinking of

Tamlen, lost in a dark cavern: Tamlen, whom she would never see again, whose fate she would never know. Alistair looked at Bronwyn in helpless indignation.

"Thirsty," Adaia croaked. Tara poured her a cup of ale, and the girl drank it down, clearing her throat. "So I left," she said. "I'd come so far, but I left with my tail between my legs. I walked out the way I came, and a guard caught me. He had been in the dungeons, and came up and found the bodies. He saw the blood on me. He hit me with the pommel of his knife—" she touched the side of her head, "and he hit me again and again, and he dragged me into his room. I tried to fight, but he started choking me."

She would not tell them all that happened. She would never tell anyone about the stuffy room, and the horribly strong shem grunting on top of her. "I couldn't breathe," she whispered. "I felt something pop in my throat. I got hold of his dagger and I stabbed him in the side of the neck. We fought a long time. I got hurt, but he died. There was water in the room. I cleaned myself up, and then I ran. I ran all the way home, and I went down into the cellar and curled up and never wanted to go anywhere else. My voice has been wrong ever since."

Tara said, "Shianni survived. We saw her in Denerim."

"Yeah, she survived. After she passed out, they forgot about her. She staggered home with Lyris a few days later. They were in bad shape. Nobody's ever going to marry them now. Valora died. They tried to make her do something so awful

that she bit Vaughan and cut his face with a broken bottle. So they tortured her to death and hung her naked body outside the estate as a warning. We don't know what they did with Nola. Probably threw her away in a midden somewhere, or in the river."

Bronwyn wanted a drink herself. All of this had triggered memories of the night of blood and death at Highever Castle. Had Mother died fighting, or had she been taken prisoner? What would Howe have done to her, when she was at his mercy? What would he have done to Bronwyn herself? She got up and walked away, looking out the window, willing her hands not to shake, as she tried to pour herself some ale. Alistair followed, and poured it for her. Vaughan needed to die, he decided, but how could it be done without hurting the Wardens?

Tara fought off the nausea at memories of anonymous Templars. She knew what it was like to think that you were dying. Things were never the same after. The world was never the same after. She hugged Adaia with one arm, while watching Bronwyn pace back and forth.

She whispered to the other girls, "Bronwyn's family was murdered before she became a Grey Warden. All but her and her brother."

Danith had been told that before, and had not been much moved. The Commander was decent, for a shemlen, but the deaths of her shemlen family meant little to Danith. Still, knowing what had befallen her was reason to hope she might

have some compassion for the sufferings of the city elf.

Tara's words only annoyed Adaia. What did she care? She was talking Soris and Shianni, and there was no room for anyone else. Angry as she was, she did get the message that Tara thought that Lady Bronwyn would understand what it was to lose family.

Bronwyn got herself under control, thinking of the smug and smarmy Vaughan, and how she had smiled at him the night before. How many men—noblemen of Ferelden—were just like him? How many raped and killed as they liked, with no one to call their power to account? It was as bad as the Orlesians. In fact, it was *exactly* like the worst Orlesians, with not a pin to choose between them. How many noble sons had she danced with, and hunted with, and smiled and chatted with, who had gone home to terrified servant girls, or innocents dragged off the streets? Surely Fergus would never...?

Her breathing slowed. No, she was sure of Fergus. He did not hurt people because he could. The servants had never gossiped about him. He had never hurt Oriana by looking at another woman after they were married. Anyone else, though... She thought of drunken, silly Thomas Howe, and was once again glad, glad, a *thousand* times glad that she had not allowed herself to be talked into a marriage with him.

But there was nothing she could do about Vaughan at the moment. She would be gone in a day or two, and must rely on Alistair to keep Adaia safe. Nor could she challenge Vaughan,

even had she had the time. The army must be united against the darkspawn. They needed the Arl of Denerim's troops. Highever was in contention, and Fergus needed the Arl of Denerim's vote in the Landsmeet. Vaughan's, too, for that matter. She must be careful and cunning, and keep her people safe: smiling at Vaughan while loathing him in her heart. It was a disgusting double game, and the idea of it made her feel dirty. For the moment, she could see no other choice.

She finally turned to the others and said, "Adaia, I'm glad that you honor the sacrifice of Nelaros by wearing his ring. It does you credit. I don't want to you go about the camp alone. Vaughan is just the sort to feel he's been robbed of his prey. Always have someone with you coming and going to your workshop. I've talked to Alistair about that."

"Right," he seconded her fiercely. "We'll stand by you. There's always someone in the workshop, so wait until one of us comes for you in the afternoon. You're one of us, now."

Bronwyn nodded her approval. "Vaughan had been told to leave you alone. He doesn't want to offend me, so if he tries anything, it would be by stealth. You must all keep your eyes open."

With a hint of truculence, Adaia croaked, "You don't want to ask if I stole anything?"

"No," Bronwyn said briefly. "Of course you picked up weapons when you were fighting. Everyone does that. I know that Vaughan was lying when he claimed that what you had stolen

amounted to a sovereign! He knew it would be impossible to prove otherwise." She took another sip of ale, and resumed her pacing.

So Adaia said nothing about the necklace she had found in one of the rooms they had gone into when they were searching for Shianni. Or about the gold ring the big guardsmen had been wearing. The ring had only brought a few silvers at Alarith's shop, since both the merchant and Father knew it was stolen, but those silvers had been welcome. The necklace had brought nothing. It was still hidden in the cellar. Someday it might be safe to sell it. It might bring in quite a bit of silver, since it had a glittering red stone in it.

"I've killed, but I'm not a *whore*," Adaia repeated, a little fiercely.

"Of course you're not!" Bronwyn said impatiently. "That's something rotten men call any woman who gets in their way. I've been called a whore myself, generally by men I killed a few seconds later."

"That's true," Alistair agreed, a little cheered at the thought.

Danith said stiffly, "We do not have whores or whoring among the Dalish, nor do our men call women by such names. And rape is very rare, and punished harshly."

Bronwyn bit back something she would have regretted. Tara said tactfully, "That's very civilized. I've been called a whore,

too, when I was a prisoner. It's also what some men call women when they want to give themselves a excuse why it's all right to attack them. Some men feel that a whore cannot be raped."

"That is a *ridiculous* notion," Danith declared. "Only a sh-a brute could believe that." Perhaps it would not be appropriate to accuse the shemlens to the Commander's face. And for all she knew, perhaps the city flat-ears and the dwarves practiced rape, as well. She eyed the big shemlen male accusingly.

Alistair looked at them, feeling harassed. Why were these women were glaring at *him*? "I've never done *anything* like that. Grey Wardens don't. We respect women. If we're men. And women respect...men. And themselves. Anyway, of course it's ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous or not," Bronwyn said, "we must accept the reality that some people think that way. Therefore, we must be watchful. This does not hold for only elves, by the way. Morrigan, has also been accosted here in camp, the last time we were here. I shall speak to the other women among our companions. However, Adaia, you are in particular peril, because you have a personal enemy. Be on your guard, and most importantly, do not allow yourself to be *alone*."

"If Bronwyn won't go for it, you *know* Alistair won't." Anders lay facing Morrigan on their cot, stroking her back. It was a quiet moment, a moment to be cherished; and he was

reluctant to get up, leave their enchanted privacy, and venture into the cacophony of Ostagar. His old friends from the Circle—and even some who had never been friends—all wanted to meet Morrigan, and talk to Morrigan, and learn all about a mage who had not needed the imprisonment in the Circle to learn her skills. On her own, she had remained both free of the Templars and demonic possession. Her very existence was a rebuke to the heavy hand of the Chantry. And no maleficar she: Morrigan regarded Blood Magic with contempt, as a shortcut seized upon out of magical weakness.

She was decent enough to Jowan, which rather surprised Anders; but it was true that while Jowan was a Blood Mage, he had proved himself an independent thinker, who had boldly cast off the authority of the Circle. Furthermore, he had survived on his own. Even Morrigan acknowledged that his first days outside the Circle he had known all his life must have been bewildering.

Jowan really was not such a weak mage, when Anders looked at it critically. He had fought very effectively in that battle to defend the refugees. He lacked confidence, certainly. Perhaps that was the root of his problem. He had been a late bloomer, and his instructors at the Circle were merciless. His fellow apprentices, too, had been relentless in their teasing. He had clung to his only friend, Tara, who in contrast had been a prodigy from an early age. Anders supposed that measuring himself against her would have been an exercise in humiliation for Jowan in those first years, and something he had never quite got over.

If Morrigan were to be protected, they would need all the mages—all their little company, in fact—to work together. Perhaps Bronwyn would see it from that angle. She was friendly with Morrigan, and Morrigan actually seemed to like her and respect the young noblewoman—at least, as much as Morrigan liked or respected anybody. Yes. Morrigan was in danger. Morrigan was a comrade. Bronwyn was certainly one to stand by her comrades. But if they were to get her approval, they would have to talk to her immediately. Bronwyn was talking about going north to find that other Dalish clan, and would be leaving soon.

"Let's go talk to her tonight," Anders suggested, "Show her the book. Tell her Flemeth's plan."

"Flemeth rescued her brother. Perhaps Bronwyn feels a debt to her for that. She is unlikely to turn on one she regards as a benefactor."

"But she didn't *like* Flemeth. You said they looked like they were quarreling when they were out of earshot."

"*Like?*" Morrigan laughed, a whispery, throaty sound, her breath tickling his lips enticingly. "Well, no. Of course not. No one could *like* Flemeth: someone like Bronwyn least of all. However, she is just the sort to feel bound by duty and obligation and the rest of that tiresome rubbish."

"Then we have to give her really good reasons to look beyond that. Your danger is certainly a good reason. We need her to *want* to kill Flemeth. What, besides protecting you, could

Flemeth's death do for Bronwyn?"

Morrigan paused, her hand resting on Anders' warm and well-formed shoulder. He really was a *very* comely man, by the far the most agreeable she had ever known. Sometimes she thought that it might be pleasant to remain in company with him indefinitely...

But he must not know the reason that Flemeth had manipulated Morrigan's placement amongst the Wardens. He must never know. The Old God Reborn was the great goal. To be the mother to such a God was her destiny. Anders was merely the tool, an essential tool in that endeavor. If he failed her, there were others who could be cozened or beguiled. Her mind, reluctantly, slid to Jowan—a poor second to Anders indeed, and then, with even more reluctance, to Cullen and Alistair. She would do as she must, in the end. She took her herbal tea regularly, protecting her from a premature conception that would ruin everything.

And it was for their own good, after all. Morrigan would save them, even if they never knew what she had done. The Old God would be preserved from the Taint, and Bronwyn would survive, and perhaps even marry that irascible, middle-aged hero with whom she was incomprehensibly in love. Tara would survive, and become the Senior Mage Warden she aspired to be. Those two were the only women friends Morrigan had ever had, and she confessed to a sentimental wish that they not die in slaying the Archdemon. They were very much at risk, as they were outstanding fighters and likely to take their responsibility seriously—unlike *some*.

And Anders... Flemeth's plan demanded that Morrigan leave the party and seek solitude before delivering the Child, but Morrigan was inclined now to think that was simply Flemeth making things easy for herself. Flemeth, it now was clear, had not told her everything—or even the most important things. It was hideously possible that once Morrigan had suffered pregnancy and labor, and perhaps had cared for the Child through its exasperating first year, that Flemeth planned to make an appearance and take Morrigan's body and the Child for herself.

Perhaps it would be wise to keep Anders about. Even if he sensed something odd in her, he might think it had come from him, and would continue to help and protect her. Perhaps the other Wardens would feel the same. The Wardens sensed Taint, but they would not sense an untainted God Child. She hoped.

But it was best to be rid of Flemeth now, and not live in fear. How could she forge the Wardens into a weapon to strike at her mortal enemy?

"There *is* something Flemeth can offer Bronwyn..." she murmured. She smiled darkly at Anders.

"Practice."

Rumor in Denerim had it that the Queen was pregnant. That was the word on the street, Fergus was informed of this by

the seneschal of Highever House. The man actually begged the teyrn to confirm it, hope brightening his eyes. The servants paused at their work, leaning in, longing for the happy news. Fergus told them the truth: that the Queen was unwell, and not expecting; and he was sorry for their disappointment. He was sorry for his own, for that matter. If the Queen were to produce a child, it would put paid to the King's flirtation with Orlais. Surely the Divine would not countenance dissolving a fruitful marriage?

But there was no child, nor did there seem to be any prospect of one, with the Queen unwell and the King making hay with his mistresses. Nor were any of said mistresses pregnant. Even a bastard would have been *something*, but to Fergus' knowledge, the King had never sired a child. It was unlikely he would do so on Empress Celene, either, though that was probably not going to prevent her from giving birth to an heir she would attribute to Cailan. There were all sorts of stratagems available to an unscrupulous woman. It spoke well for Queen Anora's character that she had not taken recourse to any of them.

At last, the King had given his leave for Fergus to march on Amaranthine. The Queen had not been present at the Council meeting, but Fergus had decided to pay a courtesy call on her before departing, if she was well enough to receive him.

It bothered him that the King did not seem worried about his wife's condition, when she had been ill for over a week. Fergus thought it would be appropriate to take the Queen a gift—some little thing to lift her spirits.

Useless to try to give her flowers: the Palace boasted the finest garden in Denerim. There was no time to visit the shops, so he poked through the chests and closets of Highever House. There was quite a bit here, though of course they had carted most of their belongings back and forth between Highever Castle and the city estate...

"Who is it, Erlina?" asked a soft, weary voice.

"Do not distress yourself, Majesty. He is going," the maid crooned.

"Who *is* it?"

"It is the Teyrn of Highever, Majesty," Erlina replied, in a more subdued tone.

"I want to see him. Send him in. Do not contradict me."

Fergus had heard she was not well, but her condition looked serious to him. Perhaps it seemed more so since he had not seen her in a week. The Queen was ghostly pale, and had noticeably lost weight.

"Come to gather intelligence for the rest of the Landsmeet?" she asked. Her tone was ironic, and just the least bit defensive.

"I have come to wish you in better health, Your Majesty," Fergus replied gravely. "And to give you a present."

That merited a little interest from her, and he held the anonymous object, wrapped in a piece of lavender silk, in his outstretched left hand. With his right hand, he whisked the silk away.

It was a little glass music box, Tranquil-made, enchanted to play "Princess on the Glass Hill," whenever the rune was touched. Inside, a little princess with braids of real gold sat on a throne, holding a rose. It was a piece of nonsense, of course, as Oriana had said, finding it a bit unsophisticated and very *Fereldan*. She had kept it at Highever House, purely to please him, he knew. It was hardly his fault that she had not grown up with the story.

It was a silly trifle, and Fergus was beginning to feel a hint of embarrassment, when Anora said, "How charming! Let me see it, my lord."

He showed her where to touch it, and she smiled a little, listening to the faint crystalline tune.

"I shall put it here on the table. How kind of you, my lord, to think of something to divert me. Sit, I pray you. I was about to have tea. Would you not join me? Erlina," she raised her voice slightly, "The Teyrn will stay for tea. Make enough for two today. Now, my lord," she said to Fergus, "tell me how you plan to approach Vigil's Keep."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

The maid left the room and sighed, emptying the contents of

the pretty Orlesian pot into the slop jar and rinsing it carefully. She would have to brew it all over again, without the powder. It would raise more questions than she could answer, were the Teyrn to sicken, too. These things always took longer than one planned...

Thanks to my reviewers: What Ithacas Mean, almostinsane, butterflygrl, Judy, Sash'Rahaal, BucklesintheSun, Costin, Eva Galana, Zute, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, mutive, EmbertoInferno, Jenna53, Angurvddel, Remenants, Josie Lange, xJanelex, Gene Dark, JackOfBladesX, callalili, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Lehni, gaj620, Lord of Murder, Spoit0, The Moidart, Eliar, euromellows, Aoi24, Windchime68, Enaid Aderyn, Shakespeira, AllyRoonya, Have Socks Will Travel, Dante Alighieri1308, Menamebephil, mille libri, chocolatebrownie12, Blinded in a bolthole, Juliafied, RobotPirateNinja, Piceron, derko5, and Halm Vendrella. I think the last chapter garnered the highest number of reviews so far.

A few reviewers did not sign in, and so I was previously unable to reply to some of your remarks.

Eliar—Your points about assembling and holding together a medieval army are very well taken.

AllyRoonya—No, I'm not going to pair everyone up. And Erlina was definitely wrong in dismissing Bronwyn's ability to interfere, Grey Warden or no.

Remenants—Yes, everyone in Orlais above the rank of peasant is in fact a half-sociopathic backstabber. Heh. Just kidding. Sort of. Interesting idea about Nate. I was inclined to think that Rendon is simply keeping one of his children out of the line of fire, so there will still be Howes if everything goes pear-shaped. However, your idea is a good one...

Butterflygrrl—You betcha Vaughan knows Melian/Adaia's name, address, and serial number. Just like a really rich swine with a giant-sized sense of entitlement would find out everything about some kid who dented his car. Even if it was his own fault.

34. Asha'bellanar

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 34: Asha'bellanar

For months, Vigil's Keep had been on alert, like a beast about to spring. Gold had flowed in and then out, and the forces of the Arl of Amaranthine had never been so numerous, or so superbly equipped.

"Message for the Arl!" shouted the horseman. The gate guard recognized him, and let him through, but the guard at the inner courtyard demanded the password as well.

"*Avvar!*" the horseman snapped. "Don't delay me! His lordship will flay you if you keep this news from him." He jumped down, right leg flicking over the horse's neck, and hurried through the throne room.

"Where is he?" he asked the seneschal, not even pausing to shed his wet cloak.

"His study. Follow me."

Eyes followed the courier. Soldiers nudged one another, wondering if they would finally get the order to do something other than wait. Rendon Howe's troops were prey to dozens

of rumors: that the King would march on them and put everyone in Vigil's Keep to the sword; that the Arl would march on Denerim and defend the King and Queen from the Cousland conspiracy; that Teyrn Loghain was coming to join them, or to mediate the differences between the Crown and the Arl; that the so-called "darkspawn" were really Orlesians in disguise; that the darkspawn were real, but were controlled by the mages at the Circle; that Fergus Cousland would send Crow assassins against the Arl and his family.

Howe was widely respected, but not loved, so there were other rumors: that the Couslands had been innocent of treason, and the attack on them had been an attempt to seize by force what the Arl had not been able to win by marriage; that the Arl had hoped to keep secret his own part in the attack, and blame it on rogue mercenaries; that the Teyrna of Highever was a prisoner in the deepest dungeons, and visited regularly by the Arl; that the Arl had sent for his eldest child, Lord Nathaniel, and was planning to marry him to the old Teyrn's daughter to make peace; that the old Teyrn's daughter was now the famous Girl Warden, fighting to save Ferelden from the darkspawn; that the Girl Warden was a dangerous siren who had seduced Teyrn Loghain, or King Cailan, or the new Dwarven King, or the Knight-Commander of the Templars—or all of them at various times.

Up the stairs and down a hall were the Arl's private quarters. It was not very far from the Throne Room, in fact. The courier had served Arl Howe for many years, and knew that the late Arlessa's rooms were in a distant tower, so as to be as far

from the Arl as possible. The Arl's daughter had taken over those rooms after her mother died. The Arl approved of that, wanting her protected from danger and from rough-tongued soldiers. The heir, Lord Thomas, had a fine bedchamber near his father, but preferred to sleep in the knights' quarters: drinking, most of the time, it was said.

The seneschal announced him, and the courier was shown in. There was the Arl, at work at his desk, looking over some maps with his faithful right-hand, Captain Chase.

"Ah, Catesby," Rendon Howe turned cold grey eyes on the messenger. "What news from Denerim?"

A little later, a pair of guardsmen were called to the Arl's study. The seneschal was grim and non-committal, and instructed the men to take the dead body of the courier to the common midden for disposal.

"Andraste's tits," grunted one. "Remind me never to give the Old Man news he don't like!"

Useless fools. Rendon Howe stormed down to the armory, cursing quietly and thoroughly. *I am surrounded by fools.*

Catesby had not seen Marjolaine in Denerim. No one answered the door. It was believed that she had gone a long journey. Wherever she had gone, it was not north to report to her employer. Where the bloody Maker was the woman? Howe had not heard from her since her last message,

advising him to wait for Fergus Cousland's arrest. That, apparently, was not happening any time soon. Instead, the King was on his way south to rejoin the army, and Fergus Cousland had been given leave to seek revenge. Catesby had left the advancing troops only half a day behind.

Everything was bloody falling apart. The Crows had failed to kill either Bronwyn or Fergus. Filthy foreign cheats. And now, news had come to Denerim that the bloody Girl Warden had arrived at Ostagar at the head of an army of four thousand dwarves. If that were not bad enough, she had made contact with the Dalish, who were sending a company of archers. Bloody Bronwyn Cousland. She had given him the slip at Highever, and was as great a danger to him as her brother. The girl who had thought herself too good for Thomas was now very close in Loghain's councils, and the whispered rumor was that they were lovers.

Bryce had fed him some codswallop about her being *in love*, as an excuse to refuse the Howe alliance. Well, she must have got over being *in love* quick smart, if she was bartering herself to Loghain. At that, she was showing more sense than he had anticipated. He should have remembered how talented Couslands were at ingratiating themselves with those in power. He had occasionally wondered if Bryce would try for a marriage alliance there, but had dismissed it, knowing how disinclined Loghain was to match himself to a highborn, high-maintenance bride. Bronwyn's tomboy antics must have amused Loghain, or recalled happier days to him. The girl did resemble Queen Rowan slightly, though the relationship was

very distant.

And that greedy fool Vaughan had been sent to Ostagar in his father's place, thus putting an end to Howe's profitable trade in elves. Urien was too cautious an old fox to take part in such a scheme, and it was too late to deal with him, anyway.

It had been, he admitted, too good to last, but had filled the coffers of Vigil's Keep with more gold than he had seen in all the years he had ruled Amaranthine. That gold might be his only salvation now: with it he had fortified the Vigil, strengthening the walls and hiring soldiers. No ordinary force could take this fortress, and if he held out long enough, Fergus and his troops would break on the granite of the curtain walls. The darkspawn continued to be a menace in the south. If Howe could hold out long enough, he might manage to kill Fergus and wring a settlement. Now that Bronwyn was a Grey Warden, she could not inherit. Fergus' brat was dead. Once Fergus was out of the way, Thomas or Nathaniel still had a good chance of keeping Highever...

He met with the rest of his captains, and gave his orders quickly, tersely. A message to Esmerelle in Amaranthine; more messages to the Packtons and Tyrells. They were well-stocked as to victuals. He had been taking his duties from freeholders in kind instead of in coin since the profitable trade with the Tevinters had begun.

To one of his men-at-arms, he said, "Find Lady Delilah. Escort her to her rooms, and lock her in. No one goes in, and she does not come out. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord!"

"And you—" Howe said to another soldier. "Send my son to me."

"May I speak to you in private?" Bronwyn asked Loghain softly, as dinner ended.

He smirked, half-amused. Apparently there had been some sort of foolish gossip about the two of them. Soldiers were easily bored.

"If you dare."

A dutiful smile, not concealing her vexation. Bronwyn no longer blushed so readily, but she was still quite young and still easily unsettled by his notice. It was a poignant pleasure, to realize that she was stirred by him. She must have heard the gossip, too. Naturally, a young lady felt rather differently about that sort of gossip that a man in his position. A smile rose to his lips, irresistible.

Her fine hound was lounging on the floor between them. Loghain tossed the dog a tidbit from his plate, which Scout snapped up almost without moving his head. A lazy tailwag expressed his thanks.

She was playing with her food now, Grey Warden appetite or not, and was clearly anxious to have her say. He rose, acknowledged the salutes, and led the way to his office, her

dog trotting along behind them. Waving her in, he shut the door, with a brief, hard look at the guard. He wanted no eavesdroppers, whatever Bronwyn had to tell him. The dog found a corner and sprawled there, completely at ease.

Bronwyn took the chair he pointed her to, and was actually blushing again. He had missed that, but forbore to smile, which would make her even more uncomfortable. At some point, he must speak to her. Not now, of course, but someday, when the worst was behind them.

She began without preamble. "I've had some extraordinary news. I had planned to leave tomorrow, but perhaps I can put off my departure a day or so. My people have given me word of a dragon near to hand. And not just a dragon: a High Dragon."

Loghain frowned at her. "My scouts have given me no word of such a creature." She looked unsurprised. "This dragon has wit enough to remain invisible, until it is sufficiently provoked. You know—" she paused, and looked at him with those piercing green eyes. He was growing used to the strange color. It was odd, but rather beautiful.

She began again. "Morrigan is a shape-shifter, taught by Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds herself. Flemeth is also, obviously, a shape-shifter. Morrigan tells me that her most powerful form is that of a High Dragon."

He stared at her, trying to see what lay behind her eyes. "And why would Morrigan tell such a story about her mother?"

"Because Flemeth is not her mother at all. When I was riding to Denerim, Morrigan and her mage friends took advantage of my absence to penetrate the Tower of Magi and abscond with a book that was once Flemeth's. In it, the witch reveals the secret of her long life."

He waited.

Bronwyn grimaced with distaste. She had been reluctant to strike at one who had saved her brother, but what Flemeth had planned for Morrigan—and for an infinite series of innocent girls—was unspeakable. It was reason enough to put an end to her.

"Every few decades, Flemeth abducts a girl child with the gift of magic. She raises and teaches the girl, training her magic to its fullest capacity. When that is done, she takes possession of the girl's body for herself, condemning her 'child's' soul to oblivion. So she has done since the Towers Age. Morrigan was to develop her magic with the challenges of our expedition. At some point, Flemeth planned to take the body for herself, and thus enjoy whatever rewards and benefits accrued to Morrigan for her loyalty to our company and to Ferelden."

It was an extraordinary story, indeed, but Loghain thought Flemeth capable of anything.

"I take it that Morrigan does not wish to be possessed?"

She smiled slightly. "It would seem not. I had wondered what

was wrong with her for the past week. She has quietly boiled with fear and anger since she comprehended certain passages in Flemeth's grimoire. She approached me, asking for my protection. That Flemeth will almost certainly, if attacked, transform into a High Dragon would give us the opportunity to test our tactics and weapons against a formidable opponent. Morrigan asks only that she not be present, as she fears that once dead, Flemeth would attempt to possess her on the spot. She believes that distance would be her best defense in this situation. However, I would bring all the rest of my Wardens and other companions to the fight. We might also try a ballista or two, if they can be positioned stealthily. The darkspawn, from your account, have been quiescent for several days, especially to the west. This might be our best opportunity."

"Flemeth is a powerful mage. Have you considered asking the assistance of the Templars in camp?"

"I considered, but rejected the idea. Morrigan tells me that Templars have not had much success against Flemeth in the past." The stories, in fact, were horrifying. It was hideous, what Morrigan had been forced to watch, when living with that abomination. "Alistair and Cullen, of course, have had Templar training, and possess all the usual abilities. We can see if they are useful when supported by other tactics."

Loghain considered the proposal. It was tempting: very tempting. Flemeth's malicious predictions had pursued and haunted him for years.

"If you keep him near you, he will betray you: each time worse than the last."

So she had declared to Maric. A vicious lie, of course. He had never betrayed Maric. Yes, he and Rowan had been lovers, but only when Maric had cast Rowan aside for that treacherous elf Katriel in the most egregious, humiliating way. Rowan had needed the support and validation of Loghain's love.

As to dealing with Cailan—well, he refused to feel bound by the ridiculous prophecy or by his ties to Maric. The son was not the father, and if Cailan planned to betray Ferelden—as he so obviously did—then Loghain felt all obligation to the son was at an end.

Flemeth. There would be a real satisfaction in putting an end to that sinister creature. She would pour no more poison into men's ears: spread no more lies. And if what Bronwyn told him was true—murder no more young girls.

"Very well. We move out at dawn. We shall take my engineers and two of their portable ballistae. A company of archers, too. Perhaps some of Maric's Shield/ Do you need more mages?"

"I think that would be an *excellent* idea. I wish I knew more about the tactics of the Nevarran dragon-hunters. I don't know much more than that they hunted the creatures nearly to extinction. What weapons they used...how large their hunting parties were...this is all a mystery."

Loghain grunted. He knew nothing about it either, and had never seen a book that dealt with it. It was one of those things that belonged to the distant past, right up until it didn't. "Better for a bit of overkill than to be unprepared. We'll have a surprise for Flemeth. By the way..." he paused, "I'd like to have one of your Wardens with me, so the darkspawn don't ruin the effect. Perhaps that new mage of yours—the dark-haired one..."

"All right," Bronwyn agreed, thinking it a very reasonable precaution, and very glad he had not asked for Tara, who was a superior battlemage, or for Anders, their healer. "I'll let him know that he'll be with you."

"—and I'd like a map to Flemeth's lair, if that is possible."

Melian Tabris was guarded by one of the Grey Wardens both going and coming to her labors in the bomb workshop.

So Vaughan's man told him. It was annoying, but not surprising. Bronwyn Cousland had made a pet of the elf. Noblewomen sometimes did such things. His own mother had filled her apartments at the city estate with her pets: lapdogs, cats, nugs from Orzammar—and elves, too. Vaughan had learned early not to risk Mamma's wrath by harming one of them. Ladies were fond of small, pretty creatures, and liked to have them about. If one of Mamma's pets displeased her, she always saw to the punishments—or disposal—herself.

Father thought highly of Bronwyn, and was disappointed that

she had been removed from the marriage market by her conscription into the Grey Wardens. Vaughan agreed that it was an outrageous abuse of the Right of Conscription. Bronwyn was making the best of it, being dutiful like all the Couslands, and she was quite charming and of unimpeachable lineage. Before the darkspawn had ruined her face, she had been quite beautiful, as well. He had not seen her in years, but she had been exceptionally appealing even as a very young girl. A shame, what had happened. Ladies should not be put in a position in which they were forced to take up arms. It was...unfeminine.

Still, she was a willful creature, and would have been a handful as a wife. His intended, Habren Bryland, was much more to his taste: delicate, refined, ladylike, soft-handed, fond of pretty things, and with a keen fashion sense. When Father had written of the arrangement between him and Arl Leonas, Vaughan had dutifully made his courtesies to the young lady. To his surprise and pleasure, he found that they had much in common. He was quite looking forward to their wedding...

But he had unfinished business with that elf whore. Just because the bitch had ingratiated herself with Bronwyn, the little tart imagined herself beyond justice. Bronwyn, however, had serious business to attend to, and would be gone in a day or so. It was doubtful that she would burden herself with a useless pet. When she was gone, it should not be hard to lure the elf beyond the camp, and then let the darkspawn take the blame when her body was found...

The Wardens and their friends gathered just before they turned in for the night. Bronwyn told them their mission for the following day: to hunt down and slay The Witch of the Wilds, who when roused to fury took the form of a High Dragon. It was daunting, to say the least, but they would have support, in the form of ballistae with poisoned and explosive bolts, a company of archers, and a dozen more mages.

Zevran grinned at Carver Hawke. "You will find, my young friend, that we lead lives of high adventure! A dragon! Now that is something that even I have never fought."

Sten frowned. "We are undertaking this as a training mission? That is a valid use of time and resources. I have never faced a dragon either. It will be interesting to see which tactics prove effective."

Cullen was suspicious of Morrigan's grimoire, but very eager for the adventure: possibly the most eager of all the Wardens. Simply the fact that she was an apostate mage made her a suitable target. That she had no doubt killed dozens—possibly hundreds—of Templars, confirmed that it was their duty. When he heard the secret of her long life, he was implacable.

"She's been murdering innocent young girls for hundreds of years!" he burst out passionately, ignoring the fact that under ordinary circumstances he would never have described Morrigan as an "innocent young girl." He stalked back and forth, full of tall indignation. "Kidnapping little children! Possessing them like a demon—driving their souls from their bodies. That *is* murder! To think that she's been doing this for

ages. I thought that the Hero Cormac killed her!"

"Tis a myth," Morrigan said with a shrug. "Flemeth told me that she never had dealings with Cormac at all."

Danith's curiosity was aroused. "This Flemeth...she is the same one we know as *"Asha'bellanar?"*

Morrigan bowed her head in assent. "The Woman of Many Years. You are indeed correct."

"I don't know the story at all," Brosca interrupted. "Tell us about it!"

Smirking, Morrigan gestured at Leliana. "Surely our bard has heard something of Flemeth, The Witch of the Wilds?"

Leliana said, "The story of Flemeth is very famous. This is what I was taught:"

Leliana's story of the Legend of Flemeth:

Ages ago, legend says Bann Conobar took to wife a beautiful young woman who harbored a secret talent for magic: Flemeth of Highever. And for a time they lived happily, until the arrival of a young poet, Osen, who captured the lady's heart with his verse.

They turned to the Chasind tribes for help and hid from Conobar's wrath in the Wilds, until word came to them that Conobar lay dying: His last wish was to see Flemeth's face

one final time.

The lovers returned, but it was a trap. Conobar killed Osen, and imprisoned Flemeth in the highest tower of the castle. In grief and rage, Flemeth worked a spell to summon a spirit into this world to wreak vengeance upon her husband. Vengeance, she received, but not as she planned. The spirit took possession of her, turning Flemeth into an abomination. A twisted, maddened creature, she slaughtered Conobar and all his men, and fled back into the Wilds.

For a hundred years, Flemeth plotted, stealing men from the Chasind to sire monstrous daughters: horrific things that could kill a man with fear. These Korcari witches led an army of Chasind from the Wilds to strike at the Alamarri tribes. They were defeated by the hero Cormac, and all the witches burned, so they say, but even now the Wilders whisper that Flemeth lives on in the marsh, and she and her daughters steal those men who come too near.

Adaia listened with wide eyes, for this was a story she had never heard. The mages listened more critically, looking for the facts amid the fancy. Carver Hawke was impressed that they would be going up against such a creature. He was a bit impressed with himself for being in such dauntless company.

Morrigan listened with increasing impatience. "Yes, yes, yes. 'Tis all very well, and that is the story, but Flemeth tells a different tale!"

Morrigan's version of the Legend of Flemeth.

As the tale is sung by the bards, there was a time when Flemeth was young and beautiful. A fair lass in a land of barbarian men, the desire of any who saw her. And that much, Flemeth says, is true. She was indeed beautiful and desirable, and many men wished her favor.

However, Flemeth told me that it was the bard Osen who was her husband, and Lord Conobar the one who admired from afar. At length, he offered Osen a rich reward, if he would relinquish Flemeth to him. I see that you are shocked at the idea, but the life of a bard—most especially the life of a bard in those savage days—was poor and hard. Osen and Flemeth agreed to Conobar's offer.

But Conobar bargained with coin he did not possess. Instead, he ordered his men to slay Osen and take Flemeth to his castle. He showed himself to be a man without honor, and Flemeth despised him in her heart. Spirits gathered about her, sensing her hidden power, and spoke to her, and gave her the means to revenge herself upon Conobar.

So she slew him and escaped, fleeing south into the Wilds, where she has lived to this day. She denies that she and her 'daughters' ever rallied an 'army' to attack the Alamarri tribes. There was such an incursion, but she says she played no part in it. As to the 'Hero' Cormac, Flemeth says that he instigated a bloody civil war amongst the chiefs of the land, claiming to be ridding it of evil. She was attached to his story much later.

As I said, Flemeth herself insists that she never fought any warrior named Cormac at all.

But none can deny her power. Some call her the Witch of the Wilds. The Chasind know her as The Woman of Many Years. So too, as we have heard, is she known to the Dalish. Yes, *Asha'bellanar* is the name.

I, too, have heard the tale of Flemeth's 'daughters,' and the Chasind tell of how she waged war against them, slew them, and ate their hearts. There is a grain of truth in all old stories, and now I know that there is truth in that one. No doubt Flemeth wishes to 'eat my heart' as she has all the rest of her daughters through the ages. I do not intend to permit it.

"Of course," Astrid said afterwards, "there's no particular reason to think Flemeth's version is more accurate than the other."

Morrigan said coolly, "I know of no reason for her to lie."

"That's just it," Astrid pressed on. "You *wouldn't*. On the other hand, what reason has she to tell the truth? We already know she never hesitated to keep the truth from you. I think we should be very careful about anything this being says. You say she looks human. Is she? I hadn't heard that humans live for hundreds of years."

"She is a very powerful mage—"

"She must be a maleficar!" Cullen declared. Jowan slunk back into a corner.

"No!" Morrigan denied it, but seemed a little shaken. "She despises Blood Magic. She considers it the resort of weak mages. She forbade me ever to attempt it."

Anders thought about it, "But if she *were*, and she wanted to keep you under her domination, that is *exactly* what she would say..."

This seemed to disturb Morrigan even more. "I do not think she is. I have never her seen her use blood to power even the greatest of her spells. What you say—" she nodded to Astrid—"may be truer than you know. It is possible that she is no longer human. Her story tells of a demon within her, but she has never taken the form of an abomination."

Cullen was fascinated, despite himself. "And abominations cannot be hidden," he said. "They have a very distinct appearance. And for both her soul and a demon to jump from body to body sounds very...unusual, to say the least. We must be vigilant that she does not attempt to possess one of our mages!"

Bronwyn nodded slowly. "They will be warned to be on their guard. Loghain is letting us bring several of the Circle mages along. Any recommendations?"

A list was put together, and Bronwyn detailed Anders to talk to Uldred and Torrin as soon as their own council ended.

"Bronwyn..." Tara asked hesitantly. "In the story, Flemeth is from Highever. You're from there. Is she just in a story, or is she in real history?"

Bronwyn had been thinking that over as well. The story had implications that made her a little uncomfortable. Highever Castle was very old: one of the oldest in Ferelden. Flemeth had been the chatelaine—however unwillingly—of the very castle that had been Bronwyn's home from the day of her birth. It was disturbing to imagine Flemeth presiding in the same hall where Bronwyn's father and mother had held sway.

Nonetheless, she saw no reason not to share with them what her tutor had taught her.

With a self-conscious laugh, she said, "You might say that the Cousland family owes its rise to Flemeth. Back in the Towers Age, before there was a Ferelden, Highever was ruled by the Elstan family. They were cousins of the Howes. In our chronicles, it is indeed written that the last of the Elstans, Bann Conobar, was murdered by his wife Flemeth. That would have happened just after the end of the Third Blight, around Towers 3:30. After his death, a cousin, Sarim Cousland, claimed Highever, and the Couslands have ruled there ever since. In the Black Age, Haelia Cousland rallied the North against the Lycanthrope Plague, and she was acclaimed as Teyrna. That was a hundred years before the crowing of King Calenhad and the unification of Ferelden in Exalted 5:42. Thus, if this Flemeth is the same Flemeth in our chronicles, she has to be at least six hundred years old. I would say that even if she began life as a human, she can't be

considered human anymore."

Oghren began to chuckle. "Human or not, you're still related to her. I guess it's sod-all true that you can't pick your relatives!"

Morrigan snickered, glad to see someone else the center of such unwelcome attention.

Bronwyn said, a bit hotly, "If we are related at all, it is only by marriage. Six hundred years ago."

"Can't pick your in-laws either," Oghren agreed genially. "Stone knows that's true!"

Anders turned to Morrigan. "That's nice. No, it's really nice. You and Bronwyn are some sort of foster-cousins-by-marriage. It's a small world, after all." Morrigan scowled at him, not at the idea of being related to Bronwyn, but at his tone.

"There is one other thing," Bronwyn announced. "Teyrn Loghain wants a Warden in his party to keep watch for darkspawn. Jowan, that's you."

"Me?" Jowan asked, his voice rising to a squeak. "With Teyrn Loghain?"

Light laughter. Bronwyn smiled patiently. "Yes, you. It's a very reasonable request. When we separate, you will stick close to him, and let him know if you sense darkspawn. Once we are engaged, you can still use long distance spells on Flemeth."

"I wouldn't mind sticking close to Teyrn Loghain," Tara said teasingly. "He's so very imposing. I suppose he doesn't like elves."

Leliana sighed, "I suppose he would not like my accent, either. He is indeed a very impressive man. In his silverite armor, he looks like the noblest of chevaliers, but probably he would not like to hear that."

Bronwyn struggled in vain against a grin. "I am quite sure he would not. He asked specifically for a mage, and you must not feel snubbed, Tara. I think he wanted to avoid appearing in the least like Bann Vaughan, with his horrible behavior toward elf women. Besides, Jowan is most junior, and is thus the proper candidate. Don't look like that Jowan, and don't quail before him. He hates that sort of thing!"

Adaia whispered to Danith. The Dalish elf frowned, and then after more prodding, reluctantly spoke. "Would this dragon be vulnerable to bombs and poisons?"

Bronwyn considered this, and when she turned to reply, she saw a beaming Adaia, practically jumping up and down beside the impassive Danith.

"I should think," Bronwyn said slowly, "that such things might be very useful indeed."

The following morning, they moved out at first light, barely taking the time for a hasty breakfast. Along with the Wardens'

party, a band of Circle mages, and a company of skilled archers, Loghain brought Cauthrien and some two dozen picked men from Maric's Shield. Trundling with surprising ease over the marshy terrain were a pair of light two-wheeled carts that could be handled a one man—or dwarf each. These were laden with an assortment of supplies and a cylinder filled with ballista bolts.

Morrigan remained at their quarters in the Tower of Ishal, sitting with queenly dignity by the window. When the party marched out, she made herself join the excited Adaia in waving at their companions. They were acting to a certain extent to protect her, and she owed them that much courtesy. Anders glanced up, looking for her. She did not find it hard to grant him a smile.

She had agreed to escort Adaia to and from her work at the bomb workshop, and knew to keep a sharp lookout for Bann Vaughan and his lackeys. She pretended to be indifferent to whatever story the elf-girl had told Bronwyn, but she had heard the shreds of gossip and was unsurprised. That creature, Bann Vaughan, had leered at her as well. Leered with more restraint than he used with the elves, but it was still offensive. *He* was offensive.

What should she do with herself today? Without Bronwyn's presence...without Anders' near her, or the support of the rest of the company...Morrigan confessed to herself that she felt rather at loose ends. Teyrn Loghain had gone with the expedition, too, and he at least could exert some control over the mob of stupid, brutal men. There were a half-dozen

Templars in the camp, which was never a good thing. Luckily with the large number of mages present, it was unlikely that she would attract their attention. She would take Adaia to her workshop, return swiftly to the Wardens' quarters, and spend the day in pleasant privacy: washing her hair, reading, brushing her gown, mending a tiny tear in one of her stockings.

Arl Bryland was in charge of the camp, and Morrigan had been introduced to him, along with the rest of Bronwyn's companions. He had been quite polite and friendly, but he was clearly only interested in Bronwyn, who was his near relation. Probably in an emergency it might be possible to appeal to him, but Morrigan would prefer than there was no such emergency.

It was tempting, so terribly tempting to shift into a hawk and follow the Wardens back to Mother's—no, to *Flemeth's* hut. She would like to see them deal with her with her own eyes. She was concerned, too, lest Flemeth do damage to those who had befriended her. Morrigan had given Anders strict instructions to remain in the back of the party, providing support as a healer. Let the others risk their foolish necks battling Flemeth. Nothing must happen to Anders. There was nothing she could do to protect Bronwyn and Tara, however, and she would not insult them with vain pleas to let others face the danger.

Bronwyn had little need of the map she and Morrigan had devised together. She had been this way twice, and even with

the change of season it seemed perfectly familiar. No doubt Teyrn Loghain felt more secure with his copy, so it was hardly a wasted effort. It was a relief that Loghain had fallen in with her own plans so readily. She faced today's adventure with some anxiety, despite her pretence of cheerful calm. The additional equipment she carried only reassured her a little.

A gloomy day it was: the sun shown red briefly at daybreak below an increasing cover of dark grey cloud. The wind had stilled, after a stiff breeze earlier. Now it was ominously silent. Bronwyn concentrated and found only the faintest hint of darkspawn: probably a mere remnant of some prior incursion. They marched on, making as little noise as possible. Everyone had been ordered to avoid any but the most necessary speech.

Just before the last low ridge that led to Flemeth's lair, the party divided. Three of the mages would join the Wardens: Niall, Ilon, and Gwyneth. They were nervous, but pleased to be chosen. The rest of the Circle Mages would stay with Loghain. Jowan fidgeted before Wynne's angry glare. Uldred smirked at him, and Torrin and most of the rest simply look disapproving. Gwyneth, at least, gave him a smile. He managed a small smile in return.

Loghain laid a hand on Bronwyn's forearm, and murmured, "Luck in battle."

She smiled radiantly, cheered by the words. "You too, my lord."

Wardens, soldiers, mages, and archers all smirked and nodded to each other. Bronwyn caught the glance Zevran shared with Tara, and narrowed her eyes. Their expressions instantly changed to masks of perfect innocence. Jowan threw her a last look of appeal, and she mouthed, "Good luck!" at him, in what she hoped was her most encouraging way. He did not seem comforted, and slunk after Loghain and Cauthrien as if going to his execution.

The Wardens moved on directly, no longer attempting to be silent. Loghain took his party along the back of the ridge, using the tree cover, ordering some of the men to carry the carts over the awkward terrain. They curved stealthily around the high ground, avoiding the treacherous marshes, moving to the west of the abandoned tower shown on the map. At one point, Loghain motioned his party to stop, and clambered cautiously up the ridge, lying flat to get a look at the killing ground.

When he had been here, more than half a lifetime ago, he and Maric had been cold and starving: too disoriented to take proper note of their surroundings. However, he did recall the witch's hut vaguely, and remembered now that stone wall to one side. That was the ruined tower. Flemeth's dwelling was of wood, and leaned crazily against the stone. There was no one in sight. He hoped that at this early hour the witch was inside and not roaming about in animal form, discovering their plans. He slipped back down the ridge, stooping, and led his people on.

His eyes met Jowan's briefly. The mage flinched and looked

away. They would have to have a talk. It seemed unlikely that Jowan had told Bronwyn of his prior dealings with Loghain. She simply was not that good at concealing her feelings. She would no doubt disapprove, if she knew that he had sent Jowan as his agent to Redcliffe. Word had reached him that young Connor was a mage, and that the Arlessa was looking for an apostate mage to teach the boy how to conceal his magic. His most trusted men had been on the lookout for an apostate who could be of use to Loghain. They had rescued Jowan from the hands of the Templars who had captured him after his escape from the Tower.

The mage had been terrified of him, but grateful—even eager—for the opportunity to serve his country. The poison he had given Jowan was not supposed to kill Eamon, but to keep him quiet and out of the political arena. However, such things happened. Either Jowan had given him too strong a dose, or the poison was more powerful than its reputation. Or Eamon was weaker than Loghain had judged him. All of these things were possible. However, after learning of Eamon's participation in Cailan's plot against Anora, Loghain felt no regret at all at his part in the man's death, other than the harm the debacle had caused the innocent people of the castle and the village.

Others, of course, might feel very differently. He considered the need for Jowan to have a fatal accident during the current expedition. Too risky, unless a very good opportunity came his way. Bronwyn would be incensed if he attacked any of her Wardens, just as he would be at an attack against his own

men. Perfectly natural.

Jowan walked a little faster, and muttered, just loud enough for Loghain to hear, "Please, my lord. Don't ever tell her."

Loghain glared at the mage, but that was a mere cover for his thoughts. So the mage had no more desire for Bronwyn to know of the poisoning than Loghain did. Very convenient.

He muttered back, "You were supposed to seek me out for your reward."

"I don't need a reward, my lord. I'm a Grey Warden now. Bronwyn has given me a second chance. I don't want her to regret it."

"Very well," Loghain shrugged, secretly very pleased. "Suit yourself. I shall keep your secret as long as you keep mine."

"Thank you, my lord," Jowan whispered. "*Thank you!*" Loghain waved at him impatiently, frowning him into silence.

They were nearly in position now, and there was no more time or opportunity to talk. Loghain could hear Bronwyn's clear voice, pitched to carry in the open air, and a lower, harsher female voice answering her. Flemeth. Cauthrien's eyes were on him, eager for his orders. He raised his hand, gesturing to the dwarves. It was time.

"So lovely Morrigan has found someone to dance to her tune,"

Flemeth drawled. The contemptuous amusement in her voice irritated Bronwyn, and she was not alone. Around her, her companions tensed. She could feel the hostility radiating from Anders, behind her, glaring at the old woman.

"We did not come here to talk, Flemeth," Bronwyn said clearly, hoping that Loghain could hear her. Beside her, Scout growled, teeth bared.

"Really?" The Witch of the Wilds cocked her head, studying her. "And what are you here for? A book, perhaps?"

Anders narrowed his eyes. Of course Flemeth would know about that. Morrigan had told him that if he took nothing else, he must find and bring Flemeth's true grimoire back with him. Tara and Jowan had been informed as well. What they wanted to avoid, aside from being killed by this powerful mage, was for the book to fall into the Circle's Hands.

"We are here to stop you, creature!" Cullen shouted.

"A Templar!" Flemeth was even more amused. "I have known so many of your kind, over the years. Not for long, granted, but they were invariably too weak to survive..." Her eyes, dancing with mock reproach, turned once more to Bronwyn, "I did not think you the sort to turn on one who had once served you well."

"Well, it seems that great age has not made you wise," Bronwyn said. It sounded deplorably pert, even to her own ears, but she wanted to get this over with.

Flemeth shrugged. "Very well. If nothing else will satisfy you..." She turned her back to them and began walking away, up to the high ground near her hut, as if they were of no further interest to her. Some of the Circle Mages murmured, confused. Bronwyn had a moment of sickening doubt, wondering if Morrigan was wrong; if she had brought Loghain and all his men here, simply to watch her cut down a defenseless old woman.

"Well," Brosca demanded eagerly, "is she going to do that thing she does, or....*Stone save us!*"

The air exploded outward, like a body blow. Some of the smaller party members, like Tara and Danith, were knocked back a few steps. The sudden vast bulk before them was startling, huge, unthinkable. Bronwyn caught her breath in a quick gasp, and shouted, "*Bombs!*"

The High Dragon screamed defiance with a bellow that shook the earth. To the rear of the hut, Loghain's voice was heard, raised in command, and then was a sudden hard slam, and then another, as two ballistae sent explosive bolts at the dragon on the hill. One soared over the dragon's haunch and drove into the marsh beyond with a crackle and a hiss. The other connected, and chunk of armored scale was blown from the creature's vast back. It threw its head back and shrieked. Uldred's ice spell connected briefly, freezing its hindquarters. A volley of poisoned arrows cast a dim shadow. Some struck and bounced off the creature's armor, some lodged harmlessly in cracks between the scales. Some struck the wings, and were deflected by the leathery skin. One struck

the dragon near the eye, and it flinched, shaking its horned head back and forth. A huge foreclaw rose up and batted at, finally pulling it loose.

Sten had a mighty throwing arm. He lobbed a shock bomb at the Dragon's feet, casting blue-white sparks in a fearsome crackle. Bronwyn cast another, which fell a little short. Still, sparks flew up and struck the Dragon's nose, startling it backwards. Five more bombs followed. Carver Hawke's bomb struck the Dragon at the top of her head, spilling acid into her left eye. Flemeth shrieked again, and with a tremendous downstroke, attempted to take to the air.

Cauthrien shouted, "Loose!"

Another volley was launched. Loghain had briefed the archers to aim high. Under no circumstances were they to risk hitting one of the ground troops.

Dworkin cackled, and fired his ballista a few seconds ahead of Voldrik. The first bolt struck the more flesh of the belly, blowing a bloody hole in it the size of a shield. Voldrik's bolt would have missed entirely, had not Flemeth flapped her right wing in an attempt to gain her balance. A flash and a bang, and the wing joint shattered. The Dragon ceased to be a flying creature in that moment.

Another soul-wrenching shriek. Another half-dozen bombs struck on or near the Dragon. It shook off the trickles of ice and acid, and faced its attackers, opening huge jaws. It breathed in, sucking the air from the lungs of everyone facing

it, and then—

"Move!" Bronwyn screamed. "Get out of the way!"

A firestorm erupted from the dragon. Searing yellow flames licked and pummeled them, Fire so hot that for the first second it was painless. Alistair and Astrid threw themselves behind their shields, letting the Dragon spend her wrath on them.

Bronwyn lay gasping, face-down on the marshy ground, grateful beyond words for her dragonbone armor. Scout huddled by her, whining from the pain of a scorched ear. Bronwyn pushed herself up on her elbows, and looked around. Others had not fared so well. Leliana was keening with pain, her voice wild and unbeautiful. Tara had fallen, and rolled down the hill, without a sound. The young Hawke boy was not moving either. Zevran's wide, wide eyes were surrounded by soot, as he scrambled on hands and knees.

Brosca's face was red with a glancing burn. She stood up and said something that Bronwyn did not quite understand, other than it must be extremely filthy, for Oghren burst out with a laugh that resembled a groan.

There was a deep, deep growl, and Bronwyn instantly focused on the Dragon before her. It had lowered its head, and was readying itself for another blast.

"Now!" Bronwyn screamed. "Follow me!"

Alistair understood her. She ran to one side, and he to the other, their teams behind them, while Sten taunted the beast in the center, distracting it from the puny figures charging it.

Lying on her belly on the ground. Tara raised her staff, briefly stunning the Dragon. It coughed, choking on its own fiery breath. More spells followed: paralysis spells, weakening hexes, Torrin's very powerful imprisonment spell, more ice spells. Anders could only give a glance to the battle raging on the hillside, as he healed Leliana's arm and Danith's broken leg. Niall moved forward in his stead, casting and casting as the warriors before him faced death.

Jowan was ashamed to be relieved that he was so far from the fight. The best spell he could cast at this distance drained life from the Dragon. It was not much, but he could target it precisely enough not to endanger his friends. It would suck that much of the creature's life force every time he cast it. And it felt...wonderful. Some of the other mages saw what he was doing, and tried it as well.

The Dragon managed another blast of flame, but the attackers had moved to the sides and Sten rolled out of the way...mostly. Niall cast another healing spell.

The archers and ballistae could do no more without hitting allies. Loghain roared, "Charge!" and Maric's Shield burst into a run behind him. The Dragon screamed in surprise and alarm.

Bronwyn was aware of almost none of this. A sword and a

dagger, she found, were almost laughable weapons against a High Dragon. It was so hard to stay clear of claws and the lashing tail that she could hardly get in a stab. Hacking at the scales was all but useless. What would work? The mages were helping a great deal, slowing it down, not giving it time or peace to take a deep, lethal breath.

"Cullen!" she shouted. "Give me a boost!"

The dear fellow understood her immediately. He dropped Yusaris to the ground, and cupped his hands for her boot. A mad scramble and a jolt, and Bronwyn was on Flemeth's back, trying to dig in with her dagger to a crack in the scales. The creature lurched, and Bronwyn's chin hit the rugged back. Teeth met on the inside of her cheek and she tasted blood. Behind her, Brosca was yelling, "Me! Me! Do me, too!" A few seconds later, a rattling thud announced her arrival.

Ice formed, cold and slippery, under Bronwyn's gauntlets. The dragon was trying to draw a deep breath again. Bronwyn got her feet under her and stabbed down hard where the scales curved at the base of the long neck. Trying to fight two-handed was insane. She frantically sheathed her dagger, and gripped her longsword's hilt with both hands, using all her weight to force her blade into the creature's spine. How much armor protected it?

She looked up, and found herself face to face with the Dragon. Its head was snaked back on the long, long neck, glaring at her with hatred and malice. The dripping jaws opened...

An acid bomb exploded in them, and Brosca shrieked. "Got you, bitch!"

The dragon bellowed its anguish to the skies. Bronwyn tugged her useless longword out of the creature's back, and clambered forward, clinging to the spikes that sprouted from the neck. Luckily, they were not dangerously sharp, and she began inching her way to the creature's head. She was good at climbing, and this was like climbing...a little. Like climbing a wall that *moved*. The Dragon thrashed and twisted, trying to shake her off. Behind her Brosca laughed and whooped, crawling up behind her. Flemeth's head ducked down, biting at the warriors on the ground.

It was madness: it was chaos. The Dragon's tail knocked warriors aside like toys. Brief goutts of flame blossomed from the gigantic jaws. One of his men screamed as he was stepped on. A few other dragged him aside. Foot-long fangs snapped where Cauthrien had been only a moment before. Loghain bashed at the massive head with his shield. Nothing else seemed to make any impression on it. Bronwyn's hound had found him and was baying at the Dragon, taunting it. Loghain was pleased to have the dog by his side, and hoped nothing would happen to the animal that Bronwyn would never, ever forgive. Where was she, anyway?

Flemeth was hurt and weakened, but still very, very dangerous. Loghain had no idea how the Nevarrans had done this for a living. *They must have been absolutely desperate. All things considered, I'd really, really rather be a farmer*

than a dragon-hunter.

The head slammed down again in a frenzy, like a horse trying to shake a burr from under a saddle. Loghain caught an outline of something that ought not to be on the dragon's neck and nearly froze in his tracks. Bronwyn!

Was the girl completely insane?

He flinched aside from a strange stink. Alistair was there, pouring something vile from a flask over his blade. Seeing Loghain looking, the boy yelled, "You want some? It's great!"

It couldn't hurt. Quickly he offered the flat of his blade and the boy splashed out the rest of it, and hurled the empty flask far out into the marsh. The head was low enough again for his blade. Loghain jabbed up and caught it under the jaw. The sword briefly caught against the bone, and for a harrowing moment, Loghain was lifted off his feet.

He fell to earth with a crash of silverite, and rolled out of the way of the pressing mill of angry, almost ineffectual warriors.

No, not entirely ineffectual. The Dragon was distracted by them. The bearded dwarf was hewing at a massive foreleg with his axe. He was doing damage. An axe was certainly a better weapon against a dragon than a sword.

Others had seen what the girl was doing and had followed her lead. That blond elf was on the dragon's back, digging his blade into the hide just under the hip, where it was thinner. It

seemed to slow the Dragon. Another little figure was weighing down the dragon's neck, stabbing at it again and again. Loghain could not tell whether it was a dwarf or an elf.

He felt a sudden rush of renewed strength and well-being. It was that mage of his, no doubt. He hoped she was doing likewise for everyone else.

Flemeth howled and lurched again. Above him, Bronwyn was clinging to one of the massive horns.

She was almost there. She was so very close. The Dragon shook her head from side to side. Bronwyn's belly roiled with nausea. She swallowed hard against the bile rising in her throat. The horn was almost as long as she was tall. She lodged herself between it and the massive head, and crawled closer. The head dipped down. At the sudden jolt, Bronwyn felt like she had left her stomach behind. Frantic as the beast was, she could feel that it was weaker now. Below her in the melee, she saw people she knew. Loghain, utterly fearless, and Ser Cauthrien, swinging her immense sword. Scout was there: alive and barking. Young Carver was on his feet again. Bronwyn felt a fleeting relief that she had not killed him with this first mission.

The space between the scales was wider over the back of the head. The creature relied on the huge horns to protect it there. Bronwyn slid forward, groping for the joint. She put the tip of her sword against it, braced her legs, and pushed. And *pushed...*

A high-pitched shriek, surpassing anything that gone before, rose up. Warriors clutched at their ears in agony. The mages shuddered back, fumbling at silencing spells. It lasted, it seemed, forever, and then was cut off abruptly. The dragon's head fell like stone, slamming hard into the earth. The body tottered and collapsed to the side, as everyone screamed and pushed and rolled and thrashed to get out of its way.

Bronwyn fell with it, half-stunned by the concussion, clutching at her sword in a death grip. People were yelling and cheering, laughing and hugging. She decided she should get up from the dragon's head and say a few words of thanks.

She rose slowly...and then vomited a little on Flemeth's head. Everyone was still cheering. Even dignified sorts like Astrid and Cauthrien were cheering. Alistair and Cullen were slapping each other on the back. Loghain was not cheering, but he was smiling at her. Not smiling, exactly...more like *grinning*. She must be dizzy from the shock. She wiped her mouth and gave a little wave, smiling weakly. Maybe no one would notice the vomit.

"Boss!" Brosca slid off the dragon's shoulder and ran to her. "Boss! You are the biggest, baddest badass of all time!"

Thanks to all my readers and reviewers: Sarah1281, callalili, Zute, Josie Lange, Lord of Murder, Anime-StarWars-fanzach, almostinsane, KiraKyuuketsuki, Nithu, Shakespira, Jenna53, demoniconargles, Aoi24, Eva Galana, mutive, mille libri, The Moidart, anon, Lydia-kitten, JackOfBladesX,

chocolatebrownie12, kwintessa, Judy, Amhran Comhrac, Angurvddel, Lehni, euromellows, Cobar713, Blinded in a bolthole, Enaid Aderyn, xJanelex, taunil ancalimon, Breaniver, Have Socks Will Travel, derko5, black-red-blue, and Raxiselic.

Sorry for the delay in posting. My mother's birthday and Mother's day. Gardening, too. I'm totally distracted by the beauty of my crabapple trees, which are blooming in a rich dark pink. It led me into a mental digression about the flora and fauna of Ferelden, and what they actually have in the way of fruits and vegetables. I am such a nerd.

35. Come Home With Me Tonight

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 35: Come Home With Me Tonight

It was difficult not to gloat over the things her...friends... brought to her from Flemeth's hut. Morrigan knelt by the big chest, smiling at the contents within.

Yes, they were her friends. Some of them, anyway. Bronwyn and Tara, certainly. Jowan was not so bad. Anders behaved as if he *loved* her, though of course that was nonsense. What mattered was that they had stood by her and protected her.

All Flemeth's rare and precious books were now hers, including Flemeth's true Grimoire, possibly the most extraordinary book of magic in all Thedas.

There were various trinkets, magical and non-magical. There was a curious amulet that seemed to be more decorative than useful. There was a set of fresh robes, obviously made for her by Flemeth. Her friends were looking them over, for Jowan sensed some subtle enchantments that might be harmful. She was thinking about finding something else to wear anyway, as she was tired of all the gaping and gawking and goggling. She had taken to wearing her fine green gown

here in Ostagar. It caused the underlings to treat her with more respect. Bronwyn thought she should wear light armor, but Bronwyn thought *everyone* should wear armor...

There had even been a bit of coin. Bronwyn and Anders had made certain that that was Morrigan's, too. Coin was a very pleasant thing to have.

Bronwyn seemed to think that Morrigan should thank everyone for their assistance, and she would do so before they all went to dinner tonight. She would show Anders more material gratitude afterward...

While they were gone to their Flemeth-slaying, she had performed her own assigned duties most diligently, shepherding that little elf. Yes, some men had followed them, pretending to be about their own business. Morrigan was not deceived for an instant. Her pride would not permit the louts to have their way in harming the girl, not when Morrigan herself had said they would not. She lurked nearby in bird form for much of the day, keeping an eye on the workshop; and then had walked back to their quarters with the girl. She had considered a visit to the quartermasters, but it was the sort of place where the wrong sort could make difficulties. Morrigan did not fear them, but she did not want to have kill some fools and then be ejected from the camp by Teyrn Loghain. That would be embarrassing, and would not suit her purposes at all. Her quarters were very comfortable, and she preferred that her food be prepared by servitors. Better to avoid a confrontation...

And then the expedition had returned, victorious but battered. Bronwyn had slain Flemeth herself, which was most gallant and heroic. She was in a thoughtful mood, remarking that they had learned a great deal—mainly about the impotence of blades against dragonhide. The ballistae that Teyrn Loghain was so exercised about had proved of some use, though more work was needed. Everything was going as well as could be, all things considered. Morrigan felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from her. Flemeth had raised her, acted as a parent to her, taught her. Was Morrigan a monster to feel not the least regret at her passing?

"If I am, then so be it," she whispered to herself. "For I regret it not at all."

Rumor had it that the Girl Warden had slain the Archdemon. Even some of the soldiers who had accompanied the mission wanted to believe it: even those who had witnessed the transformation from woman to dragon. How could the Archdemon be worse than that mountain of flame and violence?

Loghain heard the rumor early on, since his officers were trained to give him important news whether it was what he wanted to hear or not. He called the nobles and senior officers into a briefing, and informed them—forcefully—that the creature they had killed in the Wilds was not the Archdemon, but a High Dragon that was a manifestation of the creature known as Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds. Flemeth would have been very dangerous to them, in time, but she

was not, alas, the Archdemon. They had kept the mission quiet so as not to alert Flemeth to their intentions. However, they had successfully destroyed her threat, and learned a great deal about dragon-slaying tactics that would no doubt prove useful when the Archdemon eventually made its appearance.

Bronwyn attended the briefing, of course, along with Alistair, as her Second. Her testimony supported Loghain's, as she fielded anxious questions and starstruck awe.

"Yes, I am sure it was not the Archdemon. This dragon was not Tainted. I saw the Archdemon, albeit at a distance, when I was in the Deep Roads. Although a deep chasm separated us, that creature was larger, and disfigured by the darkspawn Taint. Furthermore, I spoke to Flemeth before she transformed. She was not the Old God Urthemiel, but unquestionably Flemeth, whom I had met twice before. We learned that she was planning an attack of her own. She was a powerful mage who had lived for centuries and had the power to transform into a High Dragon. She did so, and as a High Dragon she perished."

A red-haired officer called out, "Word is that you slew the creature yourself, Warden!"

Loghain smiled slightly, and nodded at the gathering. "I can confirm it. It was Warden-Commander Bronwyn who drove her sword into the creature's brain."

These were not foolish young warriors, but a hum of

admiration arose from those assembled, nonetheless.

Bronwyn declined to take all the credit. "While I struck the killing blow, I would not have got near the creature without the efforts of every man and woman who took part in the expedition. Warriors, mages, archers—our estimable dwarven engineers—everyone played a part in this victory."

Arl Wulffe growled, "Not *everyone* jumped on a dragon's back, my girl!"

The hum grew louder, more excited. Bronwyn put up a hand.

"If the ballistae hadn't rendered the creature flightless, jumping on its back would have been a remarkably foolish thing to do!"

Loghain snorted, nearly laughing. He had thought it a mad thing to do, anyway. It was a relief that the girl had a modicum of sense.

Arl Bryland thought Loghain was too reserved in giving Bronwyn credit. The man was always taciturn, but this was an extraordinary deed.

"Your modesty does you credit, cousin, but the truth is the truth. Let all present hear me! I name this woman Dragonslayer, and I offer my esteem and honor to her."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Bann Vaughan loudly. Arl Wulffe grunted approval.

The hard-bitten officers cheered. The nobles cheered, too—

even those who did not care much for the Couslands—even those who thought Bryland was using his kinship to the Girl Warden for his own advantage. Killing a dragon was something to cheer about, no matter who did it. And it was, of course, an excellent reason to party hard.

"I want to tell my story before Bronwyn leaves tomorrow," Adaia told Tara. She had thought about it, and it was something she could do. The more she thought about it, the more important she felt it was to communicate this story to people who did not understand her. She wanted important people to hear it. She wanted Bronwyn to hear it, and those Chantry types like Leliana and Cullen to hear it, too.

"Well," Tara said, finishing with her hair, "Go tell her. You should do it before we go down to dinner, because I suspect that dinner will evolve into a pretty wild party, and some of our friends might be sleeping elsewhere tonight."

"You tell her."

"Melian Tabris, you go right over there and do it yourself!" Tara commanded, pointing to Bronwyn, who was slipping on the cleaner of her two Warden tunics. Tara thought briefly that it was a shame that Bronwyn, who had been so generous to everyone else, had no gown to wear to this celebration.

"Don't call me that," Adaia sulked. "I don't want to be Melian anymore. All right...I'm going."

Bronwyn was chatting with Brosca as Adaia approached. The cheerful dwarf girl nudged the Commander who looked up, smoothing her hair.

"Did you want something, Adaia?"

"Uhh...I was thinking I'd like to tell my story before you go away. I might forget it if I have to wait until you come back."

"Ooo! A story!" Brosca cheered. "Hey! Astrid! Oghren! Yeah, you, Oghren! Get your lazy backside over here. The kid wants to tell a story. Good idea, telling it before dinner," Brosca pointed out pragmatically. "Likely we'll all be drunk as King Valtor tonight!"

"People riding with me tomorrow had better be fit by daybreak," Bronwyn warned, only half-seriously. Her team seemed fairly levelheaded, and one of the mages could use a rejuvenation spell in case of emergency. All her people deserved a celebration.

"All right," she said to Adaia. "The cooks should not summon us so very soon. I wanted to call everyone together, anyway."

They gathered by the big fireplace, and found chairs or chests to sit on, or leaned against the wall, or perched on the sills. Brosca sat cross-legged on the floor. Scout sat beside her, about the same height. She scratched his doggy chin, and he let her. The small stone-smelling packmate was all right.

Bronwyn stood by the fire, and raised her hand for silence.

"Before dinner, there are some things that need to be said. First, I hope not to be gone long. My team and I will seek out Keeper Zathrian and his clan, find out where they stand on the treaty, and return as soon as possible. It's hard to say how long that will take. While I am gone, Senior Warden Alistair is in charge, and he has my full confidence. Yes, you do, Alistair: don't make that face!"

Everyone laughed, even Alistair, who blushed. Adaia felt sorry for him, and thought about patting his hand, but then decided that would be too bold. Carver, sitting near Adaia, scowled. He was a bit jealous of Alistair. The Senior Warden was only a few years old than he was, and *he* had the full confidence of the Girl Warden, Lady Bronwyn Cousland. Alistair reminded him of his brother Adam, who Mother and Father treated as if he practically *perfect* in every way. Not that he could complain to Cullen about Alistair. They were best friends, after all. Carver wished *he* was going with Lady Bronwyn, so he could show her how much better he was than that blond ponce Alistair...

Bronwyn went on, "None of us knows when the Archdemon will rise. I don't sense anything imminent, and none of you have said anything to the contrary. If we can continue to contain the darkspawn threat here in the far south, then we are doing our jobs as Wardens. Everyone keep your ears open for rumors of darkspawn incursions elsewhere. We know there are other entrances to the Deep Roads. It's possible the Archdemon might send a sortie up through one of them. We can't watch them all."

She gestured at Morrigan. "Morrigan has something she wants to say to all of you."

The witch almost sighed loudly, and then realized that might be construed as discourteous. Instead, she rose, arranging the skirt of her green gown, and stood before them to say what had to be said. Anders was beaming at her, so it would certainly be worth her while.

"I thank you all for your courage and skill at arms. Flemeth is no more. 'Tis good news to me, as I shall be safe hereafter from her scheming. It seems only reasonable for me to point out that you are now safe from her too, since her schemes were legion and would no doubt have affected you at some point. Nonetheless, I do thank you, most sincerely."

Mutters of "You're welcome," "No problem," sounded in reply. Oghren grunted, "You *should* thank me. My arse is still burning from where that stone-cursed thing breathed on me!"

Brosca gave him a shove. "Next time, don't try mooning a dragon!"

"Or anything, *ever*," Alistair muttered, grimacing.

Sten remarked, "It was an interesting battle. Much was learned. My people believe dragons to be extinct. That they are not is news that should be reported to the Arishok."

"There might not be any more dragons," Cullen pointed out. "That Flemeth creature was some sort of abomination. While

she took the form of a dragon, she wasn't really a dragon. Maybe real dragons *are* extinct."

"After fighting her," Leliana shuddered, remembering her pain, "I certainly hope so."

Morrigan shook her head. "You do not understand the magic of shape-shifting. When Flemeth was transformed, she *was* a real dragon. And the Archdemon certainly is one. The lore of the Tevinters states clearly that the Old Gods were dragons: intelligent, powerful dragons. We know that the Archdemon exists. Presumably at least two more of the Old Gods still sleep. Thus, there are certainly dragons."

"We need more of those ballistae," Astrid spoke up. "If the dragon's wing had not been damaged, it could have flamed us to cinders from the sky."

Bronwyn agreed. "More ballistae are under construction, with additional improvements. We also need to consider our own weapons. At the officers' briefing, Teyrn Loghain discussed needed upgrades to weaponry. My dragonbone dagger was far more effective against dragonhide than my silverite sword, until I found a particularly vulnerable spot."

"And some spots were more vulnerable than others!" Zevran said. "When I was being trained, we used outlines with the kill points marked. We should consider the nature of the dragon carefully, and learn its kill points, too."

"That is an excellent suggestion," Bronwyn said. "You're in

charge of it, Zevran!" They all laughed. "Really, draw the outline, and everyone needs to think about what worked and what didn't. I expected the belly to be softer, but it wasn't. The joints, though, were weak spots. Anyplace where the scales did not overlap is a possibility. That was what I found at the back of its head, where the neck joined."

"I'll help him!" Carver volunteered. If he played his cards right, he might find himself with a real dragonbone sword. Dear brother Adam had never even seen dragonbone.

While they were talking, Loghain and a few of his officers appeared at the door. Loghain paused, intending to ask Bronwyn to come down to dinner with him. She appeared to be having a meeting with her people, but she saw him and gave him a slight nod of acknowledgment. He motioned that she should go on, quietly enough that most of her people, watching her, did not notice him. She smiled, and changed the subject.

"Dinner will be announced soon, so enough of shop-talk! We have an entertainment. Another companion has a story for us! Adaia was good enough to have hers ready before some of us head north tomorrow. Please give her your full attention."

She took the big chair by the fire that Alistair had been holding empty for her, and then Adaia stepped forward, nervous but determined. Loghain was curious. He had heard something about the Wardens and their stories, and he moved into the room and took a seat by the door. One of his officers had pulled out a piece of parchment was was scribbling on it in

pencil. It was Darnley, who was quite a good artist. Loghain supposed that the scene before him could be considered picturesque: the beautiful Girl Warden, lounging in a throne-like chair by the fire, a dog and a fierce little dwarf by her feet. Beside her, her loyal and handsome Second, a secret son of a king. On a low stool on her other side was that Orlesian bard of hers, whispering to the pretty elf mage standing behind her. A tall and serious Templar leaned against the wall. An even taller and more serious qunari glowered from the shadows in a corner. A pair of lovers, the man tall and blond, the woman dark and exquisite, looked into each other's eyes. On a nearby bench, a bearded dwarf quaffed a tankard of ale, while a handsome dwarf woman leaned forward, interested in the story. A tattooed Dalish elf, hair cropped close, crouched with casual alertness, oiling her bow. Their new young boy fidgeted near Bronwyn, eager for her notice. Farthest away, the maleficar Jowan sat, looking longingly at the rest, clearing wishing to be accepted as a friend and equal. Before them all, casting dancing shadows, stood the little city elf Adaia, long ears peeking through her shining hair.

"You may not like my story," she whispered.

"Didn't hear you!" Oghren rumbled. "Speak up!"

"Some of you may not like my story!" she nearly yelled.

Turning red, she lowered her voice a little. "But this story is important to me. My friend Nola told it to me, and I think she made it up, like a lot of stories she told. Even you elves might not like it, or think it's a proper elven story, because it doesn't

take place in a forest or an ancient palace. It's an Alienage story, so for me it's a story about home. I don't know if I like it either, but it's important to me, and it's important to me that I tell it to you."

Adaia's story of The Handful of Rushlights

There was once a little girl who was wandering the streets of the Alienage one First Day Eve. It was nearly sunset, and it was so cold that the sewage in the gutters was frozen solid. Everyone who had a home to go to was eager to go there and stay there.

And it was First Day Eve after all. The rich people were roasting chickens with dried apples. Others were stewing pumpkin and salt pork. Even the poorest people would have hot bean soup with a bit of smoked mutton, and barley bread to dip in it. The good smells drifted the length and breadth of the Alienage, all the way to the gates on either side.

The girl lived with her aunt and her aunt's husband, because her father and mother were dead, and her old grandmother had died too. That was when things that were already bad got a lot worse for her.

She had been sent out into the street to sell rushlights, as she was every day. Shems can afford candles, but rushlights are popular in the alienage. All you need is a penny's worth of rushes and some melted fat to dip them in, and they give a good steady light for a quarter of an hour. The girl's aunt

made them now, but they were not as good as the ones her grandmother used to make.

That day, she had been told that she must sell enough rushlights to bring home ten coppers, but she had earned only seven. She was afraid of the beating her uncle would give her, so she found a corner when one house stuck out a little in front of another and she crouched there, drawing her feet up under her.

Slowly, it grew dark. The street emptied, and the little girl was alone with her handful of rushlights.

Her curling hair was sprinkled with snowflakes, and the tips of her ears were numb. Her hands were red and blue with cold, because she had no gloves. Her grandmother had knit her some thick woolen mittens, but her aunt had taken those away and given them to her own child.

She thought about going to the hahren's house, because she knew he would give her something to eat; but he would take her home later, and her uncle would beat her where it didn't show. If she went to the orphanage, they would send her home without taking the trouble to feed her. She had tried that before.

Her hands were so stiff that she thought that one rushlight would do her good. She struck her flint against the wall, and lit a rushlight. How it blazed up! It burned with a bright clear flame when she held her hand around it. The light changed, and it seemed to the little girl that she was sitting in front of a

big, warm fire. She watched it popping and crackling, but just as she stretched out her feet to warm them, the fire vanished, and she was left sitting with a burnt-out rushlight in her hand.

She struck her flint and lit another one. It blazed up and where the light fell on the wall next to her, she could see right through it. She saw a big table with sturdy benches. A family was sitting around the table, and the mother was dishing out a hearty helping of redfish stew into everyone's bowls. The stew smelled so good that the poor child leaned closer. Her nose touched the cold wall, and the rushlight burned out.

So she lit another rushlight. This time she was sitting in a room lit for a feast. Rushlights shone all around her, warming her. She stretched out her hand and the lights went up and up into the sky. Her rushlight went out, and she realized that she was looking at the stars. One of the stars fell, and made a bright streak of light across the sky.

"Someone is dying," thought the little girl, for her old grandmother had told her, "When a star falls, a soul is going to the Maker."

Now she lit another rushlight, and this time she saw her grandmother in a circle of flame. She saw her clear as clear could be, looking so kind and happy.

"Grandmother," the little girl begged. "Take me with you! I'm afraid you'll vanish when the rushlight goes out!"

To keep her grandmother with her, she lit her whole handful of

rushlights. A circle of light surrounded and warmed her. Her grandmother had never looked so beautiful. She lifted the little girl in her arms and together they soared away, far, far above the world, to a place where there was no more cold or hunger or pain.

In the morning, the little girl still sat there in the corner between the houses, frozen dead, with a handful of burnt-out rushlights in her hand.

The elves of the Alienage shook their heads sadly. Some said, "She must have tried to warm herself." And others added, "She's in a better place now."

Her aunt found the seven coppers in the girl's pocket and put them in her own. The morning after First Day, the rubbish men came to take her away, for there was no money for a pyre. Her body was still frozen as they tipped her into the sea.

Silence held every man and woman in the room in its grip. Danith strode away from the group and frowned out the window, terribly upset. How could elves treat a precious child in such a way? "It must be the influence of the shemlens they live among," she muttered.

Equally upset, Alistair burst out, "That's horrible!"

Adaia's face crumpled. To forestall tears, Tara said, "You told it beautifully, but it's so, so sad..."

"Yes," murmured Leliana. "Very sad. Still, sometimes one needs a story that pierces the heart. The story is composed very well, with many fine and poignant details." She murmured to herself, "especially the falling star, which I shall use in future..."

"I think," Bronwyn ventured, uneasy at showing how much the story had moved her, "that we were all expecting the story to end with someone coming to rescue the little girl."

Adaia stared at her blankly. So did the dwarves. Brosca especially, had no problem accepting that some children would never be saved. She had seen plenty of them herself in Dust Town. Stone knew that she had nearly been one of them.

"Children die," Morrigan said coldly. "Children die every day, and the world goes on. No one can pretend it is not so."

"Then that is a scandal," pronounced Sten, his face a storm of disapproval. "A scandalous waste of your most valuable resources. Children are the future, and cannot be wasted in such a way. If you southern peoples do not want your children, send them to the Qunari, and we will train them according to their abilities, and put them to useful labor."

Anders spoke up, and asked Adaia, "Do *you* really believe that child is in a 'better place?'"

Adaia burst out, "No! I mean...I hate that kind of talk! It makes me crazy! What kind of world is it when people say a child is

better off dead?"

Uncertainly, Cullen began, "That Chantry says—"

Adaia interrupted him, "My friend Nola died begging the Maker to save her, and he didn't! She made up the story, so I leave that bit in, and it really is the sort of stupid thing people say, but I hate it!" She took a deep breath. "I *hate* it. It's *wrong*."

Zevran said softly, "*Mia bella*, your story was beautiful, and moved many hearts. That is why everyone is so stirred by it. Perhaps none of us will ever again dismiss a beggar child so easily," He bowed grandly. "I thank you."

"Yeah," Brosca agreed. "I liked that story. Usually in Dust Town the kids just starve to death, or the parents put the babies out in the Deep Roads if they can't afford to feed them." She asked Cullen, "Does freezing to death hurt?"

"It was a fine story," Bronwyn decided. "Thank you Adaia. I shall never forget it."

Alistair nudged Bronwyn, and jerked his head toward the door. Bronwyn rose, politely smiling, but still somewhat distressed.

"Teyrn Loghain!"

All her people either looked at the floor or stole little significant glances at each other; or they stared shamelessly, not wanting to miss a thing. Loghain's officers, deplorably, were

only marginally better behaved. Alone among them, Ser Cauthrien was coolly impassive. Bronwyn was immensely grateful to her.

Loghain gave Bronwyn a faint smile. "They sounded the dinner bell some time ago. I thought Wardens were always hungry."

"We *are* always hungry, my lord," Bronwyn laughed, falling into step beside him. "I want to eat heaps."

Heaps were certainly being served, along with seemingly unlimited amounts of wine and ale. Warden and soldiers and engineers fell to with gusto. The wine served at the head table was the good kind, too, and Loghain unbent sufficiently to permit the servant to fill his goblet for the fourth time. He was feeling uncommonly relaxed, and thoroughly enjoying the company of the young woman beside him.

Bronwyn, on the other hand, was not relaxed at all. Loghain's presence disturbed her. They were so crowded together at dinner that they touched, over and over again. When his thigh touched her it was most distracting: like little hot darts of lightning. There was a ridiculous warmth in her belly, seeping down, luring her into mindless complacency—

She would have none of it. She was in control of herself. She was not a little elf girl to be bullied or forced by an arrogant noble; she was not a silly woman to be seduced by a cup of wine and a reputation. She had trusted him, and he had insulted her, and she had not forgotten or forgiven him. She

sipped slowly at her wine, and brooded over it.

She had always been what people called "a good girl." She was the greatest prize in Ferelden—at least before she became a Grey Warden. Mother and Father had told her that, over and over again. It was important to do nothing foolish to lessen her worth. People loved to gossip, and would make up ridiculous, even malicious stories on the slightest provocation. The daughter of the teyrn of Highever must be above reproach.

Even when she was far away, she learned that people were still gossiping about her. Here and there—even from Duncan—she had heard what had been said, all those long years when she been kept from Court, proving herself a *good girl* to Father, over and over again. People had said she had borne a bastard, that she had a disgusting disease, that she had gone mad, that she was half-witted, that she was besotted with the King.

A *good girl*. She had been good—oh, yes—and it hadn't protected her reputation at all. It mattered not a particle that she listened to Mother's advice about never being overly friendly to Rory Gilmore and the rest of the young knights and squires at Highever.

"It wouldn't be fair to them, dearest," Mother had explained. *"You mustn't raise hopes you cannot fulfill. You are so pretty that it's only natural for young men to be attracted to you, and want to...kiss you. If you flirted with them, you could make*

them very unhappy and uncomfortable."

Gently, Mother had explained certain things about men to Bronwyn: how distressing men found it to be refused when a woman had aroused...expectations. *Nice women...true noblewomen...did not do those things to men.* Those were the sorts of heartless tricks used by wicked Orlesian females to manipulate men...and even other women.

"But you flirt with Father," Bronwyn had pointed out, *"I've seen you get your way by teasing him and batting your eyes!"* She refrained from adding *"and losing your temper..."*

"Your father is my husband," Eleanor Cousland smirked. *"It's not like I'm making him any false promises. When you're married you'll understand."*

And her tutor Aldous had played his part, too. Bronwyn loved to hear about the great women of Ferelden: about the Rebel Queen Moira, Haelia Cousland, Lady Shayna, Rowan of Redcliffe; even about Sophia Dryden before she went to the bad and induced the Grey Wardens to attack the rightful king. She learned about great women of other lands, too: the Assassin Queen of Antiva, the ruling Empresses of Orlais, the devious female magisters of Tevinter.

What successful women leaders had in common, she discovered, was that their personal lives were generally chaste—or at least appeared to be, and when they ceased to be chaste, things went rapidly downhill for them.

Soldiers, Aldous had taught her, might enjoy the company of loose women, but they generally did not respect them, nor would they follow them with the kind of blazing loyalty inspired by a young widow like Moira or an avowed virgin like Empress Blanche fleur.

Uncomfortably, she wondered how much of the virtue she prized in herself was inspired by fear: fear that she *would* bear a bastard; fear that she would disappoint her parents, or make herself a laughingstock; fear that she would be despised by her social inferiors; fear that she would lose the respect of those she led. Fear, too, that the man she allowed liberties would lose interest, or prove false, or hold her up to ridicule. It had prevented her from seeking comfort from Alistair or Cullen or any of the attractive men she commanded. She was not likely to change that now.

She studied her cup, and held on to her self-control as Loghain's thigh brushed against hers again. If he ever kissed her, and then mocked her; if she offered him her heart, and he disprized it—she would kill him. There, that was a solution. It might be ridiculous, and the result of too much wine, but the determination made her feel much, much better. If he betrayed her, she would kill him.

"This, I swear," she muttered.

Loghain, tossing the torpid Scout yet another treat, gave her a brief, puzzled glance.

After two hours of feasting and drinking, Arl Leonas Bryland was red-faced, and more than a little past his measure. Loghain regretted that he had let the man know of the plan to send Bronwyn to Denerim first. He clearly could not be trusted with wine in him.

"Call on Habren, won't you, Bronwyn? I've got a letter for her. And for my boys, too. They need to know I'm thinking of them. Werberga means well, but she lets Habren get away with too much. Their tutor is supposed to put a rein on that with Corbus and Lothar. I'll wager the boys would be thrilled to be visited by the Girl Warden..."

Werberga was his older sister. Loghain repressed a shudder. The woman had spoiled the daughter rotten, and was probably doing likewise with Bryland's young sons. The man should have married again, but word was that Werberga wouldn't have it, and had made the lives of any woman Bryland courted a living hell. She should have long ago been put in a coach and deposited at a distant manor, but Bryland was tender-hearted...

Vaughan was flushed with wine, too, and with other things, very likely. He was glaring at the Wardens, most especially at the elf girl. It was lust, certainly, but rage was there as well: rage and naked cruelty. Some people could not bear for anyone to thwart their desires. It was not uncommon among nobles.

Quite a few of the Wardens were beyond tipsy as well. The little dwarf girl was sitting in the former Templar's lap, playing

with his hair. For his part, the Templar was gazing longingly at the pretty elf mage—Tara—yes, Tara, the one Bronwyn thought so well of. *She* was flirting with the blond Crown assassin. *His* attentions were divided among nearly every female at that table, but perhaps he gave Tara more notice than the others.

The dwarf warrior Oghren's eyes were glazed, and he would probably be under the table fairly soon. The exiled dwarf princess was far more in command of herself, and was talking, quietly and forcefully, to Alistair: touching his arm for emphasis. The boy blushed every time. Loghain snorted into his goblet. Not much like his father. Maric would have had the woman in a dark corner by now. Of course, she was not an elf...

"Oh, how nice!" Bronwyn said to Bryland. "Leliana is going to sing. She's wonderfully talented."

The bard *was* going to sing. She had her lute with her and was strumming opening chords. *Maker's Breath!* She was comely creature—for an Orlesian—and had a fine voice, he supposed. Being a bard was what Bronwyn had taken her on for, after all. He scowled at the bottom of his cup, annoyed that he could not find fault. And she was singing an old Ferelden song, too. He might as well relax and enjoy it.

*A holiday, a holiday,
The first one of the year
King Arland's wife came to the Chantry*

The priests' singing for to hear.

*And when the chanting it was done
She went out the Chantry door
And there she saw Ser Kerran Loys,
And desired him full sore.*

*"Come home with me
Ser Kerran Loys,
Come home with me tonight.*

*Come home with me
My own true love,
And sleep with me tonight."*

Of course it all ended badly, with the two lovers waking to find King Arland standing at the foot of the bed. There followed a bloody duel, and the Queen pinned to the wall with the King's longsword. It was quite a beautiful song, though, and the chorus was bewitching.

*"Come home with me
Ser Kerran Loys,
Come home with me tonight.*

*Come home with me
My own true love,
And sleep with me tonight."*

Bronwyn toyed with her own goblet, and would not meet his eyes. She was blushing. He had a great deal to say to her

before she left in the morning, and if she was no longer hungry, then there was no more reason to remain at the table, drinking themselves into insensibility.

The song was ending, to great applause. Loghain caught Bronwyn by the hand.

"Come with me."

Her shocked face revealed that she had been listening to the song. He could not resist a brief smirk. Then he pulled himself together and rose, not letting go of her hand. "Come. I want to give you Anora's letter. And you need a secure cipher."

Most of the hall was wrapped up in private concerns, and was just this side of losing all restraint. Loghain tugged her hand again, liking the feel of it. She wanted him, did she not? They should certainly get to know each other better before she went galloping off again. She was, he admitted to himself, not just a desirable young woman, but his most important ally. He must bind her to him by any means possible.

"Bring your goblet," Loghain said. "In case you want to throw it at me again."

Bronwyn decided that he had *definitely* had too much to drink. She considered setting Scout on him, but the mabari was asleep at her feet and snoring. There was no help to be had there. Struggling against Loghain would only attract more attention. He was closer to her than a man had a right to be, and she had caught the scent of him all through dinner: the

musk of an active man, mixed with good, plain soap and the lavender his shirts were done up with. She went upstairs with him, her hand still in his.

Loghain closed the door behind them. Bronwyn very casually withdrew her hand and moved away, so nervous that she felt ready to jump out of her own skin.

How tiresome men were! And for all that he was a hero, and a splendid warrior, and even quite a bit cleverer than most people she knew, Loghain had turned out to be...a man. After a few cups of wine, men were ready to fight... or feel up the first girl that came their way. Loghain seemed to be more the latter sort.

Perhaps she was being too harsh. He did not seem the sort to force himself on just *any* girl. He had standards, presumably, since he was not gossiped about, other than in connection with Bronwyn herself.

She set her goblet down. Loghain lifted the decanter on his desk and raised his brows at her.

"I don't think either of us needs any more to drink," she said flatly.

That drew a rueful smile from him. "Perhaps not."

Loghain studied her, pushing away the wine's pleasant haze. The girl was as skittish as an ill-treated mare, wary as a

trapped vixen ready to bite, glaring at him as if she expected him to make a grab for her, and clearly not liking the idea.

Fancy him she might, but she was also young, and proud, and clearly inexperienced. Rowan had been like something like her: the Rebellion had given Arl Rendorn Guerrin's daughter plenty of practice at leadership and swordsmanship, and done nothing at all for her self-image as an attractive woman. He needed to put Bronwyn at her ease, somehow. Well, then, to business: she seemed to have no trouble with that.

He unlocked his correspondence chest. "Here is the letter for Anora. In it, I tell her that I trust you, and urge her to do likewise. I lay out the plot, and how you have thwarted it thus far. Put this letter into no one else's hands," Loghain said sternly. "It must reach her."

"So it shall," Bronwyn assured him.

"While you're at it," he said, handing her two more sealed parchments. "Here's a letter for my seneschal in the city, and another to the commander of the Palace Guard. They are loyal to me, and you can rely on them. And here," he said significantly, adding a thin parchment to the pile, "is a cipher for you to use if you need to send me a message. What else do you plan to do when you're in Denerim?"

She had thought it over at length. "After I see the Queen, I'll be largely at her disposal. Depending upon what she needs, I also hope to make a thorough survey of the Warden Compound and see what could be of use to my people. I've

promised to pay a social call on my Bryland cousins. There's certainly no harm in keeping their friendship. I want to visit Master Wade and give him a number of commissions. I have an idea for some weapons to use against dragons, and he's not afraid of innovation."

Loghain snorted, "Hardly!"

"I was thinking of a kind of short lance or spear. Something with a long tip and good penetration. Maybe something that will tangle up their feet or their wings. Also, something to help me keep my footing if I'm demented enough to jump on one again."

He gave her a dark half-smile, that for some reason filled her with confidence. He understood what she was getting at, and thought her ideas were all right.

"Then," she said, "I'll scour the libraries and bookshops of Denerim for anything about the Nevarran dragon-hunters. I can have my people do quite a bit of that. Meanwhile," she said, taking a breath, "I also want to see my brother. If I can make time to help him in any way, obviously I want to."

"Where does your brother stand in all this?" Loghain asked, light eyes fixed on hers.

"Beside me in all things. The Couslands will not endure an Orlesian marriage. Fergus will have his rightful revenge on Howe, and then bring the North in line. Chaos is what the Orlesians wanted, but he will yet see them disappointed."

He gave him a brusque nod, satisfied. It was the most he could hope for. He regretted the loss of Howe, who was a brave and cunning man. Had he not fallen prey to a bard, he would have been a valuable ally. The die was cast, however: Loghain could not have both Couslands and Howes. He must choose wisely; and in this situation there was really no longer any choice at all. "And Alistair will lead the Wardens remaining in Ostagar. I hope he's up to it."

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. We've already worked a way to arrange scouting. Of course, I want to keep someone in camp at all times, unless Adaia actually goes on patrol with them."

"Adaia...also known as Melian Tabris. Vaughan won't let go of his vengeance. Do you know what the issue is there?"

"He wanted to rape her, and she got away. Her cousin and friends were not so lucky, and some of them died. He still wants to rape her, and then kill her, I suppose."

"That's her story?"

"It's easy enough to verify. She gave me the name of the priest who officiated at her wedding—the one that Vaughan broke up in his quest for 'elf whores.' I shall find Mother Boann and ask her for her version. Something else on my to-do list in Denerim. At any rate, I already believe Vaughan to be a genuinely vile human being. Yes, yes, we need him. I *understand*."

"Bronwyn," Loghain sighed. "When you know the things I know about the Ferelden nobility, you'll understand that *most* of them are genuinely vile human beings. Nonetheless, I'll keep an eye on Vaughan, and your little seller of rushlights as well."

He picked up his chair and moved it over to another by the fire, kicking it to face his own. "Sit with me," he said, gesturing to the girl. He realized immediately how that sounded.

"Please."

Cautiously, she sat, pressed against the back of her chair, her head cocked like a wary she-wolf. He leaned forward, hands gripping the arms of his chair, his knees nearly touching hers.

"You need to make more Wardens," he told her, very seriously. "And you need to recruit more Wardens capable of taking the initiative, not charity cases. If you find ways to jump on the back of a raging dragon, share them with your people. The duty of slaying the Archdemon is not yours alone." He saw her frown, and pressed the matter.

"Yes, I noticed that it was you who found the way to strike the killing blow against Flemeth. You told me what that means when facing the Archdemon. There is no reason why it must always be you. Do not withhold these tactics and weapons from your people, in order to protect them. They are not children. Respect them, and give them their chance at honor. For that matter, one of the mages might have got lucky with one of those concussive spells."

Bronwyn looked annoyed, and then nodded reluctantly. "You

do understand that I am their leader, and that I am not going to hang back and send someone off to die simply to preserve my own life?"

"Of course I do!" he snapped. "On the other hand, you don't have to stage-manage your own death! Let the others take their chance. Take your own, for that matter, but don't treat the sacrifice of the Wardens as your personal death sentence. What if something happened to you that would make you unable to face the Archdemon when it comes? Would you leave your people unarmed out of your own vanity?"

"Don't call me vain!" she shouted, trying to rise. He caught her wrists, holding her down.

"What would you call it? Do you believe that you are the destined Hero of legend: the only warrior of your generation capable of saving the world?"

"You make me sound ridiculous!" She glared at him, but she was not rejecting his words.

"If you were so arrogant as to believe such a thing, then you would be. I think you're a more sensible girl than that. A Grey Warden must kill the Archdemon, and in so doing, die. I understand that. It might well be you, but it might also be another. In that case, the Blight will be over, and what will you do then, Bronwyn Cousland? What will you do with yourself after the war?"

She could not bear the intensity of his gaze. "What if there is

no 'then?'" she whispered. "What if there is no 'after?'"

"There always is." He gripped her harder and gave her a little shake. "There *always* is. I've been through this. I know what it's like to have your life consumed by war, and not be able to see beyond it. I know what it's like to feel that this —*this*—is the way it's always going to be. But there is a future, and you have to be ready for it. Maker knows *I* wasn't, and I was caught flat-footed when there were no more Orlesians to skewer. But I found other duties, other ways of living. So will you."

She sighed, and her gaze drifted away into the shadows. "I will always be a Grey Warden. There is no escape."

"Yes," he agreed, very patiently, "but you will have done your duty, and can leave both leadership and active duty to others. What is Weisshaupt going to do? Send the Warden guard after you? I think not. Once the Blight is over, there is no reason you cannot make what you wish of the rest of your life." He paused, and then took the plunge. "You made a bargain with your father: one that he planned to discuss with me, I understand. Are you still interested in it?"

Shocked, she felt herself burning with embarrassment. "Who *told* you that?"

"Your cousin Bryland really cannot be trusted with information after two cups of wine. We must both remember that in future. Your father did not, and confided in him. He told me. He expected your brother Fergus to broach the matter with

me months ago. In fact, he thinks your brother did so."

"Let go of me," she said suddenly. He did, and she covered her face with one hand, leaning wearily on the arm of her chair. He gave her a moment to compose herself, wondering if she had completely changed her mind. If so, it was better to face it at once.

"My father," she said, her voice muffled and bitter, "My *father* never intended to keep his word to me. Another thing I discovered in Denerim that night. He had other plans for me—plans he preferred to my own. I do not wish to discuss them, for they are dust and ashes now. Do not speak of my father's plans."

"Then what of your own...wishes?"

She lowered her hand and looked at him, her eyes red and damp. "I wish that none of this had happened. I wish I could go home." She waved a hand, silencing the wise words ready on his lips. "I know...I know. Yes, if you are...interested, then so am I. I've already invested years and years in you, after all! It's expecting a bit much for me to start over with someone else. But," she glared at him, a single tear trailing down her scarred cheek like a glittering jewel in the firelight, "you must never, ever call my family traitors! Not ever again!"

"I understand," he murmured, reaching out to wipe the tear away, his finger stroking down the scar to the fine, firm jaw.

"I won't live more than thirty years at the most," she said.

"I don't expect that much myself," he replied.

"—and I may be barren," she whispered, acknowledging the grief of it. "It's a Warden thing."

"I have a child," he pointed out. "I am looking for a friend and a companion. A...lover," he admitted. "Not a breeding mabari. Speaking of which, do you think Scout will approve?"

"If you keep stuffing him with smoked boar," she smiled. She scrubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand. "I think I would like some wine, after all."

He went to his writing table, and poured the strong Antivan red into her goblet. She followed him and watched, silent and tense, her breath quick. They gravely touched their cups together, the silver ringing out a plangent note. They drank.

She hardly knew herself. After a time he took her cup away from her and set it aside. Then he moved closer, and she felt him against her, a man against a woman.

His strong arms held her fast, the heat of his body joining with hers, the pulse in his throat flickering against her mouth. Somehow his lips were testing hers, drawing her will from her. The soft sound she made must have pleased him, for the kiss deepened, lengthened, and the pressure against her became intoxicating and urgent.

"Wait," she murmured. "Wait." He looked down at her, pale eyes fierce and hungry. She licked her lips. "If you laugh at

me later...if you betray me...if you forsake me, I shall stab you right through the heart."

"Of course," he agreed gently, drawing her into the darkness of his bedchamber. He must be gentle. This must go well. And she was not the first virgin to come to him, after all. "Of course. And I'd do exactly the same." The words pained him, even in this moment of victory; a memory of Maric, grief-stricken, pinning the traitor Katriel to the wall with his sword. "Right through the heart."

Thanks to my reviewers: callalili, Rosabell, demonincargles, The Moidart, DanteAlighieri1308, Eva Galana, Have Socks Will Travel, Kira Kyuuketsuki, almostinsane, Shakespira, Remenants, mutive, Zute, Josie Lange, Morwen33, Cobar713, Juliafied, Blinded in a bolthole, GLCW2, JackOfBlackesX, Menamebephil, euromellows, Jenna53, Angurvddel, xJanelex, Lehni, Judy, Costin, Vomathg, chocolatebrownie12, Samara-Draven, mille libri, Enaid Aderyn, EmbersofAmber, WellspringCD, and lapetus.

To Valmothg: Thanks for your review. I am still considering the future of the Hawke family, because they are thinking things over now. Leandra is inclined to return home to the family "estate," and Bethany and Adam Hawke are worried about Carver running off to the army. In this AU, Adam stayed home to take care of his mother and sister. He is not a mage. However, with the Blight there and so close, going to Kirkwall is looking better and better from the standpoint of

safety for his mother and sister. He will, however, want to see what's up with Carver.

By the way, is anyone going to GenCon in August?

Yes, Adaia's story is Andersen's "The Little Match Girl."

Leliana's song is adapted from Childe Ballad 81, "Mattie Groves." I did not want to slow down the narrative, but here is the complete (revised) version:

*A holiday, a holiday,
The first one of the year
King Arland's wife came to the Chantry
The priests' singing for to hear.*

*And when the chanting it was done
She went out the Chantry door
And there she saw Ser Kerran Loys,
And desired him full sore.*

*"Come home with me
Ser Kerran Loys,
Come home with me tonight.*

*Come home with me
My own true love,
And sleep with me tonight."*

"Oh I can't come home,

*I won't come home
And sleep with you tonight
By the gold ring on your finger
I can tell you are King Arland's wife."*

*"'Tis true I am King Arland's wife,
King Arland's not at home
He is out to the far Bannorn,
Bringing the taxes home."*

*And the servant who was standing by
And hearing what was said
He swore King Arland all would know,
Before the sun would set.*

*Ser Kerran Loys, he lay down
And took a little sleep.
When he awoke, King Arland
Was standing at his feet.*

*Saying "How do you like my feather bed
And how do you like my sheets
And how do you like my lady,
Who lies in your arms asleep?"*

*"Oh well I like your feather bed
And well I like your sheets
But better I like your Lady Queen
Who lies in my arms asleep."*

*"Get Up! Get Up!" King Arland cried,
"Get up as quick as you can.
Ne'er be it said in Denerim
I slew a naked man!"*

*"Oh, I won't get up," Ser Kerran said,
"I can't get up at all,
For you have two long sharpened swords
And I but a dagger small."*

*"It's true I have two sharpened swords,
They cost me deep in the purse
But you will have the better of them
And I will have the worst.*

*"And you will strike the very first blow
And strike it like a man.
I will strike the very next blow
And I'll kill you if I can."*

*So Ser Kerran struck the very first blow
And he hurt King Arland sore.
King Arland struck the very next blow
And Ser Kerran struck no more.*

*And then King Arland he took his Queen,
He sat her on his knee
Saying, "Who do you like the best of us,
Ser Kerran Loys or me?"*

*And then spoke up his own dear Queen
Never heard to speak so free,
"I'd rather kiss dead Kerran's lips
Than you and your finery."*

*King Arland he jumped up
And loudly he did bawl
He stuck his wife right through the heart
And pinned her to the wall.*

*"A grave, a grave," King Arland cried,
To put these lovers in;
But bury my lady at the top
For she was of royal kin."*

36. To Visit the Queen

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 35: To Visit the Queen

"My lord Teyrn!"

The shout, surprisingly, was audible above the hellish noise of Fergus' troops as they dug in around Vigil's Keep.

He turned to hear the exultant captain's report.

"My lord, the Packtons' manor is ours! Our raid took them completely by surprise. Lady Liza and her men are prisoners, and her cousin Lord Simon is dead. We found her granaries and cellars well-stocked. The teamsters are retrieving much of the supplies even now."

"Well done, Seyforth," Fergus replied. "We'll be glad of it, if we're here as long as I anticipate."

He did not expect this to be easy, but the brief clash along the Pilgrim's Path yesterday had raised his men's morale. Howe had set a trap for them, but had not reckoned on Fergus expecting it, and having sent out some excellent scouts the day before. Without alerting the enemy, they had reported back. and Fergus had sent some light-armed skirmishers out

to surprise Howe's men, while he advanced with his main body.

The ambushers had themselves been ambushed, and Howe's foot soldiers were slaughtered. Thomas Howe and some of his knights had managed to break away, and there had followed a running fight north. A few brave men had sacrificed themselves; more of them were picked off by mounted archers. Fergus reckoned that only a handful had survived to reach the Vigil. He had not seen Thomas' body among the slain. Perhaps it was weak of him, but he was relieved.

Thomas had been the little tag-along brother: the one who had pestered everyone, wanting to join in all their fun. He was only a few years younger than Bronwyn, but she had managed to make herself part of the older crowd. They had never been close, but Fergus was sure that Bronwyn would not relish Thomas' death.

Nor Delilah's, for that matter. Fergus' spies were sure she was at Vigil's Keep, probably in the same tower chambers her mother had favored. Fergus wondered if some of Rendon Howe's ire had stemmed from Fergus rejecting a match with Delilah, and choosing for himself on that long, exciting journey to Antiva. Delilah was a nice girl, but marrying her would have been like marrying his sister—though without all the hot temper, swordplay, and competitive spirit, to be sure.

Howe's fortress was strong; but not so strong as Howe believed. Fergus knew the place well from childhood, and had made good use of his enforced wait in Denerim, thinking

through a workable strategy. The inner Keep was strongly fortified, but the outer works were weak: too spread out, and too dependent on a low wooden palisade. On the other hand, Howe might be well fixed for water and food: Fergus expected nothing else. They would dig in here, build counterworks, and Howe would be trapped.

In fact, Howe was trapped already. There was no backdoor to Vigil's Keep. Fergus had learned the lessons of Ostagar well, and had taken on a team of dwarven engineers, telling them that he wanted the best siege engines his money could buy. He could not hold this force together indefinitely. He must make quick progress, or his mercurial King would be wanting his troops back.

After a brief consultation, and some sketches of what was being done at Ostagar, his engineers agreed that they could devise weapons that would make Rendon Howe's life very miserable indeed, and his tenure of Vigil's Keep briefer than perhaps he had planned.

The dwarves were gloating now, smirking at the stone defying them. Their foreman approached Fergus, grinning.

"Sandstone, lord," Galtak chuckled. "The place is built of sandstone. Proof against arrows and swords, but not against dwarven wit! After a week of our trebuchets, it will melt like butter. Granite would have been trouble, but this..." he shook his head.

Fergus gave a nod at the machines they were assembling,

and asked, "That's all very well and good, but will you be ready for my signal *today*?"

"We'll earn our gold, my lord, no fear!" the dwarf gave a little bow, and went back to his men, still laughing

Howe's men were shooting from the palisades. Fergus shrugged. Let them. They were wasting bolts and arrows, and doing him no harm at all. He called for his squire.

"Tyrone!" Fergus smiled down at the eager young lad. "I'm going to change my armor. I want to look my best when I issue my challenge to Arl Howe."

In an old chest lay a suit of silverite plate, lovingly preserved and carefully reworked to fit him well. It had been worn by his father the day he refused a kingdom. It had been worn by his grandfather when he defied the Emperor of Orlais. It had been worn by his great-grandfather, Aonghas Cousland, to the tournament where he had won the heart of King Darlan's daughter. Fergus would wear it today. Rendon Howe would understand what it meant.

Within the hour, he was resplendent; sitting his warhorse at the outer gate of Vigil's Keep. A captain flanked him on either side; behind was his squire, holding his helmet. Above them, the banner of Highever fluttered bravely in the wind, held high by another squire.

"Rendon Howe, Arl of Amaranthine!" Fergus raised his voice to carry past palisade and curtain wall. "I, Fergus Cousland,

Teyrn of Highever, your rightful lord, call you to account! I name you traitor and murderer. I name you oathbreaker and outlaw. Too long have you cowered in your Keep, evading rightful punishment for your crimes. Come forth! Come forth and submit yourself to the King's Justice!"

A long silence, at last broken by Fergus' resonant voice.

"Rendon Howe, Arl of Amaranthine! I call you to account, in the King's name! Give yourself up, and you shall have justice. Give yourself up and your people will not suffer for your crimes. Give yourself up and your children will be spared. Prove yourself yet a man of some honor!"

Another silence. Fergus shouted, "Rendon Howe! For the last time, I call you to submit yourself to the King's Justice! Spare your vassals; spare your children; spare the kingdom the waste and evil of civil war!"

Above the wooden gate, a sneering face appeared. Howe glared down at the young man before him; the son of a man he had loved and hated and envied above all; a young man dressed in the ancient and noble armor of the Couslands: a man who should be dead.

"Young dogs bark loudest!" Howe shouted back. "Do you think me a fool, to go to my death like a sheep?"

Fergus frowned back, grim and dour. "Not like a sheep, but a shepherd: for a good shepherd will give his life for his sheep. I am here at the King's own command. Redeem your honor by

your obedience to him, if for no other cause."

Howe stared at him, and finally said, "There it is, right there. That damned look in the eye that marked every Cousland success that held me back." Suddenly flushing with rage, he snatched a bow from a guardsman, and fired an arrow. It fell short, but not by much, and thudded into the ground a few yards away from the young teyrn.

"Sit by my gates as long your like, young fool, or take yourself off. It's all one to me! I can afford to wait, and you cannot! While you are waiting, reflect on this: I threw your brat and your Antivan whore into a midden to rot. The last thing your father saw was your mother kissing my foot! Those words are all you'll have from me! I have no alms for beggars or Couslands!"

Fergus stared at him, his face gone grey. His knights watched him anxiously. One squire swore softly under his breath; the other's eyes filled with tears. With no other words, Fergus lifted his hand.

"But I am not so ungenerous," he called back. "Take this from a Cousland, and know that I have much, much more for you!"

He dropped his hand, and the waiting trebuchet creaked and thundered. A round ball of stone arced out, ponderous and massive. It struck the tall stone gate of the Keep. and splintered the top corner into a thousand shards. Howe gaped, taken aback. Fergus granted him a grave and inscrutable look, turned his horse's head, and rode away;

ignoring the futile arrows falling impotently behind him.

Riding to Denerim was exhilarating. Bronwyn enjoyed the journey, glad that she could travel without disguise.

She needed to get away. She needed to think about what had happened, because clearly nothing would ever be the same. The night before was a tangle of delight and awkwardness: nervous discomfort punctuated with bursts of intense pleasure. She had never undressed before a man, and her past glimpses of naked men had been matter-of-fact and unclouded by emotion—or had provoked fits of laughter. What had happened last night was nothing like that.

Had Loghain made a fool of her? Sometimes she thought he had, but he had also been kind—even tender. Did he imagine she belonged to him—that he could control her? She was still her own woman, but she could not deny that it had been sweet to nestle with him afterward, flesh to flesh, listening to his heart beating in the darkness.

He had wanted her to stay and sleep with him, but that was simply not tenable. She slipped from his bed, near midnight, and allowed him to help her clean herself before dressing all over again, and finding her own quarters. Fortunately, all her Wardens were already asleep or blind drunk by the time she returned. Most of them were still asleep by the time she rode away. Loghain had come to see her off, his eyes shadowed. Their public farewell was rather more decorous than the lingering kiss the night before. She needed time away from

him in order to understand herself.

Her party was not as small as she had originally planned. Scout was with her, of course, and Tara, Jowan, Zevran, and Danith. Astrid had surprised Bronwyn by asking to join them. She was interested, it seemed, in seeing more of Ferelden. As she was a redoubtable warrior, it seemed to Bronwyn that she might as well grant the woman's request. She also liked the idea of the party including a representative of the dwarves, especially when she had her audience with the King. Alistair still had a large party remaining with him at Ostagar.

It was vital that they see the Queen as soon as possible. With Tara and Jowan's handy spells, they could make the journey in three days, first resting overnight at her cousin Bryland's castle at South Reach. They had gone cross-country from Ostagar to Bryland's arling instead of sticking to the Imperial Highway, hoping to shave yet more time from the journey. The horses—and Scout—needed rejuvenation and healing from the rough trip overland, but that was what mages were for.

They arrived: and found that the King's party had gone south on the Imperial Highway only a few hours before.

"You just missed him, my lady!"

Bronwyn was both glad and sorry. It was her duty to brief the King about the progress of the alliances, but she knew that it would be difficult not to let something slip about her knowledge of his secret alliance with Orlais. Now, she could speak freely to the Queen— in private—about the plots

against her, with no fear of the King interrupting their too-interesting conversation.

She had visited Castle Bryland twice before, but she had been very young at the time. It was quite old: a square, bare tower with a low curtain wall, protected on three sides by a bend in the River Drakon, and on the east side by a deep moat and a drawbridge. It was in the process of a vigorous housecleaning, in the absence of the Arl and his family.

Cousin Leonas, of course, was still on campaign at Ostagar. Habren was swanning about Denerim, no doubt basking in her advantageous betrothal to Bann Vaughan. Cousin Leonas' two young sons were also at the Denerim mansion, keeping safe far from the darkspawn, under the gimlet eyes of their tutor and their aunt, Leonas' widowed older sister Lady Werburga.

I shall have to pay a call on them. Cousin Leonas had made a point of asking her, and he had been very kind and friendly. That was the downside of not travelling incognito. Habren was insupportable, but Lothar and Corbus were practically unknown to her. *They might be perfectly nice boys.* It was important to maintain family ties, especially since Fergus was likely to need all the support in the Landsmeet that he could get, with his teyrnir contested by Rendon Howe.

Nonetheless, the seneschal and his staff made them welcome and paid them every attention, though the current state of the Keep meant that they would not have private rooms. The cook, especially seemed happy to have guests to feed.

Before they retired for the night, Bronwyn called her people into the chamber she was sharing with Astrid, and gave them further information about the mission.

"We are not going to look for the Dalish right away. We are going to Denerim first. I have a letter for the Queen that I must deliver. And considering our difficulties in the battle with the dragon, there is a master armorer in Denerim whom I wish to consult. We barely survived Flemeth. The Archdemon is much larger and more powerful. Obviously our current weapons won't do."

This change in plans was greeted with disappointment by Danith, and with interest by the rest. Zevran, especially, always preferred a visit to the fleshpots of civilization to camping in the wilds.

"The shemlen queen cannot wait until we meet with Zathrian's clan?" Danith asked, her voice cold.

Bronwyn looked her in the eye. "I cannot wait. I gave my word to Teyrn Loghain that I would deliver this message. Furthermore, we need supplies from the Warden Compound and to get Master Wade, the armorer, working on improved weapons for us as soon as possible."

Tara played peacemaker. "You'll find Denerim very interesting, Danith. I'm not saying you will like it, but it's very interesting all the same. Maybe this time we can get in to see the alienage. I might have some actual relatives there!"

Everyone slept for over twelve hours. Bronwyn was up earlier than the rest, and she was not terribly surprised to be joined by Astrid.

The dwarf woman had found getting away from Ostagar to be something of a relief, even if it involved riding ill-tempered four-legged beasts at incredible speed. Everyone in the dwarven army knew who she was. Many were sympathetic. Some were amused. Her brother's cronies were smug. Astrid had no use for any of those attitudes. It was not a very pleasant situation for her.

Therefore, a chance to get away and see more of this mysterious surface world was not unwelcome. She liked most of her fellow Wardens and found their company pleasant enough: Alistair, Cullen, and Jowan behaved to her with respect; Leliana was amusing and harmless; the elf mage was polite; the handsome blonde mage gave her no trouble, since he had eyes for not much else other than his dark-haired mage girlfriend. Danith was aloof, but her hostility to humans did not extend to those she called Children of the Stone.

In addition, the companions who had attached themselves to the Wardens were interesting people. Sten was an estimable warrior, though his beliefs made him more a curiosity to her than anything else. From what she could gather, his people, the qunari, were regarded as a serious threat. The elf girl Adaia had no manners of any kind, but had the sense not to pester Astrid with foolish questions. The blond elf assassin was impudently gallant, but he was not particularly interested in Astrid, so the tiresome gallantry was simply a reflex, and

could be ignored. The boy Carver, the new recruit, seemed eager to prove himself, and was much like any other eager young warrior.

Brosca. It was very curious, associating with a Duster as an... equal...but Brosca was brave and skilled, and clearly well-meaning, despite her deplorably uncouth behavior. In time, she felt she could learn to live with Brosca. Oghren, strangely, bothered her much more. He was no Gorim, but sometimes associating with him tricked her into an illusion of normalcy. He was so like so many other warrior-caste types she had known. Nonetheless, her life would never be 'normal' again. She must resign herself to it.

And she had considerable respect for Bronwyn. It was not surprising that she would find common cause with another noble—even a human noblewoman from a surface land. Or perhaps it was that she was inevitably drawn to those in power...

At any rate, she would see this city of Denerim, and see for herself how the humans lived. She very likely would meet the Queen of Ferelden, and judge her palace for herself. That would be diverting.

"I hope you slept well," Bronwyn greeted her, already in the process of downing a large bowl of oat porridge.

Surfacer porridge was excellent. Astrid accepted her own bowl from a servitor with satisfaction. "Thank you, I did. My bed was very comfortable."

In fact she had found their quarters perfectly agreeable. Each of them had her own bed, and the room was spacious enough. It was still strange to see bright light slanting through the windows in the morning, but her room had a splendid view over green fields, given extra interest by the tall dark shapes in the distance that she had learned on her journey were called the Southron Hills.

Astrid enjoyed her first spoonful, and then asked, "You don't believe that we can be in Denerim by nightfall?"

Bronwyn shook her head, intent on her own bowl. "Neither the mages nor the animals can endure a day like yesterday. With luck and the mages' spells we should be there the day after tomorrow. If the horses aren't injured. I would like to be there as soon as possible. There is much to do there. We'll stay tonight at an inn on the West Road marked on my map—The Man-At-Arms. It's supposed to be fairly nice."

Astrid studied her commander thoughtfully. "I notice that your letter to the King was not of such moment that you ordered us chase after him. With that spell the mages used, we might have caught up to him quickly."

Bronwyn gave the dwarf woman a keen look. "That is true. Everything in my letter to the King he will learn from Alistair when he arrives at Ostagar. My letter to the Queen takes precedence."

"Teyrn Loghain is the father of the Queen, is he not?"

"He is."

Astrid thought about that for a little while, while they ate their porridge in silence. Then she said, "While Grey Wardens are supposedly apolitical, it appears that that is not so much a hard-and-fast rule as it is a...guideline."

Bronwyn reached for a cup of cider. "In a perfect world, Grey Wardens could be apolitical. However, all my experiences tell me that is impossible. Simply to obtain the support we need, I've had to play politics every step of the way. We are not numerous enough—obviously—to fight the darkspawn alone. Though all life on Thedas is threatened by the darkspawn, I've had to grant endless favors and do the bidding of kings and queen, of priests and clan chiefs. You saw for yourself what I had to do in Orzammar to get the dwarves to honor their treaty. It's like that everywhere. The King of Ferelden's support is necessary to our efforts, since the Blight is in his territory. However, I think that ultimately the skill and valor of Teyrn Loghain will be even more vital."

Astrid gave it more thought. "There is some division between the King and Queen, is there not?"

The former Aeducan princess was entirely too astute. Bronwyn hesitated, and then whispered, "There is, but she does not know it...yet."

Astrid's eyes lit up with the excitement of an Orzammar intriguer. This was the sort of thing she had missed. "Is he planning to divorce her? Or kill her?"

Bronwyn was ready to dismiss the first question, since she really did not want to talk about the subject at all, but the second question brought her up short.

"Andraste's nightgown!" She tried to look indignant, and tell the dwarf that Ferelden was not like that, but that would be a barefaced lie. Bronwyn had studied too much of her own country's history to have any illusions. She did not think Cailan capable of murder—especially the murder of his beautiful young wife. Nonetheless, ugly things had happened in the past; in the pursuit of power, or for the greater good...

She lowered her voice. "I don't want to talk about it here, or anywhere where we might be overheard. Nothing can be allowed to disrupt our campaign against the darkspawn, and certainly not the personal affairs of kings. We must put a stop to anything that threatens the war effort."

That made perfect sense to Astrid. "Absolutely. I am looking forward to our time in Denerim. Would it be possible for me to be presented to the Queen?"

"I don't see why not..."

Tara came bounding down to breakfast, followed by Zevran, who was trying to flirt with a sullen Danith; and far behind, a quietly cheerful Jowan. The mage had not slept so well in... well, *ever*. At least he had once Zevran had gone to sleep and stopped quizzing Jowan about which of their companions he found most beautiful.

Bronwyn's polite queries about their rest were met by assurances—except for Danith.

"The bed was too soft," she declared ungraciously. "It felt like I was sinking into a pool of mud."

"How trying for you," Bronwyn said, on the edge of hard words. Zevran winked at her, and she managed to smile in spite of herself.

The breakfast was also not to the Dalish elf's satisfaction. Tara asked her all about the Dalish diet, which distracted Danith into a long lecture about the benefits of *hallenansal*, a soft, pudding-like substance made from the fermentation of halla milk. From Danith's description, it was not quite cheese.

"No, we do not add salt," she said stiffly, in response to Tara's question. "Excessive salt is unhealthy. Shemlen eat far too much salt. Hallenensal is eaten plain, or with fruit gathered from the forest. It is also sometimes sweetened with honey."

"In Ostwick I had clotted cream," Bronwyn said. "It's like a thickened milk, and it has a natural sweetness—"

"—The Gift of the Halla is far superior to anything made from the milk of shemlen beasts of burden," Danith declared, with cool satisfaction.

"I'm sure it's delicious," Tara said soothingly. "and very wholesome."

Zevran gave them all a dazzling smile. "I have some acquaintance with it myself. In my time among the Dalish we had hallenansal for breakfast every day. And for supper. And for snacks. Sometimes it was mixed with herbs or with shredded raw fish. Or with roots and berries. Or seeds and nuts. Every day." The dazzling smile became a trifle glazed.

Bronwyn was amused back into composure.

Soon they were on their way, and Bronwyn considered where they should stay once they were in Denerim. There was the Warden Compound, of course, which she was eager to see for herself.

On the other hand, she could also stay at Highever House, which would be a little like home. She had not been there in years—not since Cailan and Anora's wedding—but she remembered it well. There was a room there that was hers, and might even have some things of hers stowed away.

No, it would have to be the Warden Compound. She was making an official visit, in her official capacity. Highever House was really Fergus' now, and she could not in good conscience bring guests there without his permission. Furthermore, the Compound was part of the Palace, and she would have easier access to the Queen. If time permitted, she would visit Highever House and look for anything belonging to her.

They were all exhausted by the time they clattered into the outer courtyard of the Palace. The Man-At-Arms Inn had been

more than a bit grubby, and dealing with excited gawkers had been an irritant Bronwyn had not anticipated. Worse still was the innkeeper's assumption—which Bronwyn had taken some pains to correct—that Tara, Zevran, and Danith were servants, who would make do with pallets on the kitchen floor. Girl Warden or not, the innkeeper was not happy about elves in his best rooms, and had charged accordingly. Really, it was positively foul how some people treated elves...

There was impudent curiosity about Danith's clan tattoos, and even a few murmurs about "heretics." Bronwyn breathed a deep sigh of relief when she realized that Danith simply did not know what the people were talking about. The Dalish elf was too distracted, anyway, by her disgust at the "dirty, greasy" food they were served.

Worse still, the mages' staffs were a giveaway, and a number of country people had given them fearful looks and then slunk away, whispering among themselves. A pair of Templars arrived very early in the morning to investigate the rumors of "apostates on the loose." Ser Fillian and Ser Bors had been very polite, but they had their duty to perform. They demanded a signed statement from Bronwyn, affirming that these mages were Grey Wardens, and traveling on official business under the supervision of their commander. There was nothing in the Grey Warden treaties that gave the Chantry the right to ask for anything of the sort, but it was sign the statement, waste time arguing, or simply kill the men. She quietly vowed to camp in future, or stay at the castles and manors of people whose hospitality and good breeding

she trusted. Or perhaps the Grey Wardens needed to purchase some strategically-located land for a few bases around Ferelden.

And she would have to think of some way to make her mages look less like...mages. Jowan and Tara would wear light armor in future. With griffons on it. The Warden tunics were not well-known enough in Ferelden to deflect attention or garner respect. And surely there was a way to disguise a mage's staff. Could it be made to look like a longsword, or a spear? Did it have to be so bloody *conspicuous*?

As they neared the city, their progress was hindered by the thin but steady stream of refugees making their way along the West Road up to Denerim. Bronwyn sighed with relief at the sight of the spire of Fort Drakon.

No one was expecting them at the Warden Compound, and there was a tiresome wait until the grooms made their appearance to take the horses to the stables. Danith looked about, scowling at the great stone pile. How could shems choose to live with nothing green in sight?

Things improved considerably after that, however. Mistress Rannelly, the Warden's housekeeper, peered out of the Warden's entrance and gave a little squeal at the sight of their tunics. She ducked back inside and Bronwyn could hear her issuing quick, excited orders to the staff.

Alistair had told her about the woman. She really did look something like a cottage loaf: soft and comforting. Her face

might be lined with age, but her eyes were bright as a young woman's, and she bustled out to greet her Wardens with a broad smile.

"The Girl Warden!" she exclaimed, taking Bronwyn's hand in one of her own and patting it all the way to the door. "You are the Girl Warden, aren't you? And your fine mabari, too! We've all heard about Scout! I'm Peridota Rannelly, and oh, I'm so glad you've come at last. We've been quite bereft here, grieving over our Duncan and all our poor boys. He recruited you, didn't he? I thought so. Such an eye for the best, our Duncan had. Oh, introduce me to all our new Wardens! Tara—such a pretty name. You are so young, my dear! Have you been getting enough to eat? Well, well, you'll find no such trouble in the Wardens' Hall! Danith! Am I pronouncing it right? Danith. Duncan so wanted to recruit more Dalish elves. He had such a high opinion of the Dalish, did Duncan. You are very welcome here. Jowan. Another mage? That's very exciting. The Wardens need all the mages they can get! You look tired, my boy. I have a tonic that will set you right-Zevran! Not a Warden? Oh, well... Nobody's perfect, and I'm sure you'll come around soon. Astrid! Duncan always said the dwarves made wonderful Wardens. Don't worry about your boots, my dear: Toby will see to them, and we can have the floor scrubbed again in a jiffy. Such a lot of Girl Wardens, really! I've never seen the like. Well, a new broom sweeps clean. How is our Alistair? A sweet boy and a dab hand with a sword and shield, too. Oh my, second-in-command... I suppose someone has to be. Warden-Commander, you'll want to see the accounts, and there is a pile of letters in the

study for you, but what am I saying? You don't know where the study is, do you? The Commander's room is adjoining. We stored our poor Duncan's things in the west attic. Some of them, anyway... We'll have beds done up for your in a trice and food on the table. I suppose you'll want baths as soon as may be. Not that you're so *very* dirty, but still..."

Bronwyn let the tidal wave of words wash over her. It was pleasant, really, to be fussed over. It reminded her of home... of Nan—though Nan's fussing would have been mixed with more pointed criticism of Bronwyn's current appearance.

"Baths would be wonderful, Mistress Rannelly. I need to apply for an audience with the Queen as soon as possible, but I certainly can't go before her as I am now."

"Certainly not," the housekeeper agreed. "The Wardens have standards to maintain. The Queen is not well, poor soul, but I have no doubt she'll see you. The King left only three days ago, you know..."

"Yes, we missed him on the way, but I promised Teyrn Loghain to give Her Majesty a letter ..."

"Well, give Tamsin the gown you're to wear, and she have it brushed and pressed for you by the time you're clean enough to wear it!"

Bronwyn paused. "Actually, I don't have a gown. I'll wear my clean breeches and a fresh shirt. If a clean tunic could be found, that might be a good idea."

"Of course we can find you a tunic, but..." the good woman looked a bit flustered. "We have far more in the storerooms for men than women, but surely there is *something* suitable. Why don't I have a look, while you're taking your bath? But first, let's get you all something eat. I know about Warden appetites! We always have some soup on the simmer in the kitchens, just in case..."

As they walked, Bronwyn took the opportunity to look around. The entrance to the Warden Compound was a low, arched doorway. A barrel-vaulted passage of stone led past an empty guard post and some closed doors, and then into a kind of ante-room, furnished only with a candlestand and a bench for waiting visitors. A maidservant, running ahead, pushed the doors open on a high, wide, and airy chamber. The lofty ceiling boasted heavy beams, and from them, silken pennants dangled down: standards of the nations of Thedas, of noble houses, of the Grey Wardens. A long table, rubbed and polished into a mellow shine, ran down the middle of the room with benches on either side. A splendid chair whose arms and feet were carved into griffon's claws was placed at the far end, in between a pair of fireplaces. Above each of the fireplaces hung a portrait. Even at this distance, Bronwyn could recognize one of them as that of Duncan.

"The refectory, Warden-Commander," Mistress Rannelly said, with a proud gesture. Her eyes dimmed in a moment of grief. "We put up our Duncan's picture just as soon as we heard. And we moved Commander Genevieve's picture from the study, so the two of them could look down at the Hall. It

seemed right and proper, somehow."

So that was Warden-Commander Genevieve of Orlais, who had brought the Grey Wardens back to Ferelden. Bronwyn went closer to have a look. It was not a very good portrait, being too generic to tell much about the woman herself. For that matter, it had probably been painted after her death by someone who had never met her.

The woman in the portrait was certainly not very glamorous. The portrait showed a stern, middle-aged face, pale and worn, under short-cropped, no-nonsense grey hair. The burden of duty had carved deep lines around her eyes and mouth. The background was dark and shadowy, reminiscent of the Deep Roads where Genevieve had met her end, leading a mysterious mission that had included King Maric himself. Nothing much was known about the mission. It occurred to Bronwyn that Teyrn Loghain, the confidant of the king, might be the only one left who knew anything about what had happened. She must remember to ask him. She felt herself blush hotly, thinking of him.

Her people had scattered and were themselves looking about; admiring the weapons stands and the armor stands and the various curiosities on display. Tara was in conversation with a busy elven maid, and they were both gesticulating in an excited way. Bronwyn smirked. At least Tara was gesticulating: the maid was attempting to set the table and serve them a meal. Tara then drew Danith and Astrid into the conversation.

Mistress Rannelly led Bronwyn to a door off the refectory. There was another, much shorter passage. At one side was a narrow spiral staircase leading both up and down: on the other was an arched doorway.

"There's the study, Warden-Commander dear," said the woman. "And through that door beyond is your bedchamber. I'll just open them up right now. There."

The study was more than that: it was filled with bookcases, chests, and cupboards. In addition to a big desk, the room was furnished with a settee in front the fireplace, and a chess table was pushed up against the wall, with chairs set primly on two opposing sides. From the curved wall to the outside, it was clear that the room was a section of a round tower. Two arched windows lit the room brightly. The sills were deep enough to curl up in with a good book. There was no reason not to share this pleasant place with her companions. The desk, she saw, had a lock for anything that needed to be kept secret. Most of the cupboards and chests could be locked as well.

The adjoining bedchamber was smaller, and furnished simply and without ostentation. Still, it was hers by right, and hers alone. Scout trotted ahead of her, sniffing.

"—and Niniel will make up the bed for you and put away your things. We'll find a warm blanket for your mabari. I thought that we could make up two of the rooms here in the tower for the others, rather than opening up that big drafty dormitory. How long will you be staying?"

"I'm not sure," Bronwyn told the housekeeper, distracted by her pleasure at having a private room. "It largely depends on the Queen. Not more than a few days, I expect. You said Her Majesty was unwell..."

The older woman sighed deeply. "Off her food, she was. We hoped we knew what that meant, but we were wrong. Under the weather, she is, and the King riding away, merry as you please, to see the elves! Of course, there is a war on and we all have to sacrifice, but it's a heavy burden on her, poor lass."

Bronwyn thought quickly, "Send one of your people to the seneschal directly, to inform Her Majesty that I am here with dispatches from Ostagar. Meanwhile, I shall try to make myself fit to be seen..."

She caught the fragrance of cooked food, and ducked out of the room quickly. Whatever it was, it smelled very good. Fruit was heaped on a huge silver salver, and crusty bread in baskets. To her surprise, her people were standing by the benches up near the grand Commander's chair, and they were waiting for her...

Tara grinned. "Tamsin informed us that we weren't to sit down until the Commander did. She was scandalized at our greedy manners!"

"Then I'm sorry to keep you waiting," Bronwyn laughed, and after a brief moment of hesitation, seated herself in the Commander's chair. Instantly her five companions thumped themselves down on the benches and were eagerly devouring

bowls of good pea soup.

Mistress Rannelly herself scrubbed Bronwyn's filthy hair, and then patiently combed through the tangles. It took some time to have enough hot water for everyone, but the pleasure of proper baths put even Danith in a mellower mood.

"And we found you a gown!" The housekeeper towed Bronwyn's hair again, anxious to get it dry before the royal summons came. "Tamsin, show the Warden-Commander what was in the stores!"

Bronwyn caught her breath as yards of the most shimmering, sumptuous grey velvet was spread out on her bed for her examination.

"We had our work cut out for us to find something that would fit a tall, broad-shouldered lady like yourself, but there was this, and I don't think it has ever been worn. It was brought from Orlais by Commander Genevieve twenty years ago, but you see it's like new!"

Bronwyn put out her hand to stroke the fabric. It was the finest Orlesian silk velvet: the costliest of dress fabrics. Either Genevieve had been independently wealthy, or, more likely, she was a warrior whose concessions to pomp and ceremony went only as far as having the one gown, but that one the best to be had.

The Orlesian style would have been strange to Ferelden eyes twenty years ago, but was now pretty much what was worn

by all Ferelden woman who could afford it. Heavy silver braid trimmed the high neck, accented the shoulders, and finished off the sleeves. The skirt of the gown was straight and split in four parts, much like a Warden's tunic, with the splits in front over the thighs. The bodice was embroidered in silver, picked out with black, with a griffon, wings outspread. This was not just a woman's only gown, it was the gown of a woman who defined herself totally as a Grey Warden.

Tamsin had found all the rest of the trimmings that went with it: a double belt, black velvet set with crystal, and a black silk underskirt.

"I could simply wear my breeches and boots under it—" Bronwyn began to suggest, and then saw the look in the other women's eyes. She desisted. She could wear it as it was meant to be worn, at least this once. Once her hair was dry enough to be braided up—more elaborately than her usual style—they set about lacing her into the gown, and adjusting the fit with pins.

"Commander Genevieve was broader in the chest and hips than you, my dear, but of course she was no longer a young girl," Mistress Rannelly remarked. "And her preferred weapon was a greatsword. That certainly puts muscle on anyone, man or woman! I'll take a few stitches in the dress tonight, and it will fit you like it was made for you."

"Let me see!" Tara cried. She peeked into the room, barefoot, in a man's too-big shirt, her own hair sopping wet. "You look splendid!"

Astrid was waiting for Danith to finish in the bath, and came to look as well; carefully not touching anything in the clean room. It would be good to bathe again. She admired the dress in a more measured way.

"It's as much a...uniform...as a gown," she judged.

"True," Bronwyn agreed. "It's very official-looking, but for my audience with the Queen, that's all to the good."

She studied herself in the long Tevinter mirror, and decided she liked what she saw. The length was a sensible one: the gown's skirt ended just above her ankles. The underskirt could be adjusted to the same length, or pulled down to sweep the floor. She liked her hair too, and paused, regretting the indelible scar. At least her hair covered it somewhat. She liked the sensation of being dressed up once again so much that she was reluctant to take the dress off.

That proved to be convenient, for the royal summons soon arrived, and Bronwyn set off for the front gate of the Palace, feeling feather-light without her armor and a layer of grime.

Anora looked up wearily at the quick sound of boots on stone. They came to an abrupt stop at the door of the Little Audience Chamber, and there was muttered conversation. It all made her head buzz painfully.

"Majesty," murmured Erlina, "It is the Grey Warden."

"Send her in here," Anora whispered, trying not to aggravate her headache. "I don't need to leave my sitting room for Bronwyn Cousland."

Anora had been dully surprised by the message that the Grey Warden Bronwyn was in Denerim and requesting an audience. Everything was so difficult nowadays. What did the Girl Warden want? Everyone always seemed to want something. Perhaps she had brought a letter from Father. The idea irritated her further. The gossip about the two of them, dutifully related by Erlina, was *scandalous*. What was Father thinking, carrying on so? The thought of Father carrying on with anyone was disturbing enough, but doubly so with a girl younger than his daughter! Father had been alone so long that he should be used to it by now.

"The Commander of the Grey, Your Majesty," a guard announced quietly. He had a soothing voice. Anora would make sure he stood guard at her rooms more often.

She was a little startled by the person bowing, then advancing toward her. This woman bore little resemblance to the Bronwyn Cousland she knew. She had grown taller and older, certainly, and she was almost gaunt, with a serious expression that was not at all like Fergus Cousland's lop-sided, endearing grin. She had alarmingly green eyes that surely Anora would have remembered. For a brief, frightening instant she believed that an assassin had penetrated the Palace.

But the tall figure in the grey velvet gown blazoned with a

griffon merely bowed again.

"Your Majesty. I come from Ostagar with news of the campaign and a private letter from Teyrn Loghain."

Anora stared at her for a moment, and then extended a pale, languid hand for the letter.

She read, her befogged brain struggling with the code. Then she read it again. It was the most distressing letter she had ever received.

Cailan was planning to divorce her. He was planning to divorce her and marry the Empress of Orlais, the most glamorous woman in the world.

Had she not been so weak and miserable, the little moan of despair would not have escaped her. But it did, and Bronwyn started forward in concern.

"Your Majesty—"

"Sit!" It was rude, but Anora was too wretched to care about her manners. "You know the contents of this letter. You brought my father the evidence. He credits it."

"Your Majesty, this should be private—" The green eyes glanced sharply at Erlina, waiting demurely for Anora's commands.

"I trust Erlina implicitly—" Anora paused. This was too serious a matter, and while Anora knew and trusted Erlina, Bronwyn

did not, and might not speak freely if Erlina remained in the room. "Erlina," she said instead, "fetch my tea. The Commander will join me."

The maid seemed displeased, but left the room. Bronwyn took the moment to speak. "Yes. I regret to tell you it is all true. I brought the wedding treaty to your father. The King believes that it is on its way to Orlais." She spoke quickly, giving the Queen the affair in brief, not dwelling on the murder of Marjolaine, but not pretending it had never happened, either. She mentioned the Orlesian plot to kidnap Alistair and herself, at which Anora raised her brows and then nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes...Alistair is Cailan's bastard brother. The son of a serving maid. I have heard of him."

That Alistair's mother was a Grey Warden, and no serving maid was none of Anora's business, so Bronwyn did not dispute her words.

"Marjolaine was also the agent who lured Rendon Howe into murdering my father. Her goal was to destabilize the north, just as the south of Ferelden is under attack by the darkspawn. She seems to have succeeded."

"Your brother took his forces north four days ago," Anora told her. "His men have invested the area around Vigil's Keep, and he has sent his challenge to Howe."

Bronwyn sighed, wishing she could have seen him first...

wishing she could be with him. "Maker give him strength," she said. She looked at the white-faced woman opposite her, and said, "And you, too, Majesty. I am sorry to see you so unwell. When did this illness come upon you?"

"About ten days ago," Anora replied, no longer bothering to pretend she was perfectly well. "It has rather crept up on me..." She paused. She was not a fool, even with her brain in a fog. She was not a fool...

Bronwyn was staring at her, alarmed, the poison-green eyes boring into hers. Perhaps she, too, had realized that Anora began feeling ill shortly after the King had signed a treaty setting her aside...

"No..." Anora whimpered.

The maid appeared with the tea tray: her trusted, valued Erlina.

"Your tea, Majesty."

Anora reached out a trembling hand, and clutched at the fragile little cup. Such a delicate thing... She looked up into Erlina's face. and saw something she had missed.

The cup fell to the floor, scattering shards of painted Orlesian porcelain.

Note: Thank you, my loyal reviewers: Rosabell, Anime-

StarWars-fan-Zach, JackOfBladesX, Juliafied, Blinded in a Bolthole, Samara-Draven, Nithu, The Moidart, chocolatebrownie12, Shakespeira, Rooney, Jenna53, Judy, mille libri, motive, Menamebaphil, Kira Kyuuketsuki, Zute, Jyggliag, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Tyanilth, Dante Alighieri1308, Josie Lange, Thomas Blaine, euromellows, Cobar713, Have Socks Will Travel, Lehni, xJanelex, Commander Kurt, Remenants, cloud1004, Shinkansen, rldragon, Enaid Aderyn, Herebedragons66, almostinsane, Siha Shap, and RayneEthelwulf.

Wow. Over a thousand reviews... I'm so glad so many of you are enjoying this story. It's far from over.

37. A Very Important Errand Girl

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 37: A Very Important Errand Girl

Erlina did not get far when she tried to run. Bronwyn took her prisoner without even soiling her fine new gown.

Jowan healed the burns from the explosive powder hurled in Bronwyn's face. Now, she stared at the bound elf before her, grim and purposeful. True to her bardic training, Erlina's bruised face was a mask of calm and control. She understood that she was going to die, and had accepted it. That was the price of failure, and a fair one. She had not counted on the speed or strength—or the resistance to pain—of the Girl Warden.

"I strongly advise you," Bronwyn began, herself calm and controlled, "to tell us everything you know. Your contacts; when and where they took place; the Orlesian plans you are privy to; your speculations of the same. Everything. It is very much in your best interests to do so."

Erlina was silent. Bronwyn was silent too, looking at her.

The room was a bare stone chamber in the Wardens'

Compound. It had once been a bedchamber, but had been abruptly cleared out, and now it contained only a table, two chairs, parchment and ink. The only window was high in the wall, and far too thin for even a slender elf to wriggle through. In the back of the room was a plain bench, where lounged Zevran Arainai, listening very carefully.

Erlina's attempt to flee had confirmed her treason. Bronwyn had instantly called in her mages and Zevran, who had identified the poison in the little container by the tea things.

"Inheritance powder," he said, with a wry laugh. "It is used in Orlais, and also in Antiva. I suspect it is used all over Thedas, but sparingly. It is expensive—*very* expensive—and thus only used for important targets. A large dose mimics a stroke: a little causes a slow decline, so one can say that the target was sickly and like to die."

"Expensive, you say?" Bronwyn asked. She had never heard of this poison.

"The *most* expensive!" Zevran assured her. "The active ingredient is not even found in Thedas, but in a land to the far north, beyond Par Vollen. As that is now held by the qunari, it is almost impossible to obtain. This poison can only be commanded by the wealthiest King!"

"—or Empress," Bronwyn said. Zevran gave her a little bow of assent.

"Do you know what the punishment is for one who would compass the death of the Queen of Ferelden by poison?" Bronwyn asked Erlina.

The elf gave a little shrug. It was ridiculously obvious. Of course the punishment was death.

Very quietly, Bronwyn went on: "The punishment was decreed by King Arland, over two hundred years ago. He was a harsh man, was King Arland. A barbarian, you Orlesians would describe him. A barbarian ruling over a barbarous and turbulent people. There were many attempts to dethrone him, but King Arland died in his bed. After awhile, the attempts had ceased, you see, because his punishments were such that no one would take the risk."

She folded her hands and cocked her head, using her disturbingly green eyes to intimidate the elf.

"A cook was suborned by some of Arland's enemies to poison him. Not a bad plan, as King Arland was a notorious glutton. The plan, however, was discovered, and the cook captured. It was then that King Arland, in rage and fear, decreed that anyone who poisoned or attempted to poison the monarch should suffer a punishment appropriate to a treacherous cook..." She let the words drift into the silence. Erlina sat very still.

"The false servant was stripped naked. The hair of his head and body was shaved, and he was drawn through the streets of Denerim thus in a high cart, with a placard above naming

him traitor and poisoner. The people of the city pelted him with curses and with filth, and followed the cart eagerly to the place of execution appointed: the Market Place, where stands had been erected for the nobles and the wealthy, that they might see the sight. It is said that the other folk climbed to the tops of houses to see the better.

The place of execution was a pyre : but not one for the malefactor to be burnt upon. The fuel was charcoal, to prevent too much smoke that might mercifully smother a victim before the flames reached him. Instead, a great caudron was set upon the almost smokeless fire: the kind of cauldron used in butchering many boars at a time. There was water in the cauldron. Cold water."

Her face impassive, Bronwyn said, "The malefactor was enclosed in a kind of iron cage, to keep his head from dipping down under the water, and escaping the full penalty of the law by drowning himself. The cage was lowered into the water, and the water slowly heated to boiling. It took many hours. From time to time the cage was lifted from the bubbling water to see the skin sloughing from the agonized body. This prolonged the criminal's suffering. King Arland was very interested in seeing what the punishment would look like."

Erlina's eyes were red and glittering. A thin trail of snot trickled down from her nose. Bronwyn paused and studied her.

"The Queen, as you have cause to know, is a kind and just woman. Even though you have betrayed her in the worst of

ways, she is no monster who delights in the torture of others, unlike those who could watch her suffering and eventual death with complacency. Nor will I soil my hands with hot irons or the rack. Two choices lie before you."

Erlina sniffed almost inaudibly.

"Make no mistake: you will die for your treason. It lies with you whether you suffer or not. If you display true penitence by telling us everything you know, I give you my word that the Queen will permit you a strong draught of sleeping potion, and you will slip from life to death without pain. If you prove recalcitrant and hardened, you will suffer the full penalty of the law, and there is no soft-hearted King in Denerim to prevent it. I will leave you to your thoughts. You have one hour to decide. Come, Zevran."

The former Crow stretched lazily, rising from the bench. "Warden-Commander, if I may...could I have a word with the prisoner? Perhaps she will listen to reason if someone not so...imposing...were to urge her."

"As you like," Bronwyn nodded. Indeed, this had been the plan all along. She left the room, and made sounds as if going away, then quietly returned and listened at the door.

Zevran sat down by Erlina, relaxed and smiling sympathetically. He suspected the Erlina knew the ruse, but under such a penalty, she would be desperate for anything resembling pity.

"My charmer," he said gently. "I think you should reconsider any hint of loyalty you may be feeling to your former employer. And cast aside professional pride as well, for it will not cool you in boiling water."

Erlina whimpered and turned her head, not trusting herself to speak.

Zevran, not unkindly said, "I attempted the life of the Girl Warden herself, and managed to speak quickly and well enough to turn her anger. As I told her then, I was not paid for silence. Were you? No. You were a tool, and a useful one; but your mistress is far away and would not admit she knows your name, and your colleague Marjolaine is dead."

"Dead?" A long, despairing sigh.

"*Si, carina.*" Zevran said, "I was there. She was questioned, killed, and her papers seized. The Queen knows all, now. She cannot spare your life after what you have done. Had you thrown yourself on your knees before her, instead of throwing flash powder in the Warden-Commander's face, perhaps. Perhaps. But it is too late now. As my commander says truly, what you can choose is the manner of your own death. Choose wisely, I beg you. Choose for yourself, and not for others, who do not care how your suffer."

A low whisper. "And will she keep her word?"

"She always has. I myself will see that you receive the sleeping draught... if you earn it."

After a few minutes, she began to speak. Zevran dipped the quill into the ink and wrote quickly, catching every word.

Anora felt much better after the Warden mage's attentions. He was a mild-mannered, not ill-favored fellow, and spoke gently to her, explaining that he was using spells for Healing and Rejuvenation. Erlina's poison had done her great harm, and when pressed to say if the harm were permanent or not, he grew flustered. Anora shut her eyes, just wanting to know the truth.

She did not have it until Bronwyn heard it from Jowan himself, and then told the Queen.

"No, Your Majesty. There is no cure. The damage to your vital organs was irreversible. You cannot be fully healed, but Jowan feels that daily treatments will keep you feeling well and able to perform your duties."

"For how long?"

Bronwyn bit her lip. "We don't know. For over a year, possibly, perhaps more." The look on Anora's face wrung her heart. She hurried on. "We can meanwhile call in other, more experienced Healers—very discreetly. The Healer Wynne, who is now serving at Ostagar. is quite brilliant, and would know what to do if anyone does. She saved my brother's life, after all." She thought a little more. "I must go to the Dalish soon, but if it suits you, Majesty, I will leave Jowan here for you, with the story that he is convalescing from wounds and

will perform the necessary administrative duties at the Compound as our liaison with the Crown. That way, he can call on you daily for your necessary healing."

"Yes." Anora nodded, clutching at the arms of her chair. "We shall do that. Jowan will stay here, and I shall write to my father, requiring the services of this Wynne. She can be trusted, do you think? The King cannot know of this..."

Her heart almost failed her. *Unless he knows already...*

The Wardens sat over a late supper, talking about it all. "I wish we had those Ashes of Andaste that the good brother was looking for," Tara said. "They'd cure the Queen right away!"

"What ashes?" Astrid asked. She scowled, puzzled, at Bronwyn. "What is she talking about?"

When Bronwyn did not instantly answer. Danith said, "You are speaking of the Andraste who freed the slaves? She whom the shemlens worship? The friend of Thane Shartan?"

"Yes," Bronwyn allowed. "*That* Andraste. Near Lake Calenhad, we met a traveling scholar who believed he knew where the ashes were enshrined. They are rumored to possess miraculous curative powers."

Jowan muttered, "It would *take* a miracle to cure the Queen!" He wished he could do more for her. She was so beautiful and

so sad. How could anyone do such a thing to her? And people *thought blood mages* were monsters.

Astrid had heard of Andraste, generally when humans were cursing; and the Shaper of Memories said that the evidence indicated that she had actually existed. The Tevinters believed her to have been a powerful mage, though apparently that opinion was deeply offensive to all other humans in Thedas. She remarked, "If those ashes really had such powers, they would be a mighty prize indeed."

Bronwyn paused, a little shocked at the idea of Andraste's remains being considered a "prize." So too were Tara and Jowan, who had been forced to attend chapel services every day of their lives in the Circle.

After that first shock, Bronwyn forced herself to be rational about it. "Brother Genetivi was highly regarded by another scholar of the Chantry to whom I once spoke—a Sister Justine. She felt that he was a serious and learned person—and one who investigated the truth whether it was politically acceptable to those in power or not. When Tara and I visited his house to see if he had returned safely, we discovered an intruder there: someone who had murdered the brother's servant and had gone through his papers. Someone was very interested in the brother's researches, which tends to make me believe there was something to them."

"Were the papers taken?' Astrid asked, intrigued.

"No. We have them in the Wardens' secret cache." Zevran

was not there, so Bronwyn could speak freely. "In a warehouse in the Market District, there is a secret stash of weapons and notes in case anything should happen to the Compound. You should all know how to access it. It would also do as a hiding place for Wardens in the worst case."

"How distant is this supposed shrine?" Astrid asked, frowning over the idea. "Is it in Thedas?"

"Yes!" Tara burst out excitedly. "It is right here in Ferelden, though west in the Frostbacks. Bronwyn marked it on our map!"

"No." Bronwyn shook her head. "What I have marked on the map is the location of a village where Brother Genetivi believed he could learn the location of the shrine—or funerary temple, as he called it. We have the darkspawn to fight, and that must be our first priority. However, if time and resources can be found, perhaps an expedition to this village, called Haven, can be organized."

"Wouldn't that be an adventure!" sighed Tara. "I think we should find out what happened to Brother Gentivi anyway. He was a nice man."

"I need to visit the Cathedral," Bronwyn agreed. "I can speak again to Sister Justine, as well as Mother Boann. She is the priest who officiated at Adaia's wedding. I want to confirm her story with a witness, for additional protection against Bann Vaughan."

"That is well and good, but how much longer must we stay here?" Danith wondered, more than a little grumpily. Personally, she thought the shemlen rapist needed a arrow in the eye. That would solve Adaia's problems rather neatly.

It was a fair enough question. "We must settle things with the Queen, as far as possible, and I have several errands," Bronwyn told her briskly. "First of all, I want all of you to know how to get into the cache. We will go to the Market District. Most of our errands are there, anyway. We'll visit the cache, and then see if Brother Genetivi has returned. We will visit the armorer Master Wade, improve our current equipment, and discuss some custom weapons for dragon-fighting. There is no armor here in the Compound that is small enough to fit Tara, other than the helmet Tamsin found, and I want Tara to have something sturdier than robes."

"There might be something at Zathrian's camp," Danith pointed out.

Tara tried not to make a face. She found the idea of wearing revealing Dalish armor a very uncomfortable one. Baring her midriff in all weathers was a chilly prospect. It was all very well for Danith, since she was *used* to it.

Bronwyn did not want to argue with Danith about it. "If we find anything there we will purchase it. In the meantime, I want Tara to be protected now. It might be some days before we reach Zathrian's clan, and we might run into danger before then." She went on, listing her errands. There were such a lot of them. The late Paragon Branka had sneered at her in the

Dead Trenches, calling her an 'important errand girl.' At the moment, it was only too true.

"I have some kin in town whom I am obliged to visit. I will go to the Cathedral and interview the priests. Not all of you will want to go there, but there is much of interest to see in the Market, and before we start tomorrow morning, you will all be paid your stipend so you have coin in hand."

"Stipend?" Jowan looked up, interested.

"Yes," Bronwyn was pleased to tell him. "Grey Wardens are due money every quarter. Since Grey Wardens lead risky lives, they are paid on the first day of the quarter for the quarter—not at the end of the quarter, like most people. Even if you have not been a Warden for a full quarter, or you Joined before a quarter's holiday, you are due a sum for the days of service. I shall make the calculations and give you your pay in the morning."

Her Wardens went quite happily to their beds. Bronwyn stayed in the study, reading through the pile of correspondence on the desk.

There were so many letters! The most important seemed to be letters to Duncan from Weisshaupt, wanting to know the progress of the Blight. Bronwyn began arranging them by the dates they were sent. There were letters from other Grey Wardens around Thedas, the largest number of which were from Orlais. She had not the time to read them all. There were also letters to Duncan that appeared to be of a personal

nature. Eventually, she would have to do something about them as well.

She broke the seal on the most recent official letter from Weisshaupt. The griffon seal, in grey wax, was large and heavy. The letter, surprisingly, was directed to her—"*Grey Warden Bronwyn.*"

We have heard of the deaths of Warden-Commander Duncan and the annihilation of the Grey in Ferelden. You and your fellow Junior Warden, Alistair, are hereby commanded to travel to Montsimmard and report to Peyrolle, Warden-Commander of Orlais, for further instructions.

First Warden Wildauer

Bronwyn frowned over it briefly, and then filed it away with the rest. Go to Orlais, indeed! The First Warden could bloody well send her some Wardens, instead.

She updated the Warden enlistment rolls and then went through the accounts. Everybody still alive was owed money. She tried to recall the dates of recruitment as well as possible to make the proration of the period prior to the first full quarter of service as precise as possible.

"Thank you, Mother," she whispered. How she had *hated* learning accounts. Eleanor Cousland, however, had taught her that the one thing she must not be sloppy about was paying people correctly. Any mistakes there would be caught, and cause hard feelings or worse.

According to Duncan, Zevran, too, as a Grey Warden "auxiliary" was due a set sum. The base pay was less than that of the Wardens themselves, but he had been with her longer than some of the others, and thus the actual amount paid would be higher than that of her three most junior Wardens.

Then, though she would have preferred to go to bed, she steeled herself to visit the prisoner, and see what progress Zevran had made.

They did not arise very early the next morning. Astrid had taken over guarding the prisoner from Zevran, and had slept on a thin pallet outside the door. They had much to do today, and Bronwyn decided that heavy chains and a stout lock, and instructions to Mistress Rannelly to permit no one into the upper floors would be adequate to keep Erlina confined. Bronwyn suggested to Erlina that she wring her memory for every drop of useful or interesting information before Bronwyn returned.

A hearty breakfast in the Wardens' Hall was followed by Bronwyn paying everyone. Zevran was surprised to be paid as well, and immensely pleased at the amount. While everyone else made plans for their outing, Bronwyn took Jowan with her to call on the Queen.

Anora had had a fairly good night. While obviously distressed at the betrayal of her husband and her personal servant, she was physically better to a degree that gave her some

comfort.

"We have a lengthy confession, with quite a bit of detail," Bronwyn reported, showing her Zevran's roll of parchment. "We will talk to her again this afternoon, and see if she recalls anything else of use."

The Queen really was looking much, much better today. Jowan hovered over his patient, studying her for any sign of weakness. She, however, was determined to be strong, and read the sordid tale quickly. The degree of guilt of the Kendalls was unclear in all this, but she would know now to watch them carefully. Arl Eamon had been deeply implicated, as was his wife. His brother, Teagan, was evidently innocent. That was a relief. Having one openly rebellious arl in Amaranthine, and another possibly plotting against her in Denerim was quite bad enough.

Marjolaine had been the King's contact with Orlais. Erlina knew of no others, though of course that did not mean there were not any. However, it would be some time before the Empress knew that Marjolaine was out of the picture. That gave them some room to maneuver.

"Do I want to know how you obtained this?" Anora asked.

"I am not a torturer, Majesty," Bronwyn told her frankly. "I simply described to her the legal penalty for poisoning the monarch. I promised her, if she cooperated, a dose of sleeping potion instead."

Anora sighed. She had been fond of Erlina, who had made her life so very elegant and comfortable; who had done her hair so well, and sewn so beautifully. It had been the easiest thing in the world to tell the staff that she had turned her off for attempted theft. It would not be so easy to replace her skills. And it hurt. Not like Cailan's betrayal, of course, but still it *hurt*. Erlina had been a pleasant part of her life, and now Anora knew that Erlina had cared nothing for her, and had been watching her die with no more emotion than a butcher feels in slaughtering a spring lamb. She had been foolish to trust an Orlesian. Father was right about them, and she had wrong to tease and taunt him with her servant's presence.

She felt so much better: almost like herself. Jowan was so sympathetic, and his spells had done her a world of good. She would suggest he see her *twice* a day. There was such a lot of work to be done, and she needed all the strength she could muster...

"Join me for dinner tonight, Warden-Commander," she said, quite graciously. Bronwyn had proven herself a true friend and loyal subject. "We have much to discuss. As to Erlina, whether or not she has anything more to say this afternoon, I want an end to her by sunset, and I want never to hear her name again."

Bronwyn and her companions walked briskly to the Market District on the other side of the river. People stopped and stared at the Wardens, whispering and occasionally offering praise and thanks. Scout pretended to be unimpressed, but

his trot was unusually dignified. It was perfectly normal for lesser folk to admire his human.

It had rained overnight, and some of the nastier reek had been washed away. Zevran smirked to himself. Rain or not, Ferelden still smelled like wet dog, and the massive and otherwise splendid Scout was not helping.

But there were still things worth seeing, and much of his party had never visited a city—or at least a human city. Even Astrid was craning her neck, looking about her in interest. The long walk up Gate Street to the Market led past some handsome noble houses, Bronwyn was kind enough to point them out.

"That place belongs to Bann Fandarel. He collects works of art and historical treasures. It's quite nice inside... The Arl of Redcliffe's city estate is in a corner of the Market District. Arl Eamon tore down the old house and completely rebuilt it. I heard it cost a fortune..."

To Astrid's eye, it was all very sprawling, and the houses of the lesser folk were flimsily constructed of wood. She had read of the danger of fire to surfacers, and now she could see it for herself. They must be mad to use wood, cheap though it might be. Wood should only be used for bows and fine furniture. To slap it together and call it a dwelling was simply bizarre. Bronwyn had mentioned that her own family's house here in Denerim was of stone, which seemed infinitely more sensible. Of course, they were nobles.

Jowan looked uncomfortable and awed. Tara grinned at him.

She had never seen a city before her first visit, and she could imagine what he was feeling. Today they had no need to hide who they were, and it was so much more fun. And she *would* see the Alienage, this time.

This place stinks, Danith thought. *How can these people endure the reek? It is all so dirty: so dirty and squalid.* The homes of the common folk, she decided, were very shabby and ugly. On the other hand, not everything here was bad. The Palace might be hard and stony, but it was kept surprisingly clean. The room she shared with Tara in the Wardens' Compound had a large window with a bit of colored glass at the top, and it opened. One could lean out and see much of the city. From above and far away, it looked much, much better.

"Danith!" Tara murmured, pink with excitement. "You're coming with me to the Alienage, aren't you?"

The Dalish girl sighed. "Yes. I gave you my word, did I not? I shall see how my city cousins live with clear eyes, so I can tell my clan someday my own impressions."

"You're coming with us, aren't you, Zevran?"

Zevran chuckled. "If I must. No, indeed, I should be honored to escort two such lovely examples of elven womanhood. I only hope you are not too disappointed."

"I do not think I shall be...*disappointed*," Danith remarked. She hoped, for Tara's sake, that the rumors she had heard

were exaggerated.

Tara said, "I won't be disappointed. I am just going to see it, and then I'll know where I came from. If it's awful, then I can be glad I'm a Grey Warden and live in our lovely Compound, and eat Mistress Rannelly's delicious food. You admitted it was good, Danith!"

"The food is heavy," Danith shrugged, "but it is well-prepared and not over-salted. The shemlen woman is earnest in her desire to perform her duty."

Tara winked at Zevran. "I saw her eat nearly an entire loaf of apple bread at breakfast," she whispered loudly.

"The bread was good, and made wholesome by the addition of the fruit," Danith said, unruffled. "And the butter was fresh. It was an adequate meal."

Ahead, the noise grew louder, and the scene opened, as they emerged at the mouth of Gate Street in the broad and cobbled Market. Buildings large and small surrounded the irregular space. Shop signs distracted and confused the eye. People were everywhere, as noisy as the army at Ostagar, but here they were all ages. Danith particularly liked to see the little ones running and playing. Their sweet, high voices gave a touch of music to the human cacophony. A wave of homesickness struck her, thinking of the children of her clan, and how she had loved watching over them.

In the center of the Market was a large and colorful circular

awning, shading some of the vendors.

"That large building in the Chantry," Bronwyn said, pointing the side. "I expect that you would rather browse in the Market than go there. I do not think I shall be long. I'll meet you under the awning."

Astrid was actually rather curious about the Chantry, but not so curious that she would not prefer to visit the shops. She had coin to spend, and there were all sorts of little luxuries that would improve her life.

Zevran had decided to wear a hooded cloak, and pulled up the hood at this point, just in case some of his old Crow friends were watching. The gold in his purse seemed deliciously heavy, and it was calling on him to spend it...

Of course all the merchants thought Jowan was in charge. He was tall, he was human, and he was male. They were very polite to Astrid, as a dwarf and a Warden. They did not seem to know quite to make of the elves, but they did not refuse to sell to them. It was baffling to Jowan, who had never in his life been in charge of anything, but Astrid pushed him along in front.

"Look calm," she whispered. "Look calm and haughty, and no one will question your right to be here."

He glanced down at her broad and comely face, and tried to imitate her expression; though he was unsure that anyone else could manage calm and haughty as well as a dwarven

princess.

Zevran suggested they make a circuit of the vendors first, to get an idea of what was there before they started throwing gold around. It was not the flowery metropolis of Antiva, but there was much to see here: jewelry and scented oils, fine woodcraft and wax candles, musical instruments and richly dyed cloth. Pretty young girls cried their wares as they walked through the market, selling bunches of sweet herbs or berry tarts for a few coppers. Obviously, everyone had to have a tart. Or three.

Quite abruptly, Astrid's face changed, and she gasped. Before Jowan could ask her what was wrong, she was dashing away, crying, "*Gorim!*"

"I think she knows that dwarf," Jowan told the others. "She ran off to talk to him."

"Should we join her?" Tara wondered.

"Why don't we give them a moment together first?" counseled Zevran. "if she wishes to introduce us, she will let us know."

After only a few minutes, Astrid walked back to her companions. They were looking at her, and it was important not to let herself down.

She hoped her face did not betray her. She hoped no one could see just how bitterly disappointed and hurt she was. For

all his words at parting, Gorim's life had gone on without her quite well. Exiled for his friendship for her, yes; but now comfortably established on the surface. Married. A child already on the way. She should be glad for him—and she was, she really was—but their reunion had certainly not played out the way it had in her dreams.

"He's a good friend of yours from Orzammar?" Jowan asked.

Astrid fixed a cheerful expression on her face, searching out every little muscle around her eyes and mouth. "He was my Second. He was exiled when I was sent to the Deep Roads. It was so pleasant to see him again, and to see him doing well."

He had been beneath her then, she recalled, pulling her shoulders back proudly. He was still beneath her. He had been a simple warrior, and she a king's daughter. Now, he was a shopkeeper's son-in-law, and she was a Grey Warden. Unconsciously, she smoothed her tunic, fingertips lingering on the griffon blazoned there.

She added carelessly, "Perhaps I shall buy something from him later." She pointed away from them and said, "Look! There's Bronwyn!"

Relieved to see all her people in one piece and not in trouble of any kind, Bronwyn waved back at Astrid.

Her notes were tucked away. They might or might not be useful someday, but she was clear in her own mind that Adaia

—once Melian Tabris—had been the victim of a criminal abuse of noble privilege. Vaughan might be immune from legal remedies, but Adaia had been cruelly wronged. Mother Boann had signed the written statement without any hesitation. She, of course, was concerned for elvish souls; and was distressed that she had not been asked back into the alienage since the day of the "unfortunate affair." She feared that the elves, out of foolish secrecy, were reverting to some primitive, pagan marriage rite.

Further inquiries revealed that no one had seen or heard from Brother Genetivi since he had left Denerim so many months before. His house was locked, and no one answered the door. "But," as one elderly sister told Bronwyn, "the Maker sees all, and will gather the good brother to him, if that is his plan for him. We must trust in the Maker's wisdom."

Bronwyn nodded, not agreeing at all, but too sensible to argue. So. Brother Genetivi had vanished into the blue. She would go over the notes and map tonight. It seemed a mad plan to look for an mythical ancient relic, but it was possible that someone would be called on to do it, in order to save Ferelden's Queen.

She gave her people a smile and gestured at a sign nearby. "Let us visit Wade, Master Armorer of Denerim."

Not only Wade, but his partner Herrer recognized her armor the moment she entered the shop, even covered as it was with a Grey Warden tunic.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Wade dithered. "The Girl Warden! I suspected it from the first. Didn't I say so, Herren?"

"I suspected it before you did," Herren shot back. "She wouldn't remove that tacky helmet, so it was obvious that she was concealing her identity. I must say what she's wearing now is an improvement, though a bit," he paused delicately, "old-fashioned." The salesman turned to Bronwyn and asked pleasantly, "You were on a secret mission, I assume."

Her friends burst out laughing. Zevran slapped Jowan on the back, shaking his head. Even Danith smirked. Bronwyn smiled graciously. "I was indeed, and I would appreciate your continued discretion. My friend Tara here needs some light armor, and I would like to discuss the possibility of some custom weapons."

"Customized for what?" Herren asked warily. Wade bounced on the balls of his feet, hoping for something really interesting at last.

"For dragonslaying," Bronwyn said briskly, secretly amused at their expressions. "We killed a dragon down by Ostagar, but it was a messy, inefficient business. We're trying to find out more about how the old Nevarran dragonhunters worked, but until then we need to move beyond swords and daggers. I was thinking of very sharp spears that would pierce the hide more effectively. I climbed up on the creature's back to get at the brain, but I nearly slipped off. Perhaps spiked boots or some sort of hooks to anchor oneself with? We might need some unusual materials..."

Herren appeared horrified at the time and work that would distract Wade from his usual tasks. Wade was looking ecstatic.

"Unusual materials! Custom weapons! We can test them on my stock of dragonbone! This is wonderful! Tell me, do you have any diamonds?"

"Diamonds?" Bronwyn faltered. How much was this going to cost? Wade wanted to be paid in *diamonds*?

"For the tips, of course!" Wade raved on joyously. "Diamond-tipped lances might be just the thing... I suppose sapphires or rubies would do... Oh, at last something worthy of my talents..."

Bronwyn managed to calm Wade a little, and get him back to the issue of armor for Tara *now*. Armor in elven sizes was not produced in great quantity, but in his storeroom, he did have a striking gambeson of studded russet leather that, with some alterations, would fit a small and slender elf woman. It was expensive, of course, and Bronwyn was relieved that Tara already had sturdy boots and gloves, purchased at Ostagar. With visions of amazing, never-before-seen weapons dancing in his imagination, Wade promised to have Tara's armor ready by the following afternoon.

"We'll talk more," Bronwyn told the armorer. "I'd like to see some sketches, perhaps, and talk it over. The Wardens, alas, do not have an unlimited treasury."

Herren's face fell a bit, but Wade was too excited to care about mere coin. As they left the shop, he was muttering about "lyrium-silverite alloys."

"Next, we're going to The Wonders of Thedas," Bronwyn told them. "I want to see what can be done about disguising a mage's staff."

So they walked to the other side of the Market, and turned down a narrow street leading off it. Tara pointed out the Gnawed Noble Tavern to Danith and Astrid.

"It's very elegant," she informed them. "And they make baked apples to die for!" She was bubbling with delight, eager to find out what Wonders Thedas had for her.

Bronwyn had not been in the shop since she was twelve years old, and was relieved to see that it was as large as she remembered: a huge, dim interior, filled with books and rarities and whimsical objects. It had an odd, not unpleasant smell that reminded her of the Circle of Magi.

Scout sniffed the air. He knew what that odor meant. It could be good or bad, depending on the person.

"It's the lyrium," Jowan murmured, sniffing the air, too. He looked at the counter across the room and flinched. The forehead of the man on duty there was glittering with a distinctive lyrium brand. He was one of the Tranquil. Jowan glanced over at Tara, who caught his eye, understanding.

This was the fate that Jowan had feared above all: this was what he had turned to Blood Magic to escape. To be forcibly cut off from the Fade, to be stripped of feeling and independent will, to be made a mere puppet of the Chantry—it was a fate worse than death. It was also a fate very profitable for the Chantry, who used the Tranquil for unpaid labor, crafting precious items for sale. Any money spent here would go directly into the Chantry's coffers. Some Circle apprentices did indeed choose to be made Tranquil: terrified by the unknown terrors of the Harrowing. More were forcibly made Tranquil: unharrowed mages who were deemed to be "trouble" for one reason or another. Tara and Anders had passed their Harrowing, and so were free of this one fear, at least.

"Welcome to the Wonders of Thedas..." said the proprietor in a smooth monotone. Bronwyn allowed her people to browse, while she quizzed the former mage about the possibility of making a staff not appear to be a staff.

"It would be easy to accomplish," the Tranquil informed her calmly. "The Chantry, however, prefers that mages be distinguishable by large and ornate staffs."

"Could you make a sword work as a staff?" Bronwyn pressed. "Or a dagger? Could a mage cast with it instead of something made of wood?"

"Wood is hardly the only substance to be used for a mage's staff," the Tranquil pointed out serenely. "A staff can be made of wood, metal or bone. It needs to be inscribed with the

appropriate runes, but a sword-shaped staff is not inconceivable. I have heard of actual swords that could be used for limited casting. However, no one in our workshop is skilled in weapon-crafting."

Jowan was trying not to look at the Tranquil. He did not know the man. From his age, Jowan guessed he must have become Tranquil at least ten years ago. Still, simply knowing what he had been, and what he was now made Jowan's flesh crawl. He muttered, "And I know nothing of weapons-using. I'd rather have a sword-shaped staff than a real sword, Bronwyn. I wouldn't know what to do with a sword."

"And I wouldn't want to try to carry a shield around," agreed Tara. "I'd do better defending myself with magic. A sword-shaped staff! That's...sort of funny when you think about it, but I don't know why it wouldn't work. A staff is simply a focus, after all. Mainly, you have to believe in it."

"I like the idea, thought," Jowan said slowly. "If I had a scabbard, I wouldn't have to carry my staff in my hand all the time. It would feel...powerful...to draw a sword and cast with it. Even a fake sword."

Zevran nodded, "And you could put in all in a harness with a real dagger. My friends, I suggest that you have a non-magical weapon with you as well. Something that would not set off certain...alarms, shall we say? A standard double-harness, shall we say, with a dagger and your "sword-shaped staff." "

Prices and specifications, based on the mages' preferred Schools of Magic, were then discussed. Bronwyn groaned inwardly, shuddering at the expense. It was for the best, and she should really order a staff for Anders and Morrigan as well...

Luckily, Tara could give the Tranquil very specific information about the type of staff that each of the absent mages would find useful. The Tranquil required no leisure, and the staffs would be ready the following day. Bronwyn herself needed some leisure rather desperately after hearing the total cost, and decided to visit the Gnawed Noble for a drink.

"Zevran, you're with me," she said. "Tara, take the other Wardens to the cache. Bring back all of Brother Genetivi's notes, along with whatever suits your fancy there."

Tara felt deliciously important, leading the other junior Wardens to the cache, showing them the tricky way in, then displaying their hoard of emergency supplies.

"A lot of these books are copies of the ones in the study," Jowan said, closing one, and moving on the crates of clothing. Sometimes he missed robes, but Bronwyn insisted that he stay in the light armor she had bought for him. If he was going to be visiting the Queen regularly, however, he would need something less martial. There was always his Grey Warden tunic, but Mistress Rannelly had overheard, and assured the Commander that there were all sorts of fine garments for men in the storage rooms. She would find a "proper" doublet for

Warden Jowan to wear when he visited the Queen. Jowan sighed, thinking about it. His life had certainly changed.

"Some of the victuals need to be replaced," Astrid said, wrinkling her nose. "When time permits, this place should be thoroughly cleaned and inventoried." If one was going to be a Grey Warden, one should do it thoroughly.

Danith had found some Dalish arrows. There was dust on the quiver, but it was from a Northern clan. It was comforting to know that she was not the first Dalish Warden. She slung the quiver over her shoulder and tightened the strap.

It was rather shocking for a human lady to sit down with an elf for a drink in the Gnawed Noble Tavern. If the lady had been anything less than a Cousland and the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, it would have been too scandalous to be permitted.

Edwina, the landlady, being told by a serving maid of the odd behavior by the tall lady with the winged helmet and the griffon tunic, took a look, understood immediately who the lady was, and said, "That's the Girl Warden, that is: Lady Bronwyn Cousland herself. Great nobles will have their little eccentricities, Dilys. Address her ladyship as "Warden-Commander" and give her what she wants. If she wants to stand a drink for an elf, that's her business. I've heard that some elves have been Grey Wardens, so it's likely that fellow with her is one of them. That's all right, I suppose. They're heroes, after all."

Dilyls brought the drinks as instructed. It seemed odd to be serving an elf, but he was a handsome fellow, to be sure, and his armor was high-class. For an elf to be strutting about town in armor meant he had to have permission, so she smiled back when he smiled at her. He really was *very* handsome.

More elves came in after a bit, and one of them was a *mage*: a real mage with a *staff*. She was wearing one the Grey Warden tunics, too. There was a nice-looking human warrior and a dwarf in good armor, so that made the group a *little* more respectable. There weren't a lot of customers so early in the day, and no one was complaining about the elves, so Edwina gave strict orders to offer the Girl Warden and her party every courtesy, short of drinks on the house.

Oblivious to the stir she had created, Bronwyn went over their plans for the rest of the day.

"Mistress Rannelly will serve a middday meal for us at the Hall, so I suppose we should go there soon. Buy what you have a fancy for, and then let's head back to the Compound. This afternoon, I must go pay that visit to my cousins. Arl Bryland is well-disposed to the Wardens, and I want him to remain so."

"He's a nice man," Tara agreed. "He speaks to me nicely, without smirking in *that* way."

"You will speak to his wife...the...Arlessa? Is that the correct title?" asked Astrid.

"Cousin Leonas is a widower," Bronwyn told them. "His wife died in childbirth with his second son, Lothar. Lothar must be—let me see—ten years old now! Corbus is a little older, maybe twelve or thirteen. The only one of those children I know well is my cousin Habren. She's a year younger than I, and when we were children we visited back in forth in an effort to make us become friendly."

"Your unenthusiastic tone suggests that it was not a success," Astrid remarked.

"I have to be polite to Habren," Bronwyn said, obliquely answering Astrid. "She is my cousin's eldest child, and she is..." she blew out a breath..."betrothed to Bann Vaughan, and thus will very likely someday be Arlessa of Denerim."

Danith looked utterly repulsed. "Should you not warn your kinswoman about that vile man?" she asked Bronwyn.

Tara seconded her. "He might hurt her!"

"I don't know..." Bronwyn hesitated. She was unsure how much she should tell them about her relatives. It would hardly be tactful to explain that Vaughan would very likely treat the noble daughter of a powerful father entirely differently than he treated other women—especially elves. Even less did she want to admit that Vaughan's cruelty to others would probably not be in the least offensive to Habren. She said, "...Habren dislikes me, and I have no influence with her. If I told her one thing, she would do another to spite me. The person I could speak to would be her aunt Werberga, Arl Leonas' older

sister. She raised Habren, and is very fond of her."

Her companions nodded sagely at that, even Danith. Bronwyn changed the subject. "While I am visiting Bryland House, I know that Tara wants to go to the Alienage. Do I understand that Danith and Zevran are going with you?"

"Yes! I'm so excited!"

"Very well. Please return to the Compound before sunset. I will be back long before that, for we must conclude things with the traitor. Jowan, I'd like you to seek out the Royal Library and start researching the Nevarrans. Anything you can find out about the old dragon hunters would help. We need to visit the Queen late in the afternoon, both to report and for her healing. I'm sorry to do this to you, Astrid, but I would like you to keep an eye on the prisoner while the rest of us are out visiting."

Astrid shrugged. "I shall take a book with me. I only ask..." she smiled slowly. "That you take me with you when you visit the Queen this afternoon. I wish to see her with my own eyes."

"Of course. We'll report and I'll present you. Jowan will do his spells. I'll be dining with the Queen tonight, so I'll be sure to tell Mistress Rannelly not to wait supper for me."

Zevran considered the matter. "Do not be too hasty with little Erlina. I will speak to her when I return, and see if there are not some last gems of intelligence to be coaxed from her."

It had to be done, so Bronwyn did it. In the privacy of her room at the Compound, she changed into her grey velvet gown, smoothed her hair, and set off on foot to the Bryland House with Scout at her side. It was not far from the Palace—on the same side of the river, luckily, and she need not fear soiling her only finery.

She wondered how she could possibly care about looking well for that irritating old cow Werberga, or for horrible, horrible Habren. Scout paced beside her, and she had daggers concealed in her boots. She was more than sufficiently armed for any threat likely to befall her at Cousin Leonas' house.

She gave her name at the door, which opened for her instantly. The upper servant showing her to the ladies' sitting room looked askance at Scout, and was evidently within an inch of telling Bronwyn that he would have to stay outside. Then he caught her eye, and looked away.

"My dear Bronwyn!" exclaimed Lady Werberga, coming forward to meet her, hands outstretched. Though fulsome and rather insincere, she was at least more polite than Habren, who did not bother to rise to greet a guest.

"I'd get up," said the young lady, with an impudent titter, "but you can see I'm *busy*."

In her lap was a mabari puppy. It was a handsome little fellow, perhaps a month old. It was squirming and crying, trying to escape Habren's clutches.

Scout lowered his head and growled softly. "He doesn't look very happy," Bronwyn said. Was Habren trying deliberately to provoke her?

"I'm imprinting on him," Habren declared. "It takes time. This is definitely the right one. I have a *feeling* about him."

"Habren is so fond of animals. Won't you be seated, Bronwyn dear?" Werberga asked. "We've heard so much about you. Such heroics! Your dear mother and father would be so proud."

Bronwyn forced herself to smile, hating Werberga for bringing up her parents. She did not want to discuss them in the presence of Habren.

"Cousin Leonas asked me to bring all of your letters," Bronwyn said, forcing her voice to its most mellow tones. Was Habren going to strangle that puppy in front of her? If she did, Bronwyn had a dagger in her boot with Habren's name on it. She pulled out the folded and sealed parchments. "For you, Cousin Werberga," she said, handing the older woman her letter. "And for Habren..."

"Put it on the table. How nice of you to run errands for people. Didn't Father send any coin?" she asked, in a peevish whine. "I need some." The breeder had refused to sell her any more puppies until she paid something down on her account. This one had *better* imprint, and soon, if he knew what was good for him.

"He sent his best love, and these letters. I have letters for Corbus and Lothar as well. May I see them?"

Werberga hated to have the boys in the sitting room. They made such a noise... Still, Leonas had wished it...

"Of course, my dear." She summoned a servant. "Fetch Lords Corbus and Lothar to me at once. Their cousin, the Girl—I mean—the *Grey Warden*, is here." She gave a little embarrassed laugh. "Such an odd nickname, Bronwyn. It seems almost disrespectful."

"I'm used to it, now," Bronwyn smiled.

"You must be," Habren said carelessly. "It's clear you've been doing nothing but fighting. Is that a *scar* on your face, or did you forget to wash today?"

"Habren!" her aunt reproved her. She said to Bronwyn, "I hardly noticed it, my dear. I have a very good formula for face cream. You see how it has taken my wrinkles quite away. I'm sure it would help."

Habren smirked at her. Bronwyn smiled back mildly, imagining Habren in the Deep Roads.

"Yes, Habren," she said sweetly. "It's a scar. I got it fighting darkspawn. And my eyes are green because of darkspawn poison. There now, that takes care of me. And what about you? Are you happy with your betrothal?"

Lady Werberga leaned forward, triumphant. "Bann Vaughan," she confided, "has given my dear Habren a diamond!"

Habren kept a firm grip on the poor puppy, while waving her left hand in Bronwyn's direction. On it was a massive, sparkling boulder.

"See my ring?" Habren demanded. "Vaughan gave it to me before he left for Ostagar. I heard that Grey Wardens were practically like *priests* and could never marry. I am so sorry for you."

"It is certainly true," Bronwyn said pleasantly, "that Grey Wardens are generally too busy in the middle of a Blight to plan a large wedding. I do hope Bann Vaughan's military obligations do not interfere with yours."

Habren's eyes glittered, but before she could say what was on her mind, the door opened and Arl Bryland's two sons bounded in, with their tutor bringing up the rear. They were nice-looking lads, even though they resembled their sister with their dark hair and grey eyes.

"Bronwyn, here are Corbus and Lothar," their aunt introduced them. As an afterthought, she added, "and their tutor, Master Cletus. "My dear boys, meet your cousin, the Warden-Commander of Ferelden!"

Lothar narrowed his eyes. "If you're the Girl Warden, where's your sword?" The tutor winced.

His brother elbowed him. "Don't be rude. Where *is* your sword?" he asked Bronwyn himself. "Don't Girl Wardens fight?"

"Quite often," Bronwyn admitted, "but I come to you in peace, hence the gown. My armor and weapons are back at the Warden Compound. Except for the daggers in my boots, of course."

The boys were entranced. "No way do you have daggers in your boots!" Corbus challenged her.

"Yes, way," Bronwyn contradicted him, and drew them at once, the boys' everlasting delight. She twirled them briefly, not as expertly as Zevran could, but well enough for the boys' edification. She then resheathed them emphatically, grinning at them.

"Wicked!" they breathed.

She pulled out the boys' letters. "Your father sent these to you, along with his love," she told them seriously. "He misses you very much, and talks about you all the time. He's a very brave man, and thinking about how you're learning and growing into fine young men yourselves helps him do his duty in the war."

Habren sulked. Bronwyn had not said anything nice about Father missing her; and he had not sent more coin, or any jewels either. He favored the boys *scandalously*: anybody could see it.

Corbus said, "I wish I could be with him. I'm nearly old enough to squire for him. I've heard there are boys at Ostagar younger than me!"

"And me!" Lothar agreed stoutly.

There were, of course, but Bronwyn thought it was a horrible thing to exploit children in such a way. Very few of them were officially soldiers, but they were in the baggage train and in the bomb workshop, or running errands. They were often in considerable danger. Most were orphans, and very poor, and were glad to be earning their bread. There was certainly no reason for the sons of the Arl of South Reach to emulate them.

"You'll be old enough in few years," Bronwyn said calmly, "and meanwhile you need to prepare yourselves for leadership. Study your lessons and get your exercise. Your time will come soon enough. You never know what you'll need to know. I hated learning accounts, but it was very useful when I had to take charge of the Grey Wardens and make sure I could keep my warriors supplied and paid!"

"I suppose," Corbus granted dolefully. "Did your tutor make you learn *Orlesian*?"

She ruffled his hair, laughing. "Of course he did!"

"Are you going to stay for dinner?" asked Lothar. His aunt turned red.

"Of course I meant to ask you, my dear. It was right on the tip of my tongue. Would you do us the honor of dining with us tonight?"

"Thank you so much," Bronwyn purred, "but I am dining with the Queen." A mischievous thought struck her, seeing the boys' disappointment. "Perhaps you would care to take your midday meal with me at the Wardens' Compound tomorrow? I fear I shall not be in Denerim any longer than that."

Habren sneered, "I am quite sure that no matter how long you are in Denerim, I have a prior engagement."

"We don't!" Corbus beamed. "Might we go, Aunt? Seeing the Grey Warden is like having a lesson...sort of."

"Yes," Lothar said loyally. "Like an *ancient* history lesson. Master Cletus, isn't visiting Grey Wardens like a lesson?"

"I suppose..." ventured the scholar.

"Of course you may go," Werberga said generously, glad to get the boys out of the house. "But be back by mid-afternoon, mind."

There was much cheering and capering about. Habren looked away in disgust, so annoyed that her long and manicured nails dug into the puppy's skin. The poor thing squealed in pain. Instantly, Scout charged at Habren, baying like a Hound of Hell.

The shocked young woman cringed away. Taking advantage of an enemy's weakness, Scout snatched up the puppy by the scruff of the neck, and ran him over to Corbus, dropping him in the delighted boy's hands. The relieved puppy, glad of the change, wagged his tail nearly off.

"How lovely!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "I believe that Corbus has imprinted on the puppy. It is so kind of you, Habren, to give Corbus such a generous gift. There is no friend so true as a mabari! What do you think you shall name him, Corbus?"

"He's mine, and his name is Fluff!" Habren leaped to her feet, eyes blazing. Scout growled at her, and she sat down hastily. "And take your vicious monster away from me!"

"Scout, sit!" Bronwyn commanded, amused that Scout obeyed immediately, sitting in front of Habren and watching her, not blinking, just exactly as he watched poisonous snakes. Werberga smiled weakly.

Corbus flopped onto a settee, admiring the happy puppy, allowing his younger brother to tentatively scratch a small ear. "His name is Killer. That's a good name for a mabari, isn't it?"

Scout barked: a cheerful agreement. A very suitable name for a true warrior. Killer squeaked adorably.

"Do bring Killer with you tomorrow," Bronwyn advised. "You need to keep him with you as much as possible to help the imprinting along. The little fellow is too small to walk that far, so put him in a basket." She turned to Habren, her smile

menacing. "Your father will be so happy to hear that Corbus has imprinted on a mabari. I shall certainly tell him all about it. If anything were to happy to little Killer, I think he'd be very displeased."

Thanks to my reviewers: Enaid Aderyn, Zute, Juliafied, ZarosKnight, Thomas Blaine, Jyggilag, cloud1004, dyslecksec, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Josie Lange, Samara-Draven, derko5, mille libri, Judy, RayneEthelwulf, The Moidart, Gene Dark, Shakespeira, almostinsane, Costin, JackOfBladesX, Herebedragons66, Kira Kiyu, chocolatebrownie12, JtheClivaz, mutive, euromellows, Jenna53, Have Socks Will Travel, Tyanilth, Lehni, delilahmedea, xJanelex, and Valmothg. Please keep them coming! They make me so happy.

King Henry VIII was very much afraid of being poisoned, and did indeed institute the punishment of boiling alive for poisoners.

Next chapter: Tara, Zevran, and Danith in the Alienage, the fate of Erlina, Fergus at Vigil's Keep, and Loghain and Alistair at Ostagar!

38. No One Harms Me With Impunity

Victory at Ostagar

I've decided that the adventures of Fergus, the elves in the Alienage, the Wardens at Ostagar with Loghain, and the fate of Erlina all need their own chapters. Here is the first. I'll post the next one in a few days, but no later than next Sunday. Perhaps Ostagar, with the arrival of the Dalish elves led by Merrill, will be next. Quite a bit of that is already written. It didn't mesh well with this chapter, however.

Chapter 38: "No One Harms Me with Impunity"

A resounding crash shook Vigil's Keep to its ancient foundations. Maids shrieked, dropping trays and pitchers, and huddled together under tables, trembling. With daybreak, the bombardment had started afresh.

The two sturdy young footmen kept on walking upstairs, though the lithe and slender one raised his brows expressively at his big and burly friend. The young teyrn must be genuinely enraged to seek out and harness such weapons. Of course, the Arl had killed Teyrn Cousland's wife and child. His parents, too, if the young men understood the story aright. If this went on, everyone in this Maker-forsaken fortress would die.

In fact, calling the two louts "footmen" was a bit of an exaggeration, though that was how they described themselves to impressionable peasant girls who were awed by anyone grand enough to live in the Keep. They had been taken on, after much begging and flattery, as kitchen guttingmen, the lowest of the low, needed after the last of the elves had mysteriously departed. They had proved skilled at the job. The head cook had seen with his own eyes how deftly they wielded their knives and cleavers, and even talked of apprenticing them.

That mattered little now. It was only a matter of time before Teyrn Cousland battered his way into the Inner Keep. There would be a last-ditch stand, and anyone with the least bit of sense knew how that would go.

By all the laws of war, handed down for thousands of years, the Vigil would be sacked. That was what happened if a town or castle declared besieged held out to the last. The victors had the right to rape, kill, and plunder without let or hindrance.

"You know, Luke," said the guttingman Galen to his friend, "Very likely, if the old Arl has his way, we'll all be dead by the day after tomorrow."

Luke only shrugged. He was not a talker.

Not even the Arl's daughter—possibly not even the priests—would be spared, though probably the young lady would be kept fresh for the Teyrn's personal attentions. That was the way it was, and the two young men on their way upstairs saw

no reason to complain. The world was what it was.

Because they were not so completely unmanned as the other servants, Cook had allowed them to take the breakfast trays up to the Arl and his family, and given them clean smocks to wear. Ordinarily they would have not have been permitted out of the kitchens, but the Arl and his family must have their breakfast, looming apocalypse or no. There was no seneschal to prevent such a lapse of decorum, since old Varel had been demoted to clerk for arguing with the Arl about something or other. Of course Varel was not in the office, but was in his armor and taking his watch on the battlement, along with every other trained warrior.

So up the guttingmen walked, their boots tramping in unison, a hard rhythm like the irresistible footsteps of Fate. They paused briefly in front of the solar door, to put everything in order, and then Luke shouldered his way in. Servants only knocked at the Arl's study and at bedchamber doors.

"Breakfast," Galen announced, adding almost insolently, "my lords and lady."

The old man looked at them only to sneer. The heir, Thomas, was slumped at the table, a tall silver cup of ale already empty before him. He peered up blearily at the servants and gestured vaguely at them to put the food on the table. Useless sot, Luke had called him once; but Galen had held that there was nothing wrong with him that a spot of hard work wouldn't cure.

The young lady was already sitting at her place, silent and sad, with red eyes. Galen looked at Luke, and gave a deep expressive sigh. It was a shame what innocent young ladies had to suffer on account of no-good fathers. Luke just stared at her. He thought she was a very nice young lady, and hoped she would eat her breakfast without a fuss. It was the best thing for her.

He loomed over her, immense and beefy. She looked up at him, a question in her mild grey eyes.

"Eat your porridge, my lady," he rumbled softly. "It'll do you good."

She gave him a wavering, uncertain smile, and dipped her spoon into the bowl. Being bossed by well-meaning, simple servants reminded her of happier times.

"Bit of spiced cider for your lordship," Galen whispered to Thomas, giving him a sly wink. Thomas snorted, and was pleased at how the man had spiked the cider with Antivan brandy. He should slip the fellow some silver later.

Galen jerked his head at Luke, and they backed away, standing by the door like good, invisible servants. The old Arl flung himself down in his chair and began eating like he was angry with his porridge. Galen's opinion was that he was angry at nearly everything in the world most of the time.

In between fierce, quick, swallows, he was berating his son. "Do up your buckles, for Maker's sake, Thomas! Do you want

the men to see you like that?"

The young man gulped down his cider and then obediently fastened his buckles. He muttered, "I don't see that it makes much difference."

"Pull yourself together, boy," sneered his father, still wolfing down his breakfast. "We're not dead yet. I have a plan..."

Luke felt sorry for the young lady, listening to her father going at her brother that way. He probably did it all the time.

Arl Howe lowered his voice, and hissed, "There's a tunnel out of the dungeons that only the Arls of Amaranthine know about. After breakfast, Delilah, I want you to put on some stout walking shoes and go to the dungeons as far as the crypt entrance. I'll get together my picked men. Thomas, you go with her, and no dallying for a drink! Then we'll make our way to Esmerelle..."

"*Esmerelle*," said the boy, looking disgusted.

His father snarled at him. "*Bann* Esmerelle to you! Our most faithful friend. She'll stand by us no matter what. The King will not permit his finest port city to be destroyed by Fergus Cousland's infernal machines."

Thomas grimaced. "Yes, Father." He grimaced again, like a man with a bellyache.

"Father," Delilah said softly. "I don't think..." She got to her

feet slowly, steadying herself with one hand. "I feel so strange..." She swayed, and stumbled away from the table.

Thomas uttered a soft, guttural belch. Rendon, already exasperated at Delilah for her weakness, scowled at him. It was bad enough that Delilah looked like she was about to faint. Now was no time for Thomas' drunken tricks...

Abruptly, a red spray of vomit burst from the young man. He choked, jerking in violent spasms. Another burst of bloody vomit, and he toppled from the bench, voiding urine in his rigors.

"Oh, no..." Delilah gazed at her brother wild-eyed, and put out her hand to Rendon, feebly. "Help...oh, Father, I think...we are... poisoned..." She sank to her knees, her head drooping like a wilted flower, and then fell sideways, her arms outspread and limp.

Galen rolled his eyes at Luke. He must have put Quiet Death in the girl's porridge. *What a big softie.*

Howe took a breath to shout for help, when he was seized from behind by a pair of mighty arms. One held him up off the ground, and the other was across his throat, stifling his cries.

One of the servants who had brought the breakfast was grinning at him: the smaller one. He was pulling a dagger from his boot, while he walked up to Howe, careful not to unkindly step on the dying young woman on the floor.

"So, Dog Lord, here we are. You think there were no Antivan merchants in Highever, to carry home the story of your murdering ways? You think Signora Fortuny would let you get away with killing her daughter?" Galen smirked, Howe attempted to struggle, growing weaker, ever weaker. "It never occurred to you that the House of Fortuny would want *revenge*? The old lady's pretty angry about it, I can tell you. She never wanted to send her daughter off to Dog Land, but the girl was crazy about her big handsome barbarian. Signora Fortuny knew something terrible would happen, and it did. But you know what? You kill one of hers, and she'll kill two of yours!"

Luke grunted in Howe's ear. "That's the *Antivan* way!"

The dagger struck. Howe thrashed impotently. It was a cruel blow, but not an instantly fatal one. The assassins had their instructions.

Galen went on with the story. "So now that you're on the outs with your Dog King, our Queen gave Signora Fortuny permission to send in the Crows." Galen gave his dagger a twist. "Galliano and Lucian. At your service."

Howe bit back a scream. He would not give this scum the satisfaction of seeing him beg for mercy. Thomas was still jerking, but weakly; and Delilah was already still, so very still, so white...like a statue of Andraste...

"Signora Fortuny gave us a nice box for your heart. She wants to see it," Luke—Lucian—rumbled, his powerful grasp

relentless.

Howe's vision was blurring, turning to grey. This was death! It was wrong, all wrong. He himself had a contract with the Crows to kill the Cousland spawn! Everyone had betrayed him... He had his plans, and Ferelden *needed* him. All he wanted was a chance to get to Loghain, and explain...

"But first," Galliano purred, "she instructed me to say these words to you: '*No one harms me with impunity,*' and then, of course," he laughed, "to make sure you saw your children die in front of you."

A tiny, red-hot flame of hope lingered to the last, before the grey dissolved to black.

They don't know about Nathaniel...Maker, don't let them know about Nathaniel...the Howes...must live...

Within the hour, a white flag of parley was flying from the shattered battlements of Vigil's Keep.

Fergus approached, and found himself facing Varel, Howe's seneschal. He frowned, wondering if this was some trick. He was not risking himself within bowshot to speak to an underling.

"Where is Howe?" he demanded brusquely.

"The Arl... is dead, my lord," Varel said heavily. "He and his

children together. They appear to have been assassinated by the Crows, for that mark and a note were found by their bodies in the solar."

"Killed?" Fergus stared at the silver-haired man, shocked. "Delilah, too? Thomas?"

"I fear so, lord teyrn," said Varel. "Howe was slaughtered gruesomely, but Lord Thomas and Lady Delilah appear to have been poisoned. We are searching the castle for suspects, but in all the confusion... At any rate, I am here to offer our submission. With the Arl dead, there is nothing left to fight for."

"Have your men lay down their arms at once," Fergus said stiffly. He felt oddly bereft. There would be no final battle. There would be no duel, no settling of accounts, no blood vengeance for his wrongs. Rendon Howe was already beyond his reach, and his fate was in the hands of the Maker.

"My lord," Varel said uncertainly, "we ask forgiveness and amnesty for the soldiers of Vigil's Keep, and that punishment for the deeds of the late Arl not be visited on his men."

Fergus stared at him, his face hardening. "I shall use them as they deserve. I shall not give amnesty to men who killed my wife and son—who murdered my mother and my father. I want the names of every man who participated in the attack on Highever, not for collective punishment but for individual justice. Their stories will be heard. At the top of the list I want the names of the officers who led the attack."

"There will be resistance," Varel said quietly. "It may take some time."

"Then you'd better *sort it out*. The bombardment will resume in one hour." Fergus turned his back on the man and stalked back to his knights.

A watchful silence fell over the besiegers. Fergus took the break in activity for a quick meal, standing up by a trebuchet, munching bread and cheese. Something was going on in the fortress. There was movement and the occasional loud voice. Another silence and then from the courtyard, there were a group of voices raised in hot debate, growing louder and louder. A clash of metal against metal followed.

"A little civil war in there, my lord," Fergus' squire Seyton laughed.

"Serves them right," snarled one of his captains. "Let the swine kill each other off."

"They're afraid," Fergus said quietly. "They're afraid because they know what they'd do in my place. They know what they did at Highever, and that they have no right to expect anything else."

"My lord!" a soldier ran up. "A pack of the bastards broke out of the outer wall to the east. It's not a sortie. They're escaping. We brought down a few, but half a dozen are headed north, riding hard!"

"Naois! Fenwick! Take your men and ride them down!" Fergus bellowed. "If they're fleeing, they're the ones we want!"

The knights galloped off, hot on the trail. Not too long after, a runner presented himself before the teyrn.

"My lord, Ser Naois is after the fugitives. We examined the bodies of the fallen and took two wounded men captive. They identified one of the dead as Captain Dillon, one of Howe's most trusted officers. Another one of Howe's picked men, Captain Chase, is among the fugitives, and it is thought he is going to the town of Amaranthine, either to take ship or to join forces with Bann Esmerelle. The two prisoners have themselves admitted having been at Highever the night it fell, though they claim they were with the reserves."

"They're lying," Fergus growled. "If they had nothing to fear from me, they would have stayed in the Keep. Keep them close and we'll find out where they really were." He had always known this would be ugly: it had been ugly when Howe began it, and it would be just as ugly when a Cousland made an end of it. He felt calm, but it was bitter and forced, nasty as a slick of grease on a stagnant pond.

He waited, his anger turning sour. Delilah was dead. He had never really wanted that. He had pictured her kneeling for mercy before him, and then he would have said something sad and noble and spared her life. If Thomas has surrendered, he might well have done the same. Childhood companions were dead: poisoned by the Crows. He had contacted the Crows, yes; but surely that ship had not yet

reached Antiva. And he had never suggested killing Delilah and Thomas. Who had arranged *this*?

The hour was gone, and there was still noise from the Keep. Fergus swore, and turned to the dwarven engineers.

"I've had enough of this. Send a missile into the face of the Inner Keep. If they can't make up their minds, I'll make them up for them."

Machinery creaked and squealed, as the engines were cranked into position. Fergus pushed a dwarf aside and muttered, "I want to send them the message myself."

The lever was filthy with oil and required a hard pull. It was satisfying to release his anger and disappointment and sorrow like this. With a tremendous *THUMP!* the rounded stone flew up and made a slow and graceful arc toward the Keep. The quarrel and fighting in the keep changed to screams of alarm. Stone met stone. A crash followed, and stone splinters exploded outwards. More screams rose from the courtyard. Fergus put up his hand, gesturing for the dwarves to hold the positions, and wait.

They did not have to wait for very long. The white flag was up once more, and Varel, looking very much the worse for wear, limped into view above the gate.

"My lord teyrn!" he called, sounding a little desperate. "We accede to your terms. We surrender unconditionally. Vigil's Keep...is yours." Thumps and thuds sounded from the gate,

as the men inside unbarred it and swung it open.

"Summon my officers," Fergus quietly ordered his squire. When they were assembled, he addressed them briefly.

"Victory is ours, gentlemen, not so much by our own valor as by treachery within the Keep. My wife's family sent the Crows, and I regret that I have lost my opportunity to face the murderer of my family face to face. Seek out the assassins and bring them to me, and any of Howe's officers you find as well. As for the others, the defenders of Vigil's Keep have surrendered, and I will not have them harmed unnecessarily. Soldiers are to be questioned, and those who participated in the Highever massacre will face their just punishment. For the rest, kill only those who resist. Spare the servants and the unarmed, I command you. I despise cowards who think to prove themselves men by committing rape. Rapists will be hanged. I hold you responsible for the actions of your men. You have served bravely and unflinchingly, and there will be rewards for all. Now let us enter my fortress of Vigil's Keep, not to seek revenge, but to deliver the innocent, and to mete out justice for all."

Prudently, he sent in an advance guard. They picked their way through the bloody debris of the shattered courtyard, past the dead and the dying. Reports were coming in that there had been other defections. Some men had slipped through the west pastures; others had been seen running down along the river. They would catch those they could, but they must secure the Vigil, first of all.

The surviving defenders were rounded up. From smithy to storehouse to stable, the compound was combed for potential threats. A few warriors were hiding, but most of those they flushed out were frightened maidservants and trembling stableboys.

Varel stayed close at hand. Unless there was some proof that he was involved with the events at Highever, Fergus felt he would have little choice but to keep the man on as seneschal. Who else knew Vigil's Keep as he did? For that matter, who was better qualified to administer the arling for him? What was he going to do about Amaranthine, anyway? Would the King want to recall Nathaniel from the Free Marches? That was the logical solution, but at the moment Fergus could not think of a man he had less desire to see.

"Have the dungeons searched as well," he ordered another pair of officers. "They're large enough for quite a large force to hide in."

He remembered that the dungeons were accessed by a separate building in the courtyard that was outside the wall of the Inner Keep. It was an eccentric arrangement: one that Father had said dated to a time when the actual fortress was in a slightly different location. Nonetheless, a strong party was sent down to clean the dungeons out and to look for possible captives. Not that he held out much hope of finding Highever survivors, but he had to try. The search parties encountered scattered resistance from soldiers hiding in the dungeons, but found no prisoners, other than the usual local malefactors.

Then it was time to enter the Keep proper.

"Take me to Howe," he ordered.

Varel led the way. Fergus, his knights around him, followed through the damaged structure. He had commanded that there was to be no murder or rape of the unarmed, and his men seemed to be obeying, at least anywhere that he might see such offenses. There would be looting, of course. It was beyond any commander's power to prevent *that*.

The opulent Great Hall was not in terrible shape, other than some of the high clerestory windows being broken. Fergus and his men marched up through labyrinthine passages to the well-protected Lady's Tower. Vile as the murders had been, Fergus was bitterly relieved that he and his men would not have to fight their way through the castle, inch by bloody inch.

Some frightened Howe soldiers were posted outside the solar's open door. At the sight of Fergus and his men, they dropped to their knees.

"Lord Teyrn," they muttered.

"This is the place, my lord," Varel said quietly.

Fergus had been in this room many times: generally when he and the other men had interrupted the ladies having tea. It had smelled of sweet herbs and sunlight; of silks and sugared cakes and expensive floral perfumes. He could almost see them now: his mother and Arlessa Mechtilde... Bronwyn and

Delilah...Oriana...

Now it was a slaughterhouse, stinking of blood and voided bowels.

"Maker's Breath!" a knight swore, staring at Rendon Howe's mutilated body. "It looks like someone cut his heart out!"

"That's a shame," murmured another knight to a friend, pointing discreetly at Delilah's body. "I heard she was a nice girl. Shame to get mixed up in this."

"Almost looks like she's asleep," the friend replied.

Fergus hissed in disgust. Delilah did not look like she was sleeping to him. She was crumpled on the floor, pale face turned to the side. Her father's blood was everywhere, and had crept across the floor to her, where it was drying in a crust along the pure line of his daughter's profile. Delilah's lips were blue, and her eyes half open. Looking down at her, he felt nothing but grief.

"Some of her women must be alive," he said, "Have her delivered to them so they can prepare her decently for the pyre."

Thomas—silly, good-hearted, drunken Thomas— was almost unrecognizable. He had grown a beard since Fergus had last seen him, and his face was smeared with blood and vomit. Whatever the Crows had used on him, Fergus would wager it had been extremely painful.

And Howe—well, Fergus could not bring himself to care how much *that* man had suffered. His plots had ended in the death of his own children: a terrible judgment on him. Howe's eyes were open, staring at the empty air in agony and disbelief. Outrage was there too, frozen into his dead face. His murderers had seen that face, and had been unmoved. The terrible injury to his chest did indeed appear to be from someone cutting into him.

A piece of parchment was nailed to the breakfast table with a table knife. It bore the sign of the Crows and a clear message:

"Blood will have blood. Nemo me impune lacessit."

It was her, then. His bitch of a mother-in-law. The motto of the Fortunys, written in Old Antivan, was in effect Sanguina Fortuny's signature. She had stepped in, meddling and poisoning as she had back in Antiva. Fergus had nearly been poisoned by her himself. He had taken Oriana away from her, and the old woman had hated him for it, but not enough to refuse the trading concessions Father had paid for Oriana's marriage to Fergus. Oriana had always insisted that her mother loved her "in her own way." Fergus had thought that the Waking Sea had put enough distance between them for safety. Clearly, he had been wrong.

Well, I suppose this does indicate that the old woman felt something for Oriana. Love or pride, it's come to the same thing.

"I've seen enough," he said harshly. "Prepare their bodies for the pyre, and cover their faces. Retrieve the Arl's rings and seals and anything that may give a clue to his doings. I wish to see where he kept his papers."

Out and down, down the stone steps. Women whispered and squeaked as they huddled away from him. Another door, this time opening to a blessedly quiet place.

"This is the study, my lord," Varel said. "I have impounded the Arl's papers for your examination."

"Thank you, Varel," Fergus murmured. He slumped tiredly into Rendon Howe's chair, staring at the pile of loose parchments and account books on the writing table. After a blank moment, he said, "I want to be alone now."

"As you wish, my lord," the seneschal acquiesced. "A meal and a bath are being prepared for you. And a room...the best guest room, not the family quarters...I thought—"

"Yes, yes, that's fine. I don't want to sleep in Rendon Howe's bloody bed! I *really* need to be *alone*, Varel," Fergus growled.

"My lord." The door closed, leaving Fergus to the anguish of memories. Perhaps somewhere in this study was the forged letter that had sentenced his family to death. A subtle, heartless trick by an Orlesian agent had killed his father and mother, his wife and his child, and all the loyal retainers of Highever. Marjolaine was still killing: today she had killed Rendon Howe and Delilah and Thomas—and all and the

soldiers and servants who had died to defend the Vigil. He pawed blindly through the parchment, praying that Marjolaine would prowl the far edges of the desolate Void for all eternity.

And her Empress with her. This is her doing, as well.

He owed his family more respect than to collapse now. He wiped his face and then began reading through Rendon Howe's account books. By the time his meal was ready, he knew why there were no elves within the walls of Vigil's Keep. Once he found Howe's treasury, he could rebuild Highever from top to bottom...with accursed gold paid by Tevinter slavers for free Fereldan men and women. Highever's Alienage would exist now only in memory.

When his hands stopped shaking, he took pen and ink, and wrote a message to the Queen.

Your Majesty—

Vigil's Keep fell to me just before noon today. Crow assassins, hired by my late wife's family in Antiva, came secretly into the Keep before our engines broke the gate; and they assassinated the Arl of Amaranthine, Lady Delilah, and Lord Thomas Howe. With their deaths, resistance largely collapsed. I have sent my men in pursuit of the assassins, but there is great confusion, and they are not the only ones fleeing the siege. I examined Howe's accounts, and discovered a new outrage. It appears that he financed his rebellion by selling elves to Tevinter slavers. According to

his records, he sold the entire Highever Alienage, his own servants in Amaranthine, and any unfortunate elf he could lay hands upon. In addition, under the guise of needing "labor crews," he paid Bann Vaughan to permit elves from the Denerim Alienage to be sent to Amaranthine, where they were sold and shipped away. Bann Esmerelle is implicated in this as well. It is clear that she knew about the slavers, and accepted a portion of the proceeds. It is not likely that Bann Vaughan knew that the elves were to be sold, for then I think he would have demanded more to ship them north. This deed is a shame and a disgrace to Ferelden. As soon as the Vigil is secure, I shall take some of my troops north, to deal with Esmerelle and confront the Tevinters, if they have not already fled.

He hated the idea that anyone would believe him the sort of man who resorted to poison and treachery, and so he added a disclaimer—

I swear to you on the soul of my son that I had nothing to do with the murder of the Howes. I had every intention of sparing Lady Delilah, and also Lord Thomas, had he made his submission. That I cannot now show them mercy grieves me more than I can express.

Believe me, Your Majesty, your most obedient servant,

Fergus Cousland, Teyrn of Highever

He laid the quill aside, wishing that none of this had happened,

and dropped his head into his hands.

And thus, Fergus Cousland had his victory, after a fashion; and took possession of Vigil's Keep.

Thanks to my reviewers: Valmothg, cloud1004, Zeeji, kart87, Zute, callalili, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Morwen33, Menamebephil, Blinded in a bolthole, Josie Lange, Aoi24, demonicnargles, JackOfBladesX, Jenna53, Judy, Juliafied, mutive, almostinsane, Thomas Blaine, Samara-Draven, Costin, Kira Kyuu, The Moidart, Shakespeira, euromellows, Pirate Ninjas of the Abuss, Enaid Aderyn, Lehni, Angurvddel, mille libri, kwintessa, BlackCherryWhiskey, Dante Alighieri1308, Jyggilag, chocolatebrownie12, Gene Dark Tyanilth, nataliexo, and Remenants. Your remarks mean so much to me, and they keep me thinking!

I've always had problems with the lack of consequences for Howe's murder of the Couslands. I realize the limitations of game design, but we are told that Oriana came from a powerful and wealthy family of Antivan merchant princes. There must have been trade agreements. There must have been Antivan merchants in Highever. Howe massacred everyone in the castle, but he could not have killed everyone in the city. As I see it, the Antivan merchants rushed home to give Oriana's family the news. The only feeble excuse I can give for her family not to pursue revenge in canon is that possibly the crown of Antiva did not want to cause an international incident by killing the Regent of Ferelden's right

hand man. It's not much of an excuse, but it's all I've got. As Howe is not the Crown's right hand man in my story, there was no reason for them to hold back.

39. Into the Wilds

Victory at Ostagar

This chapter just kept growing...and growing...and growing...

Thanks to Enaid Aderyn for the insight that the Dalish do not march.

Chapter 39: Into the Wilds

Cailan, King of Ferelden, arrived at Ostagar with much fanfare, pleased beyond measure that he had not missed the arrival of the Dalish. The army, as a whole, was glad to see their handsome and cheerful young king.

Loghain was resigned, but not pleased at all. Things were going well, and he did not need Cailan's interference. Nor did he want to pretend that all was well, knowing that this traitor had betrayed his daughter and was planning to sell Ferelden to the Orlesians. From time to time, he played with the idea of confronting and arresting Cailan. Could one arrest a King? He had never heard of it, but surely kings were answerable to the law of the land. Or if they were not, they should be.

But he could not. They were in the middle of a war, and the King and the General could not admit to differences in front of

the troops. Loghain was sure of Maric's Shield, but the rest of the army would fall apart if he set himself against the King. And that could not be allowed to happen.

The Orlesian plan might still fall through, now that the marriage treaty had gone astray. Loghain smiled bitterly when he thought of it, carefully locked away in his own correspondence chest. It would be months before Celene and Cailan realized that something was wrong. A great deal could happen before then.

The dwarven allies were presented to him, and Cailan was on his best and friendliest behavior. He even knew some of them, remembering them from his visit to Orzammar with his father some years before. He was always up for drinking parties, and so he and the dwarves got on rather well, all things considered.

"All we need are the Dalish," he exulted, "and the Archdemon might as well give it up altogether! How grand that will be, the day the Dalish come marching into Ostagar."

Days passed, but the Dalish did not march in. Watchful eyes at the top of the Tower of Ishal were trained on all the approaches to Ostagar, but they did not see their elven allies.

The Dalish did not march in, because the Dalish did not march at all. Their culture was not the sort that marched, hundreds of feet tramping the earth in unison, trumpets blaring, making as much noise as possible. Instead, they drifted in one evening at sunset, indistinguishable from rock and tree, from

vine and trailing bush. Over fifty Dalish were actually within the walls of the fortress before a shocked guard noticed a tattooed elf peering down at him from the branches of a whitewood tree on the north side of Ostagar Gorge. The unprofessional oath he bellowed turned heads right and left. Very shortly, weapons were seized and a trumpet blatted out an alarm.

"The Dalish, Your Majesty!" an officer bawled out, bursting into the council room. "They're here!" Loghain scowled at the man.

Cailan turned, his face bright with his widest, whitest smile. "They been spotted on the road?"

"No, Your Majesty! They're here! Right here in camp! They crept in like shadows. Reckon it was *magic!*"

Stunned looks were exchanged, and the senior command, men and dwarves both, hurried down the winding stairs and out into the cool air of twilight.

Ser Cauthrien was glaring down at a semicircle of slender and tattooed elves, declaring that the manner of their arrival was contrary to the law of arms. "—and it is customary to announce one's presence at the gates, instead of simply infiltrating the camp! We might have mistaken you for darkspawn and shot you!" She saw the King hurrying forward and gestured at him, "See how you have discomposed the King!"

"Oh, I am sorry!" apologized a pretty elf woman, her enormous green eyes luminous with sympathy, an appealing burr in her voice. She gave Cailan a vague, sweet smile. "You're the king, then? My, you are tall and shiny. Sorry, King. We didn't mean to frighten you. We were just being...er... Elvish. We thought you might be at supper, and we didn't like to interrupt...Where is Bronwyn? I like Bronwyn. I thought she would be here... And Danith? I'm supposed to report to the Warden. *The Warden. A Warden...*"

Alistair, slightly behind the King and Loghain, gave her a shy wave and a grin. "Bronwyn's off to find Zathrian's clan. Danith, too. I'm Alistair. Senior Warden Alistair. I'm afraid you'll have to make do with me."

"Oh, that's very kind of you. You're just as nice as Bronwyn. Tall, mind you, but nice all the same. In fact, you're all...tall... Oh, wait, I'm supposed to say something..." She straightened her thin little shoulders and declared, "'We are the Dalish, Grey Warden, and we are here, according to our oath!'" She cocked her head. "There now, I think I remembered all the words that time."

The human nobles were in varying states of shock, delight, wry amusement, and fury. Cailan was quite enchanted with the elves' appearance: so wild, so free, so picturesque—and in the young woman's case, so exquisite. Her tattoos enhanced her high cheekbones and dainty pointed jaw.

Loghain glanced at her, saw she was pretty, and understood that she had no more idea than a cat of how humans

conducted themselves. He was more interested in two of the archers lounging gracefully behind her—the two with grey in their hair. He knew them...

"Thanovir! Maynriel!"

"Andaran atish'an, Loghain!" Thanovir answered cheerily. "It is many years since you led us in battle."

Arls Wulffe and Bryland and a number of the banns relaxed slightly. These must be some of Loghain's Night Elves, the scouts he had organized during the Rebellion. That Loghain knew them and apparently was vouching for their reliability gave them considerable validation among the humans. The pretty girl must be the daughter of some clan chief or other, leading the elves just as noble youths sometimes led human forces—with the quiet support of experienced soldiers.

"That's Merrill, our Keeper," Thanovir informed Loghain, still beaming to see an old comrade-in-arms. Loghain was not looking too badly, either. Older, of course, but they were all older.

"Keeper, eh?" Loghain said, lifting a brow. Personally, he thought that fey little girl needed a Keeper herself.

Maynriel looked up at Loghain, mildly admonishing. "She is our Keeper on this journey, and has led us well."

"Then," beamed Cailan, preferring a pretty girl to Loghain's greying old cronies any day, "she shall be welcomed as befits

the representative of our worthy Dalish allies." He inclined his blond head to Merrill, with his most winsome smile. "You are most welcome, my lady! Most welcome, indeed!"

"Indeed you are, Keeper," Loghain agreed, remembering his manners, and that these were valuable allies. "There are no archers in Thedas to equal the Dalish!"

More Dalish arrived and now were let in properly—through the gate. A dozen aravels—the landships of the Dalish—came in with them, pulled by white halla, which were of more interest to the army as a whole than the elves themselves. Loghain was more concerned about how easily the Dalish has infiltrated his fortress. Merrill explained how very simple it was to slide through gaps in the stones or up overhanging trees and move among the branches. Of course, those of them who were the very best at it went first.

"It would have been even easier on the south side of your big stone camp," she told Loghain, "but Maynriel said that might be too sneaky and smack of arrogance."

"Maynriel is a wise man, and no doubt will always give you sound advice," Loghain answered, carefully expressionless. She was a mage, of course. He knew that Dalish Keepers were mages. Was that why she was so...odd? Not that it mattered. Five hundred Dalish scouts and archers had just joined the Fereldan Army, and he could bear with an eccentric young figurehead. For that matter, better her than a swine like Vaughan or a brash fool like Cailan. To her credit, this

innocent little girl did not remind him in the least of the elven spy Katriel, who had been a city elf, a sophisticated seductress, and a foul traitor.

Others were not so pleased to see the Dalish.

"Look at those knife ears!" sneered Bann Vaughan to his companions. "Painted and half-naked! They're nothing more than animals."

"That's true, but—" his friend Lord Braden advised him, "—the King thinks a lot of them. It's a lot of nonsense, of course, but it wouldn't do to go against him..."

"—And they're armed to the teeth," Lord Jonaley pointed out. "They're animals, right enough, but they're *wild* animals, Vaughan, not tame brutes like the ones at home who've at least learned to live indoors."

"Ha!" Vaughan agreed, barking a laugh. "Well said, Jonaley! Nothing more than wild animals. Just so. One can hardly blame Loghain for making what use he can of them. If they are here, and set to fighting darkspawn, they can't be murdering or thieving elsewhere! The darkspawn will thin them out a bit."

"That Keeper of theirs is a pretty thing," Braden remarked. "I wonder if Dalish women give good sport? I daresay they go at it like rabbits. If we hang about near their camp, we shall probably be able to watch them!"

Vaughan laughed heartily at the suggestion. Jonaley merely replied. "Perhaps so...but they're armed to the *teeth*..."

"Carver!" called Alistair. "You've got a visitor!"

"Ooo! A visitor?" smirked Oghren. "Is she pretty?"

"She's a he," Alistair replied, coming into the Wardens' quarters. "I don't know about pretty." He raised his brows at Carver. "He says he's Adam Hawke and your brother; and he looks a lot like you, so he probably is."

Carver slumped despondently, trying to blend into the corner where he was sitting, sharpening his eating knife. Adam was here, trying to ruin everything. *As usual.*

"How wonderful to have a brother," sighed Leliana. "I wish I'd had a brother...or a sister! That is what I like most about the Grey Wardens. We are all like a big family, yes?"

"Better than *my* family," growled Carver. "Couldn't you tell him I was on patrol?"

"No," Alistair shot back. "And I agree with Leliana that it's a pretty special thing to have a brother."

Who at least admits it, he thought to himself. Cailan was perfectly polite to Alistair, but it was because he was a Grey Warden. There was always a wall between them: the wall that declared, *"I am the King, and I have no equals."*

Carver grumbled, but got up, tucking his little knife away. Adam was waiting, just outside the door. He must have done some fancy talking to get into the Tower of Ishal and all the way to the Wardens' quarters. Adam could always talk anybody into anything, of course. Everybody loved Adam. He was wearing a light leather vest that somehow looked debonair and expensive, though Carver knew it was a mercenary's castoff, carefully polished and repaired. Everything looked good on Adam. It was the perfectly muscled arms, probably.

"Carver!" Adam said, seeing him. "We've been worried sick about you!" He saw the people in the room coming to have a look at him. "Won't you introduce me to your friends?"

"No." Carver glared at him, remembering all the times that his friends had met Adam and somehow become Adam's friends instead of his. The Grey Wardens were *his* friends, and he was not giving them away to Adam.

"Don't be childish," Adam said, ignoring him. He smiled charmingly at the Wardens, and gave them a wave. "Alistair, isn't it? I'm Adam Hawke, Carver's older brother. We hadn't heard from him in a while, and our mother asked me to come to Ostagar to see if he was all right."

Alistair responded to the infectious smile, and took the offered hand. "Good to meet you. Carver's been great. Not everybody's here, but over there is Leliana and that's Morrigan. And over there is Oghren. Most of us are out right now, but before you are the Grey Wardens' finest. More or

less."

"Excuse us." Adam Hawke said abruptly, steering his brother down the hall and away from the quarters. Carver went, but shrugged off his brother's heavy hand. They paused, glaring at each other.

"So it's true?" Hawke asked, his brow furrowed. "You've become a Grey Warden? Carver, you should have talked to me before taking such a drastic step!"

"Why?" Carver demanded. "When I left with the army, you knew I wanted to make my own way in the world. The Wardens are my friends, and they think I'm good enough to join. They're important people. Did you know the Warden-Commander is Lady Bronwyn Cousland, the sister of the Teyrn of Highever? She's really been really nice to me. I get to call her 'Bronwyn,' just like all the other Wardens. I like being here. I'm doing my bit for the war, and I don't have to hide from the Templars, or watch what I say."

"You haven't even asked about Mother and Bethany," Hawke said, shaking his head. "Carver, what have they done to you?"

"They've accepted me! And I'm not the tag-along little brother to them. I can't go on living in your shadow, Adam!" He rubbed an irritated hand over his hair and said, "After all this is over, I'll come home and see everyone."

"That might be harder than you expect," his brother told him, jaw set. "Mother wants us to move to Kirkwall. She's afraid of

the darkspawn."

"We're *holding* the darkspawn!" Carver said, indignant.

"For how long?" Adam frowned, leaning back against the wall. "Now that Father's gone, she's been thinking about going home. Uncle Gamlen will probably put us up at the family estate. She's tired of living in country cottages, always on the run. The Amells are a noble family, and Mother misses the kind of life she knew as a young girl."

Carver snorted. "What did she think was going to happen when she ran off with an apostate? And how does she know that our uncle wants anything to do with her? Didn't her own parents disinherit her?"

"She thinks he's forgiven her. She wants to go home. She wants to be somewhere safe: somewhere that doesn't have armies of darkspawn two days march away."

"She'll never be safe: not with Bethany living with her. If she wants to be safe, Bethany should turn herself in to the Circle of Magi—or, you know what? She could come and join the Grey Wardens too! They have mages! That Morrigan—the really gorgeous brunette—she's a mage, you know. And she was an apostate, and lived on the run all her life, just like Father and Bethany!"

"Is that what you want for Bethany?" Adam asked coldly. "You want her in danger, facing soulless monsters, facing a horrible death? Nobody in his right mind wants to be a Grey

Warden! It would absolutely kill mother to lose Bethany, too!"

"She hasn't *lost* me!" Carver insisted. "How can you expect me to stay home and sit by the fire all my life? I'm sick of being a farm laborer, working from sunup to sundown, bringing home a pittance and handing it over to you, and then you doling out some coppers for spending money if I'm a very, very good boy. Is that what you want for me? To be a mindless peasant, grubbing in the dirt until my back gives out?"

"You're being ridiculous! Of course I don't want that! We'll all go to Kirkwall. We'll live with Uncle Gamlen and find some sort of positions there in the city. The Amell name is well-known there. We can live like nobles, and Mother can spend the rest of her life in comfort."

"Everybody knows that Kirkwall is crawling with Templars," Carver growled. "You're taking *Bethany* there? How long do you think your dream of being a nobleman is going to last? Until the Templars kick in the front door?"

"They don't kick in the front doors of noble houses," Adam said, his tone superior and contemptuous. "Bethany would be better protected there." He took a deep breath. "Look. If you're absolutely determined to throw your life away, I can't stop you. We're leaving Lothering in twelve days. We'll take ship in Gwaren. If you want to see Mother and Bethany before we go, come to see us. Otherwise, this is farewell, probably forever."

"You want to go—so go," Carver sneered. "You're supposed to be the great fighter, but I don't see you standing up for Ferelden. I guess I understand now. You want to be a noble, and you can't be one here. Go off to Kirkwall, and be Uncle Gamlen's poor relation, if that's what you want. I'll come and see Mother and Bethany. And I'll tell them the truth: they're safer staying in Lothering than traveling through the Brecilian Passage and then taking a long and dangerous voyage through pirate-infested waters, to arrive in a strange city mostly run by the Chantry." He added bitterly, "And I am not throwing my life away. I'm making it *mean* something." He left without another word, not trusting himself to look at his brother again.

He slammed the door of the Wardens' quarters behind him.

"So much for having a *family*," he muttered. "They're leaving for Kirkwall in twelve days. I need to go see my mother and sister. "

Alistair was unsure what to say. He remembered all of Duncan's teachings: how the Grey Wardens renounced title and family; how the mission came before all. Still, if his mother was only two days away and was leaving the country forever, he would want to see her. Suddenly he thought of Fiona, living her lonely life among the Wardens, keeping her secrets; and he felt close to weeping.

"Of course you can go. Not alone, maybe. We'll work something out, I promise. Teyrn Loghain is taking some of us on patrol for a day or two, When we get back, we'll talk it

over."

The King was still sleeping off last night's celebration when Loghain's scouting expedition left Ostagar.

Loghain had been prepared for the King to celebrate the elves' arrival at length. While the King was in his cups, Loghain went quietly about, speaking to key people; asking them to refrain from drinking so much that they would be indisposed the following morning.

The darkspawn had been quiet for ten days now. It made him uneasy. Had something changed? His scouts were not giving him the information he needed. Either they were turned back after spotting large parties of darkspawn, or they never returned at all. On his detailed map of Ostagar and the Korcari Wilds was an ominous red circle to the east. That was where the first Wardens on the spot had seen a wide hole in the earth, big enough for an ogre to squeeze up through. The two men had not been able to get close, but had reported that the darkspawn were enlarging it the opening, busy as ants on an anthill. What was it like now? Was it fortified? Was the Archdemon there?

It was time for a sweep of the Wilds, and for that he needed not a mere scouting party, but a fairly strong expeditionary force.

Furthermore, he needed to see things for himself, as far as possible. Interpreting other men's observations was tricky.

There was no substitute for personal reconnaissance. He spoke to Bryland at the feast, and persuaded the man to limit his intake, since he would be in temporary command in Loghain's absence. He informed the King of his intentions just as Cailan was attempting a flirtation with an oblivious Keeper Merrill. As he expected, Cailan listened to him with half an ear, and agreed to anything he wanted as long as Cailan was left alone.

The gates of Ostagar swung wide, and they moved out into the fresh breeze that came with the red sunrise. It was good to be on the march again with Thanovir and Maynriel. They had brought a dozen of their youngsters along, prime archers and trackers. Lord Ronus Dace and his second, Frandlin Ivo agreed to join them, accompanied by mixed company of their own men and the Legion of the Dead. Sergeant Darrow headed a score of picked soldiers from Maric's Shield. Keili, the young Healer who had attached herself to him, walked along with the soldiers. They were used to her now, and accepted her to a certain extent. What reservations they had seemed to stem more from her youth and frail physique than her magic. Nobody objected to being healed, of course.

And, of course, there were the Wardens.

It was useless to wish that Bronwyn were here to share the adventure with him. He was more enamored than any man of his age had a right to be. He missed her, and wished her good fortune in her journey north. He could picture her plotting with Anora, and the image warmed him. He hoped they got on together.

Instead, he had Alistair, cheerful and admirably sober. The boy had learned at least one thing from the fiasco of the great battle last Bloomingtide: and that was not to risk all the Wardens in one place at one time. With him were the Orlesian bard and the Healer who looked enough like him to be his brother and a son of Maric. Their new boy and the big Qunari were here, too. The rest must have remained at camp.

Young Carver was pestering Alistair with questions.

"—but I hear you were raised by *Arl Eamon of Redcliffe*—"

"Did you hear me say that?" Alistair replied, with mock astonishment. "Actually, I was raised by dogs: big flying dogs from the Anderfels. Smelly and drooly, and devout Andrasteans, every one of them."

Carver made a face. "Can't you be serious about *anything*?"

"It sounds serious to me," Anders declared, straight-faced. "Being raised by flying dogs is seriously *funny*."

A sweet trill of laughter from the Orlesian. "I miss having Scout with us. He is so big and dependable. I had not understood about Fereldans and dogs until I met him. When I was young and living in the house of Lady Cecile she had a dog, but it was a horrid little lapdog that yipped until my head ached, and always bit at my ankles. She called it...*Bonbon*."

Loghain winced, picturing the little abomination all too clearly. Orlesians bred their dogs in all sorts of perverted ways, and

he had seen Orlesian ladies with those creatures, feeding them sweetmeats while Fereldans starved.

"...One day," Leliana went on, smiling at the memory, "Bonbon leaped out and bit my leg. I thought it was a rat, and I kicked as hard as I could. Bonbon *flew* through the air—" she smirked "—and never troubled me again."

"You kicked a *dog*?" Carver asked, horrified. Loghain snorted a reluctant laugh. It wasn't like it was a *real* dog. Perhaps the bard was not as bad as he thought.

"Warden!" he called, looking back at Alistair. The boy flushed guiltily, but a faint grin lingered. The expression was so like Maric that Loghain stared for a moment. How had this boy grown to be so like his father, when he had never known him? Cailan was not like Maric at all. Nor did he resemble Rowan in the least, for that matter.

"My lord?" Alistair asked, moving up to speak to him.

"Walk with me," Loghain said. "And let me know the moment you sense darkspawn."

"Well," Alistair said, "around Ostagar we sense them all the time, but it's like a faint noise in the background. We know they're around, and within a day's march or so, but they're not in the next room, so to speak."

"Then let me know when they knock on the front door. All right?"

"Yes, ser. My lord." The boy looked like he wanted to say something else, so Loghain tried not to look too repressive. Maric would have been chattering a mile a minute by this time, forcing answers out of Loghain.

Instead, it was clear that Loghain would have to do the talking. He pulled out his map and showed the red-circled portion to Alistair. "How much did Duncan tell you about that first scouting mission back in Drakonis?"

"Quite a bit. And I heard more first-hand from Belarion, who was one of the Wardens who went. They camped by the old Warden outpost, and kept sensing darkspawn really strongly. The next day they found this huge thing like a sinkhole, swarming with the brutes." He pointed at the map, and asked "May I?" At Loghain's nod, he pointed to a small square, indicating a building. "That's the old outpost. You see it's only about a quarter-day's march from the fissure. There's not much there anymore, but at least there are walls, and bits of a roof. It's where we first met Morrigan. She took us to her mother—I mean—Flemeth, who'd been keeping the Warden treaties safe." His shoulders hunched, as a shadow passed over his face.

"She did that for her own purposes," Loghain told him sternly. "Not for any altruistic reason. She *wanted* the Wardens to feel indebted to her. Does—" he made himself use the witch's name "*—Morrigan—*know why?"

Alistair shook his head. "Whatever she wanted, it died with her. Good riddance. She always gave me the creeps."

Loghain huffed a laugh. "You weren't the only one."

"Really?" Alistair asked, curiosity overcoming his reserve. "You met Flemeth? I mean, other than the other day, when we killed her?"

"Long ago," Loghain said, "when I was on the run with Maric. We were guests—prisoners for a time—in her hut. She pretended to tell us our futures." He waited for the boy to quiz him about it, but Alistair only nodded, his face closed off. Loghain realized, with an unpleasant shock, that Alistair believed he had no right to ask anything about his father. Or perhaps he really did not care about a man who had not taken care of him. How could he rebuke him for that? Placing Alistair with Eamon was a mistake. Loghain had told Maric so at the time. Eamon was a bizarre choice for guardian, considering that he was the brother of Maric's wife. He stole another look at the lad.

On the other hand, if Maric believed it more important to protect Cailan's rights, he could not have chosen better. Who else would be so likely as the blood kin of the royal heir to keep the bastard child down? Had Alistair been given to the Couslands or to *any* of the great nobles, for that matter, he would have been raised, inevitably, as a secret rival. Loghain glanced at him again. He might even have been married off to Bronwyn by now, though that would be tantamount to a challenge to Cailan. It was hard to imagine this diffident young lad as a schemer, but there were plenty who would have been glad to do his scheming for him.

"She told Maric," Loghain said, after a time, "that there would be a Blight, but that he would not live to see it. I thought it was ridiculous at the time, since there hadn't been a Blight in over four hundred years anyway. It was the sort of thing any sham fortune teller could come up with."

Alistair considered this. "She liked to pretend to be all-knowing, but since we know that there are still legendary Old Gods out there, it was only logical to say there's going to be a Blight *someday*. Saying it wouldn't be in his lifetime would have been a good guess. What did she say to—" he stopped abruptly and grimaced. "Sorry, my lord. I was just being nosy." He pointed at his face. "See the nose?"

Loghain smiled wryly. "I do. You want to know what she predicted for me. She told me I would betray Maric. Repeatedly. I think it's fairly clear that I did not."

"Well, that's good, isn't it? It proves that she wasn't all-knowing and all-powerful after all. She just liked to tell people depressing things and make them feel bad about themselves. I never liked her anyway." He laughed in his self-deprecating way. "Not that she would care. I sort of thought she liked Bronwyn a little, but they talked privately when we found Teyrn Fergus, and whatever she said really upset Bronwyn. Anybody could see it. Bronwyn wanted to get away from her as fast as she could."

"Sensible girl." Loghain would have paid good coin to know what the Witch of the Wilds had said.

"But this is not so bad!" cried Leliana, exploring the ruins of the Grey Warden outpost. "This could be fixed, yes? Some good dwarf masons, a little cleaning...I think it has possibilities!"

Anders chuckled, catching Alistair's eye. "*Women.*"

Sten took Leliana seriously. "The curtain walls should be rebuilt. It could indeed be made defensible against a middling force of darkspawn, depending upon the number of projectile weapons available to the defenders."

It was just the place to rest and have a midday meal. Alistair examined the site. The last time he had been here, they had been distracted by *Morrigan*. It was an interesting place. He liked the idea of the Wardens have a hideaway of their own, not beholden to a King for house-room in his Palace. This was really not a bad little stronghold. Leliana and Sten were right. He was no expert in fortifications, but it seemed to him that the surrounding marshes were a defense in themselves. Maybe when the Blight was over, it would be nice to spend time here, where Wardens could hunt and fish... and practice their rites in private.

Absently, he munched his rations, testing the mossy stonework, startling a storm of bats from a dark, crumbling lower chamber. The weather was holding well. They could just —

He hissed. The ever-lasting scratchiness of darkspawn suddenly spiked, like a needle in his brain.

"Teyrn Loghain!"

Leliana felt it too. "Darkspawn!" she cried.

These were skilled and seasoned warriors, and so there was not chaos, but order, as the differing troops took their positions and the archers readied their arrows. Darkspawn howled and chuckled, coming closer, drawn to the Wardens like metal filings to a magnet. They were charging, without art, without subterfuge, up the hill to the north, and they were met by Dalish arrows.

And Leliana's. Loghain noted the woman's accuracy of aim and economy of motion. No wasteful flourishes or pointless posturing. Arrows were drawn, nocked, and loosed in a single, fluid motion. She was not unworthy to draw bow beside the Dalish, and that, Loghain believed, was praise enough for any archer. Then the surviving hurlocks rushed them.

It was nasty, brutish, and short. Darkspawn took a lot of killing, but that was just what the scouting party was able to deal out. An ogre lumbered toward them, bringing up the rear, and was blinded and stumbling by the time he met the party's swords and axes. Anders and Keili moved in, healing any wounds or injuries immediately.

"Alistair!" Carver yelled, pointing triumphantly to a tiny flask. "I got that vial of darkspawn blood you wanted!"

Alistair, Anders, and Leliana facepalmed simultaneously.

Loghain hid his smirk. Leliana hurried over to scold the boy.

"He's Joining *tonight*," Alistair muttered to Anders. The mage nodded, with a wry smile.

No one else had noticed Carver's indiscretion. "Are these darkspawn an isolated band," wondered Lord Ronus, "or are they an advance guard?"

"I wish we could see past those hills," Alistair complained, pointing to the north. "I suppose we'll just have to go there."

Loghain frowned. They were in a sound, defensible position here, and would not be further on, on the treacherous marshes. While he was considering it, Anders whispered in Alistair's ear.

"What? Well, why didn't you tell us this *before*?" Alistair bit his lip and approached Loghain, lowering his voice. "My lord, I need to tell you something...privately."

Loghain watched the tall mage fidget and make faces. He stepped aside with Alistair, and gave him a sharp nod.

"We can get a scout past the hills pretty fast. It appears..." Alistair's tone grew biting, "...that Morrigan is not the only shape-shifter among the Wardens. Anders says he can do a raven. It's how he and Morrigan got into the Circle Tower to steal Flemeth's grimoire. But he doesn't want anybody else to know."

Anders responded to Loghain's suspicious glare with a light-hearted shrug, and an innocent, "*Well, what can I say?*" spreading of his hands.

Loghain jerked his head at the crumbling outpost. "Get him out of sight and let him do it."

While the archers were collecting their arrows and the warriors were wiping their blades, a large black bird rose from behind them and winged swiftly to the northeast. Loghain furrowed his brow. Anders was an odd creature. No doubt he was right to keep such a skill to himself, for the Chantry labeled any magic that made it harder to control mages as "evil." In this case, it was extremely useful, and Loghain refined his idea of a mage in every unit in the army to include shape-shifting scouts. There were too many times he could have used a bird's-eye view before going into battle. He had never had the least desire to be a mage, himself, but this one ability would be...intriguing.

A heady thrill of magic shivered over his skin. It was that *girl* again.

Alistair took his whetstone to his blade, wanting to fill up the time until Anders returned. Things were not going so badly. Teyrn Loghain seemed to think well of his swordsmanship, and had not said anything critical about the Wardens' party. He had even unbent a bit, and told him a story about his father—of course, without actually saying that Maric was his father.

What would it have been like, if the King had acknowledged him, and had brought him to live in the Palace? Teyrn Loghain would have been a fixture from his earliest years. Like an uncle...sort of. What would it have been like to grow up in comfort, taught by the best tutors, studying Orlesian and Arcanum, and learning about border disputes and trade agreements; and all the rest of the things that made his head ache just to think of? Would he even have been the same person? Would he have become someone convinced he had the right to treat people however he liked? A man like...Bann Vaughan...or really, like his brother sometimes.

Probably. Maybe. It was hard to say. Not all nobles were noble. On the other hand, some of them were. Nor were all oppressed elves thieves, nor all dwarves greedy. Maybe he would have been the same Alistair, only with better clothes.

Carver had finished his bread and hard cheese and was coming over, with that *look* in his eye.

"Really." Carver whispered. "What was it like, growing up in a real *castle*?"

"Wait until Bronwyn gets back," Alistair advised. "You can ask *her* what it's like to grow up in a real *castle*. I lived in the stables. It was nice and warm there."

"But—"

"Carver," Alistair said kindly, "I'm a *bastard*. You do understand what that means? It means that nobody wants to

be embarrassed by having you around. I lived in the stables, and when I was old enough, I was sent to the Chantry, where I was taught to read and write, because nobody could be bothered before then. Then, by great good fortune, I was recruited into the Grey Wardens over the Grand Cleric's protests. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, I kid you not."

"But if Arl Eamon was your fath—"

Alistair cut him off. "Not talking about this with you. Not now, not ever. Conversation over. I think you need to go stand over there by Sten now. This is your Senior Warden talking."

"Oh. All *right*."

To his dismay, Teyrn Loghain was looking at him. Frowning, as usual. The Teyrn beckoned him over, and Alistair went, mentally dragging his feet, hoping that Loghain was not going to want to talk about his questionable birth.

He, of course, was not that lucky.

"The stables? Really?"

Alistair made his face bland and inquiring. "Why not, my lord? I made myself useful there, and only annoyed the Arlessa a few times a day, instead of constantly."

"I don't think that Maric intended—" Loghain paused, seeing something hardening in the young man's face. He spoke more

quietly. "Even if your mother was a servant, Eamon should have—"

"She's not a *servant*," Alistair interrupted, sudden anger boiling over, remembering the looks, the jokes, the filthy names the boys had called him, the things they had called his mother... "My father kept her a secret too. Even a *servant* would be better than an elf, a mage, an Orlesian... and a Grey Warden."

Loghain stared at him blankly, and then realization struck the older man. There had been a young woman along on Maric's lunatic outing to the Deep Roads over twenty years ago. "Of course! The elf! I should have known..." He looked at Alistair, as if seeing him for the first time. "You said 'she's not a servant.' Are you saying your mother is still alive?"

His voice just for the Teyrn's ears, Alistair took the plunge and said, "When Warden Riordan came to warn us that the Orlesians were trying to kidnap us, Fiona—my mother—was with him. She didn't tell me she was my mother until later: she said Bronwyn figured it out and talked her into confessing. I'm awfully glad she did. It made it better to know that I wasn't—that my father hadn't—oh, Maker, I was glad to know that my father hadn't raped my mother or even just bullied her into submitting. I know about nobles and servant girls. I've seen it from the servants' side, and the thought made me sick. Anyway," he said hurriedly, his courage and anger failing at Loghain's expression, "it was the greatest thing in the world to meet my mother. The Wardens made her give me up. She didn't want to, but she didn't have a choice. If she didn't do

what the Wardens wanted, she would have been forced back to the Circle and then I would have been dumped on the Chantry's doorstep. So Duncan helped her and she brought me to...my father. And he sent me to Arl Eamon. She didn't mean for me to grow up in a stable either, but it's fine now. It all worked out for the best. I'm a Warden, after all."

Loghain took a breath. And another. It was oddly painful that Maric's son looked upon being a Warden as the best possible outcome for him. "Maric would never have forced himself on a woman. He never had to. He was *charming*..." He could see that the boy was unconvinced.

"Lots of nobles think they're '*charming*,' my lord," Alistair shot back. "Probably Bann Vaughan thinks he's '*charming*,' too. I can tell you that something you never want is to be the only man in a room with four women when one of them is talking about what Bann Vaughan did to her. I thought they'd skin me alive. But that doesn't matter. My father and mother cared about each other, even if only for a little while. She cared enough about me that she didn't want me to be a prisoner of the Orlesians."

"Not a very loyal Orlesian, then," Loghain remarked.

"She's a Warden, my lord," Alistair said, "and besides, from what she told me, mages and elves have no particular reason to think Orlais is all that wonderful."

At last Bronwyn's curious adventure at the Orlesian border made sense to Loghain. She and Alistair had been saved, not

by the fabled Grey Warden brotherhood, but by the boy's mother. Loghain struggled to remember the young mage's face. An elf with short-cropped hair was all he could come up with. Most elves were good-looking, and she would have been the only young woman Maric would have seen for over a month. They would have bonded over deadly danger in the Deep Roads. For Maric, that would have been more than enough.

"Look!" Alistair whispered urgently, "It's Anders!"

Out of the northeast winged a sharp-edged shadow, black against the sky. Loghain was annoyed that this interesting conversation was at an end... for now. He was not sure what to make of this personable young warrior: this unacknowledged prince. If the day came when Cailan had to be deposed, would Alistair be a suitable candidate to take the throne? Nothing indicated that he had the least interest in being king. And he was, after all, the son of an elf, a mage, an Orlesian, and a Grey Warden. But he was also a son of Maric.

Anders made his discreet appearance from the shadows of the outpost, and Loghain and Alistair talked to him for some time. The mage had seen a great deal of interest and was provided with parchment and sharpened charcoal. Soon he was busily sketching the vast cavity he had seen.

"And I saw more than the one opening," he told them. "There are two others within a few leagues of each other. They're smaller, but the darkspawn are out there working on widening

them. There's also a lot of movement to the east that we might need to check out."

They would have a few days' work before them, Loghain decided. It might be possible to thwart the darkspawn by destroying or damaging their access points. However, they must be cautious. His fear had been that the darkspawn had found Ostagar too well defended, and had decided to erupt somewhere else, like Gwaren or South Reach or a few miles from Denerim: some place where no one was prepared for them. He needed to sit down with the dwarves and study their maps of the Deep Roads at greater length, and place lookouts at vulnerable spots, where the darkspawn might most easily tunnel up to the surface. It might even be possible in future to lure a large force out of the Wilds, and destroy the darkspawn piecemeal. Anything that would weaken the Archdemon when it eventually made its appearance was very much to be desired.

Adaia funneled the sticky, sharp-smelling fluid into the flasks on her worktable. Afternoon light slanted through the windows of the workshop, and glittered through the brightly-colored, noxious liquids Adaia worked with.

Dworkin Glavonak, the dwarves' mad inventor, nodded approvingly. "A nice steady hand, lass. Like me." He grinned maniacally, sifting powdered lyrium onto a silverite tray. His lips moved as he counted to himself. Adaia had learned to tune him out. Dworkin always talked to himself. He came over and peered at her ingredients. "Enough for another batch. Try

more madcap this time. A quarter-weight."

He went back to his own task, muttering happily to himself. Adaia found it very peaceful here. It was quiet at the Tower, too, since Alistair had taken some of the others and gone scouting with Teyrn Loghain. Adaia felt not the least regret in not being asked to go with them. She felt like a fish out of water in the Wilds.

There was a knock at the door.

"Get the door, lass."

A young elf boy was there, pert and restless. "Message for Master Glavonak. Arl Bryland needs to see you right away!"

"I'm busy!" Glavonak shrugged, "Sod all nobles anyway..."

"He really wants to see you," the boy insisted. "Something's gone wrong with one of the engines, and he needs you to figure it out."

"Ha!" cackled Dworkin. "Didn't he ask that smooth-talking brother of mine? I'll show him who the Master Engineer is!" He dithered a little longer over his mortar and pestle and scales, distracted by his work.

"Master!" the boy reminded him of his presence. "Arl Bryland!"

"All in good time..." Dworkin continued working, making notes and humming to himself. Adaia smirked. He was a funny fellow, but he had been kind to her, and had no more love for

nobles than she herself. He had some very good ideas about protecting oneself too, and Adaia felt safer already. Arl Bryland could go hang, for all she cared. Virtuously, she went back to work on her acid bombs. Some of the flasks were smaller and rounder. She worked with those, filling them carefully with the compound, enjoying the sound of Dworkin's humming.

Time passed, and the boy fidgeted anxiously. Adaia felt a little sorry for him. He was probably expecting coin for delivering the message—and Master Dworkin—to the Arl.

"Maybe you'd better go, Master," she urged. "We don't need Arl Bryland angry with us."

"Hmph," he scoffed. "*Nobles*. They're the same everywhere!" Reluctantly, he set his mortar and pestle aside. "I shan't be long." He followed the boy out, still humming.

Adaia went back to work, frowning over her flasks. The simmering kettles kept the workshop pleasantly warm. She was so focused that she hardly heard the soft step, coming closer; or the creak of a leather-clad arm coming up behind her...

She could still put up a fight, even though there were two of them. Acid pooled on the floor from the broken flasks: acrid fumes dispersed throughout the room. They pinned her arms and gagged her, but she kicked back at an attacker's knee. He grunted at the sharp pain, and his fist smashed into the

side of her head, stunning her briefly.

"I'll kill you, knife-eared bitch!"

"Quiet!" Jonaley hissed at the unlucky Braden. "Quick! Wrap her up in this, and we'll throw her over the horse!"

Adaia spat furiously as the length of coarse sacking descended over her. They bundled her up in it, half-smothering her. She could see light, a dirty brownish yellow, as she blinked against the bristling fibers, but she was disoriented, hardly knowing where they were carrying her. The gag stuffed in her mouth was nasty. She bit at it, raging and fearful.

The air changed: she was outside, and tried to make some sort of noise. Abruptly, she was lifted up and flung over the back of a horse, her nose crunching against the flanks, cushioned only by her shroud-like wrappings. She struggled, futilely trying to wriggle off. The two young noblemen were laughing, excited and sly, like boys doing something they know could get them into trouble.

"Hurry up!" Jonaley complained, as Braden looped a rope under her and tied her to the saddle. The rope dug into her arm painfully. She would be badly bruised when they let her off the horse.

They were leaving Ostagar. They galloped out, shouting and hallooing at the guard like the drunken, bumptious wastrels they were. It must be the south gate, for Adaia would have

recognized the sound of shod hooves on the bridge spanning Ostagar Gorge. No. They were heading south, into the high forest.

Her mind raced as she bumped and flailed, slipping back and forth, tugged and yanked by the rope binding her. The horse was galloping on earth now, not stone. She must find a way to escape them or to fight them or to stop them. Master Dworkin would return to find her gone. He knew she was supposed to wait for a Warden to escort her, but he might think she had stepped out to the latrine, or that Brosca had come for her earlier than usual. Yes, it was Brosca's turn this afternoon, and surely she wouldn't be late. When she found Adaia gone, she would give the alarm.

But that would be too late. She could not expect people to save her. No one had ever saved her. It was save herself or nothing.

All too soon, Braden was reining the horse in, and the dreaded voice of Vaughan was greeting his friends, smug and full of anticipation.

"Ha! You've got her! I've been waiting at least an hour!"

"You'll enjoy your present the more, Vaughan!" Jonaley called back. A few slashes with a belt knife, and Adaia was shoved roughly from the horse.

"And now you get to unwrap it!" laughed Braden.

He was using a knife. He was using a knife, and he was not being very careful with it. Adaia hissed as the blade slid along her leather armor, and she gave deep thanks to Bronwyn for finding armor for her and making her wear it. If she had to put up a fight, it might save her life.

The next few minutes were as ugly as she had always imagined they would be. The sacking was ripped away from her head, and her heart nearly failed her at the sight of Vaughan's gloating, fleshy face. Her expression must have displeased him.

"Doesn't know her place, does she?" he sneered, hauling her to her feet. He backhanded Adaia casually, saying, "You look as ugly as a three-copper whore, knife-ears. And that's more than you're worth. Get over here..."

They were in a clearing, surrounding by trees on three sides, backed up to the side of a hill. She searched the landscape desperately, looking for options. A foot was out to trip her. She went down, heels of her hands burning as they scraped across the stony ground. The men kicked at her, joking among themselves, as if she were not a living being at all, but a toy to be played with.

"We'll bend her over that," Vaughan declared, gesturing vaguely. "I chose it just for her."

Adaia glanced up quickly. They were kicking her toward a fallen tree.

"We can tie her hands behind her if she makes too much trouble," suggested Braden.

Adaia knew that once they bound her, she was as good as dead.

"I want that armor off her," Vaughan said. "Too good for a tart like her."

"She won't be needing it anyway," Jonaley agreed, nudging her between her legs with his boot. "Move along there, whore. No high-born lady to protect you now."

"She won't even know what happened to you," Vaughan assured her suavely. "Poor Bronwyn will realize that she was taken in by a little knife-eared ingrate who ran away the first chance she had."

Sickened, Adaia knew they had been waiting for this chance. Bronwyn had gone north; half her friends had gone with Teyrn Loghain. Would anyone even come looking for her?

"I brought some wine," Braden remembered, heading back to his horse. "Wait for me."

Adaia moved quickly, with a swift crabwise motion, ignoring the pain in her arm. She needed to get her feet under her and run. Braden was moving away, and when he came back with the wine they would be distracted...

"Wait..." Braden called, bottle in hand. The other two men

stopped their sport for moment to look his way. The young nobleman asked, "Did you hear that?"

A pause. "What?" Vaughan snapped, annoyed at the delay.

Glass exploded, shards glittering in the mild southern sun. Wine splashed like blood, spattering Braden's fine doublet. Everyone froze. The heavy arrow went on, thudding into the underbrush.

A harsh chuckle echoed off the hills: a gloating *ha-ha-ha* that Adaia recognized in an instant of pure panic.

"Darkspawn!" she shrieked. The horses, smelling the foulness, reared and screamed. More arrows whizzed past. Adaia glimpsed Vaughan's face: a comical mixture of outrage and terror. He was looking this way and that, probably for men to order to protect him. There was no one but himself, his two drunken friends, and a battered elf girl.

Who was running, just as fast as she could. Between the shouts of the men and the screams of the horses, the darkspawn had no time for her at all. In the distance, she could see the Tower of Ishal, and she fixed her will on it, hurdling a log, her feet hardly seeming to touch the ground. The screams and shouts and chuckles faded, blending into the bird-calls of the forest. Adaia ran on.

Vaughan hacked desperately at the huge hurlock. They were supposed to be safe, here at Ostagar. The darkspawn had

been quiet for days. What had gone wrong?

A shattering blow stunned his arm, and his sword fell, sticking point first into the ground. Vaughan gaped at the sight, and it seemed at first that it would be easy to pick it up again, until he looked again and saw bright blood pumping from the stump of his wrist. He shrieked in disbelief.

"Braden! Help me! Jonaley!"

Braden, eyes open and glazed, sagged against a whitewood tree, nailed there by a sword.

More arrows hummed past Vaughan's ear, like angry wasps. One was sticking out of Jonaley's mouth. Redder than wine, blood spurted under his bulging eyes. A tottering, swaying moment, and a genlock rushed up and bowled Jonaley over, squealing as it buried a pair of daggers in the young man's belly.

Vaughan staggered, looking desperately for help. He croaked a last defiance as the grinning hurlock reached back for the beheading stroke.

"Don't you know...who...I am?"

The head struck the ground, bounced twice, and then rolled some distance before the hurlock claimed it. The hunting party finished killing the horses, while the hurlock took a moment to display its trophy on a sharpened stick.

Adaia picked herself up from another fall. She had rolled down a hill, scratching herself in some rashvine bushes. The Tower looked bigger now. Longing for something to drink, she set off again, eyes seeking out the best and quickest path. She must have run miles by now. What would happen to her when she got back? Would she be accused of murdering Vaughan, or at the least, of luring him to his death?

She ran through a stand of dragonthorn, twisting among the gnarled trunks, afraid every moment of hearing darkspawn on her trail. Her breath sobbed in her ears. She had never run so far in her life. How could she, when the world was measured by the length of one filthy alley?

Among the trees, she lost track of her beacon: the Tower of Ishal. She prayed to any listening god, shemlen or elven, that she was not running directly back to the darkspawn.

Another clearing. She ran through the dappled light, remembering the taste of water. Her feet were growing heavy, and now crushed the verdure underfoot with hissing little thuds.

"Adaia!"

The elf left the ground in fright, trying to double back in the air until she saw who was grabbing at her, holding her straight...

"Brosca!"

The dwarf girl was there, face murderous. Behind her was

Cullen, frowning and concerned, and Oghren, puffing with effort. Morrigan looked amused.

"You see? 'Twas nothing after all! She made fools of fools. How unsurprising."

Two Dalish trackers leaned on their bows, watching the scene with mild curiosity.

"Stone save us!" the dwarf girl huffed. "You're hurt! I'll kill that bastard!"

Adaia began laughing. "Get in line," she gasped, breathless. "Behind the darkspawn." She guzzled from the canteen Cullen offered her. Water was the Maker's gift.

"Darkspawn?" Cullen asked urgently.

"Up in the hills," Adaia told him, slurping. "They took me up there for their sport, and the darkspawn spoiled their fun. They might be still fighting them, for all I know. I ran."

Morrigan laughed lightly. "And now," she said, "we shall track them and attempt to save their worthless lives. Sadly, I believe, we shall be too late. 'Twould be best, I think, if our little elf's name were not mixed up in the story."

Cullen bit his lip. "That might be possible. Brosca already told Dworkin to keep quiet about the trick." He looked at the Dalish. "This is a secret matter,"

The elder of the two Dalish elves shrugged. "As you wish,

Warden. We are pleased to find the *asha* alive."

"What trick?" Adaia asked, realizing that her legs hurt. She bent down to rub them, but her boots were in the way. It would be wonderful to take them off and soak her feet.

Brosca said, "Dworkin figured it out right away when he discovered that Arl Bryland never called for him. When you weren't in the workshop and he saw there had been a struggle, he came to us. And here we are. Let's go find those bastards. How many darkspawn?"

"I didn't stay to count them. Maybe eight? Nine? A big hurlock and at least two or three archers."

"We should go and check on it. Try to clear them out." Cullen thought a little more, and asked the Dalish, "Could one of you help her back to the Tower? And then tell Master Dworkin she's all right?"

"I can," said one. "And then I shall follow you to find the darkspawn."

The camp was shocked to hear of the death of Bann Vaughan and his boon companions, Lords Braden and Jonaley. Leonas Bryland was particularly stunned by the loss. He had not liked Vaughan, and he had liked him even less as he had come to know him better, here in Ostagar; but Vaughan had been his prospective son-in-law, and Habren had *fancied* him. It was a setback, certainly. At least the Wardens had tracked down

and destroyed the band of darkspawn stragglers that had killed the young noblemen.

Why they were out in the Wilds in the first place was even more problematic. Their clothes reeked of wine. Why would they go somewhere so remote and perilous, when they could get as drunk as they pleased right in camp? Whispers raged that the dead men had been up to some sort of depraved orgy, "all *three* of them, you see, and that was why they had needed *privacy*."

Bryland sighed deeply, disgusted by the rumors; and prepared quill and ink to write a letter that would sadly disappoint his daughter.

The Wardens and their allies discussed it thoroughly when Alistair's party returned to Ostagar three days later. It was as exciting as finding the source of the darkspawn, as exciting as Carver's new status as a bonafide Warden. His Joining had gone well, and he had now learned what he could and could not talk about in public.

Carver was glad that Adaia was safe, of course, but was much more interested in his own situation. Yes, the dreams were horrible and the darkspawn blood tasted worse than anything in the world, but he was a Warden now, and he *belonged*. He had done something that Adam had never even dreamed of.

"So, how about it?" he asked Alistair eagerly. "Could I go

home for a day or two and talk to my family? Can I wear your Warden tunic, Alistair? I wish somebody would talk to them, and make them see that it's mad to run away."

"Bronwyn's really good at talking people into things," Alistair considered, "but she's not here. Of course, a bard might be able to help..."

Everyone's eyes turned to Leliana. She gave Carver a warm smile. "I would be happy to go with you, Carver, but I can promise nothing. If your mother is homesick for her childhood home, that is not something to be reasoned away."

"Just try," Carver pleaded. "And it would be great to have you along." Maybe his mother would think he and Leliana were... well... Leliana was *gorgeous*. And refined. Even Adam would be impressed by Leliana. "Anyway, I should get them some presents before we go. I'll go see the quartermaster right away. Maybe you could come with me and help me pick out something? Could we leave in the morning?"

"Of course. It will be very interesting, going to Lothering again. We shall call on your family and then on the Revered Mother."

"Before you go anywhere, Carver," Alistair said, "We have to be united about Adaia's situation. We're not telling anybody what we know about Vaughan's death, except for Bronwyn. She needs to know."

No one disagreed with that. Carver nodded, impatient to be at

his shopping. Leliana patted his hand.

Adaia asked, uncertain, "She won't be mad at me, will she?"

"Course not!" Brosca said stoutly. "She'll be glad you're such a good runner. Bastard had it coming."

Sten could not hide his contempt for human inheritance customs. "The man was unfit for command, and has been removed by his own stupidity. That is as it should be."

Oghren chuckled, "Aye. No one here is going to talk. Blighter was asking for it, just like Brosca says."

"What should I get my mother and sister?" Carver asked Leliana. "I suppose I should get them something practical for a journey, but I don't want to encourage them to go. And I don't want to get them something that they can't take with them, in case they *do* go."

"Jewelry is practical in its own way," Leliana advised. "If your funds do not run to gold, silver is always pretty. In a crisis it can be used as money. It is portable, so it can be taken anywhere, or simply worn at home."

They were not the only ones seeking out the quartermaster. A group of Dalish elves were there, dickering with the man. The quartermaster had little experience dealing with elves as customers, other than the odd Warden or two. If he made himself think of these elves as more Wardens, it was not so

uncomfortable.

Leliana smiled brightly at the pretty elf woman gazing dreamily at some blue linen, and then realized that this was their leader.

"Keeper Merrill. Good day to you. It's pretty, isn't it?" she asked, pointing at the cloth. "Blue is my favorite color."

"I love blue," Merrill agreed. "All sorts of blue. No," she said to the quartermaster. "I'm not going to buy it. I just want to look at it. Unless someone else wants to buy it, and then it won't be here anymore. That's the point, I suppose. Oh, well. Perhaps I shall, after all. I can hang it from the ceiling of my aravel and it will look like a blue sky..."

"A charming idea," Leliana approved. "Carver, that silver bracelet is nice. Perhaps for your sister...?"

Merrill turned to Leliana, and, apropos of nothing, asked, "Do you think we'll win?"

Nonplussed, Leliana hesitated. "Win? Against the darkspawn?" She paused, and then said firmly. "Yes. We shall win. Sooner or later, the Blights are always overcome. We shall defeat the darkspawn, just as our ancestors did; for good always triumphs over evil."

"That's very comforting," Merrill considered. "Very comforting, indeed. The darkspawn are certainly evil. The question, as I see it, is: are we good?" She gathered the lengths of sky-blue

linen to her shallow bosom. "Oh, yes, thank you, Quartermaster. I get coins back? That's very nice." She gazed past Leliana's head, and her smooth brow contracting minutely. "Oh, Creators..."

"Keeper Merrill!" A young knight bowed to her, "The King requests the honor of your presence in his tent!"

"That's very kind of him. He has nice wine." She drifted away in the direction of the royal enclave.

Carver and Leliana caught each other's eye. The Dalish, however, were unperturbed. "The Keeper is well able to protect herself," said one. "The shemlen king will get a surprise if he is overbold."

Of course, Bann Vaughan's death was not soon forgotten, and there were those who were capable of putting facts together. Alistair was called to Loghain's quarters the following morning, after the departure of Carver and Leliana, and to his surprise found himself alone, facing the Teyrn.

"What do you know about the death of Bann Vaughan?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, my lord," Alistair said cautiously, falling back on his childhood ploy of looking innocent and stupid.

That ploy was useless with Loghain, who had raised Anora. "Hmm. Let's see: a nobleman and his friends are found dead

by the Wardens. They were up in the hills, drinking wine, not even wearing *armor*. There is something missing from this picture, don't you think?"

Alistair's face hardened. "The darkspawn killed Vaughan and his friends, not the Wardens."

"I'm not accusing them of killing Vaughan. It's clear that something else was involved. Where's that elf girl? Shall I have her join us?"

"No!" Alistair said sharply. "She's suffered enough!" He glared at Loghain, made brave by indignation. "There's no need to drag her into this. I suppose people would accuse her of *forcing* Vaughan's friends to sneak up on her when she was alone in the workshop, and *making* them attack her and kidnap her against her will, and tying her to the back of a horse, and cruelly *ordering* them to take her up to the hills so they could do what they liked. Or they'd blame her for not saving Vaughan's life when the darkspawn attacked, and for running away instead." He took a breath, hot and flushed.

Loghain look at the boy calmly. He really was terribly easy to manipulate. He might not defend himself, but he would strike back when his friends were attacked, or his mother was insulted.

"That's what I needed to know. Was the girl badly injured?"

Grudgingly, embarrassed that Loghain had so easily got him to spill everything, Alistair said, "Not so she couldn't run. They

hadn't got far with her when the darkspawn showed up."

"I see. Keep her out of the public eye, won't you?"

"Er...sure. Right."

"Good. Enough of that. We have work to do." He spread out the map of Ostagar and the Wilds, and the two men were soon engrossed in planning.

Thanks to my reviewers: Josie Lange, demonichargles, nataliexo, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, almostinsane, phoenixandashes, Menamebephil, Zeeji, draconous, Shakespeira, Zute, chocolatebrownie12, Remenants, Costin, JackOfBladesX, Dante Alighieri1308, Lehni, RakeeshJ4, The Moidart, cloud1004, mille libri, callalili, Have Socks Will Travel, Enaid Aderyn, Jyggilag, Judy, Jeen53, Blinded in a bolthole, mutive, BlackCherryWhiskey, Eva Galana, Gene Dark, Angurvddel and fangirl42.

40. Queen of Schemes, Queen of Swords

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 40: Queen of Schemes, Queen of Swords

Jowan wondered if he would have had better luck in the mages' library at the Circle Tower. The royal library had a number of books about Nevarra, but they were mostly political histories. He might learn quite a bit about the powerful Pentaghast clan, but not about how they had actually killed dragons.

That was how the Pentaghasts had made their vast fortune: by leading campaigns, Jowan read, against the dragons. While the campaign rhetoric was rich with fulminations against the dangers of the creatures posed, it appeared the hunters were doing it mostly for gold and glory. Dragonbone was immensely valuable, and was recycled and reprocessed from owner to owner, generation to generation. Later references in the book seemed to indicate that dragons had once again become a threat along the Orlesian-Nevarran border, and no one seemed to be having much luck against them.

Were dragons making a resurgence? It would certainly seem so. The Divine had named their own age the "Dragon" due to an unexpected sighting after a long period in which dragons

had been thought extinct. Jowan pondered the matter, sitting in the pleasantly quiet room, dust motes dancing in the light slanting down from high windows. The place reminded him a little of the Circle, but was better appointed and better lit. The tables were not defaced with hundreds of years of graffiti carved into them, and Jowan occupied a comfortable chair, rather than a hard, wobbly bench. The librarian was polite and helpful to the Warden, and had heaped a stack of books about Nevarra at Jowan's elbow.

Maybe he should read more about the border issue. The Nevarrans and Orlesians were at odds, and had been for hundreds of years. In fact, you could almost say that Orlais had invaded Ferelden in order to bolster its eastern strength, while the north was under attack by Nevarran encroachment. The Bannorn was famously fertile country, and the Orlesians had wanted the Fereldan breadbasket to support their troops. Over the past few hundred years, the Nevarrans had built quite a coalition in the western Marches. Everyone there hated the Orlesians. According to this book, the Nevarrans had recently taken yet another city, Perendale, from the Orlesians. Jowan checked the date of publication. Well, 'recently' meant eight years ago.

At any rate, something was up with the dragons. Jowan flipped through the pages to the later chapters, looking for anything referring to them. Yes. Something was definitely up. It looked like there had been attacks in the countryside both in Nevarra and in Orlais, and attempts to put the dragons down had met with disaster. Did the Queen know about this? Was

this why the Orlesians had made peace with Fereldan after the Rebellion was successful? Maybe between the Nevarrans and the dragons, not even wealthy Orlais could manage yet another war.

Flemeth had not been a real dragon, of course: just a shape-shifting mage. And yet...he fidgeted in the polished chair, biting his lip. Shape-shifters supposedly reverted to their true shape after death. Flemeth had not. A huge dragon corpse had sprawled out on the little hill where Flemeth died. Teyrn Loghain was having it methodically stripped of everything useful: bone, scales, hide—especially the precious wing hide—tendons, fire glands—everything, really. It was gruesome, considering that it had once been a woman, but Teyrn Loghain was a ruthless man. And a thrifty one. Fresh dragonbone was very nearly priceless. Why had Flemeth not reverted to human form? It was a puzzlement.

He picked up another book, thinking it over. The word "*campaign*" struck him. Calling the efforts of the dragon hunters "campaigns" made it sound like there were significant forces involved. More than fifty people had taken part in the killing of Flemeth, and that had not felt like too many. A lot of them had been archers, and their arrows did not seem to have done a great deal of good, but people were already discussing new poisons and exploding arrowheads. If there had been darkspawn there, or—Maker save them!—another dragon on the scene, they would have been in serious trouble. And not many people would jump on a dragon's back, unlike Bronwyn Cousland, who would, and had.

The mages had done much better than the archers. Jowan smiled faintly, feeling pride in the accomplishment. He suspected that enough mages, working together, might be able to bring down a dragon on their own. But it would take a *lot* of mages, and the Chantry did not like the idea of mages associating in large numbers, especially when curses were being cast. The College of Magi occasionally met in Cumberland. These conferences were attended by only Chantry-approved, elderly enchanter, and at that, they were heavily policed by Templars. Only a Blight could have produced the mob of battlemages down at Ostagar. Jowan wondered how many would find a way to escape the Templars and live as apostates, when the Blight was over and won.

Every single one of them, he hoped fiercely.

He had been crazy and reckless, but escaping the Circle had been the right thing to do. Beyond all expectations, he still had Tara, his best and oldest friend. Anders was treating him decently, as long as the issue of Blood Magic was never mentioned. Morrigan was no more scornful of Jowan than she was of nearly everyone else. He had been fantastically lucky that Bronwyn had allowed him to join the Wardens. And she never watched him, or made him feel like a monster. The Wardens, henceforth, would be his home. And the Warden compound was hands down the best home he had ever known.

He skimmed through the book in his hands. *War with Orlais...*

mighty Pentagast clan... 'a family built on dragonbone'.... the deeds of King Tylus... Nothing new here. Heaps of genealogical charts, and capsule biographies of the kings and queens. He yawned, and picked up the next volume.

Tara, Danith, and Zevran made it to the Alienage without difficulty. A few people looked at them askance, but the guards recognized the Grey Warden insignia. Others on the street simply looked away in disgust, muttering that "knife ears should be locked up with their own kind." The walk was not a long one, along the broad King's Way. The tall, imposing homes of the wealthy and noble lined the route. Tara and Zevran amused themselves by speculating on the people who owned them, and debating which one would be the nicest to live in. Danith shuddered at the thought of living anywhere in this city on a permanent basis.

The guard at the Alienage gate gave them a hard stare, but let them pass. It offended his sensibilities to see armed elves without arresting them, but two of them were wearing those griffon tunics.

"Grey Wardens, eh? They take all sorts," he grunted. "Get on with you, then."

Tara smiled charmingly at him.

They passed through, and immediately the stink of the city, already strong, nearly knocked them down. There could not have been a greater contrast to the mansions they had

passed. Here, a confusion of random boards were discovered to be houses, so precariously assembled that it seemed that they might collapse at any moment. There was no logic or order to the place: walls poked out at crazy angles, roofs rose and slumped away.

"Well," Tara sighed, "I knew that elves were poor. I suppose I didn't quite understand what that really meant. It's better than Dust Town, Danith. The casteless among the dwarves don't even have the sun and the sky!"

"I thank the Creators that I have never seen that place," Danith said briefly, "though I am told that I shall, someday. It is difficult to conceive of anything more foul than this!"

"Within their own houses, however humble," Zevran countered her, "they are free. I think that is better than to be a slave, in however luxurious a Palace—or whorehouse," he muttered to himself.

Danith stalked over to a rancid pile of offal cast carelessly under a window. "It is not a matter of only two choices," she said coldly. "Freedom is always best, even the freedom to starve and die, but must they live like *this*? Have they no dignity? No pride?"

"That I cannot tell you, my halla," Zevran smiled. "I know even less of alienages than I do of the forest."

A gust of wind stirred the rubbish in a lazy whirlwind. It died away, and the alley was silent.

"Where is everyone?" wondered Tara. "I thought the Alienage was supposed to be crowded."

Zevran frowned. He had been wondering the same thing. This place was *wrong*. He murmured, "The people are inside. They are watching us. I feel their gaze. We are a frightening trio, are we not?"

Danith pushed on, scowling. Elves lived here? It seemed impossible that anything could live in this place, but no, behind one of the hovels she caught the glimpse of something green—a little vegetable patch, struggling to grow amidst the dismal shadows.

The alley meandered on, grey and rotting. Beyond a projecting wall, it widened, and they turned the corner.

"Oh!" Danith cried out, involuntarily.

It spread its luxuriant boughs before her: tall, majestic, dark-green and rooted deep in the earth. It was a Vhenadah, the Tree of the People. It looked down on this filthy place, proclaiming that yes, elves lived here, however sad and degraded. Danith felt near to weeping.

"That's a beautiful tree," Tara observed innocently. "It's the biggest tree we've seen in all Denerim. At least they have that!"

"Yes," Danith repeated dully, "at least they have that..."

Zevran whispered the lore of the vhenadahl to Tara, or as much as he knew. Tara nodded thoughtfully. She wondered if she had been right to come here. Danith was so upset by it all...

"Pssst!" Someone hissed at them from the shadows. "Pssst!"

Danith frowned, peering closer. Zevran grinned. Tara said, "Hello, little girl!"

A pretty, dirty child of eight or nine peeked shyly at them. "You're going to get in trouble! You need to hide!"

Zevran and Danith glanced about them sharply. Tara asked, "Why? Why are we in trouble?"

"Don't you know anything?" The little girl pointed to a parchment nailed to a wall. "I can't read, but that says that elves can't carry weapons—especially swords. If the guards catch you, they can kill you right there and then!"

Zevran smiled winningly. "I see no guards. I see no one but ourselves. Where are the elves?"

"Mostly gone," the child told him frankly. "Gone away to find work. Valendrian and Shianni think they're silly."

"And you have not gone—because you are too young to work?" wondered Zevran.

"No. I can't go," the child said, "because I'm waiting for Mother. She's hasn't come back from Highever yet."

"What do you mean?" Danith asked sternly.

"Mother is Lady Landra's lady-in-waiting. Lady Landra is very generous, and gave Mother a beautiful dress to wear when she attends her. Mother put it on so I could see her in it. Only...Lady Landra doesn't like her ladies to have children, so Mother sent me to stay with relatives in Denerim. She used to send money, but I haven't heard from her in the longest time. But she's coming back: I know she is."

Tara whispered, "Maybe Bronwyn knows this Lady Landra."

Danith nodded, eyes fixed on the beautiful little child. How could elves neglect their own like this?

"We shall ask her. Where do you sleep, child?"

"The hahren lets me sleep at his house, now that the orphanage is empty. I have my own corner!" she said proudly.

"You have a *hahren*?" Danith asked, absolutely stunned. How could a proper hahren allow...all *this*?

"Yes," the child told them, glad to grant ignorant grownups her important knowledge. "Valendrian is the hahren. He's very nice. He understands about waiting for Mother."

"I would speak with this 'hahren' Valendrian," Danith declared, very grim.

"What is your name, little beauty?" Zevran asked the child.

"Amethyne. My mother is Iona. Have you seen her anywhere?"

"Alas, no," Zevran replied. "Let us introduce ourselves, and then visit your hahren. I am Zevran, this is Tara, and this is Danith of the Dalish. Tara and Danith are Grey Wardens, and I suspect your hahren would indeed like to talk to us, since we can give him news of Melian Tabris."

"He'll be upset to see you carrying weapons. He doesn't like it when elves get hurt, and you'll get hurt if the shems catch you."

"We're Grey Wardens." Tara smiled at her. "Do you see our special clothes? That means we're allowed. Let's go see Valendrian now."

The child slipped out of the shadows and took Tara by the hand. "All right, but if the shems come, I'm going to hide. I'm good at hiding. It doesn't say anything about Grey Wardens in the signs."

The signs were indeed posted at regular intervals and printed in black block letters. *"Elves found with swords will die upon them."*

Danith ripped one down and trampled it underfoot as they followed the child.

Tara went on with her gentle questioning. She was used to talking to the little apprentices of Circle, and realized that she

had missed being around children. "When your mother left for Highever, did she leave you with the...hahren?" She whispered to Danith, "What's a hahren?"

"An elder of the people. One who is considered...." She forced out the word as if it tasted sour. "wise."

Amethyne was already answering, "No. I stayed with Maranni and Lodor, but when they left to find work, the hahren said I couldn't go, because I had to wait for Mother. So then I went to the orphanage, and that was nice because I had lots of friends; but one night big shems came, and they took everyone—grownups and children and all. I hid under my bed and made myself as small as I could. In the morning, I was the only one left. That's when the hahren took me to his house. We took my bed from the orphanage and put it in my special corner, and I've been there ever since." She pointed. "There's the house!"

It was in a place where the alley bent and widened, and was just opposite the great and shady vhenadahl.

"Ha!" laughed Zevran. "The privileges of leadership. The hahren has the only pleasant view in the Alienage!"

Danith put a gentle hand on the bark of the vhenadahl, thinking back on the history of the elves, grieving that it had come to this for so many of their people. With a frown, she followed Tara and Zevran to the house of Valendrian.

The child opened the door of the humble dwelling without

ceremony and called out, "Hahren! There are people to see you!"

He looked like a proper elf to Danith's eyes, though he wore the rough clothes of poor shemlens: his eyes wise and filled with the knowledge of the things that many years bring. The lined face brightened with pleasure at the sight of new elves for him to meet.

"You are most welcome!" the elderly elf said in a mild, low voice, worn by years of smoothing over the troubles of life in the Alienage. "I see that one of you at least is a cousin from the Dalish clans. And..." he looked again at Danith and Tara's tunics. "You...are Grey Wardens?" he asked, in awe. "That is a noble thing. May I know your names?"

With cool reserve, Danith said, "*Andaran antish'an*, hahren. I am Danith Mahariel of the clan of Marethari, now a Grey Warden."

"You are most welcome."

Zevran nodded with formal grace. "Zevran Aranai, late of Antiva. I am not a Grey Warden, but I have the honor to fight beside them." The hahren studied the handsome young elf, his fine armor and weapons, and his air of assurance with some perplexity. Perhaps things were very different in Antiva, but this young man was not much like any elf Valendrian had ever met.

"But *I'm* a Grey Warden!" Tara laughed. "Tara Surana,

formerly of the Fereldan Circle."

"Surana!" Valendrian repeated in surprise. He thought a moment. "...Tara...Surana? You have come home, child. I know your parents. They grieved deeply the day the Templars came to take you away. How happy they would be to know you are alive."

Tara's face fell. "Are they dead? I'm sorry, but I remember almost nothing. I was told I came from the Denerim Alienage, but I was just four years old when I went to the Circle, and that's pretty much all I remember."

"Your parents were not dead when they left to find work. That was two...no...three months ago. Tirian and Layli Surana, with their daughter Nessa."

Tara was amazed. "I have a sister? I have parents? That's so...wonderful! Tell me about them."

"They are good people. Tirian is a tireless worker, and Layli is a kind woman and a wonderful cook."

Zevran laughed, "That does not seem to have been passed down, alas."

"Oh, you!" She turned eagerly to Valendrian. "Tell me more please. Does Nessa look like me?"

"Your hair is darker, but there is a family resemblance. But come, let me offer you refreshment, and we shall talk in

comfort."

He led them to a simple but clean table, and while they seated themselves, he bustled around, with Amethyne's eager help. It did not take him long to bring them steaming tea in his best earthenware cups. It was flavored with elfroot leaves, and with it he served crisp sweet biscuits: the kind that would keep well, so he would always have something to offer guests.

He sat with them, with a weary old man's sigh but a ready smile. "So Tara Surana has returned home, bringing friends. This is a happy day. We must share this news with the people of the Alienage!"

Tara smiled back. He reminded her of some of the elven Senior Enchanters at the Circle.

Valendrian gestured at them to go ahead and eat. He said, still full of wonder, "And now you are a Grey Warden. Everyone will be proud to hear it. I knew Duncan. He came here from time to time, seeking out likely youths and maidens."

"It would be difficult to do any recruiting today," Zevran remarked. "There are fewer people of the Alienage than I expected."

"It is true. Word came of well-paying work to the north. It was done so secretly that I spoke against it. In my experience, when a thing is too good to be true, it really is. Many were too

desperate for to be reasoned with, however, and they listened to the humans. I told them they would do better to go south and serve the army, but they feared the darkspawn."

"Darkspawn are certainly something for a reasonable person to fear," Tara said easily, "but we have other news for you. Melian Tabris is with the Wardens in Ostagar. She uses the name Adaia, but she told us her real name."

Valendrian's eyes lit. "Melian is alive? That is wonderful news. I must tell her father, Cyrion. I must tell Shianni..."

"They have not gone after this 'well-paying work in the North?'" asked Zevran.

Valendrian shook his head. "Cyrion would not go while there was hope he would hear the fate of Melian. Shianni would not go, because Bann Vaughan had arranged for this mysterious 'work.' She fears anything to do with the man, and in this I believe she is right. At least the Bann is far away now, but—" His eyes widened in distress.

"Yes," Tara told him. "He saw Adaia—I mean Melian. He saw her and was very angry, and insisted that she be rendered to him for what he calls justice. Our commander, however, defied him, telling him that Grey Wardens were beyond his reach. There was a quarrel, which Teyrn Loghain seems to have resolved on the surface. Our commander ordered the Wardens in Ostagar never to leave Melian unescorted. We take care of our own."

"As should all elves everywhere," Valendrian agreed, very pleased with his visitors.

Danith was not so pleased. She rose and paced back and forth, peering about the little house. Simplicity she could not disparage. This house at least was clean, though the furnishings were poor and plain. She said, "Words are all very well, but it does not seem that elves are caring for one another *here!*" She whirled on Valendrian, scowling. "Why is there refuse in the streets? Even a savage shemlen disposes of his waste!"

Tara blushed for her friend and for the hurt look on Valendrian's face. The old man did not raise his voice, but spoke gently, as if to a child.

"Because it not the first, the tenth, nor the twentieth day of the month. Those are the days the contracted city crews come to haul away waste and nightsoil. Only the city crews, whose contract is held by the Bann of the Alienage, are permitted to haul and dispose of trash, and to carry nightsoil from the privies. It is sold as fertilizer to farmers outside the city, and a portion of the proceeds goes to the Bann. There are heavy penalties if an elf is caught dumping trash, either within the city or into the sea. A small amount of waste is used to fertilize our own gardens, but it must be done discreetly, lest the Bann's men destroy the plants as punishment."

Danith's eyes blazed, and she struck against the wall with her fist.

"That is monstrous!"

Valendrian gazed at her with compassion, having a lifetime of experience with angry young elves railing against the ways of the world.

"It seems unreasonable," Zevran agreed, smiling wryly, "for an elf to be punished for putting his own shit on his own garden. However, noblemen are not widely known for their reason."

"That is very true," said Valendrian, pleased to see that the young man was so level-headed. "However, it would be wrong to describe all shems—even all noblemen—as greedy and irrational. There are all kinds among them, as there are among elves."

"Like Bronwyn, our commander," Tara put in eagerly. "She's very fair and very generous with all us, whether human, dwarf, or elf. And she's noble. So is her brother, Teyrn Cousland. He's the one who stepped in to protect Melian. Afterwards we all agreed that Melian needed to get out of Denerim, since the Alienage was locked fast and we couldn't get her back in."

Valendrian gave her a nod. "I am glad Melian is with friends, no matter what their race. Amethyne," he called the little girl to him. "Do you know the house of Cyrion Tabris?"

A quick nod.

"Then," said the old man, "go to him and tell him to come at

once. We have good news of his daughter. If Shianni is there, bring her, too."

"Are you going to tell them to hide their swords?" Amethyne asked the hahren. "I warned them they'd get in trouble."

"No one is going to bother Grey Wardens," the old man assured her. "Now off you go to Cyrion."

When the child had gone, Valendrian remarked, "That is something of a falsehood. Many may not recognize your tunics, and there are those some who will always wish to bother an elf. However, the world is what it is." He smiled slowly. "Before Cyrion arrives, Tara, it may interest you to know that you and Melian Tabris are second cousins. Cyrion and your mother are first cousins. Shianni is also your second cousin. I can show you the records if you are interested."

"Oh, yes!" she said eagerly. "I'd love to know about my relatives! I've never had any before..."

"In the Alienage," Valendrian smiled ruefully, "we may lack many things, but we never lack family."

"Some do," Danith put in. "That child—Amethyne—is her mother dead?"

"I do not know," Valendrian admitted. "We heard of the terrible bloodshed at Highever, but no word has come of Iona, or from anyone in the Alienage, for that matter. I have attempted to get word to friends there, with no success. I

think it likely that she was killed, but while any hope remained, I could not permit the child to be taken to an unknown fate by Bann Vaughan's men."

"What about the children being taken from the orphanage?" Tara asked. "Why would they take them?"

Valendrian looked at her gravely. "I believe it is obvious that it would be for no good purpose. Amethyne was able to hide. The rest of the children and their caregivers were not so fortunate. It was done quietly, under cover of night. We did not even know they were gone until Cyrion went there the following day to perform some repair work, and found the place abandoned, but for that one child."

There was a bustle at the door, and a young woman called. "Hahren?"

Valendrian rose to lead his visitors in. "Cyrion...Shianni...we have wonderful news. Melian is alive and well."

"Tell me everything," begged Cyrion, looking like a drowning man offered a rope to cling to.

Brief introductions were made, and as Cyrion was delighted to hear that Tara was close kin, she became the spokeswoman. She told them Melian's story from the night the girl had been trapped outside the Alienage.

"—So she's with us, and working at Ostagar, and she would have sent her love, but we didn't know until we were already

on the road that we would have to make a stop in Denerim."

The red-haired cousin, Shianni, was openly crying.

"I thought I'd screwed up again, and got her captured— me going off to try to talk sense to Elva and those other idiots."

"She was captured," Tara told her, "but Bronwyn and Teyrn Fergus intervened. What with everything, since we couldn't get her back into the Alienage, it was best for her to leave Denerim with us. Vaughan is down in Ostagar now, and he tried to have her arrested, but Bronwyn wasn't having it. She told Teyrn Loghain that Adaia—sorry, Melian—was a Grey Warden recruit and nobody could touch her. And she didn't care what Vaughan said she'd done! Melian stays with us in the Grey Warden quarters: her cot is right next to mine.

Bronwyn ordered that one of us walk her back and forth to her job at the workshop. So she's fine. She misses her family, of course, but she's fine."

Cyrion and Shianni wanted every detail of Adaia's appearance, health, diet, and activities. They were interested in Tara, too; though her life in the Circle was as mysterious to them as if she had been living on the moon since she was taken away.

"Who is this Bronwyn you keep talking about?" asked Shianni.

Tara stared at her. "She's the Warden-Commander. She used to be Lady Bronwyn Cousland. She's the sister of the Teyrn of Highever. She's great. She saved my life. You haven't heard

of the Girl Warden?"

"The Girl Warden?" Shianni scoffed. "That's just a story!"

Valendrian smiled slightly, and sighed.

"My dear young lady," Zevran said suavely, "I assure you that the Girl Warden is quite real, and in Denerim as we speak."

Shianni stared open-mouthed at Zevran, undone by the accent, the looks, and being called a "dear young lady." Valendrian wondered if the handsome stranger was married. While the hahren was not sure how well being an elven warrior *paid*, the young man certainly had the appearance of one able to support a wife and family.

Tara told them more. "Danith here is teaching Melian—and me, too—all about Dalish customs and elven language. It's so exciting being among elves from other backgrounds. We're all learning so much!"

Shianni stared even more, and blurted, "but the Dalish—" She was about to say "are a story!" Clearly, things that she thought only made-up were true. Which meant that things that she had been sure of were false. It was very confusing. "I like your tattoos," she finally said to Danith. "Is it true you live in the woods and eat raw meat?"

Danith narrowed her eyes. "Live in the woods? Yes. Eat raw meat? No. Well—only when absolutely necessary."

"But how do you cook if you don't have any houses or pots and pans or *anything*?"

With more patience than she knew she possessed, Danith briefly explained about aravels, the landships of the Dalish, and how the Dalish took pride in living simply.

Shianni tried to take it all in, overwhelmed at the idea of a life on the move, without the security of four walls and a roof: without the protection of the Alienage gates.

"But...aren't you *afraid*?" she finally asked.

Danith shot back, "Aren't *you*? You live surrounded by and under the power of hostile shemlens. Every hand is against you. Shemlen nobles harm you as they please. You have no Keeper to lead you, for the shemlen priests take care to have them removed from among you."

"A Keeper?" wondered Shianni. "What's a Keeper?"

Zevran almost spoke, but Danith answered ruthlessly, pointing to Tara, "There is the one who should be your Keeper, but who was stolen from you. She—or one of more years, who would be training her, just as our Keeper Marethari is training Merrill."

"But she's a *mage*!" Shianni gasped. "You live with mages? I mean-" she backtracked, with a little apologetic smile at Tara. "You seem really nice and all, cousin, but everybody knows that mages are dangerous!"

"Shianni," Valendrian said gently, "your cousin is a Grey Warden. It is allowed for her to travel freely. She has had years of training at the Circle, and knows how to use her magic wisely."

Tara wished that Knight-Commander Greagoir could hear this hahren's glowing assessment of her qualifications and abilities. She nearly burst out in laughter, imagining the sober Templar's head—exploding.

Sighing happily to herself, she said, "Shianni, there are all sorts of different ways for mages to be trained. The Dalish train their own without the Circle, and they seem quite expert to me. The Circle exists mainly so shemlen Templars can bully and oppress mages. It's a pretty awful place. Being recruited for the Grey Wardens was the best thing that ever happened to me." She thought more about what Danith had said.

"Danith, I hadn't thought about that. It's true, though. Keepers help maintain the elven clans' history, and they lead and protect them. Taking children with magic away from the Alienage—and training people to be afraid of it—is just one more way to control us. I'm trying to imagine being a Keeper. That's too much responsibility for me!"

"Now, perhaps," Danith allowed. "But I suspect you are already a different girl than the one who was plucked from the shemlens' Tower. Who knows what you shall be, when you come into your own?"

Shianni was still wrestling with the frightening idea of mages

living among normal people. "The Chantry says they keep the mages at the Circle for their own good..."

Danith clucked her tongue in annoyance. "How closely my city kin clasp the chains that bind them!"

Valendrian spoke softly. "The last thing elves should do is quarrel among ourselves. Surely we have enemies enough without that!"

Danith huffed, but did not disagree. More tea was poured, and more biscuits handed round. Until they departed, she took no more part in the conversation, but thought a great deal about the child Amethyne, and how she might save her from this dreadful place.

Bronwyn was reading correspondence in the study when the trio of elves returned.

"I have cousins!" Tara told her, bouncing a little, eyes bright. "I have a mother and a father, and a *sister!* Hahren Valendrian knew who I was!"

Bronwyn set aside the letter from Starkhaven and gave Tara her full attention. "You met your family! How wonderful! I hope they are well."

"Actually," Tara confessed, "my family went north with those work crews. But I found out that Adaia and I are second cousins. The hahren showed me his book where he records

all the marriages and births. And I was there! Tara Surana! Apparently 'Surana' is a common family name. And my parents didn't want me to go to the Circle! They wanted to keep me, mage or not! The Templars came and took me by force!"

"I'm glad you found the elves so welcoming," Bronwyn said.

"Very welcoming," laughed Zevran. "If we had stayed much longer, the hahren would have arranged marriages for all of us—especially me."

"Well," Bronwyn pointed out, "you *are* quite the catch."

"Ah, but I have already been caught by the Wardens, and so am ineligible."

Danith snorted. "It was very dirty," she said, "and the people are oppressed and pitifully ignorant. The hahren does what he can with nothing. He is a well-meaning man, however," she allowed.

"How were *your* cousins?" Tara asked Bronwyn, conscientiously changing the subject.

Bronwyn shook her head. "It was all very...interesting. I had not really met the two young boys before. They seem nice young lads. Oh-I invited them to join us for their midday meal tomorrow. They are very excited about meeting more Wardens. One of them has a puppy, and will be bringing it with him."

Scout glanced up at the elves, panting happily.

Danith rolled her eyes. Tara was more concerned about making a good impression.

"Do we need to dress up?"

"Only in all the armor and weapons you have. I think the boys would like that best." Her smile faded. "Zevran, you and I need to conclude matters with our prisoner before I go to see the Queen."

"I am with you in this as in all things, Queen of Swords," Zevran assured her gallantly.

"Ooo, Zevran!" Tara approved. "*Good one!*"

"Commander," Danith said formally, "I realize that you are busy at the moment, but when you are at leisure, I wish to speak to you about some matters that came to our attention when we visited the Alienage today."

"Of course," Bronwyn agreed, rather puzzled. "I am dining with the Queen, but I should be quite free afterward."

"That is well." Danith's face shut down.

Tara whispered. "She was upset. And so was I. We'll tell you later!"

Bronwyn's curiosity was aroused, and she would have preferred to remain and heard what the elves had to say.

However, the afternoon was drawing to a close, and with Zevran here, she could no longer delay the inevitable. She had a spy to execute and a Queen to visit, and neither could wait any longer.

"It's time. Scout, stay with Tara."

Within minutes, Bronwyn and Zevran were climbing the winding staircase to the room where Erlina was spending her last moments.

Zevran asked, "May I speak to her alone first?"

Bronwyn shrugged. "If you think it worth your time."

Astrid was lounging comfortably in a chair outside the door, entertaining herself with a book of ancient ballads. On the floor beside her was a tray bearing the remains of a hearty snack.

"There you are!" Astrid greeted them. She jerked her head at the door. "I gave her a sandwich and a cup of cider about an hour ago. I sat in the room and took the cup and plate back when she was done. So she's had her last meal. It was a pretty good sandwich." Since she had no personal quarrel with the elf, she saw no reason not to give her decent treatment. On the other hand, regicides deserved to die.

"Thank you," Bronwyn said. "Then that is something we need not bother with, though we might want to use the cup again."

Astrid unlocked the room, and Zevran slipped in.

"Do you trust him?" Astrid asked quietly. "Sleeping potions are tricky things. Sometimes they don't work exactly the way they're supposed to."

"That had crossed my mind," Bronwyn said. "I've planned to take additional steps on my own."

"Good," Astrid nodded, pleased that the Commander was such a sensible person.

After a few moments, Zevran was back. "She wanted to keep me talking, but she really had nothing more to say."

"Really?" Bronwyn asked. "A few more questions occurred to me. There is time for a little conversation before we report to the Queen."

She pushed the door open, and loomed over the elf woman. Erlina sat on the edge of the narrow cot, her eyes fixed on the floor. She barely glanced up to acknowledge Bronwyn's presence.

"I would like to speak to the Queen," she whispered. "To apologize."

"She does not wish to see you," Bronwyn returned crisply. "She does not wish to hear your name mentioned to her ever again. If it comforts you, know that you have succeeded in causing her great harm and pain. However, my expert Healer

feels there is nothing wrong with her that he can deal with, given time."

A lie, but Bronwyn was in no mood to allow Erlina the cruel triumph of knowing that she had shortened the Queen's life and ruined her health. It was far more satisfactory to let the treacherous maid believe herself a failure. Bronwyn leaned against the wall, and brought up something had puzzled her.

"You know, the more I considered your plan, the more full of flaws it seemed to me. How exactly did you plan on making Teyrn Loghain submit to the King's marriage to the Empress, and to our new Orlesian overlords? He commands the army, after all."

Erlina kept her face immobile. No one knew about the agents sent to Ostagar. This was the one thing she would keep back. It was the one thing she could cherish in the wreck of her plans and the loss of her life.

Instead, she said, "Teyrn Loghain is only a jumped-up peasant. He is not the King. In the end, the Empress trusted in the loyalty of the Fereldan people to the house of Calenhad. The King would have had the support of the Chantry. And with the death of the Queen, the Teyrn would have had no standing had the King chosen to remove him from command. There are others who would obey, even if Loghain would not. If the Queen died, Loghain would have come to Denerim. He would have been arrested and confined. Later, he would have died of 'grief.'"

Bronwyn was silent, considering this. Erlina held her breath, hoping that the Warden would believe the lie. It was plausible: very plausible. It was just the sort of thing that Cailan would do. Indeed, such a plan had even been proposed to the King some time ago. Probably he believed that it was what would happen eventually.

There was a long silence. Erlina glanced up at the Warden, who was simply looking at her. Frowning. Erlina's heart beat a little faster. She did not want to die, but if she must, she would rather die without pain.

"I know nothing more about the plans afoot," she said pleadingly. "I only know a bit of gossip about the past, from my old bardmaster..."

"Go on."

"This is not the first time inheritance powder has been given to a Queen of Ferelden. When Emperor Florian was dying, he became spiteful."

Bronwyn exhaled, utterly taken aback. "Queen Rowan was *poisoned*? Are you sure?"

"No. I am not sure. It was only gossip I overheard. I know nothing more about it. It could have been mere boasting. Still, Queen Rowan grew ill and fell into a decline and nothing could be done for her. It took a long time, but she died."

Wondering what to do with this bombshell, Bronwyn gestured

to her companion. "That's enough, then. Zevran." She held out the little cup to him and he produced a vial.

"Only three drops would suffice for a peaceful sleep. With half the vial, you will sleep forever," he told Erlina.

Bronwyn gazed into the innocent liquid, and then presented it to the traitor. "Drink it down, and do not try anything foolish."

"I don't suppose..." Erlina faltered, "...that I could speak to a priest?"

Zevran rolled his eyes. Bronwyn said shortly, "No. You cannot. Take the cup."

Erlina's hands were shaking, as Bronwyn set the cup firmly in them. Erlina bit back a sob. Now that the end of her life had come, she was very frightened. "I don't want to die," she choked out. "Please, I don't want to die!" She threw herself on her knees in front of Bronwyn. "I don't want to die!"

"*Bella mia*," Zevran urged. "Drink it down quickly. It will be over—*phfft!*"

"No!" Erlina looked up at them, eyes running with tears. "No!" She threw the cup away and began screaming. "*No! No! No! No! No!*"

Zevran pulled his dagger, and Erlina shrieked and lashed out, hands scrabbling, fingers cut as she tried to push the blade away. "No! NO! *No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!*"

"Andraste's *nightgown!*" Bronwyn shouted, her nerves frayed by the elf's screams. She reached down her boot for her own dagger.

"No!" Zevran shouted. "Stay back! You will soil your gown!"

The door burst open, and Astrid stood there, looking exasperated. "Stone-sodding *idiots!*" she growled. "How hard is it to kill one elf girl?"

She had her answer in a moment. Zevran moved in expertly, yanking Erlina's arm behind her back to get it out of his way. His hand was a quicksilver blur as he drew his blade across her throat. Erlina stared at them in horror, her screams bubbling and then dying away in a gurgle. She slid down, slumping hard on the stone floor, one hand still raised in a last protest.

There was quite a bit of blood. Bronwyn saw, to her irritation, that she was standing in a puddle of it. Her boots left red tracks as she stalked from the room, shaken and sickened. Erlina had begged her, Bronwyn, for her life, and it was more painful than Bronwyn could have imagined. Had she been alone in there, what might she have done? She had seen her father and mother on the days when they had passed judgement on criminals, and sometimes, when the malefactor threw themselves on the Teyrn or Teyrna's mercy, they were granted it. On those occasions, Bronwyn had thought her parents were being too lenient, but now she understood how terrible it was to hold a frightened, defenseless person's life in one's hand...

"So," Astrid asked her, perfectly nonchalant. "Are we going to see the Queen now?"

Bronwyn took a breath and fought for calm. "Y-es," she finally answered. "We'll collect Jowan from the library and see the Queen. Yes. Thank you, Zevran. I made arrangements for her-" she gestured, not quite looking at Erlina-"disposal. The maids will clean in here later. Sergeant Quincall is in the guards' day room and will know what to do." She scuffed her boots on the floor, trying to rid herself of the red witness of a woman's death.

Jowan fell into step with them as they passed the library.

"Very nice," commented Astrid, admiring Jowan's new doublet. It smelled faintly of its time in storage, but the embroidered silk was rich and lustrous. Jowan was dressed like a gentleman of the Court, but in Warden colors. A gentleman of the Court, of course, who just happened to be walking about holding a mage's staff.

"Very nice indeed," Bronwyn said. "Was your afternoon productive?"

"Go ahead," he boasted, his smile ironic, "Quiz me about political marriages in Nevarra and how many times the Pentaghasts have held the post of Captain-General or Chancellor. I dare you."

Bronwyn managed a light laugh. "I bow to your expertise.

What about the dragons?"

"I still don't know *how* they killed them," Jowan admitted, "but I know how much gold they amassed from the hunts. I also think the current Pentaghasts don't remember, because there are dragons on the border between Nevarra and Orlais that nobody seems to know what to do with. Of course," Jowan shrugged, "the Pentaghasts are much too powerful and important to spend their time hunting dragons now."

"That *is* interesting," Bronwyn said.

Astrid thought a little about that. "Yes, it's interesting. Are there any songs or ballads about the dragon hunters?"

"Probably," Jowan said, "Do you think—?"

The captain of the Queen's Guard interrupted this intriguing line of thought, and they were shown into the royal apartments. Bronwyn gave the names of her companions to the velvet-voiced seneschal.

"You will be received in the Little Audience Chamber today," he murmured unctiously.

Astrid looked about her with interest. This palace was big enough, to be sure, but rather dull and plain, when all was said and done. The stonework was competent—and probably dwarven—but uncarved and unornamented. The good chairs and cabinets of wood would have been valuable in Orzammar, but were no better than those in the Wardens' quarters. Astrid

knew that Fereldan was a poor country compared to Orlais, and it was made manifest when one compared this place to what she had read of the grandeur of the Empress of Orlais' palace, with its walls paneled with polished amber and malachite.

The Little Audience Chamber was not a *bad* room. There were some decent hangings to soften the stone walls—mostly depicting mabari. Astrid liked Bronwyn's dog well enough, but the glorification of dogs in Ferelden was simply *odd*. No wonder people everywhere else referred to Fereldans as Dog Lords.

A low dais supported a pair of thrones: simple chairs of high quality wood, polished to a silken sheen. Behind the throne was a purple velvet arras, with another dog tapestry hung just in front of it. Fireplaces on either side of the room kept it pleasantly unchilled. A pair of tall bronze braziers on either side of the dais contributed light and some decoration. Astrid thought the room could be improved immeasurably by laying a floor of marble tiles over the plain stone.

The arras was drawn aside by a servant, and Queen Anora emerged from a door behind the dais. Everyone bowed as the queen took her throne—the one on the left. A seneschal said quietly, "Your Majesty: the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, the Grey Warden Jowan, and the Grey Warden Astrid."

Astrid straightened and examined the blonde human woman. She had heard that Queen Anora was a renowned beauty, and her reputation was deserved. She was a most comely

woman, even had she not been the wife of a king.

"Welcome, Commander," said the queen. Astrid thought she sounded sincere in that. Her voice was pleasant. "And welcome to you, Warden Jowan. To you as well, Warden Astrid. We are grateful for the assistance of our good allies of Orzammar. I understand that 'Astrid' is something of a *nom-de-guerre*. Am I correct in understanding that your original name is Gytha Aeducan; and that you are daughter of the late King Endrin and sister to the current King Bhelen?"

Astrid bowed again, "Your information is faultless, Your Majesty. I was Gytha Aeducan, and now I am the Grey Warden Astrid."

Queen Anora seemed pleased at her answer, and smiled graciously. Obviously, the queen liked to think of herself as a highly intelligent woman. Perhaps she was. Her illness was not very apparent at the moment, but she did look a bit tired. About thirty years old, Astrid guessed, though her illness might have given her a few years that were not rightfully hers. She was dressed well, but wore no jewels, and her hair was plainly arranged in a pair of coiled plaits. Perhaps this was her appearance for a private audience. Astrid hoped she put forth more of an effort for formal occasions. People liked kings and queens to look the part.

This was Teyrn Loghain's daughter, though Astrid saw little or no resemblance to that towering, glowering, black-haired champion. This woman was tall, but delicate-looking. Not a warrior queen, but a queen of plots and politics; a queen of

cunning and scheming and double-dealing. She was apparently well-disposed to the commander, but would bear watching. Her position seemed strong, but was in fact precarious. She had been married to King Cailan for five years and had borne him no children. Now her enemies were trying to depose or kill her. Humans did not follow the customs of Orzammar, and so Alistair, whom Astrid had discovered was a bastard son of the late King, was not the heir, as he would be in Orzammar. It was all very foolish, and all too human. Alistair was a fine warrior, and with proper guidance and training would make a decent leader. He was a far better choice for crown prince than any mewling infant the Queen might eventually produce. For that matter, why did not this woman discreetly take a lover, and make a little princeling herself, if her husband was inadequate? Astrid would certainly have done so in her place. Of course, humans had their Chantry and their sins and their guilt, and tricking the King in that way was probably something the Queen would never consider. More fool she.

"It is my understanding, Commander," Anora said to Bronwyn, "that you intend to leave the city tomorrow afternoon."

"That is correct, Majesty."

"I wish to bid you farewell, and give you some tokens of my trust and esteem. Bring all your people with you before you leave."

"I shall, Majesty."

"Very well. Then I thank you for your presence, Warden Astrid. You have our leave to depart."

Astrid bowed again, and hid her smile. Anora's last words amused her. In her childhood, Father had explained to her that those particular words, when spoken by a monarch, meant, "I'm busy. Go away." Backing away with scrupulous courtesy, she did.

The servants were also sent from the room, and Jowan cast healing and regeneration spells on Anora. Bronwyn could see the results instantly. Anora was enveloped in a blue glow, and as it dissipated, she took a deep, relaxed breath.

"Thank you, Warden Jowan. I feel, as always, refreshed by your treatment. I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you will be remaining here in the Palace."

When he too was gone, Anora asked, "Have you dealt with that unpleasant matter, Commander?"

"I have, Your Majesty."

"Good. We shall be dining informally in my sitting room. Come."

It was a very nice dinner indeed. It was one of the best dinners Bronwyn had ever had. It was not quite enough food for a Grey Warden, but what there was, was choice.

Bronwyn wondered if the Queen was simply seizing the opportunity to have a dinner like this with another woman. The Queen, as far as she knew, had no close woman friends. The food was too delicate to appeal to the King, at least from what Bronwyn had witnessed of his dining habits. And Loghain...Bronwyn sighed mentally, wistfully recalling fierce strong arms, a man's musk, and moments of wild abandon. Did the Queen have any idea about Bronwyn's relations with her father? Bronwyn devoutly hoped not. It was simply too embarrassing.

But Loghain would certainly have snorted at the daintily arranged table, the hothouse flowers, the clear consommé, the delicately spiced galantine, and the *caille en sarcophage*, served with chilled Antivan wine. This repast was definitely designed with high-born ladies in mind. Next came an astonishing dessert: an Orlesian *vacherin*. Bronwyn almost regretted demolishing the exquisite little basket of meringue, filled with whipped, sweetened cream and ripe summer berries.

"This is marvelous," she said. Perhaps she should not comment on it. Perhaps commenting on it made clear that she was not accustomed to eating this well. Still, the Queen seemed pleased that she was pleased.

"I sometimes wonder," said Anora, "if men even notice what they are eating, other than complaining if there is not enough meat! Your dear mother and I occasionally dined alone, before I was married. It was always very pleasant. Eleanor was so kind to me: so gracious and so full of wise advice. I

can hardly describe the extent to which she helped me navigate those first few years at Court."

"My mother was always full of wise advice," sighed Bronwyn. "I wish I had listened to more of it." If she had listened, perhaps she too would have been included in those dinners. She would have been at Court, and not relegated to the country. Everything might have been different. A brief pang of jealousy shot through her, picturing Mother and Anora, dining together, sharing secrets and sublime food. Bronwyn could not remember ever sharing a private meal with her mother... just the two of them alone. It would have been...*lovely*.

She must not regret the past, which could not be helped. She polished off her dessert, not quite satisfied; and comforted herself with the knowledge that when she returned to the Compound she could cadge a bowl of stew from good old Rannelly.

"I shall give you a letter to my father," said Anora. "I shall tell him of the poisoning and my condition. If I continue to feel as well as I do, I see no reason for him to leave the army. Perhaps that is even what our enemies wished. I see from your expression that I have hit the mark."

Without explicitly mentioning Erlina's name, Bronwyn replied, "Yes. Our source indicated that when he heard of your condition and hurried back to you, he was to be arrested and confined. Later..."

"I quite see." Anora's lovely face grew hard. "Take him my

letter. I am all right. I can endure everything I must endure. If he can send me this Wynne, that would be appreciated, but for now Warden Jowan has helped me a great deal. It is generous of you to spare one of your Wardens for my exclusive benefit."

"Ferelden cannot spare *you*, Your Majesty."

"You may call me Anora, here in my sitting room."

"Thank you...Anora. Ferelden cannot spare you for a multitude of reasons. It cannot spare your father. And if for no other reason, I simply cannot bear the idea of the Orlesians winning, especially by such guile and treachery."

"Does your brother feel the same?"

"My brother is loyal, if that is what you mean. He is loyal to Ferelden, and loyal to you. We have talked, and made our decision. We have some time before anyone even knows that the contract has been delayed. Much may happen in that time. I wish I could have seen Fergus before he went to Amaranthine, but I am certain of his loyalties."

"He gave me a charming present," Anora remarked. She rang a small crystal bell by her place, and the maidservant appeared. "Regan, bring me the music box from the table over there."

It was brought, and admired. Bronwyn had never seen it, as Fergus had bought it for Oriana after Bronwyn had ceased

coming to Denerim.

"The Princess on the Glass Hill! I always loved that story, I suppose because Fergus and I were so fond of climbing. It made us appreciate the hero's precarious situation all the more, in that bit of the story when he was trying to clamber up the polished hill and rescue the princess."

"I, too, am fond of the story, because I appreciate the equally precarious situation of the princess! Now," Anora said, setting the little box aside, "tell me *everything* going on at Ostagar."

Thank you to my reviewers: mille libri, JTheClivaz, demonichargles, Zute, Dante Alighieri1308, Sarah1281, dyslecksec, Josie Lange, Jyggilag, JackOfBladesX, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Remenants, SkaterGirl246, The Moidart, Oleander's One, Lehni, Aoi24, Juliafied, Enaid Aderyn, Judy, Thomas Blaine, Marcus Crassus, Blinded in a bolthole, cloud1004, Kira Kyuu, Have Socks. Will Travel, BlackCherryWhiskey, euromellows, Tyanilth, chocolatebrownie12, Meritheia, mutive, Kitty Kyinsky, Granoc, Shakespeira, Jenna53, almostinsane, Fastforwarmotion, and CervantesOsis.

Caille en sarcophage is quail in puff pastry with truffles and foie gras. (Quail in a sarcophagus)

41. Adventures in the South

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 41: Adventures in the South

"Spice cookies!" Carver nearly shouted. "Where did you get them?"

"A soldier named Tanna," Leliana told him, dimpling. "She's the best baker in Maric's Shield. I have no idea how she manages. She's built some sort of oven out of the ruins of Ostagar!"

"I have *got* to meet her," Carver declared, inhaling the treats. "She is a hero among cookie-makers."

"A taste of home?' Leliana teased.

"Ha!" Carver snorted. "My mother is great and all, but she's not the world's best cook. And a worse baker. My sister Bethany at least can bake decent bread. We *never* had anything like this at home."

They sat comfortably, just the two of them, by the campfire. Carver was very grateful to Alistair for allowing him to go see his family. He was nervous about it, but hoped he could

convince them not to leave Ferelden. It seemed a crazy plan to him. Yes, Mother had been the daughter of Kirkwall nobles, but they had cut her off when she eloped with Father. Why look backward, when she and Father had made a new life here?

Kirkwall was a horrible place, anyway. Everybody knew that. Who would want to deliberately go live in a place called 'The City of Chains?' How could they even *consider* taking Bethany there? It was tricky enough in Lothering, with her secretly being a mage. In Kirkwall, the Templars had largely taken over the city. They had murdered Viscount Threnfall when he tried to limit their power. The new Viscount was nothing more than a puppet. At least that's what Uncle Gamlen said in his letters.

And there was something strange about Kirkwall anyway: some mystery that was hinted at but never explained. Why did so many mages go mad and become abominations there? There was no place so haunted and so dangerous as Kirkwall. Why they even had a Circle of Mages there was the biggest mystery of all. It was a bad, bad place, and Carver had not the least desire to go there. Mother might be sentimental, but her children owed it to her to be rational. Ferelden was their home, and their home was in danger. They should be staying to defend it, not fleeing across the Waking Sea. That smacked of...desertion.

"You are worried, Carver," Leliana said softly. "Don't be. Trust in the Maker."

"Leliana," he said uncertainly, "there's something I need to tell you about my family..."

It had occurred to him that with her background in the Chantry, she might be horrified to hear about Bethany and Father, but she was not. He blurted out the truth, and she was unafraid.

"I am sure that your sister is a lovely girl," she said. "Everyone must find their own path to the Maker. Is that not what the Prophet Andraste taught?"

He grumbled, "It's not what the *Chantry* says these days. I like your ideas better. Just...don't tell your old friends about Bethany. We're twins, you see. We've always been close. Don't...tell them."

She dimpled again. "I wouldn't dream of it."

They took turns standing watch that night. There was no way they could reach Lothering in a single day, even were it not for the darkspawn. Carver thought Leliana looked very pretty asleep. Her mouth pouted a little, like she was dreaming of kissing someone. He sighed, and made himself think of other things. With the dawn, they were on horseback again, and resumed their way northward

There was quite a bit of traffic on the Imperial Highway: couriers for various noblemen, traders and victuallers and merchants with protective guards. They nodded respectfully at the griffon tunics.

"Good day to you, Wardens!"

Leliana always replied. Carver followed suit. Being a Warden was being a part of something very special. It was even worth the nightmares. Besides, Leliana said that you got used to those after a while. He told her more about their home in Lothering. She knew Lothering, and so could picture where it was.

"So it's on the other side of the river? I did not go there often. The Chantry's fields and gardens were to the south. We were not encouraged to go out much in the village. I think I know your house, though."

"It's not a big house, but we've always liked it. Mother would have liked something off by itself, with a bit of land. It turns out that with the darkspawn that wouldn't have worked out very well. We couldn't have managed the rent anyway. Still, maybe I can put together enough someday to help Adam purchase a freehold. That would be something."

"I don't remember meeting Adam in Lothering," she said. "Is he in the militia?"

"He doesn't go to the Chantry much, and he wouldn't have been there when Bronwyn was mustering the militia," Carver shrugged. "He missed the big battle. He was up in Denerim, trying to talk the Bann into giving him a commission. Of course it didn't happen, since Adam didn't have enough money to pay off the right people. He may be in the militia now. I don't know. He might do better to enlist in Maric's Shield, and I'll tell

him so. He'd be a private soldier, but he's educated and a good fighter. They promote on merit. He'd probably be an officer in no time."

"Is your brother as gifted a warrior as you?"

Such a question, phrased in such a way, could not but bring a smile to Carver's lips. It pleased him so much he could answer it fairly.

"Adam's really, really good. He's a sword and board man: fast and strong. He's smart, too, and canny in a fight. He's always been hard to beat when we've sparred, but for a long time it was mostly because he was four years older. I think he should have gone into the army years ago, but Father made him promise to look after Mother and Bethany."

"Perhaps," Leliana suggested mildly, "he could look after them better with regular army pay."

"That's what I decided to do," Carver smiled. "I've saved most of my pay to bring to them, and I've got some other things I've picked up, too. It should help. Mother's never really worked, you see, and she and Bethany don't know how to do much of anything...practical. It was Mother's noble upbringing, you see. Well, they embroider beautifully, and Bethany makes a bit of money from that, but Mother hates selling her work."

"I...see," Leliana said softly. She did, too. In Orlais, she had met her share of gentry fallen on hard times. It was always a sad spectacle, especially for the women. A few, strong and

brave enough, with money enough for equipment, made their way as warriors. Many more took vows in the Chantry, though of course that was impossible for Carver's sister, and it should not be done unless the Maker had given them a true vocation. Leliana had even heard of bards of noble birth, amusing and entertaining those who once boasted of knowing their families. Some of course, became courtesans if they were beautiful and very, very clever: and some ended walking the streets if they were not. Some closed the curtains of their decaying mansions, and died of genteel starvation.

"Does your sister play the lute or sing?" she asked.

"Pretty well," Carver allowed. "Adam and I used to tease her, but Mother said it was an accomplishment that all gentlewomen must have. She doesn't do it in public, of course. Mother wouldn't stand for it."

Leliana rolled her eyes. How to help people who felt they were too good to help themselves? At least Carver was trying to make his own way in the world. The brother, too, sounded like he was willing to find employment, if his mother and sister could be safe.

By late afternoon, they were turning from the Highway, and were in Lothering. The militiamen at the gates greeted them cheerfully and called out congratulations to Carver on becoming a Grey Warden. Carver thanked them, grinning, and pushed his horse along, obviously eager to see his family. Chickens clucked indignantly, flapping out of the horses' paths.

"There's the house! I can't wait to give them my presents!"

They tied up the horses outside, and Carver opened the door for Leliana.

"Mother! Bethany! I'm home, and I brought a guest!"

A big mabari looked up suspiciously from a corner, and then got up to greet Carver in a friendly way.

"This is Hunter. He's Adam's dog."

"A very handsome fellow," Leliana laughed, letting the dog sniff her hand.

A pretty girl with wavy black hair rushed downstairs to them. and threw her arms around Carver.

"Carver!" she exclaimed in an oddly hushed tone. "Don't shout! Uncle's very sick. Oh, I'm so glad to see you, but we must be quiet..."

"Wait! Bethany, this is Leliana. She's a Grey Warden, too."

"How do you do? Will you be staying? Of course you will, but I'm afraid you'll need to share my room, because we're a bit crowded right now. Uncle has Mother's room, and she's moved in with me, and..."

Leliana absently rubbed the mabari's ears, and studied Carver's twin with no little amount of pleasure. Very pretty indeed: the eyes large, dark, and expressive; the skin well

cared-for; the voice modulated and sweet. With time, Leliana felt quite a bit could be made of such a girl. She had been trained to be a lady: that much was clear. Whether she could be trained to earn her bread was an entirely different matter. But her pleasant ruminations were interrupted by the brother and sister's urgent conversation.

"What do you mean, 'uncle?'" Carver peered down into his sister's face. "Our only uncle is Uncle Gamlen in Kirkwall!"

"Well," his sister sighed, "he's 'Uncle Gamlen in Lothering' now."

"What?"

"Shhh!"

A family crisis, of course. Leliana eavesdropped discreetly while studying the room. It was decent enough: an all-purpose room for living and cooking, fairly well kept. A pot of soup bubbled on the hearth. While her hosts caught up on events, Leliana helpfully shifted the pot to keep the soup from boiling over. Voices came from a room next door. If Carver's family could not offer her a place to stay, Leliana knew she could always have a bed at the Chantry.

The door opened, and another young woman emerged, her brown hair a cloud of curls.

"This is our cousin Charade," Bethany told Carver. "She got Uncle here safely when he lost everything and his enemies

tried to kill him."

Carver's jaw was hanging. "Hello," he managed. "I didn't know we had a cousin."

The girl shrugged. "I'm a bastard," she said with proud indifference. "Father didn't know about me either, until recently. Good job for him he finally did, because they would have killed him for sure, if I hadn't got him on a boat and out of Kirkwall."

"Well...thanks," said Carver. "I guess this means we don't have a mansion or a title waiting for us in the Free Marches."

"I guess not," Charade said. Leliana noted that her speech and manner was considerably less polished than the Hawkes. Her mother was probably a commoner. However, the girl seemed sensible and resourceful.

"Don't gloat, Carver," Bethany said softly. "Mother is absolutely crushed."

Carver saw Leliana listening from the hearth. "Leliana! I'm so sorry. You must think we're the rudest people in Lothering! Cousin... Charade?... this is the Grey Warden Leliana. I'm a Grey Warden, too, though you might have heard that."

The girl snorted in a very unladylike way. "I might have heard a word or two about it. Congratulations. It's sounds like Ferelden needs all the Wardens it can get!"

Bethany said, "I'm very happy to meet one of Carver's new friends, Warden Leliana. If he's happy, I'm happy, but I miss him terribly."

"Of course you do," Leliana said soothingly. "You are twins, and very close. Carver has told me so much about you."

The girl gave her brother a panic-stricken glance. "And...just what did he say?"

"Nothing you need worry about," Leliana assured her. "It was all very nice. I have other friends who are also *talented* people."

"Look," Carver said, "I really, really have to tend to the horses..."

Leliana smiled. "I'll be fine, Carver."

She helped Bethany and Charade arrange the simple supper at the trestle table: soup, bread, yellow cheese, and a bowl of elfberries. There was a little trouble finding bowls for everyone, but Carver brought their packs in, and Leliana fished out her tin camp bowl and her own silver spoon. Eventually the door to the bedroom opened, and Carver's mother and brother were introduced.

Leandra Hawke clearly had been a great beauty, and was still a very handsome woman. Bethany strongly resembled her. The mother had the same sweet voice as Bethany, but hers was now worn into fretfulness. Leliana believed Carver's

stories of how his mother had been so admired that a very noble, very advantageous marriage had been arranged for her. Instead, she had eloped with a Fereldan commoner. Leliana was very fond of a romantic tale herself: no one could be fonder. However, in real life, romantic tales of elopement often ended just like this: with loss and regret, and trying to eke out a living.

Carver was obviously jealous of his older brother, so Leliana was careful not to flirt. Adam Hawke was extremely attractive, certainly. Right now, he looked harried and out of sorts, but he greeted Leliana civilly enough, and urged her to sit and join them for supper. He took the chair at the head of the table, and his dog sat down by him, gazing on him lovingly.

And then the talking began: Leliana assured Mistress Hawke that Carver could not change his mind and be released from the Wardens. On the contrary, he was doing very well, and they were all glad to have him. She immediately changed the subject to the sick uncle and his difficult journey.

"Poor Gamlen!" mourned Leandra. "He's been the victim of a ruthless plot. Charade here says he would have been killed—*killed*—had he remained in Kirkwall!"

"He certainly would have been," Charade said briefly. "We had to find the first ship that would take us away. We were lucky it was bound for Denerim."

"I've never been to Denerim," Bethany remarked. "Is it wonderful?"

"Not if you're short of funds, but most places are like that. With the war and all, people thought we were crazy to go south, but you're Father's only relatives, so it was here or nothing."

Leandra grew teary eyed. "The Amell family home...gone to strangers..."

Charade gave her an odd look. "Yes. It's a shame, but there's nothing to be done. The house is gone, the fortune is gone, and there's nothing in Kirkwall for us but a dagger in the dark. I know we can't impose indefinitely. I'll look for work. With all the men in the army, people will need help in the mills or the fields. I'm strong and I can work hard. I should be able to find something."

"You don't have to work in the fields!" Adam burst out. "Of course you can stay here!"

"Of course you can stay," Leandra seconded, more hesitantly. "You're family, after all. We'll just have to adjust and make do..."

Carver grinned and pulled out his money bag. "I can help! I've saved up quite a bit of my pay, and I have presents. I might as well give them now. Who made the soup, by the way? It's really good."

"Your cousin Charade," Leandra said mildly. "She is quite the housekeeper."

Carver was quite proud of his presents, and he had bought some extra things, so he had something he could give Charade too. She seemed a nice girl, and it was sort of grand to have a cousin, especially one who knew how to cook. He wondered if she knew how to make spice cookies.

Adam looked at the contents of the money bag. "Are you sure you can spare all this?"

"It's for the family," Carver said firmly, proud that he had done something at last: something genuinely helpful.

"I won't say it's not welcome, but you mustn't short yourself," his brother said. "Really, Carver..."

Leliana finished her meal, and said, "I'm sure you would prefer to discuss your family business in private. I could go to the Chantry to pray..."

"No, don't go," Carver pleaded. "You have such good ideas."

Adam gave Leliana a keen, admiring glance. "If Carver trusts you, then it's fine with me. Obviously, we've had a major change of plans. Mother, I really am going to have to find employment. We can't go on living on the remains of the nest egg Father earned. It won't last forever, and I need more to do than I'm doing here."

"But you're in the militia now..." Leandra said, and then grimaced, "under the command of Tobery Salt!"

"Tobery is a fine swordsman and good fellow," Adam said patiently, in the tone of one who has talked about a subject all he cared to. "With Charade here now to help you around the house, I think I'll have to join the army at Ostagar."

"That's great news!" Carver said enthusiastically. His mother and sister clearly did not agree.

"Adam," pleaded his mother, "promise me you won't join the Grey Wardens!"

"If I may," Leliana said gently, "perhaps our Commander can help when she returns to Ostagar. She has influence with many of the nobles in the army, and might be able to be of service. She is generous to all of us, and would, I am sure, be willing to help a Warden's kinsman." She smiled winningly, "Especially one who also has a good mabari friend!"

"The Girl Warden!" Carver crowed. "Lady Bronwyn Cousland! I'll bet she could get you something, Adam! Her brother is the Teyrn of Highever. She has Teyrn Loghain's ear, and she's a cousin of Arl Bryland. He thinks a lot of her. She killed a dragon east of Ostagar, and he gave her the title of Dragonslayer. She'll probably come through Lothering on her way back, but even if she doesn't, I can tell her you're looking for an appointment."

Leandra looked more hopeful. She had heard of the Couslands, who had trade agreements with Kirkwall.

"Dragonslayer! I hope you weren't there, Carver. It sounds so dangerous..."

"Actually, Mother—" Carver began. Adam caught his eye, and chuckled, shaking his head. Carver grinned back.

"If only Adam didn't have to leave home," Leandra complained. "If only Bann Ceorlic were more helpful..."

Adam sat back, thinking. "Bann Ceorlic isn't going to do anything for someone who can't buy his commission, Mother. Lady Bronwyn really may be my best chance. When do you think she'll be back in Ostagar, Carver?"

"We're not sure, but she told Alistair—you met him—that she wouldn't be long. Another week, maybe? She might want you to spar with her before she gives a recommendation, so be ready for the scrap of your life!"

It was a success, her meeting with the queen: an unqualified success.

Bronwyn returned to the Compound with a spring in her step, very satisfied at the degree of her understanding with Anora, very easily putting out of her mind the wretched fate of the traitor Erlina.

Did she like Anora? She did, rather. Anora might not have many female friends, but neither did Bronwyn. Her life in Highever had been too isolated. People were intimidated by her birth and education, or by her skill at arms. There were no female knights her own age in the castle, nor any young gentlewomen squiring there. Cutting herself off from the

Landsmeets by her own willfulness, she had also cut herself off from the opportunity to build friendships with young women with whom she had the most in common. If there were to be a life beyond the Blight—if she and Loghain might have a future together—perhaps Anora might be a not unpleasant part of it.

There was still the matter of the lovely but insufficient dinner, but a word to Rannelly, and a large napkin to cover her gown, and she was seated at the table in the Warden's hall, wolfing down a bowl of lamb and pea stew. It seemed a shame to combine that with the exquisite cuisine Anora had provided, but Bronwyn knew she would not sleep well hungry; and indeed, it would be ridiculous to go hungry, when all the servants in the Compound wanting nothing more than to feed her.

She was scraping the bowl, wondering if she wanted another, when the elves found her.

"Jowan and Astrid are in the study, talking about books," Tara told her, sliding onto the bench. "Didn't the Queen feed you?"

"Of course. The food was gorgeous, but not enough for a Warden." Bronwyn gave the bowl another careful scrape. "The dessert was this basket of meringue—that's sugared egg whites whipped until they're puffy. They were piped through a fancy funnel and made into a basket and baked. Then the basket was filled with whipped cream and berries. It was beautiful."

"It sounds too pretty to eat."

"Almost. But I am, after all, a Warden."

Danith thought it sounded odd, though cream and berries were wholesome enough. "We wish to discuss what we found in the Alienage today."

Rannelly saw the Wardens sitting together and brought out a plate of oatmeal cookies and a pitcher of cider. Bronwyn thanked her, thinking that a cookie was just what she needed to fill up the corners. "Of course," she said to Danith. "I can see it was troubling all of you."

Zevran nibbled a cookie, thinking it over. "I believe, noble one, that it disturbed us for different reasons and in different ways. Nevertheless, I too am concerned. Something is wrong there."

Not wanting to be sidetracked by shemlen politics, Danith said at once, "Do you know a noblewoman by the name of Lady Landra?"

Astonished, Bronwyn dropped her spoon into the bowl with a dull clang. "Lady Landra? Why would someone in the Alienage speak of her? Of course I know Lady Landra. She was one of my mother's dearest friends! She was staying with us when Howe's men attacked us, and she was killed. My mother was heartbroken when we found her body."

"You probably don't know if she had a servant with her..." Tara ventured. "An elven maid? Would she have been there at the time."

Bronwyn's mind was racing...there had been that pretty lady's maid. Lady Landra had even introduced her...what was her name...?

"Lady Landra's maid?" she said, beginning to smile. "Did you meet her? Did she escape the massacre? That's wonderful news-"

"No," Danith said shortly. "We did not meet the woman, but her child. She is waiting for her mother to return from Highever. It seems that you do not know for certain that she is dead."

Bronwyn was still trying to remember the name...Iona...Nona...

"Iona. That was her name. A very pretty woman. Blonde hair. We talked a bit in the library. I believe she did mention a daughter, and perhaps she mentioned that she was with relatives. She was certainly not at Highever." She sighed. "No, I don't know what happened to Iona. Mother and I found Lady Landra's body, but not Iona's. She was not in the library either. It's possible that she was carried off somewhere, but considering the brutality of the attack, I wouldn't hold out much hope that she is still alive."

"The child's relatives are also gone," Danith said. "They left town to find work-"

"-and we want to tell you about that, too," Tara interposed.

Danith made a face, and went on. "-and the child now lives in the house of the hahren. Her care is inadequate. Among the Dalish, such neglect would be inconceivable."

"I am very sorry to hear it," Bronwyn replied. "I shall send some coin to this...hahren...for the child's care. Does he seems a reliable sort?"

Danith wanted to say no, but Zevran broke in suavely, "He is the elder of the Alienage. I believe him to be a man of good character, though of slender means. If you gave him coin for the child, it would be used for her benefit."

"I agree," Tara said firmly. "Valendrian is a very nice man."

"The child would be better off away from that terrible place altogether," Danith burst out. "Commander, I wish to take the child with us. She could be placed with Zathrian's clan, among people who would care for her properly-"

Zevran and Tara stared at her in astonishment. Their astonishment, however, was nothing compared to Bronwyn's.

"Take a *child* with us?" she echoed, incredulous. "Danith, we cannot honestly guarantee the child's safety! We could be set upon by darkspawn or bandits or wolves!"

"I would protect her," Danith replied stubbornly. Already, a wormish doubt had bored through her certainty. Obviously, the child would be better off among the Dalish. Getting her there safely, however, was a genuine problem. Still, she hated to

back down from a shemlen.

"The Wardens," she said scornfully, "are supposed to be the heroes of legend. How can we not protect one child? I do not demand that she travel to Ostagar with us. There would be no one to care for her, and indeed the journey is too long. But I have from Keeper Marethari the location where Zathrian's clan will be camped this time of year. With Tara's magic, we can be there in two days. The child can ride with me on my horse. The Dalish travel constantly, and we do not leave our children behind."

Taken aback by such a vociferous protest, Bronwyn looked a little uncertainly at Tara and Zevran. What was Danith *thinking?*

Zevran offered, "While I do not think taking the child with us is a sound plan—" He held up his hand against Danith's protests "—I understand her interest. The child Amethyne is very appealing, very charming. Her story is a sad one: one that would soften even the heart of a Crow. And there are elements that reflect on troubles in the Alienage."

Tara nodded. "Yes! She was in the orphanage after her relatives left the city, and someone in authority abducted all the children and their caregivers. Valendrian thinks there's something wrong about this work in the north. You remember that we learned that Bann Vaughan has been sending people north for months. Well, no one has heard from them since. Oh—" something occurred to her that might interest Bronwyn. "and Valendrian said he was trying to contract his friends in

the Highever Alienage and hadn't heard from them either."

"You see!" Danith said triumphantly. "The child is not safe!"

"Wait!" Bronwyn put up her hand. "Bann Vaughan has been sending people north...yes, we knew that. Adaia told us about it, since Shianni was nearly caught, too, urging others not to go. It was being kept rather secret. I presumed that they were going to work for Howe, and Vaughan did not want to sully himself by association. But no one has heard from them? No letters?"

"Nothing," Tara affirmed. "Nothing at all. Valendrian tried to send someone to Highever, but it was just too dangerous, and the man had to turn back. Some men tried to "round him up," and they said. Something about "rounding up" all the elves. It must be an awfully big project to need so many workers."

"They might be fortifying Amaranthine City, or they might be digging in at Vigil's Keep...or both," Bronwyn considered. "And if they wanted to keep the nature of the work secret, it might explain why people can't get letters back and forth. Still, it doesn't sound good. And to take children? Why would they take children? Surely children would not be useful at such work. They could carry water, I suppose..."

Zevran was staring at the table, the corners of his mouth turned down. "Children can be valuable," he said slowly. "In Antiva, in Tevinter...in many places, slavers can get a good price for young children. The carpet-makers can train little ones as young as five years to knot wool. And the brothels, of

course, can use children even younger..."

Bronwyn shuddered at the image. "There is no slavery in Ferelden! ...And who would sell a child for such a purpose, anyway? I can't believe it..." She blushed. "I know that such crimes exist, but here..."

Danith, if anything, was more shocked than Bronwyn. "Sell children as-" she sputtered.

"We're just talking," Tara said softly. "We don't know anything. They might have them weed gardens. I've heard of children doing that. Let's not jump to conclusions."

"We are to see the Queen before we leave," Bronwyn said, making up her mind. "I shall tell her that something untoward is happening to the elves. She is the best person to deal with such a thing. She is in contact with Fergus, and can send a message with the next courier. He can look into the matter. Of course, it's horrible that the orphans were abducted, but we cannot abduct a child ourselves, Danith. Iona placed her child in the Alienage: that was her decision, and we have heard nothing that would give us any legal right to remove her."

Danith rose, glaring, hands balled into fists. "If it were a shemlen child, you would not be so indifferent!"

"That's not fair!" Tara gasped.

Zevran rose, too, to put a strong but gentle hand on Danith's shoulder. "Sit, my halla," he ordered. Reluctantly Danith

resumed her seat on the bench beside him. He went on, with quiet authority. "We cannot steal this child. The mother might be a prisoner of the this Arl Howe. She might be trying to return home as we speak. What if she were to return, only to find that the child is gone? Her sufferings would be cruel."

Bronwyn felt inexpressible gratitude to the former Crow. "You speak well and wisely, Zevran. Danith, it cannot be. Even if this child were absolutely friendless—and it is clear she is not—we could not simply pluck this child away and take her with us. We cannot, in the midst of a Blight, turn nursemaids, however winning and lovable this child is. Perhaps, when the fighting is over, you might see if the child is orphaned indeed and in need of your help. For now, it seems to me that she is far safer in the house of this Valendrian, than she would be in the wilds of the Brecilian Forest!"

"The child is not safe! No elf is safe in this horrible city! I shall not forget this!" Danith snarled. Shaking off Zevran's hand, she flung away, and stalked from the hall.

"She'll come to her senses, after a night's sleep," Tara sighed.

"Perhaps," Zevran said. He took another cookie, and savored it slowly.

Bronwyn took another herself. This kind of dissension was exactly what they did not need. "How old is this child, anyway? If she's bigger than an babe-in-arms, it's not like Danith can hide her away in her backpack!"

However much there was to be done before they left Denerim, Bronwyn made arrangements to bathe and wash her hair the following morning. She had no idea when next the opportunity would present itself, and she felt no embarrassment at appearing in Denerim Market with her hair in a wet braid. Everyone packed their gear as far as possible, and they set off for Denerim north of the river.

Jowan rushed to catch them up, having just visited the Queen. He was still in the velvet doublet Rannelly had found for him.

"Everyone will think we're part of your retinue, Ser Jowan," Tara teased. "You really look the part of a Fereldan nobleman."

Danith snorted in disdain, walking as far away from Jowan and Bronwyn as possible. She was otherwise silent and aloof, and Bronwyn decided to let her alone until she got over her disappointment about the child. Surely she saw that her request was completely absurd? Bronwyn had not forgotten her promise. She had sent three sovereigns by courier to headman Valendrian for the care of the child Amethyne, and that, at the moment, was all she felt able to do.

Astrid frowned, and cocked an eyebrow up at Bronwyn. Tara had told her about the quarrell last night. Danith's behavior, in Astrid's opinion, was insubordinate. Bronwyn would need to watch her. Take a child with them, indeed! The elf would do better to find herself a useful pet, like Bronwyn's dog Scout, if she craved affection.

Tara and Jowan's curious new staffs were ready at the Wonders of Thedas. Extraordinary as they were, the Tranquil proprietor showed neither pride in the achievement, nor curiosity about the uses they would be put to. He presented them to Tara and Jowan with the same bland monotone that was his only manner. Similar "swords" for Morrigan and Anders were wrapped in canvas and taken along. The Tranquil craftsmen had even fashioned appropriate harness. Jowan slipped into his and buckled it, feeling a little ridiculous.

"We'll get you a dagger for the left scabbard," Bronwyn said, "for you, and Tara as well."

That could be done at the armorer's, where there was also Tara's armor to retrieve and ideas to expound with Master Wade. His latest proposal was an alchemical compound with which to coat the tips of silverite spears. It was an expensive coating, of course, with ground diamond and lyrium among the ingredients, but with extraordinary penetrative power. He also said something that piqued Bronwyn's interest.

"I wonder if anything like the kraken-hunters use would help?"

"I don't quite follow—wait. I think I see what you mean. Like a harpoon?"

Astrid furrowed her brows. What was a harpoon? She had never heard of such a weapon. The armorer seemed to understand Bronwyn well enough, however.

"Yes, yes! Something with cables or chains attached, perhaps

weighted down with something that would foul the wings."

"Could something like that be devised as a ballista bolt?"

"Certainly, though the attachment would have to be furled until the bolt was in flight. Interesting idea..."

So they talked, but not too long. Wade was engaged to make her a half-dozen of the spears-and at Danith's suggestion, two score arrowheads -and to write out his proposal for harpoons and send it to Ostagar. Bronwyn moved on to her next errand, while Astrid questioned her about harpoons, and how they were used in hunting sea serpents and other monsters of the Ferelden oceans. The idea of going out on small wooden craft with only deep water below made the dwarf woman faintly queasy, but apparently there was coin to be made when one could traverse water faster than one could travel the land routes. There was trading, of course, but also profit to be made in hunting the sea creatures itself. Some of them yielded valuable crafting items: whale ivory and whale oil, ambergris for making perfumes. Astrid knew little of the oceans of Thedas. They were a separate world: a world of which she knew next to nothing.

She had a taste of it in their next errands in the Market. Bronwyn wished to buy presents for all her companions.

"When I was first at the Frostback Fair," Bronwyn told her, "I gave some then. Fifty silver each," she said. "Buy whatever you like, or keep the money. I shall pay. If you have any ideas for something our friends at Ostagar would like, tell me." She

paused. "Astrid, I saw something before, and you might find it interesting, since you ask me of the sea..."

At a booth of expensive trinkets, Bronwyn showed Astrid a little box of whale ivory, carved with shells and fish and strange little tentacled monsters. Bronwyn asked her if she found it interesting, and she certainly did.

And everyone wanted things that the Ostagar quartermaster could not provide: scented soaps, polishing silks, jewelry—

"Oghren would like West Hill brandy," Astrid told Bronwyn, sniffing the flask, "I'm going to get some myself. It's better than the rotgut at camp!"

"Don't forget to get yourself something, Bronwyn," Tara scolded her.

"Yes, mother," Bronwyn laughed. "I shall get another blank book for my notes, since I sent the last one to Fergus. I saw one with a mabari on the cover."

Scout approved vocally. Bronwyn rubbed his ears. "Perhaps I should write down all the stories we've told in it..."

Even Zevran bought something.

"Now that you have paid me, I feel myself quite the man of property!" he laughed, and showed her the silver-embossed shoulder belt he had found. "I shall wear it, and think of you!"

"It *is* simply gorgeous..." she pointed out, straight-faced.

"But of course!"

"Warden!"

Bronwyn looked around, and found herself being hailed by a lanky, ginger-haired man, wearing the decent clothes of a commoner. Not a warrior, not even armed, so the fact that he was running after her seemed no cause for alarm. She waited, and the man caught up, puffing. Zevran moved in a little closer, just to her left.

"You're a hard woman to find, Warden!" the man said, beaming. "Been looking for you everywhere!"

"Well, here I am," Bronwyn said guardedly. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I'm Levi...Levi Dryden," the man said, eager and ingratiating. "Didn't Duncan ever tell you about me? Trader Levi? Levi of the Coins?"

"You knew Duncan?"

"Known him for years," the man assured her. "Promised to do me a favor, but events, alas, have intervened."

"What sort of...favor?" Bronwyn began to suspect that this was something time-consuming and difficult, for if it was not, why had Duncan not already done it?

"Maybe the name 'Dryden' doesn't mean much to you," the man said, his smile fading briefly. "It doesn't mean much to

anyone these days, but we were once a noble family of Ferelden. My ancestor—"

"—Sophia Dryden!" Bronwyn recognized the tainted name of one of Ferelden's most notorious traitors. "You're a descendent of Arlessa Sophia, you say?"

"Well," the man shuffled, "as you know, she was forced to become a Grey Warden, and then got involved in the doings that got the order thrown out of Ferelden. Still, we Drydens are tough. When we lost our lands, we became traders and merchants. It's been passed down to us that Sophia wasn't the traitor they branded her. The proof might be up at the old Warden fortress at Soldier's Peak!"

"And you wanted Duncan to...do what?" Bronwyn wondered.

"Go up to the Peak!" Levi urged her. "See it for yourself! The Wardens get their old fortress back, and I get a chance to prove my family were loyal!"

"Why do I think it's not as simple as all that?" Astrid remarked.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "Because it's not," she said shortly. "I've heard of Soldier's Peak. I think I've even seen the tops of its towers in the distance. It's up north in the Coast Mountains. It's supposed to be haunted..." She gave the merchant a questioning stare.

"Well..." he allowed. "...that's probably true. A hundred

Wardens held off the whole King's army for a year up there. But," he rallied his spirits. "It's full of history! Wardens like history, don't they?"

"Master Dryden," Bronwyn managed, in a long-suffering voice. "I am in the middle of a Blight, and Soldier's Peak is exactly in the middle of Highever and Amaranthine, an area currently controlled by the rebellious Arl Howe, who is responsible for the murder of my family. Somehow, I just can't see him giving me safe conduct so I can investigate an ancient haunted fortress." She cocked her head. "Can you?"

"Well...maybe not," the man admitted, crestfallen. "But someday..."

"It's sounds very interesting," soothed Tara. "And we do like history, don't we, Jowan?"

"Yes!" Jowan, said, responding to the nudge. "We'd love to check it out. It would be great to explore an ancient fortress. How ancient is it?" he asked Bronwyn.

"Oh, it's old, all right. Pre-kingdom, pre-Cousland. I'm not saying it's not an intriguing prospect, Master Dryden, but I cannot not pursue it at the moment. I must return south this very day. However," she considered. "give me an address where I can contact you. If the matter of Arl Howe can be settled, we would then be able to travel there."

The merchant was mollified, and gave her the address of his family in Piper's Alley, where someone would always be home

to take a message for him. Bronwyn shook her head in disbelief at the man's retreating back.

"A fortress..." Astrid said. "I wonder why Duncan did not pursue this matter? He was commander for the past twenty years, I understand? Do you suppose the place is a ruin?"

"I have no idea," Bronwyn told her. "I suppose that will always be a mystery. Perhaps Duncan thought it best to be close to the seat of power. At any rate, there's no way we can spare the time to go north, when the south is calling us so imperiously!"

The shadow of the sun had moved on, and all too soon it was time for the Wardens to move along as well. Bronwyn wanted to get back to the Compound in time to greet her young guests for the midday meal.

They arrived, dressed in their best, tutor in tow and puppy in basket. Formal introductions were made, and the boys tried hard to mind their manners, not peering too curiously at Astrid or the elves.

That out of the way, the boys ran about the Hall, exclaiming at the pictures and the weapon stands. The tutor did his best to keep small hands away from sharp edges. Killer was cooed over by Tara, who thought him "the cutest thing ever!" Scout greeted his young canine guest with a lick and nuzzle.

Corbus was proud that a Grey Warden had taken notice of his

mabari, but was not quite pleased at the word "cute."

"He's going to be a great warrior someday. We'll fight side by side, and nothing will stand against us as long as we're together!"

Scout and Killer barked approval, two octaves apart.

The boys, not too surprisingly, fastened on Jowan and Zevran, as the only men present, and followed them around, full of questions.

"-How many darkspawn have you killed?"

"-Were you *scared*?"

"-Do darkspawn stink? I heard they stink."

This from Lothar. Zevran assured him that they did. "Most horribly."

"-Is their blood black?"

"-Could I hold your sword?"

"-Is being a Grey Warden fun?"

"-Do you think the Blight will be over soon?"

"-Well, when *do* you think it'll be over?"

None of this was surprising, of course, but what Bronwyn had

not anticipated was the tutor's shock at being expected to sit at a table with elves.

At first, she did not quite understand that sickly smile, or that disgusted expression. There was nothing at the table she need be ashamed of. The long table was clean and polished, and set with their best crockery and plate.

"I'm not sure... I didn't realize..." the man said, drawing her aside and whispering urgently.

"What is it?" Bronwyn said, wishing the man would spit it out, so they could get on with their meal. She needed to see the Queen and leave Denerim before nightfall.

"Lady Werberga," he assured her, "would be very displeased to find out that the sons of the Arl of South Reach sat at a table.. with e/ves. That elf over there is...I mean... look at those marks on her *face!* The dwarf lady, I suppose, is not so... Surely you understand? Surely you'll have the servants set up a separate table for the elves?"

"I understand," Bronwyn said, slowly and dangerously, "that my fellow Wardens would never respect me again if I treated them in such a shabby and cowardly fashion. I swore an oath to regard them as brothers and sisters, and I do not intend to break it to satisfy Lady Werberga. The boys are here to learn about Wardens. Well, the first thing that they will learn is that birth and race count for nothing among us."

It was not true, not completely true, and she knew it; but it

ought to be true, and this anxious, self-important man needed to hear the truth as it should be.

"Come to the table, cousins," she called, putting out a hand to each boy. The tutor, panic-stricken, tried to remedy the situation as far as possible.

"Now then Corbus, sit down by the Commander—that's right. Lothar, I'm sure that gentleman," he gestured supplicatingly to the well-dressed Jowan, "would not object to keeping an eye on you. And I'll be between," He gave Bronwyn a quick, false smile that melted over his lips like pig grease. "I always sit in between, just to keep the boys from mischief. I'm sure you understand."

"I want to sit by Bronwyn, too!" Lothar whined.

"Of course you shall," Bronwyn declared. "You're both honorary Wardens for the day: Corbus on my right and Lothar on my left." With a touch of perversity, she left everyone else to sort themselves out. All peoples of Thedas, by and large, were creatures of habit, and her companions sat as they usually did, indulgently making room for the children by Bronwyn. Danith scowled at Bronwyn, but not at the children, so it seemed unlikely that she would be unkind to them.

And so it proved, even though, with the unerring ability of children to embarrass their elders, they asked her all sorts of silly, ignorant, innocent questions, mostly about her facial tattoos, and if she really ate bad children.

That last came from young Lothar, and it made his tutor turn red and squeeze his eyes shut. Corbus dismissed it before Danith had a chance to form a reply.

"Of course, she doesn't, you silly git! She's a Grey Warden, and they're heroes. Everybody knows that!"

It was a particularly delicious meal, with Rannelly hovering proudly over her Wardens and the noble children. The boys, in fact, would have lingered too long, but Bronwyn gave the tutor a significant look. He was only too happy to escape such an uncomfortable situation, and flee back to the Bryland town house. Bronwyn kissed the boys, rather glad to have such likeable young relations. No doubt the boys would tell their aunt and sister all about their new, socially unacceptable Grey Warden friends. She smirked, picturing Habren and Werberga's horror.

Nonetheless, they needed to be on their way. There were hours of daylight left before they must camp, and Bronwyn did not wish to spend an unnecessary night here, however comfortable she was. Indeed, it would not do to get *too* comfortable.

"I wish I were going with you," Jowan said quietly. "I mean...it may sound stupid...but I do. I'm not particularly brave, but I feel like I'm letting you down by staying here at the Compound. All I have to do is visit the Queen twice a day, after all, and read books that I'd enjoy reading anyway. I've never had so much freedom. I won't know what to do with myself."

"Don't be an idiot, Jowan," Tara said, squeezing his arm. "Somebody has to keep the Queen going. Who else is going to run the country? We'll send Wynne to replace you, and then you can come back to Ostagar."

Bronwyn herded them along, down the passage to the Palace proper. She threw Zevran a glance, wondering at the last moment if she should leave him, too, to guard Anora.

"Don't, Fair One," he murmured shaking his head. "I see what is on your mind. Do not leave me with the queen, for, beautiful as she may be, my place is with you. I am your sworn man, not hers."

"Zevran," Bronwyn told him quietly, pulling him a little ahead. "If anything happens to the Queen, my brother and I are as good as dead."

"The attempt has failed, at least for the most part," said Zevran. "And you will need my blade when you go south, I am certain. Never leave me behind. It would be a mistake."

Anora did not keep them waiting. She had gifts for them: silver cloak pins with the Queen's personal insignia on them: a rose in the midst of brambles. They were gifts that she had on hand to give to those she favored, and they were very well-made. Even Danith could not object to wearing one.

"Your Majesty," Bronwyn said, "I thank you for myself and my companions." Briefly, she added the disturbing news from the Alienage. It was obvious that Tara and Danith would have

liked her to say more about it, but Anora assured them she would look into the matter, and pass the news on to Teyrn Fergus.

Jowan cast his spells, and then it was time say farewell. They bowed their way out of the Little Audience Chamber, and hurried to the Compound.

Rannelly was nearly in tears, but had been amazingly efficient. Their bags and packs—all but Jowan's—were neatly arranged at the door, and the grooms had brought their horses. Straps were tightened and buckles done up, and even the new sword-wands were secured to Tara's horse.

"Here, Warden-Commander, dear," the housekeeper said, pressing another bag on Bronwyn. "A little something for the road."

Everyone had one, a little packet of something smelling of spice cookies and meat-and-mushroom pies. There were bows and curtseys...there were hugs and kisses. Jowan's eyes were red as he stood in the doorway, tall among the maidservants, and waved his farewells. He looked so forlorn that Bronwyn embraced him as a brother.

"You'll be fine," she insisted. "And you're doing what none of the rest of us can do. Aside from your research and hacking through the correspondence, which I simply did not have time to finish, this country will fall apart without the Queen. There would be chaos, and we cannot afford chaos in the midst of the Blight!"

"You heard the Commander," Tara said, hugging and kissing Jowan herself. "Stay out of trouble." She lowered her voice. "And be careful with knives!" She gave his shoulders a little shake and he nodded, miserably. "And eat a pastry for me tonight," she laughed, cuffing him.

He stayed at the door to the courtyard, waving as they clattered away, out of sight, out of hearing, on their way to adventures in the south. Mistress Rannelly put an arm around him.

"You'll be seeing them again soon, Warden dear."

"Not soon enough," he sighed, and went back to his reading.

Note: Since the Hawkes were not in Kirkwall to work off Gamlen's debts by indentured servitude, his creditors caught up with him.

Thanks to my reviewers: Meredith, Josie Lange, demonichargles, cloud1004, Zure, Zeeji, Kira Kyuu, Jyggilag, JackOfBladesX, almostinsane, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Remenants, chocolatebrownie12, The Moidart, Aoi24, Jenna53, Shakespeira, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, mutive, Judy, Have Travel, Lehni, SkaterGirl246, DanteAlighieri1308, euromellows, Tyanilth, Eva Galana, Enaid Aderyn, mille libri, Costin, MsBarrows, tgcgoddess, Gene Dark, and WellspringCD. Your remarks always give me inspiration.

42. On the Trail of the White Wolf

Victory at Ostagar

As I am back on a canon quest, I have used quite a bit of canon dialogue in the following chapter. Thank you, Bioware.

Chapter 42: On the Trail of the White Wolf

The Queen received some fairly earthshaking letters the day after Warden-Commander Bronwyn left. It was a pity, really, that she was not still here, for she would have found them very interesting.

From her father came the news that Bann Vaughan was dead, killed by the darkspawn in bizarre circumstances. The fool and his fellow fools had gone up into the hills for some sort of drinking bout, and been gruesomely slaughtered. The Wardens had found the bodies while scouting.

Anora rebuked herself for the pleasure the news gave her. Vaughan's involvement in the plots against her was not fully established, and whatever he had done, he was now horribly dead. He was the only child of Arl Urien, who would be grief-stricken at the loss. She must find out if the Arl knew, and send him her condolences. She presumed that Urien would absorb the Bannorn of South Docklands back into his own

titles.. The tiniest smirk escaped her, picturing Habren Bryland's dismay at the overthrow of her wedding plans. Anora disliked Lady Habren, with a roiling intensity she was perfectly able to mask. Habren managed to be both insipid and vicious, and was the worst sort of useless noble parasite. Bronwyn had been guarded in her talk, but Anora had gathered she felt the same about the Arl of South Reach's eldest child.

Father also told her at length about something Bronwyn had only touched on: the slaying of a High Dragon in the Korcari Wilds. Bronwyn, with commendable modesty, had not told her that she had been acclaimed as Dragonslayer before the captains of the army. Very distinguished. No, this creature was not the Archdemon, but was in fact Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds, in her dragon form. Father himself knew the woman and had seen her transform. The battle had been fierce and protracted, and in terse but clear language he told her enough to grasp the violence of it. Now Flemeth's dragon remains were being put to good use by the armorers and tanners.

From Cailan she learned about the charms of the Dalish: most especially of the Dalish Keeper, by name Merrill. Cailan's descriptive powers were always most in evidence when describing other women, especially beautiful ones.. It was impossible to tell if the elf woman had succumbed to Cailan's considerable charms or not; but Cailan clearly thought it inevitable.

Anora pushed the letter aside. She had always put up with Cailan's philandering ways, thinking them meaningless in the

context of their strong marriage—their strong friendship. Now that she knew that her marriage had become a sham—a sham that Cailan was busily trying to discard— this boasting was odious to her.

A little later, a courier from the north arrived, blurting out his message before he put the letter in her hands.

"Your Majesty! Arl Howe is dead, and Vigil's Keep has fallen to Teyrn Cousland!"

"And the Teyrn? He is unwounded?"

"Not a scratch, Your Majesty!"

Door opened and closed. Anora sensed the news spreading through the Palace like a contagion, and from the Palace to Denerim as a whole. She nodded a dismissal to the courier, and broke the Highever seal, reading Fergus' message very carefully. From the first, it was clear that this was not the revenge he had wanted: not at all how he had wanted events to play out. The Crows! They were dangerous, of course: very dangerous. They had been commissioned by Howe to murder the Couslands, but had failed. And now Rendon Howe was dead by the very tools he had wished to use against others. A bitter irony, certainly, since it had led to the death of his children. A shame about Delilah. A cruel end for an innocent young woman, but Eleanor Cousland's death had also been cruel. Cruel, too, were the deaths of Fergus' wife and child. It was a relentlessly cruel world, after all. She sympathized with Fergus' regret and sorrow over the fate of

the young Howes. He was a good man. She glanced at her little music box, glad of the keepsake.

Still, Howe was gone and no longer a problem. Fergus was going after the remains of the rebels, and the north should be thoroughly pacified in short order. He had done well: very well indeed.

What was to be done with Amaranthine? She considered the matter. The arling was a prize: the richest by far of all Ferelden's arlings. If Bronwyn had not been a Grey Warden, it would have been likely that she would have been proposed for it, and thus a branch of the Couslands would rule there directly. There was the eldest son, Nathaniel, of course, sent away a few years ago for his education. Would Fergus accept him? Anora thought so, since he was so distressed by the murders of Thomas and Delilah Howe. Relations there were likely to be touchy for a generation or so, of course, and that would be tiresome.

Then she read the rest of the note, and sat down, thinking about it. It explained, in the ugliest of ways, the strange news Bronwyn had told her yesterday. The elves had been tricked into looking for "work," and had been instead sold to Tevinter slavers, and loaded just like cattle onto their ships. The *entire* Highever alienage? Howe must have made a fortune! No wonder he had been so intractably confident.

She must send a reliable man to the Alienage here for a tally of the lost. The elves would have to be informed, and she did not envy the one who carried the news. She would need to

send in the Guard, in case of rioting. And there would be other consequences. People might scorn the elves, but many relied on their cheap labor, and this would be a blow to them.

Bann Esmerelle in the plot? What would they do about the city bannorn? Anora rolled her eyes, exasperated. It was inconceivable that Bann Esmerelle could remain in power after such a scandal. Not only that: for her complicity with Howe, she must certainly be executed.

A number of major fiefdoms were now empty, all within a few days. The Ferelden nobility was simply too thin on the ground, and those remaining were mostly a useless lot. An infusion of new blood would certainly be welcome. People might snipe at Father, rising from the earth to rule a teyrnir, but he had proven himself over and over. While the war was raging, vacant titles could be temporarily administered by stewards and seneschals and castellans; but when the Blight was over, there would be changes in Ferelden. Anora would see to it.

Esmerelle had closed the gates of Amaranthine to him, and was hiding behind them like a weasel in her lair.

Fergus Cousland studied the city. He could reduce it, certainly. He could smash the walls down and demolish the Keep. In so doing, he would destroy homes and businesses and helpless people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And they probably didn't like Esmerelle, either.

Technically, Amaranthine was his city, anyway: the fiefdom of the vassal of one of his own vassals. He had not the least desire to spoil his own property. He rode up and down, outside the walls, while his forces dug into position. Anxious eyes followed him from the battlements above.

He called for the white flag of parley, and rode forward.

A captain above the gate shouted down.

"My lord! Bann Esmerelle has been summoned, and will be here directly!"

"She'd better be!" Fergus shouted back without ceremony. "If she is not, then I'll speak to you and anyone else up there, just so you know what's coming if you do not open your gates!"

His temper rising, he raised his voice again.

"Rendon Howe is dead! Vigil's Keep has fallen! If that ancient fortress cannot keep me out, neither will your walls. Think hard, People of Amaranthine, before you defy your liege lord!"

"And I do not come only on my own behalf! I am here at the Queen's command. A blow struck against me, is struck against the Crown of Ferelden. Loose your arrows against me, and you name yourselves traitors and renegades! What is it to be? Will you save yourselves, your wives and families from the fury of my army, or will you defy me, and be destroyed?"

A tense silence. Fergus scanned the wall for activity. Some messengers were hurrying along the catwalks at the top of the walls. One was rushing, crouched defensively, toward the captain at the gate. There was a muttered conference, and the captain uttered a loud, startled oath.

"What? Maker's Breath!"

More muttering. More men-at-arms were gathering by the captain. They sounded angry and...yes... frightened.

Fergus sat his horse, keeping himself steady and immovable. The focus had shifted away from him. Something was going on in the city, and the people were sorting it out themselves. The captain was coming back, head down. He looked defeated.

"Well?" Fergus demanded "Do you yield?"

"My lord," the captain said, in anguished misery. "We yield, and most humbly implore your mercy. Amaranthine is yours. Bann Esmerelle is gone. We believe it possible that she took ship on the dawn tide. She is gone, and her household servants and guards with her. Another ship, carrying some Tevinter associates of hers, has just left the docks as well."

Fergus digested this. Yes, he had feared this, but it was only thing for Esmerelle to do, really. Her days as a Fereldan noblewoman—in *Ferelden*, at least—were done.

In a cold, level voice, he said, "Then open your gates. Open

your gates *at once*. I am sending a detail to the docks and commanding them to impound every ship there. No one leaves until I have examined their cargo. For gold and power, Bann Esmerelle and Rendon Howe have loosed Tevinter slavers amongst you, and no man, woman, or child is safe!"

That got a reaction, and none too soon. The great gates swung open, and the city guard lined up on either side, bowing in submission. Townspeople crowded close behind them. There were some scattered cheers for "the Good Teyrn!"

Fergus and his knights clattered through, and down the long stone steps leading to the market. He trotted past the empty stalls—for the merchants had prudently hid their goods and their persons—and then beyond to the towers and the other long stairs that led up to the docks.

Not two miles away, she could see a ship standing out, sails billowing. Tevinter. There was no way on earth to stop them now.

After some delay, they were able to find, not the harbormaster, but one of his assistants. He at least could find the shipping manifests, and he and some other loungers could tell them what had happened.

Pointing to the departing vessel, the assistant gabbled, "That's Master Caladrius' ship. Very important man, Master Caladrius. He and the Arl were like this," the man gestured, two fingers together.

"Tevinter ships have been coming and going for months, my lord," another man put in, trying to ingratiate himself with the new regime. "Very busy, like."

"Is that true?" Fergus demanded.

"True, my lord. Tevinters have been in and out of here for months, my lord," the assistant gabbled, very intimidated by the big man and his big friends. "The wagons pulled up, and the cargo was loaded, quick as quick. We was paid not to talk about it."

Fergus eyed the man in disgust. "The "cargo" was elves, wasn't it? The Tevinters were slavers, and you helped them abduct free Fereldans!"

"Well, what was we to do, my lord?" the assistant squawked. "The Arl said we had to, and the Bann said we had to, and Captain Chase would just as soon kill a man as look at him, and if we gave trouble, they might turn us over to Master Caladrius! And we'd end up like—well, you come over here and see, my lord..."

The men led them to the end of the Long Pier. From a distance, Fergus recognized what it must be.

A young boy, no more than eleven or twelve was stretched out there. His delicate elven face was pearly pale under the dirt and dried tears. Blood still pooled at his wrists and ankles from ritual cuts.

The assistant muttered. "Master Caladrius learned you was coming, my lord. He needed a wind."

Frustration, horror, fury: all swelled in his heart until he thought it would burst.

"Did he get them all?"

"All? Well...no, my lord. Wasn't room for all them. No time to get another ship, either. There's some cargo left in the West Warehouse..."

Not much, really. What "cargo" were left behind were the sick and old, and to Fergus' distress, the very small children—even an infant, torn from her more valuable mother's arms. Without anyone to nurse the child, she would starve.

Fergus turned to one of his men. "Find that child a wet nurse."

The man grimaced. He did not mean to be cruel, but facts were facts. "It'll be hard, my lord, finding a woman who'll nurse an elfling."

"Then buy a she-goat and a nursing-tit! The elves can keep the goat, anyway. I think I'm good for the coin."

The elves were not particularly grateful for their rescue. They were too traumatized and terrified for that. They shrank back in their cages, away from Fergus and the other men in armor, expecting new horrors. There were unhealed cuts on many of them, as well.

"Are you from Denerim?" Fergus asked. The elves stared at him in blank incomprehension. He repeated, "Are you from the Denerim Alienage? Or from Highever?"

A scrawny old elf licked his lips, and croaked. "Denerim, my lord. Denerim."

"I'll have you returned there in one of the wagons," Fergus said. "Seyton, arrange it."

"Yes, my lord."

An haggard old woman wailed, "But what about Maia? What about Maia and Kirri? We can't leave without them!"

Fergus gave a few more orders and stalked back out into the sunlight, away from that hopeless misery. He'd remember to check about the goat, anyway. The Tevinter ship was a fading dot in the distance now. They were getting away: they were getting away clean with their victims, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Esmerelle had got away clean, too. Slipped away at dawn, leaving her city to its fate.

Fergus wandered through the bann's mansion, kicking at the litter of papers and trash: the remains after the woman had packed everything she wanted for her own use. Nothing of value was left here. Unlike Vigil's Keep, where the treasury of the Howes was left for Fergus, Esmerelle had planned her escape and executed it neatly. Drag marks in the dust

showed where a heavy chest had been removed from a store room. Her chosen favorites had removed their own belongings, too. From what the remaining servants could tell, the traitors had dressed plainly and fled in the quiet before dawn.

Seyton bent over to retrieve a forgotten silk scarf. "We can but hope, my lord, that the captain of the ship she escaped in is as lacking in honor and decency as the lady, and throws her and her lackeys over the side before robbing her!"

Fergus liked the idea. All sorts of hazards could doom Esmerelle: treachery, as Seyton suggested; storms, pirates, qunari, or another Tevinter slave ship. He snorted. He had heard that Tevinters had not the least compunction about enslaving humans when they had the chance. Beings without magic were nothing and nobody in the Tevinter Empire. If not a slave, then a servant or a peasant, certainly. With a great deal of pleasure, Fergus imagined Esmerelle there, chained beside the elves she had betrayed.

However, real life was never so just. She would very likely make the journey successfully, and live long and happily off the gold earned from the slave trade. In the Free Marches, no one would care, as long as she was rich enough.

"Enough of that bitch!" he snarled stalking toward her study. The city was in confusion: several major officials, including the chief constable of the city guard, had left with the Bann. He would have to move quickly, create a working city government, and return this place to a semblance of

normality. He had no idea how many of Rendon Howe's loyalists had remained in the arling. The forces the king had granted Fergus here had been enough to deal with the worst of the rebels, but was not enough to manage the arling on a permanent basis.

He was rooting out people like the Paytons and the Temmerleys. They had colluded with Howe in the attack on Highever, and their lands were forfeit, as were many of their lives. While he would not visit vengeance on the children, he would not give them a way to fight against him in the future. They would be sent to the Chantry, or they could be sent to relatives abroad, but they would hold no land from him ever again. Many fiefdoms and estates would be vacant and idle.

He needed more men: reliable men. It would be best to find capable people with no ties to Amaranthine, who would look only to him for patronage.

Even if Nathaniel came home and the Landsmeet confirmed him as arl, Fergus decided that he wanted to put his own man-or woman, for that matter—in as city bann. Amaranthine's bann had great power, with control over the splendid harbor and its lucrative trade. A faithful city bann could counterbalance a hostile arl to a great degree.

Howe's remaining militia he would round up and send down to Ostagar, where they could do good service, and not cause trouble in their homeland. His own troops were still looking for the Crow assassins: all ships wanting to leave the harbor would be carefully scrutinized.

Esmerelle's study looked like it had been swept up in a whirlwind. On the writing table, sealing wax puddled thickly, while spilled ink pooled like old blood. Papers littered the floor. More had been burned in the fireplace. A few of those, edges crisped black, were crumpled on the hearth.

"See what you can salvage there," he ordered. "and have someone fetch my camp desk."

Her private chamber adjoined. Fergus glanced in. It looked even worse than the study. A great deal of the furniture had been taken—though not the great bed, which would have required a dozen men and a great commotion to shift. The linens were gone, of course, but Fergus was not feeling particularly fussy. The featherbed there looked thick and comfortable. He shrugged, and returned to the study, rummaging through the writing desk.

Esmerelle had taken the seal of the City of Amaranthine, the tawdry cow. He would have a new one devised: one as different as possible from the old. Yes, a new seal...a new coat of arms...a new day for Amaranthine.

Still, it was fortunate that Rendon Howe had been wearing his seal ring when he was killed. Fergus wore it now, along with the seal of Highever stolen from his father by his murderer.

"I'll leave a small garrison here for now," he decided, "and we must move on to Highever." Sitting down at Esmerelle's writing table, he wrote a letter to the Queen to that effect.

Danith had been given directions to the hunting grounds Zathrian's clans used at this time of year. It was good thing, or Bronwyn would have wandered in the Brecilian forest for some time. Instead, they were there in two days.

A trio of Dalish elves stepped out of the trees, bows at the ready. "*Andaran atish'an*, cousin," said the leader, a slender blonde elven woman in hunting leathers. " I am Mithra, of the clan of Zathrian. You are of the clan of Marethari, are you not?" Her face hardened at the sight of Bronwyn. "And how is that you travel with a shemlen? " She paused, and her eyes swept Astrid with aloof disdain, "and a durgen'len?"

Bronwyn took a breath, but kept silent after all. The question was clearly addressed to Danith. To interrupt would no doubt be as offensive to these elves as it would be in a similar situation among humans.

Danith answered calmly. "I am a Grey Warden, Danith Mahariel of Clan Marethari. This is Bronwyn, Commander of the Wardens. With us are Wardens Tara and Astrid, and this is our companion, Zevran Aranai. Our commander wishes to speak to your Keeper."

Bronwyn gave her a nod. "Greetings, Mithra. May we be taken to Keeper Zathrian?"

The two elves behind Mithra grimaced in distaste. One spat on the ground. Mithra stared at Bronwyn, and then at Scout. After a moment, she shrugged.

"*Ma nuvenin*," she said. "But remember, shemlen, that our arrows will find you if you prove treacherous."

Bronwyn had no idea what "*ma nuvenin*" meant, but it seemed to imply acquiescence. She signed to her comrades to dismount, and swung down from Posy. Leading their horses, they followed the Dalish guards to a clearing.

"Tie your beasts here," Mithra said sharply. "We do not want their filth soiling our camp. And you must clean up after your dog."

Scout stiffened with outrage. He was a mabari, not some sort of careless wild beast who relieved himself anywhere and everywhere. These people lived outside. Why would they care? Bronwyn looked at him, and he forebore to growl. These elves were un-friends, but his Bronwyn wished to try to talk to them. Scout sniffed the air, and then licked her hand and looked up her anxiously.

This place is bad. It smells bad. It is sick and wrong.

His Bronwyn was clever, and understood. She rubbed his ears, whispering. "We'll be very careful, Scout."

This camp was much like that of Danith's clan, on the surface; yet there were fewer elves in evidence. Some tiny elven children peered out from behind trees, whispering and pointing at Scout, eyes wondering and fearful. The landships stood silent, and down in a paddock, the halla bleated mournfully. Closed faces peered her way, as they approached the

Keeper. Bronwyn had heard that this elf was old; but while entirely bald, which was unusual for an elf, the face was unlined, and the straight and slender form radiated energy and power.

"Keeper, our cousin says that she is a Grey Warden," declared Mithra. With a gesture at Bronwyn, she added, "She said that this shemlen is their leader. I thought it best to bring them to you at once."

"You have done well. You may return to your duties." The Keeper studied Bronwyn a moment and said, "I am Zathrian, the keeper of this clan, its guide, and preserver of our ancient lore."

"Greetinga to you, Zathrian," Bronwyn replied with a nod. "I am Bronwyn, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden." Briefly she introduced her companions. Zathrian was warm only with Danith, but to Tara and Zevran he was at least civil.

"Your errand is no surprise to me. I have already sensed the growing corruption in the south. I would have already taken my clan further north," he told her, "but events intervened. You are here, I am sure, because the treaties we signed ages ago. Unfortunately..."

And then he began to explain why his clan would not be able to fulfill their obligations. There was sickness in the clan. The majority of the hunters and trackers were suffering from the effect of a curse.

"A curse?" Bronwyn asked. "What kind of curse?"

Tara wanted to know as well. It would unthinkably rude to imply that she could do more than the venerable Keeper of a Dalish clan, but she had a feeling Zathrian was not being very forthcoming. She knew—from knowing Danith—that the Dalish were clannish and close-mouthed about their own business.

Zathrian said, "Come with me."

Within the circle of landships, they were shown a score or so elves on cots, obviously very ill. A curse, Zathrian repeated. An ancient curse in the forest, now directed against his clan. More were falling ill every day. Many had already died.

"The clan came here one month ago, as is our custom this time of year. We did not expect the werewolves to ambush us."

"Werewolves?" Bronwyn bit back her wonder and disbelief. Werewolves were supposed to be extinct: a danger long past, due in part to the heroism of her own ancestors.

"Indeed. Even with all our magic their curse lies heavy on us. If this continues, we may be forced to slay more of our own people. Do not think I discount the danger of the danger of the darkspawn. The Blight is an evil which must be stopped. However, in our current situation, we have no aid to give you."

"You have hit on no way to help your people?" Bronwyn asked.

"The affliction is a curse in the blood, which must end either in an agonizing death or in a transformation to a monstrous creature. There is a way..." he paused, his large elven eyes assessing Bronwyn, "but it would be no trivial task."

Bronwyn sighed inwardly, remembering King Bhelen and the Anvil of the Void. There was no way she was committing herself to such an effort here. She kept her face perfectly blank. "I see."

"Within the Brecilian Forest is a great wolf named Witherfang. It was within him that the curse originated. If he were killed and his heart brought to me, perhaps I might have the power to lift the curse."

"You know of this creature?"

A curious expression crossed the old elf's face. "I have...seen him. Days ago I sent hunters after Witherfang. None have returned. I dare not risk any more of my own people."

"How did this curse begin?" Tara asked, trying to think of anything she had read about lycanthropy.

Zathrian granted her a patronizing smile. "That is a long story, and one which matters little now. Perhaps Sarel or Lanaya, my First, could tell you, if you are at leisure. I fear I have not the time for old tales."

Bronwyn felt her scalp prickle.

He's hiding something.

She cleared her throat. "Where is this Witherfang to be found, do you suppose?"

He raised his gaze to the skies above, thinking. "On an island in the river south of here there is a small island. Wolf tracks and spoor have been found there. The creatures lair nearby. If they are anywhere, that is the place more likely. The old hunter's trail will take you there. Mithra can show you."

Bronwyn glanced briefly at her people, who were listening with interest. Danith looked ready to go on the hunt immediately. Tara was lost in thought. Bronwyn was hoping she could come up with some other sort of magical cure. Zevran and Astrid were impassive. Bronwyn thought it likely that they suspected, as she did, that there was more going on here than Zathrian intimated.

"You said," she ventured, "that 'perhaps' the curse could be lifted. You are not sure?"

Zathrian shook his head. "There are no guarantees, but that is the only way imaginable."

Bronwyn stood studying him a moment, thinking it over.

It was tempting, very tempting, simply to turn her back on this man and head straight for Ostagar. There was some mystery here, and these people wanted something substantial from her without fully explaining what it was or why. Could she

justify going off on a hunt for a magical white wolf and a band of creatures that were supposed to be extinct? She had business in Ostagar and a letter for Loghain from the Queen.

She said to Zathrian, "If you will excuse me, I must speak with my companions." She gestured to them, and withdrew into the privacy of a stand of oaks.

"This is certainly not what I expected. These people have troubles of their own, and with the losses from the curse, will probably not be able to assist us in any significant way."

"You are thinking of leaving them like this!" Danith said angrily. "You are eager to help others, but not the Dalish!"

"That's unfair, Danith!" Tara protested. "That man is not telling us the whole story."

"That is certainly true," Bronwyn agreed grimly. "I did think of leaving, Danith, but I have a duty to raise all the forces I can against the Blight. Had the Keeper not given me clear directions to where I can find Witherfang, I would leave, for we do not have the time to blunder through the forest, looking for cursed monsters. We will camp tonight, and first thing in the morning, we will see what we can discover, but I cannot promise to spend an unlimited amount of time helping these people."

She stalked back to Zathrian, and said, "We shall make camp and at daybreak set out to search for this Witherfang. We shall leave our horses, if that does not inconvenience you."

"As you wish," Zathrian shrugged. "And now, I have much to do. My first, Lanaya, can assist you as you deem necessary." He moved away, cat-footed, his feet hardly making a sound.

Lanaya was a very pretty young woman: blonde, with dainty features. Not surprisingly, she revered the Keeper, telling them she had been his apprentice, and had spent the past few years studying under him.

"If it is not too impolite," she said, hesitantly, "I have a question..."

"Yes?" Bronwyn asked, trying very hard to control her impatience.

"Do your people ever regret what they did to ours?"

Bronwyn paused. Did Lanaya mean humans in general? *Did* humans regret that the Tevinter Imperium had destroyed Arlathan, the ancient seat of the elves? Did humans regret the fall of the Dales to the Chantry's Exalted March? Did they regret that elves were now a race of servants? They were now hewers of wood and drawers of water—or vagrants living in the woods, as most people regarded the Dalish. Taken all in all, humans had done a great deal to the elves—all of it fairly horrible. Before Bronwyn had become a Warden and set off on her travels, she had never thought about it at all. It was something that she learned in lessons about people long ago about whom she knew nothing. She had not even thought it very relevant, when compared with the importance of learning recent Orlesian history. Elves were there, and they were

servants, and that was the way the world was. Bronwyn felt no more responsible for their fate than she did for the betrayal of Andraste. However, such an answer would probably not be the most tactful at the moment.

"Some do," she said quietly. "Not all humans are the same."

Danith snorted. Tara nudged her.

Lanaya only looked sad.

"It is difficult for our people to accept that so many humans feel no guilt or sorrow. A poet once wrote of them, before the fall of the Dales: *'Like Dragons they fly, glory upon wings. Like dragons they savage, fearsome pretty things.'*"

Bronwyn was rather taken aback at the idea of being compared to a dragon. "That sounds like a description of the old Tevinter magisters, who were indeed fearsome. Most humans are just people trying to make a living and get along, and are neither glorious or savage, nor even very pretty."

Lanaya sighed and managed a smile. "Forgive me," she said. "You must have questions of your own."

"Your Keeper is a very interesting man. Could you tell me more about him?"

This subject Lanaya liked very much: and waxed lyrical about Zathrian's venerable wisdom and his utter devotion to the Dalish. "He is a compassionate man: a man who has suffered

and lost much."

"Really?" Bronwyn queried mildly, "What has he lost? Do tell me," she persuaded. "I do not wish to hurt or offend him unnecessarily."

"Well," Lanaya began, "he lost his family—a very long time ago. I don't know the full story, but I understand the circumstances were horrific."

"Were they attacked by werewolves?" Zevran asked. Bronwyn shared a glance with him.

"No—oh, no..." Lanaya shook her head. "I am sure they were not. The werewolves are a very recent trouble to us."

"Thank you, Lanaya," Bronwyn said. "We shall make camp nearby and set out at first light tomorrow. I have already informed the Keeper that we shall leave our horses here."

"Yes...your horses." Lanaya looked beyond to the clearing where they were tied. "I have not seen many horses. They are not as beautiful as halla, but they too are gifts of the Creators. May I look at them?"

"Be careful of them," Danith said. "They are useful beasts, but quick-tempered and violent." She threw Bronwyn a look of thinly veiled cynism, clearly implying *"Much like their human masters."*

"My horse is gentle," Tara suggested. "it's the smaller one

with the white mark on her face and the white stockings."

Astrid had been silent up to now, listening very carefully. She felt uncomfortable and out of place here, but she still could spot someone lying, even by omission. This Keeper fellow was indeed hiding things. Was there something shameful about this curse? Some detail he did not want them to know? Perhaps it wasn't simply Dalish secrecy.

Zevran too was silent, eyes flicking around the camp, remembering clearly why his brief sojourn among the Dalish had been such a failure. The clannishness, the utter lack of privacy, the conformity—the lack of wine, easy women, and good fish chowder: all of them were reasons to flee this place as he would the lair of darkspawn. It puzzled him that Danith, who had now seen other ways of living—ways that Zevran much preferred—clung to her traditions so fiercely.

They set up their tents on the outskirts of the Dalish camp. Scout stayed close to Bronwyn. These beings were unused to dogs, and Scout sensed they were curious and frightened, and the adults hostile. With a show of indifference, he trotted at Bronwyn's heels, and then sprawled near their fire, watching Zevran prepare supper, snapping up the tidbits that the elf threw him.

Later, as it grew dark, a young girl came by to invite them sit with them and listen to the hahren's stories.

Bronwyn was not sure she was included in the invitation, but

the elf girl seemed to think so. She and Astrid shrugged at each other, and followed their elvish companions. Keeper Marethari's camp seemed cosmopolitan and friendly in comparison, but surely there was nothing amiss in hearing stories.

Except that this clan really was very rude and antagonistic. Astrid they ignored, just as if she did not exist at all. Bronwyn knew that she was offended, but the dwarf woman was too shrewd and too self-assured to show her opinion of her present company. She sat behind the rest, by Scout, and stroked the dog's shining coat. Scout was a fine creature, and not too proud to make friends with her.

Bronwyn would have preferred to be ignored, too. Alas, since she towered over everyone in the camp, all eyes were upon her, and she was a target for Dalish grievances. Hard looks were thrown her way, and hard words as well. She tried to be reasonable and pleasant, but it was clearly not working. And then Sarel began his story, and that did not help at all, either.

Sarel's Tale

In shemlen lands, you will hear tales of the woman Andraste. They name her prophet, and bride of their Maker. But we knew her as a war leader, one who, like us, had been a slave and dreamed of liberation. We joined her rebellion against the Imperium, and our heroes died beside her, unmourned, in Tevinter bonfires. She was betrayed by her own husband, but not by Thane Shartan, the leader of the elves. He, too,

perished, hoping for a better world.

We stayed with our so-called allies until the war ended. Our reward: A land in southern Orlais called the Dales. So we began the Long Walk to our new home.

Halamshiral, "the end of the journey," was our capital, built out of the reach of the humans. We could once again forget the incessant passage of time. Our people began the slow process of recovering the culture and traditions we had lost to slavery.

But it was not to last. Orlais grew: the shemlen multiplied and spread to the south. The Chantry first sent missionaries into the Dales, and then, when those were thrown out, templars. We were driven from Halamshiral, scattered. Some took refuge in shemlen cities, living in squalor, tolerated only a little better than vermin.

We took a different path. We took to the wilderness, never stopping long enough to draw the notice of our shemlen neighbors. In our self-imposed exile, we keep what remains of elven knowledge and culture alive.

Tara spoke carefully. "I have read that the elves were not without fault when the troubles started that led to the Exalted March."

Sarel raised an elegant brow.

He replied, "Oh, I am certain we played a part in our downfall. We believed that the shemlen would not revoke their prophet's gift so lightly. We were wrong. They took our lands, forcing us to abandon our gods and live as beggars in shemlen cities. I have heard that Halamshiral still stands, and in it there is an Alienage. I wonder if the irony amuses the shemlen, or if they have forgotten that they did not build the city they rule themselves."

Danith quoted, her voice low and fervent, "*We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last elvhen. Never again shall we submit.*"

There was a rumble of assent. Everyone stared accusingly at Bronwyn again. She was not pleased to be challenged about her actions of seven hundred years before. Zathrian was smiling faintly, eyes half-closed. Bronwyn considered bringing up a major grievance that helped launch the Exalted March against them. It was, of course, the elves' isolationist refusal to participate in the war against the Second Blight; a refusal that climaxed in the elves watching from a distance as the entire city of Montsimmard was destroyed. It was useless, of course. and would only exacerbate the elves' hostility to her.

Trying to be diplomatic, she said only, "The Grey Wardens have the greatest respect for their Dalish allies, and for their Dalish brothers and sisters."

There was little else to say, unless she was to point out that she had not been there and had not driven any elves from their land. However, how could she deny that she, as a human

noble, had benefited from the destruction of the elven homeland? Very likely elves had once ruled in what was now Highever. Saying anything would probably only provoke a quarrel. She must keep to her mission. Becoming angry and combative would not gather allies against the Blight.

Zevran, however, had quite a bit to say in her support. "If I may, I would like to point out that our Commander was not born until the Dragon Age, and that her ancestors are Ferelden, and so did not take part in the Exalted March in Orlais."

"She doesn't even *like* the Orlesians!" Tara muttered angrily. "She's never been anything but kind to me, and she saved me from the Templars. She saved Danith's life, too! Did you tell them about *that*, Danith?"

"My life, as well," Zevran pointed out. "I certainly have not forgotten it."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, broken by Lanaya. She said softly, "Of course, we hope you do not take this story personally. We certainly would not wish to be inhospitable to a Grey Warden, who endures so much for the good of all, And of whom, I understand, our Keeper has requested a difficult and dangerous service."

The mutterings subsided—grudgingly—and Bronwyn bade them goodnight, feeling she had put up with quite enough criticism for the actions of the Orlesians and the Chantry for one night.

Astrid joined her, flashing a grimace. "Dalish hospitality, indeed," she murmured. "All things considered, I would rather be at the Warden Compound!"

Bronwyn smiled briefly. "As would I, my friend."

They moved out at daybreak without much conversation. Thinking hard while she helped feed and water the horses, Bronwyn decided that she would have to have it out with Danith eventually, but this was not the time or place. They had a wolf to hunt. They left the horses behind, hoping that nothing unfortunate would befall them, and traveled on foot.

Past the camp, the forest closed in: dense, humid, emerald green. In places, Bronwyn had to use her sword to clear the way.

It was old, that forest: watchful and not easily comprehended. Danith took the lead, her footfalls soundless on the thick soft floor of decayed vegetation. Generations of trees had strewn their leaves and dead branches here, and all of it had melded into the foundations of the earth itself.

Astrid grimaced at the feel of it under her boots. It was not honest stone. It was yielding and cloying. It smelled like something alive: like the soft corruption one sometimes found in the Deep Roads. It was not tainted, certainly, but it was alien to her nature. It reminded her unpleasantly of the time she had stepped on a nug in the dark,

"A strange place," she whispered to Bronwyn.

The human did not disagree. "I have never been in such an odd forest," she whispered. "I do not recognize some of the trees. You can tell by the size of them that they are extremely old. The lumbermen of Gwaren and South Reach must not come here. That black silkleaf, for example," she pointed out a thick-trunked tree with rough bark and glossy dark leaves, "is very valuable. A bed made from it would cost a hundred sovereigns in Denerim. Only a wealthy noble could afford such furniture."

Astrid eyed the tree with more respect. All wood, it seemed was not the same.

Faintly in the distance there was a deep groaning, like the creaking of frozen branches in winter. Danith paused, poised in mid-step, her head swiveling at the sound. The others fell silent.

"What is that?" Bronwyn asked softly.

"Hush!" Danith hissed. "It is something we do not wish to meet. Do not stray from the path!"

She moved on, hand brushing back an overhanging vine, peering into the green tunnel before them.

"It's very pretty," Tara murmured to Zevran. "Isn't it? I like the green light coming through the leaves. It's like the colored glass in the windows at the Circle Tower."

"Be cautious," Danith told them, leading the way. "Here there are trees...that are unfriendly..."

"Unfriendly?" Astrid asked. "How can trees be unfriendly?"

"Unfriendly trees?" Tara echoed. "That doesn't sound good."

"Sylvans," Danith murmured, looking about carefully. "Sometimes they...awaken." In a low voice she described them. "Oval leaves, narrow shape, Sometimes..." she confided. "Their trunks are double."

"Double?" asked Bronwyn. "I'm not sure I understand you."

"Like...legs."

"These trees...walk?" Bronwyn managed.

"So it has been told."

"Walking *trees*?" Tara said. "This entire forest thing is much more peculiar than I expected. What's *that*?"

Danith picked up the rank scent, and had barely time to turn her head, when the bear burst out of the woods, raging. Scout bayed a defiance, and rushed to meet it, teeth bared. Bronwyn's sword was already out. Tara uttered a short, sharp cry, before raising her new staff to freeze the beast. Zevran dove past her, running up behind.

The bear was too furious to be stopped so easily. It hurtled toward Danith, slowed but not halted. The elf loosed an arrow

and then another: quick, straight flashes through the green light.

Astrid thought it was rather like a bronto, but with more hair. She struck her shield with the flat of her blade, and shouted. The bear was briefly distracted from the archer, and roared with pain as gashes opened in its flank and black. Rearing up, it towered over them. Scout darted in, startling it, while arrow struck and sword blade cut.

It had claws! Astrid discovered, and yellowed fangs, which gnashed at her face. Flecks of red foams burst from the bear's throat with every roar. Crackles of energy sputtered from Tara's staff. Burnt fur smoked, turning the air thick and grey.

One of Danith's arrows found its throat, and Bronwyn's sword pierced its heart. It thrashed violently, pulling Zevran off his feet, and then rolled over, trembled, and was still.

"Is that a bear?" Astrid asked. "I have seen pictures of them. A black bear?"

"Yes," Danith said, extending her hand over the dead mass of fur and flesh. "A black he-bear." She murmured a quick blessing in elvish. "I have made peace with its spirit. It fought bravely against great odds."

Astrid was still curious. "Do people eat them? Dwarves eat brontos, and these are also large and fierce."

"Yes," Danith answered shortly. "They are nourishing. It would

be courteous to tell the clan of this, that the children eat well. It is not hot today. Perhaps we can bring some of the meat back with us later. I can quickly dress it and wrap it in a part of the hide. If I place it up in a tree branch, it should be all right for some hours."

Bronwyn and Zevran helped her, to move the work along faster. After all, they might want some themselves that night. Astrid watched in interest and Tara in mild horror. They finished, and resumed their tracking.

The sun was overhead, when they stopped briefly to rest. The air was mild and still, heavy with moisture. Bronwyn felt a little drowsy, and resented having to get up and continue. There was no help for it, though.

Danith moved ahead, scouting, studying the ground, bending to look and smell. After awhile she made a soft sound of disgust.

"The creatures are very close. They passed this way before noon."

It was not long before they met them. They were not darkspawn, but they were very frightening indeed. Three of them rushed out into a glassy spot on their little island. Instead of instantly attacking, they stopped, and one raised a...claw. It was exactly like a man gesturing to be allowed to speak.

Werewolves were thought to be extinct, and that was what

her tutor Aldous had assured Bronwyn, when as a little girl she had been distressed by tales of the Lycanthrope Plague during the Black Age. Haelia Cousland had raised a warband that had faced and slaughtered the creatures, driving the survivors into the Hafter River to drown. What the old tales did not make clear was how *big* werewolves were. Nor was Bronwyn prepared for how horribly man-like they seemed, as they slouched along on two legs.

And then the beast in the lead spoke. No story had ever warned her of talking werewolves. Even Scout was startled. The voice was deep and distorted, but it certainly spoke in words and the words expressed sentient thought.

"The watchwolves spoke truly, my brothers and sisters," it growled. "The Dalish, a human, and a dwarf, come to seek revenge.. come to put us in our place..." The creature's fellows answered him with growls and snarls.

After a thunderstruck moment, Bronwyn said carefully, "I had not expect to speak with you." She gripped her sword more tightly. "It was my understanding that werewolves were mindless beasts..."

A coughing bark. "We *are* beasts!" Yellow eyes glared into hers. "But we are neither simple nor mindless. We have names! I am Swiftrunner. I lead my cursed brothers and sisters! Go back to the Dalish, and tell them they have failed! Tell them that we will gladly watch them suffer as we have suffer. It is time for them to pay for what they have done!"

Things were obviously far more complicated than Zathrian had told her. Indeed, he had told her nothing important. These were thinking creatures, and they clearly thought themselves wronged.

"What have the Dalish done to anger you? Tell me more of this matter," she said, trying to look interested, and not intimidated. "We are not a hirelings of the Dalish," Bronwyn explained. "but Grey Wardens. We came here to enlist the aid of the Dalish against the Blight, and they said they were too weakened by your attacks to fulfill their obligations. I am here to talk and to see if some agreement can be reached. Can there not be a truce between you until the darkspawn are defeated?"

Her words pleased only Tara, Zevran, and Astrid. Danith was infuriated, and the werewolves unconvinced.

Swiftrunner snarled at her. "We care nothing for your Blight! We kill the darkspawn when we find them. Our quarrel is with the Dalish. They cursed us, and thought to escape revenge. A Dalish hunter stands at your side. Do not think to trick us!"

Bronwyn lifted her left hand in a peaceful gesture. "I am not seeking to trick you, but to understand. Tell me of this curse you suffer."

A chorus of growls. "You know nothing, do you!" Swiftrunner barked. "Nothing of the curse, and nothing of those you serve. We are done talking. Run to the Dalish, and tell them they are doomed!" The werewolf crouched, turning his back. "Come,

brothers and sisters! Leave them to the forest. It will deal with intruders as it always has!"

"Wait!" Bronwyn shouted. "I don't understand!"

Angry silence. "There is much more here than meets the eye," Astrid said. "These creatures are cursed and they blame the Dalish. Did the Dalish cast the curse on them first?"

Tara looked uneasy. "Zathrian didn't *tell* us that the Dalish cast the curse first..."

"No," Zevran smirked. "He did not. He was, remember, very evasive about its origin. Perhaps they cursed an enemy and got more than they bargained for."

"Why would my people do that?" Danith demanded hotly.

"We don't know, do we?" Astrid answered. "Could these werewolves have been a rival clan? Perhaps they were quarrelling over territory. All speaking peoples do that."

"I cannot believe that any elf would curse another in such a way," Danith protested. "Perhaps these creatures were wolves to begin with. Whatever happened, they must have deserved it!"

"Well, we won't know," Bronwyn said coldly, "until we find out a great deal more. Perhaps I can persuade them to tell me all about it. Zathrian might have told me that the creatures can speak and reason! Scout, track them!"

They followed at cautious speed, through bracken, up hill and down. They found more traces: trampled undergrowth and droppings.

"The air is different up ahead," Danith whispered, narrowing her eyes. "We are close." She sniffed the air. "Something is foul here. Something strange." Scout growled softly.

Tara muttered, "Something stranger than *walking trees*?"

Bronwyn pushed another branch aside, and stepped into a wide clearing. A huge expanse of ruins loomed ahead.

"Look at that!" Tara marveled.

They were quite impressive. A circular central structure rose up in a dome. Wings stretched out on other side, symmetrical and ornate. Even choked by the forest, it was a magnificent structure.

"Are those ruins Tevinter?" Astrid asked quietly. "I had not read they penetrated this far east."

"Not Tevinter," Bronwyn said under her breath. "There are Tevinter ruins all over the north. I've visited half a dozen in Highever and Amaranthine. We've all seen Ostagar. This is nothing like that."

Tara was wide-eyed with wonder and excitement. "Could they be elvish? Could this be something from the days of the elves before...everything happened?"

"It's very impressive," Zevran granted judiciously.

"Quite...beautiful." He asked Danith, "Have you been here before?"

"Never," Danith replied, studying the ruins with some unease. "No one comes this deep into the forest."

Bronwyn stopped and said, "That's...not entirely true."

The werewolf Swiftrunner rose up from the undergrowth and stood tall, silhouetted against the ruins. His muzzle was thrust forward in a snarl. Around him, other mighty forms emerged. The werewolves were out in force.

Swiftrunner roared, "Still you come! You are stronger than we could have imagined. The Dalish chose well. But you do not belong here, outsider. Leave this place!"

Bronwyn said, "You suffer from a curse. The Dalish are suffering from a curse. The same curse. You want the same thing, surely? To end this curse? Let me see if I can resolve this dispute, and find a way to help all of you!"

"You are sent by the treacherous Dalish to kill Witherfang! I will not stand by and allow that to happen!"

"Is Witherfang your leader?"

"You know nothing, and I am not about to enlighten you. This is our place! Here Witherfang protects us. Here we learn our names! We will defend Witherfang and this place with our

lives!"

With shocking speed, the werewolves dropped to all fours, and charged.

Thanks to my reviewers: demoncnargles, mutive, SkaterGirl246 Dante Alighieri1308, Juliafied, Sarah1281, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, MsBarrows, Aoi24, Josie Lange, cloud1004, JackOfBladesX, Enaid Aderyn, Zute, Psyche Sinclair, karinfan123, Remenants, Jenna53, Shakespira, Eva Galana, almostinsance, Jyggilag, Kira Kyuu, Judy, euromellows, The Moidart, derko5, Valmothg, mille libri, Casey, Tyanilth, and Have Socks. Will Travel.

Fergus before Amaranthine is much like Henry V before Harfleur. Act III, scene 3.

Sick as a dog in Baltimore. Not a great chapter, but all I can manage with food poisoning. I hate traveling for work.

43. Where the Dead Walk

Victory at Ostagar

Thank you, Bioware, for the lovely eloquence of the Lady of the Forest.

Chapter 43: Where the Dead Walk

The sheer momentum of the werewolves' rush nearly knocked Bronwyn off her feet. Scout was already in front, teeth bared in rage, and he slammed one of the werewolves aside, wrestling with it, growling horribly. Tara shrieked spells and Zevran dodged and spun, evading the slashing claws and dripping fangs. Danith rolled out of the way and began loosing arrows with lightning speed. Like a rock, Astrid threw up her shield and stopped a werewolf in full attack. Bronwyn's sword caught one across the muzzle, and laid it open. The creature jerked away, howling. These were terrible creatures, but they were no more terrible than the darkspawn. Bronwyn gritted her teeth and lunged for a shaggy belly, as one of the werewolves reared up on its hind legs.

It was a brief, furious fight: an endless moment of savage action. Two werewolves lay dead, bleeding out into the dust. Abruptly, the fight was broken off, when Bronwyn was struck down by a mass of white fur. Scout snarled and snapped at

the newcomer. Bronwyn scrambled to her sword and was up, panting.

The surviving werewolves had drawn back, and were ranged behind the biggest wolf Bronwyn had ever seen.

Witherfang.

It was no werewolf, nor was it like any wolf of Nature. There was no doubt, looking into those yellow, intelligent eyes, that this was a creature of magic. The white wolf backed away slowly, urging the wounded werewolves along.

Zevran had been raked along his arm, and Tara flicked a healing spell his way. They watched, frozen, as the werewolves retreated. Witherfang bounded ahead, and the tallest of the werewolves rallied the remaining creatures, shouting commands.

"We are invaded! Fall back to the ruins! Protect the Lady!"

"The Lady?" wondered Tara, healing a graze across Scout's back. "What Lady?"

"These creatures must have a ruler we have not yet seen," was Astrid's opinion.

"They are beasts," Danith said dismissively.

"No," Bronwyn said sharply. "They are thinking, speaking beings. Thus, they are not beasts, but *people*." She muttered,

"Whatever their appearance, they are *people*..."

Their cries growing fainter, the werewolves vanished into the huge, crumbling ruin. Bronwyn blew out a breath. They would have to go in after them, whether they went to fight or to parley.

"Come on."

"So..." Tara muttered. "this is Werewolf City. Fancier than I expected."

"Not what any of us expected," Zevran agreed. "Is it a palace? A temple? It has no obvious fortifications."

"Thus," Astrid deduced, "it was conceived and built during a time of peace."

Bronwyn nodded. Whatever it was, it was very, very old. Older than Ostagar or the northern ruins. Older than the spire of Fort Drakon. Warily she approached the entrance. The doors were long gone, and vegetation twined greenly around the arched opening. Scout, too, was wary, but seemed to sense no immediate threat.

Ancient trees had become one with the structure. The party descended some crumbling stone steps, and then slid down enormous roots systems to access the entrance hall. Looking around, it was clear that the building was even larger than it appeared from the outside.

"A lot of it must be underground," Bronwyn muttered.

"Underground?" Tara asked. "I didn't know elves lived underground. Danith, have you heard of this?"

"Never," the Dalish elf admitted reluctantly. "These symbols and carving do appear to be elven designs, but underground passages? No. This is truly strange."

"We are not the first visitors, either," said Astrid, examining a pile of bones. "This must be an unlucky adventurer. Perhaps he was killed by the werewolves, or perhaps by something else."

They found more remains: human, elven—even dwarven, as they moved further into the chamber. Passages led off in several directions.

Scout barked and rushed forward. Two werewolves charged out of the shadows, snarling. Danith, up on the steps and a little behind the others, had a clear shot. She brought one werewolf down almost immediately. The other fell to spells and swords. Bronwyn eased cautiously into the passage from which they had emerged. A long staircase led down, down, down. With grim determination they moved down it. Danith stayed in the rear, watching to see if they were followed. At the base of the staircase they found a heavy metal door.

It was locked and barred from the inside.

"They're here, aren't they, Scout?" Bronwyn whispered.

Scout stared at the door, and growled softly.

"We could wait until they come out," Tara suggested. "They have to come out sometime, don't they?"

"Alas, *carina*," Zevran whispered back, "this may not be the only entrance."

"You're right," Bronwyn agreed. "Let us explore this ruin. Perhaps there is a...back door."

They trudged up the long staircase, back to the entry hall, and moved through the main passage into the ruin. Almost immediately, they discovered that the ruin was home to more than werewolves.

Bronwyn had not realized immediately what the long white cords were. She touched one, expecting to feel silken plant fiber, and was disgusted when it clung to her hand, finally snapping away with a dull, low vibration. A strange clicking filled the air. Scout nearly jumped, uttering an undignified squeal. When the bloated bodies scuttled out of the side passage, Bronwyn swore.

"Andraste's bloody knickers! Spiders!" she shouted. "Bloody big spiders! Tara! Freeze them!"

She had seen creatures like these before. These were not exactly like the spiders either in Lothering or in the Deep Roads: they were smaller, a little bigger than a mabari. Aside from that, they seemed equally intent on having Warden for

dinner. Glittering black eyes fixed on prey. Tara's spells worked better than Danith's arrows. Bronwyn hacked at furry legs, disabling them, and then plunged her sword into the grotesque bodies. One by one the spiders fell, twitching, and turned belly-up.

"That was nasty," Tara said.

"They are disgusting," Danith agreed, crouching down by one, and digging out the poison gland with her dagger. "Their poison can be useful, however."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "I still have some of the last we brewed from the Deep Roads spiders. It can be very effective."

Danith did a double-take, surprised that her companions had seen such creatures before. Even Astrid was unsurprised by them. Danith had thought they lived only in the depths of the forest. "In the Deep Roads?"

Astrid confirmed this. "Parts of Ortan Thaig are crawling with them. They're bigger there, too."

They cleared out the chambers along the passage one by one, carefully not to let themselves be trapped. Danith and Scout found few signs of the werewolves here: this was the realm of the spiders. Huge cocoons hung from the ceilings, horribly man-shaped. They were old enough that there was clearly nothing alive left in them. Bronwyn shuddered.

The halls and chambers were littered with broken weapons, disintegrating armor, and rotting sheets of parchment, but here and there they found treasure. Some chests contained old coins—mostly silver—and now and then they came upon a weapon or piece of armor that was still sound. They pocketed the coins, and Zevran found a little pouch of jewels that disappeared under his breastplate. Cautiously, they moved on, checking each passage.

"Feel the air," Danith said at the mouth of one. "This passage leads to a large chamber with either windows or another entrance."

Yes, Bronwyn could feel the dank current swelling up from below. Scout lowered his head, growling.

"The werewolves?" she asked quietly.

"Perhaps."

Scout growled a little louder, and padded carefully down the stairs. The rest followed him. There was a turn, and they went down another half-dozen steps. Then Bronwyn caught the smell herself. It reminded her of...Flemeth.

"It's a dragon," she said instantly. "It's a dragon."

Tara hissed suddenly, drawing back. "I smell it, too!" she whispered. "It can't be as big as Flemeth, can it? Not and live inside?"

Bronwyn peered into the cavernous chamber before them. Shadows clung to the to lofty ceiling, and gathered further in. The room was nearly as large as the Landsmeet Chamber. Stray rays of light from cracks in the roof illuminated the place, but dimly. Bones littered the floor: bones of people and of animals. Bronwyn recognized bear bones, deer bones—that might be halla—and even ox bones.

"The werewolves have gone through here, though not recently," Danith said softly, reading the signs on the floor. "Perhaps they know when the dragon sleeps, or they cling to the walls."

Bronwyn gestured at the animal bones. "Or they leave an offering and run through while the dragon is busy eating."

"Perhaps. That might work."

"Do you suppose it likes spiders?" Tara asked nervously. "I don't think we have enough jerky for a dragon."

Bronwyn picked up the leg bone of an ox and tossed it, end-over-end, into the darkness. It fell to the stone floor with a clatter. An answering rumble made the floor tremble. A large shadow detached itself from the ceiling and flapped down to investigate.

It was certainly a dragon, but it was really not much bigger than a big horse. It nosed at the bone with a blunt snout, snorting. Tara clutched at her staff. Bronwyn gestured at Zevran and pointed to the left. He nodded. Astrid she

gestured to the right.

The dwarf shook her head. "I have a shield," she whispered on a thread of breath. "*You go right.*" Bronwyn shrugged, and gave Scout a pat. He knew what to do. He would stay with his Bronwyn.

Smoothly and silently, Danith nocked an arrow. Bronwyn mouthed, "The eyes and throat." Danith nodded, drawing her bow.

They burst out on the dragon with silent fury. Three arrows struck before the warriors reached the dragon, one hitting under the left eye. The creature reared back, pained and outraged, spouting flame. Astrid caught that on her shield, crouching behind it, while Zevran rushed in from the left and Bronwyn and Scout from the right. Tara cast a paralysis curse—which slowed it somewhat—and then cast a glyph on the floor to keep it immobilized. It missed. Green light glowed behind the dragon. Tara swore horribly, and tried again.

Wounded and squealing, the dragon lashed out with a claw. Zevran danced over it and rolled away. Astrid shouted, banging her sword on her shield. The ugly head swiveled in her direction, and the dragon inhaled ominously. Another gout of flame burst forth. Bronwyn bounded forward, her silverite sword gripped in two hands and she aimed at the outstretched neck with all her strength. The blade severed the spine and stuck in the neck half way through. The flame became a trickle, and the beast uttered a horrible, unnatural croaking scream. The neck flopped, and Bronwyn's grip on

the sword pulled her down with it. Scout bayed furiously, fearing that she was hurt. Everyone else slammed the dragon with everything they had. The creature screamed again, a wet guttural cry, and thrashed in its death throes. When it lay still, Bronwyn had to set her boot on the neck while she struggled to pull her blade free. At her first fumbling, impotent attempt, Zevran and Tara burst out laughing from relieved tension and excitement.

"Very funny," snarked Bronwyn. She tugged again, and then again, and at last she could wipe her sword and sheathe it.

Many people—many creatures—had died in this chamber over the ages. There were no whole bodies, for the dragon had clawed away the armor to feast on the flesh inside, but in the jumble of bones, one could recognize the symbols of many lands and noble houses, as well as the amulets and signs of gods other than the Maker and his Prophet Andraste. Astrid picked up a signet ring, and shook her head.

"You were a long way from home, House Dace. What brought you here? *Atrast nal tunsha*, my friend."

Zevran moved to the back of the chamber, and they discovered that a portion of the wall had collapsed, making a tunnel into yet another part of the building. In front of them was a great deal of broken stone, fallen from the ceiling over time. Some of it had made a little wall, and Zevran stopped, staring at what was hidden behind it.

"Come and see!" he called.

"That's...quite the treasure," Bronwyn said, impressed. She had read of dragon hoards, but seeing one for herself was something of an event. Four chests were overflowing with loot. Silver chains, carved malachite, armor, weapons, winking jewels, and everywhere the glint of gold.

"Well," Zevran declared. "I for one hope we survive today, because I would very much like to take this with us."

"We can't carry it all," smiled Bronwyn, hunkering down to fish out an amazing two handled cup of polished malachite. The handles and base were pure gold, beautifully chased. She dusted it off, admiring the pattern in the rich green stone. "A pity, though. This is gorgeous."

"This treasure," huffed Danith, "belongs to the elves."

Astrid, who was admiring a gold torque with wolves at the finials, narrowed her eyes and looked up. "And just how do you make that out?" she asked coolly.

"It used to be the dragon's," Tara argued, holding up a pair of elaborate gold earrings. Inside the big hoops, little jeweled leaves danced and trembled. "Now it's ours by right of conquest. That's the law of battle."

"Some of it is of elven workmanship, my halla," said Zevran suavely. "but much of it is not. And if elves lived here once, they have long since changed their place of residence."

Bronwyn said pleasantly, "And as I said, we cannot possibly take it all with us. You are perfectly welcome to tell Zathrian about this, Danith, However, we did indeed kill the dragon, so everyone gets to take one thing now, because we may or may not be able to return. One thing, agreed to by all—and a pair of earrings counts as one thing, Tara."

"Oh good!" cried the elf mage. "I want to wear them right now!"

"Does anyone object to Tara's possession of the earrings?" Bronwyn asked her companions. Danith scowled, but shook her head.

"And I want this," Astrid said, displaying the massive gold torque. "This is good workmanship."

"Made by my ancestors," Bronwyn told her. "That's old Alamarri. The wolf was an important totem among them. I have no objection."

"I want that," Danith declared, pointing to the cup in Bronwyn's hands.

"That's mean," objected Tara, "Bronwyn already picked that."

Bronwyn paused, incredibly annoyed, and then smiled graciously. "But I did not publicly call dibs on it. Take it, Danith, if it pleases you. I shall find something else." Politely, she waited for Zevran to make his choice.

He gave Danith a swift, disappointed glance, and made his choice quickly: a wickedly narrow and sharp stiletto, its gold and ivory hilt fashioned in the image of a naked woman. The lovely eyes were tiny sapphires. More sapphires studded the little headdress that was the only thing the woman wore. The blade was silverite, and untarnished.

"That's quite a masterpiece," Bronwyn said, impressed. "Tevinter make, and very ancient, I would guess."

"I cannot resist a beautiful woman," declared Zevran, slipping it into his boot.

"Now, you, Bronwyn," Tara said jealously. "And pick out something really nice!"

Fortunately, there were lots of nice things. Bronwyn plunged her hand into one chest and came up with a necklace of big cabochon rubies, smooth and crimson as drops of blood. Each of the rubies was set cunningly in gold.

"Magnificent, my dear Warden!" admired Zevran.

Bronwyn smirked at Danith, and fastened the necklace around her throat, dropping it under her armor.

Not wishing to spend another moment on this trifling matter, Bronwyn led them through the broken wall into a long passage, and found that they had moved from the realm of the living to that of the dead. Dragons and giant spiders were at least material, natural creatures.

But here, the dead walked. Shambling skeletons barred their path, mindlessly advancing until they were cut down. Some of them might be the shades of those adventurers who had died here, but more—

"I think this was a burial place," Tara said. "Look!"

"You're right," Astrid agreed. "It explains a great deal. It is like Bownammar, the dwarven City of the Dead. This great structure, if not a city of elven dead, is at least their palace."

The chamber they entered contained a large stone block. Not accustomed to the concept of burying whole bodies, it took Bronwyn a moment to process what she was looking at. "It's a coffin," she said, searching for the exact word.

"A...sarcophagus."

"There are more," said Zevran, glancing into another chamber.

Tara found it morbid, but interesting. "I read that in Nevarra, they still bury their dead. The rich build huge tombs like houses, with parlors and libraries and ballrooms. It seems so bizarre. I think it's clear that in ancient times the elves buried their dead in these stone sarcophagi."

Astrid thought it very appropriate and rather like home, despite the intrusive tree roots and the random shafts of sunlight, here and there. "The ancient elves respected the power of Stone. Very interesting, indeed. I once read that some elves, when attacked by the ancient Tevinters, took refuge in one of the lost dwarven thaigs, and dwelled there

until the advent of the darkspawn."

Danith scowled. The building seemed very alien, but of course their ancestors had not been forced to move from place to place, fleeing human oppression. They had established this great burial temple, and it would have had provided places to stay for visiting families and for the elves who maintained it. That was probably what the first part of the building they had explored was. It was all a fascinating lesson in elven history. The elves had lost so much; but here, right in the forest, was a piece of their past. The passage opened into a large room with smaller passages leading off from each cardinal point.

"Why are the dead so restless?" Bronwyn wondered. "Could it be because the building is deteriorating?"

"I don't think so," Tara shook her head. "My guess is that...sorry to give you the bad news...I think a demon has taken up residence. The Veil..."

A ghostly elf child rushed past, sobbing.

"Mamae? Mamae?"

"...is torn here," Tara finished her thought.

Scout whimpered. Bronwyn felt like whimpering herself. One heard stories about such phantoms, but it seemed unbelievable. This was no demon, but a wandering spirit. Danith, deeply distressed, tried to talk to the child in stumbling Old Elvish. The spirit did not seem to hear her, and dashed

away, vanishing at the doorway to one of the side passages. More walking dead rose in his wake.

"*Braska!*" snarled Zevran.

They hacked their way through the mindless monsters. They were hard to put down, but not hard to outsmart. It was dangerous and tiresome, and Bronwyn knew that if they had not had to find those bloody werewolves, she would not be here, intruding on an elven burial ground.

The corridors branched.

"Which way?" Tara muttered.

"It doesn't matter," Bronwyn said, "We'll probably have to clear it all out in the end." She led them up a short, broad flight of steps. With some effort on their part, double doors opened on a vast room—larger than the dragon's lair. It was on many levels. On the lowest, dense mist rose from the floor. It was filled with elaborate sarcophagi. Broad pillars supported the rich and inlaid ceiling, like a forest of stone. They all paused, admiring the sight.

"Splendid!" Astrid exclaimed, her opinion of the ancient elves rising with each sign of their artistry and fine craftsmanship.

"It *is* beautiful," Tara agreed.

"The werewolves do not come here," Danith said positively, examining the dusty floor. Scout seemed to concur.

"Could we look around, Bronwyn?" Tara asked. "Just a little?"

"If you like," Bronwyn agreed. "We need a rest, anyway." She took a long drink from her canteen, and they moved slowly through the burial chamber, stopping to admire this piece of carving or that mosaic. It was a fantastic, dream-like place. There were inscriptions on the sarcophagi, in letters and script unknown to Bronwyn. Danith stood tracing one with a reverent fingertip, her brow furrowed.

"Do you know what it says?" Tara asked softly.

Danith shook her head, defeated. "We have lost...so *much*. I cannot even read the words of my ancestors..."

Up some mellowed stone stairs they found a round stone platform with an open stone coffin. In it was the skeleton of a woman. Her gems glittered: the remains of jewel-colored silks clung to her bones.

"She must have been a very important woman among the elves," Bronwyn judged. "A leader? A queen?"

"Why is her coffin open?" Astrid asked.

"*Uthenera*," Danith murmured. "Truly. She lay here in the waking sleep of the elves for countless years...perhaps ages. When her family visited, she would awaken to speak to them, and afterward slip back into the living dream. It is said that there were those who were refreshed by centuries of this, and awakened to once more tread the earth. She chose, it

seems, never to rise." She leaned closer. A mist seemed to be gathering in the coffin... Zevran grabbed at her arm and yanked her back.

Well," Tara said, readying her staff, "she's rising now."

The angry, beautiful phantom did not seem to care if some of them were elves. She shouted curses and imprecations in echoing Elvish that Danith could not follow. Scout snapped at the the things she summoned. Swords could defeat those faceless masses of flesh, but only Tara's spells could slow or hinder the elven queen's phantom.

"This is more work of the demon!" cried Tara. "We must get out of here!" She cast a web of blue light at the phantom, imprisoning it long enough for the party to take to their heels. The floor trembled. They dashed through the broad double doors and slammed them shut.

"There," Tara assured them. "She cannot leave the burial chamber, but she ought not to be wandering at all. If we can find the demon and kill it, she and the other spirits of this place will be at peace again."

Bronwyn blew out a breath. Now they had to look for a demon, too? Of course, it was more likely, with their luck, that the demon would find *them*.

In the opposite direction down the long hall were many smaller chambers. Most of these held tombs. Nearly all were refuges of the walking dead. One contained a powerful, malignant

manifestation, that Tara identified as a Revenant. Bronwyn's sword arm ached after they finished putting it down.

One small room appeared to be a library. Tattered volumes filled bookshelves, and many tomes lay scattered on the floor. A wooden rack held a curious crystal phial, crowned with a gem. Further back in the room was a stone slab that was too small for a sarcophagus. It had, instead, the look of an altar. Tara was interested in the crystal phial and picked it up, studying it thoughtfully.

"What is it, Tara?" asked Danith.

The mage shook her head, frowning, and touched the gem on the stopper, then walked over to the altar. She laid the phial on it, and abruptly collapsed.

Zevran rushed forward and caught her, lowering her to the ground. Almost instantly, she opened her eyes.

"Oh...hello!" Tara said, smiling up at them, a little dazed. "Did I faint?"

"You certainly did!" Bronwyn replied, kneeling by her in concern. "Are you all right?"

"I think so. I'll cast rejuvenation on myself. I hadn't realized I was getting so tired." A blue wash of light spilled over her. "That's better. I'm fine now."

They helped her up and dusted her off, and then went on.

Tara smiled quietly to herself.

There was no need to frighten the others. Mundanes grew alarmed when they heard of mages conversing with spirits, always expecting the worst. What Tara had experienced was something astonishing: communication with the spirit of an ancient elf. The being had died long ago and been trapped in the phial for countless centuries. The first clue that something was unusual here was that the gem had been warm to the touch. And then, touching it, Tara's mind swam with visions and memories of a life not her own. She sensed keening loneliness and inarticulate longing. A presence was there: tenuous, desperate, half-mad, tormented by long imprisonment. In exchange for Tara helping him escape his prison to final death, he offered her a wealth of knowledge...very remarkable, specialized knowledge. The elf had been a mage, like Tara, but also a warrior, using his magic to enhance his skill at arms.

"Whoever follows the path of the Arcane Warrior," the spirit whispered, "will be the last of the Order."

"Not the last!" Tara promised. "Not the last! I shall share with my friends! Your knowledge will live again."

When she set the phial on the altar, there had been a burst of rapid images: some violent; some meditative. The sword on her back could be a sword indeed. The presence faded: grateful for the release, joyful at the prospect of oblivion...

Tara walked on. She could hardly wait to tell Jowan.

There was a new chamber, full of traps and more walking dead. Tediously, they slew the dead and even more tediously, they disabled the traps. On the floor of the chamber, Bronwyn found a small weathered journal, and thumbed through the pages that were still decipherable.

...And when his kingdom fell, so disappeared the stolen riches of an age. The beast, the Unbound, dormant until one of true spirit claims his throne. So must hunt the hero of his people, the principled who would search for ancient evil. This is how they can make a real difference...

A little further on, the handwriting became less antiquated.

...The riders follow after every town, ever since my lucky break deciphering the story. I see it now, how they take the locals closest to me, preventing rest or kinship. I thought this a road to glory, but I am dogged at every step by his talons. Gaxkang: curse his name and the day I heard it...

At the bottom of the page, a message was scribbled in a shakier hand.

Three pages, three ages. Same story, updated.

Same as the tavern song, but older!

Signature torn on purpose, but compare and get "Vilhm Madon".

All from him! How?

Inserted among the pages was a single piece of parchment,

apparently part of a letter, with the signature torn off.

...You asked, so I'm telling you. Don't go. The stories talk of the riches, but never the names, never where they supposedly spent their wealth. I heard the same tales as a lad in Denerim, felt the same pull, but it's a lie, son. They may paint a trail, but once you're on it, does it lead to the beast or back to you?

There were maps: lots of them, and lots of them of places Bronwyn did not know. It seemed an interesting diversion, so she slipped it under her breastplate, and went on.

The final room they eventually came upon was the largest of all, and lit with magical lamps. An upper gallery was furnished with a long table which supported strange instruments: crystal phials, armillary spheres, oddly-shaped tools of silverite. Down a grand, broad staircase, the wide floor was scored in mystic circles. Brooding statues stood guard. In the center circle was a great globe of glass and gilded bronze.

"It's here," Tara said softly. "Something nasty."

The wraith, or spirit, or demon that opposed them was nasty indeed. It was the source of the walking dead, and raised many against them now: horrid, shambling creatures that were the most life-like they had yet seen. The wraith itself was vaguely man-shaped, but long and attenuated. It floated several feet above the floor and could vanish and appear in any of the circles it chose. A mere gesture could generate

blasts of concussive magic. Finally, the party broke up and stood guard at each circle, ready with magic or a blade, and succeeded in weakening the monster enough that it could no longer escape. Thin, pale ichor dripped from its wounds, and its scream was a high, tearing sound, very painful to hear. When it at last perished, a hush fell over the ruin.

"I think that takes care of it," Tara said, burning the gruesome remains with magical fire. "I wish I had some salt, though: a lot of it. Does anybody have any silver?"

The ashes were scattered, and the circles were defaced with silver, made molten by Tara's magic. "It won't be coming back," she said, brushing her hands off with satisfaction.

"Then let's go," Bronwyn said, relieved. "We can go this way, or we can go that way."

Because there were only the two side corridors. The one they first explored proved to be yet another burial chamber, filled with sarcophagi.

"It's got to be the other, then," laughed Zevran. "Don't they say that you find things in the last place you look?"

They found only more sarcophagi, and another dead end. Bones littered the floor. One of the sarcophagi lids was broken, hinting at rich grave goods within. A square dark pool of water glittered in the middle of the room. A ritual bath? A cistern? Bronwyn scratched her head in irritation.

Tara was baffled. "Where are the werewolves? Did we miss them?"

Danith was also baffled, but annoyed as well. "There's no other place to look. I am certain we did not miss a passage or a hidden door." She made a face. "It stinks of them in here."

Scout agreed. He sniffed at the floor, the reek of werewolves filling his nose. He followed it to where it stopped, and sat down, looking at Bronwyn expectantly.

"There is one more place to look," Bronwyn said grimly, walking to the pool. "Here."

The black water could not have looked more foul and uninviting. Nevertheless, Bronwyn removed her weapons and set about stripping off her armor. Zevran helped her with suspicious eagerness, and she granted him a wry grin. Once down to her smallclothes and her new ruby necklace, she lowered herself gingerly into the water, hating the smell and the chill of it. Very carefully, she began feeling her way around the sides.

It was not a deep pool, but it was deep enough for the water to cover her head when her feet reached the bottom. Blindly, she groped along the walls, moving carefully, lest she suddenly find a pit under her feet. It was unnerving, and she expected at any moment to feel hands—or claws—clutching at her legs.

Out of breath, she broke the surface, gasping. Water trickled

from her ears and hair. With a hiss of annoyance, she pushed the wet hair away from her face.

"Did you find anything?" Tara called out. Scout nosed at the water, whimpering.

"Not yet." Down she ducked again, moving past a corner to another wall, her fingernails scraping over chipped tiles. If she could find nothing in the sides, she would have to feel her way over the entire bottom, which did not much appeal to her.

Another corner, another wall. She went up for more air, saw that her people were all right, and dove down again, her hands seeking.

There! The plunge into the void startled her, and she flinched back reflexively. Then she felt again. A large, circular opening. Probing deeper, she felt rounded sides.

"A tunnel!" she gasped out, splashing. "A tunnel that goes toward that wall." She pointed. "I'll follow it as far as I can. I can't believe that those werewolves are any great shakes at swimming underwater."

She took a deep breath and plunged down again, lost to sight. Only the rough ripples in the water hinted that someone was in the dark water.

"I can't swim at all," Tara confessed in a small voice.

"Neither can I," Astrid said grimly. "We'll improvise,

somehow."

Bronwyn forced herself to keep her eyes open, as she knifed through the tunnel. She could only go so far, for she must have enough breath to get back. A faint glimmer of light teased her. Her imagination? Taking the risk, though her lungs warned her against it, she swam on.

She scraped her hand on the edge of the tunnel and rose toward dim light, wondering if there would be a werewolf with a torch above the water. She broke the surface, gasping, and twisted around for a quick look.

To her relief, there was nothing. Another empty chamber. This one, too held sarcophagi, but was better lit, with more torches. It also smelled of more frequent use. Bronwyn made a face, thinking about what the werewolves probably did in this water. Across the room was another door—thank the Maker, a closed door. She clambered out of the pool, dripping and nearly naked, and walked softly to the door, pressing her ear against it.

But the doors in the ruin were heavy, and she could hear nothing. Giving the door the gentlest push, she peered through a crack into the next room. It was spacious and littered with animal skeletons, excrement, and other debris. In the distance, she could hear growling conversation.

Steeling herself to brave the pool again, she slipped down into the water, took another lungful of air, and swam back through the tunnel, more quickly this time. Since she knew what to

expect, it was not so difficult. She burst up out of the water to Scout's excited barking and her friends' relieved cries.

"Yes, there's a tunnel," she told them. "It leads to another pool, just on the other side of that wall. The werewolves aren't far away, so we'll need to be quiet. You don't even have to swim. You can crawl along the tunnel if you're fast. You've just got to take a really big breath and not give up until you're out. The problem will be our gear, but I can take it all in a few trips."

"As can I," Zevran assured her. "I can help Tara and Astrid and with our possessions as well."

"I can help, too," Danith volunteered.

"If it is not far," Astrid said, "I will wear my weapons, at least."

"Fine," Bronwyn agreed. "Let's get everything bundled up and make it as water-resistant as possible."

Danith had a special gut pouch for her bowstrings, which were her main concern. Bronwyn asked that she put the little journal and their tinderboxes in it for safe-keeping. Their clothes and armor would be wet, but there was no help for that. These items were bundled up for easier carrying.

It took some time to get through the underwater tunnel. Bronwyn took one trip, bearing her armor and wearing her weapons, and then went back to help Astrid through. Then she urged Scout after her, hoping he did not panic. He almost

did, and shook himself afterwards, coughing and sputtering.

"Only a mabari could do that, Scout," Bronwyn praised him.

With one thing and another, they all made it to the pool on the other side of the wall, and emerged with relief, dripping and wringing out their hair. Putting on their armor was very unpleasant indeed, but must be done, and eventually they were battleready once more. There was nothing left but to follow the werewolf voices to the heart of their lair.

The door creaked as they opened it. There was a barking roar, and three surprised werewolves leaped at them, raging. Bronwyn expected more to come: they were making an unholy racket. The werewolves screamed as blades bit into them, and the Wardens swore and shouted. Metal tore away flesh and shattered bone. Two of the werewolves went down: one quickly, one thrashing in agony. The last of them broke off the fight and fled down a passage, yelping.

Grimly, Bronwyn wiped her sword and slowly followed.

In a windowless, torchlit room, three werewolves were waiting. Bronwyn braced herself for an attack that did not come. One of the creatures was bleeding from the fight, and slunk back into the shadows, its tail between its legs.

The tallest of them, a pale-furred creature, rumbled, "I am Gatekeeper. We did not think you could come so far. We do not wish anymore of our people to be hurt. I ask you,

outsider: Are you willing to parley?"

Big as they were, the werewolves seemed afraid. Why not? They were in mortal danger. Bronwyn wondered what was in the lair beyond the door? Were there children...babies, even? She was here for Witherfang, not to slaughter creatures that were defending their home.

"All right," she said slowly, "let's talk."

Gatekeeper made a brusque gesture. "Not with me! I come on behalf of the Lady of the Forest. She means you no harm. She believes you may not know all you need to know to judge fairly. She is willing to meet with you, provided your offer of parley is an honest one."

"Not an ambush?"

"What would be the point? You have already proven your strength. We have no wish to anger you further."

"Why did you not make this offer earlier?"

"Swiftrunner did not think it would matter. He thought you would attack and kill no matter what was said. The Lady disagrees, and since you have forced yourself this far, we must acquiesce to her wishes."

Finally! A sensible person. She was eager to meet this Lady of the Forest. Bronwyn glanced at Astrid, who nodded. They would give it a try.

"Very well. Take me to this...Lady."

It was not far. Another short passage...another door. It opened on a round chamber whose walls were deeply penetrated by massive roots. Light slanted down a shaft leading up to the surface. It appeared that the last of the werewolves were here: less than a score in number. Some were growling and defiant: some cringing and terrified. There was a sudden stir, and from among them emerged the strangest being Bronwyn had ever seen. Woman-like in shape, fair and slender. but pale green as young shoots and twined with brown roots. She was nearly naked, save for the thin, brown branches twisting up from her thighs and curving tenderly around her breasts. Her long, straight hair was dark, and her eyes brown and opaque as the bark of old oaks. Her hands—the fingers ending in sere and leafless twigs—rested on the shoulders of two of the werewolves. The beasts knelt in submission. The rest followed suit. Scout sniffed and wagged his tail, just a little.

"I bid you welcome, mortal. I am the Lady of the Forest."

Bronwyn almost broke into a smile at the sound of that voice: gentle and lovely, refined and musical. She summoned up all her diplomatic training, and gave a little bow.

"Greetings, Lady. I am glad you have permitted me to speak with you."

The werewolves growled. Swiftrunner shouted, "Do not trust her, my lady! She will betray you! We must attack!"

Tension boiled in the air, and then ebbed at the sound of the Lady's exquisite voice.

"Hush, Swiftrunner. Your impulse to fight will only lead to the deaths of those you wish to protect. Is that what you want?"

"No, my lady," Swiftrunner rumbled hopelessly. "Anything but that."

There was a silence. Then the Lady spoke to Bronwyn again.

"I apologize on Swiftrunner's behalf. He struggles...with his nature."

"As do we all, Lady," Bronwyn said quietly.

A soft, ironic laugh. "Truer words were never spoken; but for these creatures it is an extraordinary burden, for their nature is a curse, forced upon them. You must have questions. There are many things that Zathrian has not told you."

"And why should we believe you?" Danith challenged her.

Bronwyn scowled. "I wish to hear your version of the tale," she said to the Lady.

Tara put her hand on Danith's shoulder, much as the Lady had with Swiftrunner. Zevran gave Danith a quick, repressive look, and both sides quieted themselves to hear what the Lady of the Forest had to say.

She began, "It was Zathrian who created this curse: the curse

the werewolves bear; the curse his people now suffer. Hundreds of years ago, when Zathrian was a young man, the Dalish came to this part of the forest. Zathrian had children then: a son and a daughter whom he loved dearly. Nearby lived a human tribe, who wished to drive the Dalish away. One day, when Zathrian was away, they attacked and captured the boy and the girl."

Swiftrunner took up the tale: "The boy they tortured and killed. The girl was raped and left for dead. The Dalish found her, and she discovered she was with child. She...killed herself."

"And so," said the Lady, "Zathrian cursed the humans..."

Danith surged forward. "They deserved it!"

"Sshh!" Tara hushed her. Bronwyn turned and frowned, signaling to them all to be silent. She gave the Lady a slight nod.

After a moment, the Lady continued.

"Zathrian raised a terrible spirit from the forest, binding it in the body of a great wolf, whom you know as Witherfang. This creature hunted the humans. Some he killed, and some survived his attacks, but the curse passed to them. They became werewolves: savage monsters preying on loved ones and strangers alike. The human tribe fled the forest, leaving behind their cursed kin. Many generations have lived and died as werewolves. Other humans, traveling through the forest, have become infected by ill chance. The actual perpetrators of

the crime against Zathrian's children, of course, are long since dead and dust. And so the werewolves have lived in this forest for almost two centuries: pitiful mindless beasts."

"Until you came, my lady," rumbled Swiftrunner. "You gave us peace."

The Lady nodded thoughtfully. "I showed Swiftrunner that there was another side to his bestial nature. As you see, they have come to have a society of their own. They have learned speech, and struggle to live as rationally as their werewolf nature allows them. They have taken names. They have regained, if not their memories of their former lives, at least their minds."

Bronwyn was about to ask why, if the werewolves had regained their minds, they did not attempt to rejoin human society, but stopped. It was a ridiculous question. Who would accept such creatures?

Instead, she asked, "Is that why the werewolves attacked Zathrian's clan? For revenge?"

Another, considered nod. "In part. We seek to end the curse. The crimes committed against Zathrian's children were grave, but they were committed centuries ago by those who are long dead. For years now, we have tried to speak to Zathrian when his landships passed this way, and he has ignored us." The gentle, lovely face grew taut and fierce. "We will no longer be denied!"

Swifrunner put in, "We spread the curse to his people, so he must lift it to save them."

"Oh," Bronwyn managed, understanding at last. Did Zathrian know this? If so, how could he hesitate a moment to protect those he led?

"I beg you, mortal," urged the forest spirit, "go to Zathrian. Persuade him to come here. When he sees the suffering of the werewolves, surely he will lift the curse, and they will be free."

"And what if he wishes to cure only his own people?"

"Surely his rage cannot run so deep. If he will come, I will summon Witherfang here, for I have that power. If he does not..." said the Lady with silken menace "...If he does not come... if he does not lift the curse...he will never find Witherfang, and he will never cure his clan."

"I shall find him," Bronwyn said grimly, "and I shall do my utmost to bring him here."

"It is well. The passage to the surface has been opened. Return with Zathrian as soon as you can."

This was the door. then, that the werewolves had barred against them. This was the door that had forced their dangerous detour into the realms of spiders and phantom; that had forced their confrontations with a dragon and a wraith and the walking dead. A small thing, to cause them so much

trouble. Bronwyn stalked out, not looking forward to her next confrontation: that with Zathrian. It was a long, weary climb up the broken stairs to the entry hall—

—where Zathrian awaited them.

Thanks to my readers, to those who have favorited, alerted, and lurked, but above all to my reviewers: MsBarrows, demonincargles, derko5, Blinded in a bolthole, Zeeji, Aoi24, almostinsane, Tyanilth, karinfan123, Lehni, Josie Lange, The Moidart, Shakespeira, Judy, JackOfBladesX, mutive, SkaterGirl246, Dante Alighieri1308, cloud1004, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Zute, Raxiselic, Anonymous, Have Travel, Kira Kyuu, Enaid Aderyn, Jyggilag, euromellows, mille libri, Jenna53, Costin, chocolatebrownie12, Herebedragons66, Death Knight's Crowbar, Northern Warden, ellechiM, callalili, Graffiti My Soul, and Juliafied.

Death Knight's Crowbar: since your private messaging feature was disabled, I was unable to reply to you lengthy and interesting review. I will take your critique under advisement.

This chapter became monstrously long. The other half will be edited and posted next week.

44. An Ancient Gnarled Root

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 44: An Ancient, Gnarled Root

Zathrian was examining the bodies of the recently dead werewolves with an air of detachment. He glanced up casually and took in Bronwyn's appearance with no surprise whatsoever.

"Ah! There you are!" he said. "Do you have the heart?" He seemed quite at his ease. Bronwyn scowled at him.

"No," she said, gritting her teeth. "I do not."

Zevran smiled cynically. "He's here to see if we did as he wanted. Impatient, aren't you, old man?"

Zathrian glared at the assassin, and then deliberately ignored him. He turned to Bronwyn. "Did you acquire the heart, or not?"

Bronwyn stared him down. It was easy, towering over him as she did. "I have done my share of fighting today, but as it happens, the werewolves wished to parley. Their leader, the Lady of the Forest, has asked me to bring you to her. She says that you must break the curse before she summons

Witherfang. She wants to talk."

The Keeper raised a brow, and scoffed. "The Lady of the Forest! You do understand that she actually *is* Witherfang, do you not?"

Bronwyn paused. It all fit together. Witherfang, the defender; the Lady, their counselor..."Yes. I thought as much."

Astrid nodded. Bronwyn imagined that she had reached this conclusion even faster than she had herself. Tara and Danith looked surprised. Danith opened her mouth, and then shut it again, in deference to Zathrian, who was speaking.

He said, "Then you must understand that the curse came first from her, and those afflicted it with mirror her dual nature, becoming savage beast as well as human."

"But now, things have changed," Bronwyn said. "For whether by magic or the slow experience of years, the werewolves have regained their minds."

Zathrian found that bitterly amusing.

"Absurd! They attacked my clan, and they are the same savages then that they have ever been. They deserve to be wiped out and not defended. Come. We will go to the creatures, and I will force this 'Lady' back into Witherfang's form. It may then be slain and the heart taken.."

He was not understanding her. He was deliberately not

understanding her, and worse, he was patronizing her.

Bronwyn did not move, and tried again, clinging to her temper. "They are speaking beings. They are not mindless beasts. They are *people!*"

"It matters not. They are the same brutes their ancestors were. They deserve to suffer. We are wasting time."

"These werewolves were not even *alive* when the curse began. Did you even trouble to curse the actual perpetrators, or would any random humans do? *You* cast this curse, not Witherfang. Do you still hate humans so much even after all this time?"

"You were not there! You did not see what they did! You are not Dalish! How could I let their crimes go unanswered? If you had seen your own blood perish before your eyes, would you not swear an eternity of revenge?"

Bronwyn exploded, her frustration boiling into rage, her temper shredded. "No! I would *not!* I would punish the guilty, and not the innocent! So you lost your family? Do you think that makes you *special*? Do not presume that you know anything about me! I have, in fact, *seen* my own blood perish before my eyes. I know who is to blame for that, and I do not randomly slaughter people to slake my grief!" She glared at him, her blood up, ready to strike him down if he said her nay. "We will go now, and *speak* to this Lady."

Danith burst out, "We should do as the Keeper commands!

There are only a score of them left, Keeper! When we get inside the lair, it will be the simplest thing to slay them all, if we take them by surprise—"

Bronwyn whirled on her, blazing. "I gave my word! We will not strike the first blow!"

"Then you're a fool, shemlen!" Danith raised her bow, just enough that Zevran reached over and gripped her arm, hard. Astrid stepped up beside Bronwyn, her posture both easy and menacing. Scout growled, ready to charge and kill.

"Danith," Tara said quietly. "Shut up. Now."

Zathrian looked at them all, taking in the situation, his lip curling up slyly. Bronwyn could have killed him on the spot.

"I fail to see the point of the 'parley.' I did not come so far to listen to a pack of talking dogs." He shrugged, "But very well. I am curious to hear what the spirit has to say."

To do him credit, Zathrian entered the lair of the werewolves with no sign of fear. Bronwyn wondered if his courage was native to him, or it was sprung of his contempt for the werewolves and his confidence in his own magic. At any rate, he stalked up to them, heedless of the growls and snarls of hate, and stopped, examining the the manifestation that called herself the Lady of the Forest.

"Interesting," was his only comment.

The Lady spoke, her face at once sad and hopeful. "We wish to know if you are willing to forgo your retribution, and lift the curse. It would be for the benefit of your people as well as mine."

Zathrian shook his head. "My retribution is eternal, as is my pain. This is justice!"

Exasperated, Bronwyn asked, "How can it be justice to punish the innocent? These people did nothing to you!"

"They have stalked and murdered my clan. Their own deeds condemn them. Let them suffer; let them perish. Yes, that is justice."

The Lady regarded him with cool appraisal. "Are you sure it is only justice? Have you told the mortal *how* the curse was created?"

A pause. Bronwyn then said, "He said he summoned you out of the forest, and bound you to a wolf."

"That is more or less true. This is an old forest, mortal, and I am its spirit, its heart. I was not summoned from across the Fade, but pulled from the rocks, the trees and the very soil. I was then bound into the body of the wolf who became Witherfang: not possessing a host like a sylvan or one of the undead, but bound into a single being. But such a process could not have been accomplished without Zathrian's blood...a great deal of his blood. The curse and his life...are intertwined."

"A blood mage!" Tara cried.

That certainly explained a great deal, Bronwyn thought. Zathrian, for his part, did not deny it, but stood defiant before them.

Cool and sweet-voiced, the Lady continued. "Your people believe you have rediscovered the immortality of their ancestors, Zathrian, but that is not true. Your blood fuels both your life and the power of the curse. So long as the curse exists, so do you."

Zathrian burst out in denial. "No! That is not how it is!"

Bronwyn was furious. "Your revenge is clearly not satisfied by cursing humans for hundreds of years, Zathrian. Now you demand the lives of your own clan? How much revenge does one old man require?"

Ever practical, Zevran asked, "Does that mean if he's killed, the curse ends? Because I could—"

"No," said the Lady quickly. "The curse is bound to his life, but it is more complicated than that."

Zathrian sneered at them all. "Only I know how to end the curse, and that I will never do!"

"You see?" demanded the impatient Swiftrunner. "He will not help! We must kill him! We must kill them all!"

"You see?" Zathrian echoed mockingly. "For all their powers

of speech they are only animals: only the same worthless dogs they have ever been...they and their whole evil race! Do what you came to do, Grey Warden! Slay these monsters!"

"Evil race?" Bronwyn shouted back, trying to be heard over Scout's furious barking. "Do you mean them, or humans in general? A curious way to deal with an ally! I will not be your pawn. End the curse, Zathrian!"

"No!"

"I'll stand with you, Keeper!" Danith called out, nocking an arrow and aiming at Bronwyn. "Kill the—" She fell to ground, sound asleep. Tara glared at Zathrian.

"We stand with our Commander," she hissed. "You cannot defeat us!"

Zathrian's staff was lifted in a storm of magic. "Then die with her! Die with them all! All of you will suffer as you deserve!"

Rock cracked as tree roots became animate, seeking out the Keeper's enemies. Screams and roars echoed off the walls. Bronwyn did not wait to see what the old man was summoning: she and Scout bounded at him, furious and irresistible. The door behind him was closed, and he was outnumbered. Briefly stunned, the werewolves slashed at walking trees with naked claws. Tara shouted curses back at the Keeper.

It was all confusion, but twenty-six against one in a closed

room was a foregone conclusion. Bronwyn kept her eye on Zathrian, the key to it all. He slipped away, behind one of his summoned trees, and shot a fiery hex at her. It hit Scout instead. The dog yipped in pain, his burnt fur stinking.

That was the end. Bronwyn leaped after the spry old mage, screaming. He fell under a pile of Bronwyn, Astrid, and Zevran, while Tara fought back the straggling, seeking plant tendrils. With Zathrian immobilized, they drooped and went limp.

Bronwyn was in no mood to be charitable, even after Tara healed Scout's burns. She smoothed her hand over the burned patch on his back. "Worthless dogs, indeed!" she muttered under her breath, "My dog is worth more than you and your whole bloody clan together!"

Scout licked her hand, and gazed up at her lovingly. Bronwyn always said the nicest things. And they were true.

In short order, Zathrian was dragged before the Lady, bruised and hopeless. "No," he groaned, "I cannot fight you. Kill me, and end this!"

"You heard him, Lady!" Swiftrunner urged. "Kill him! Kill him now!"

"No. Swiftrunner, if there is not room for mercy in our hearts, how can we expect room for mercy in his?" She pleaded with the mage, "Lift the curse. Make an end of this violence."

Even with Astrid's sword pressed to his back, Zathrian shook his head. "No. I am too old for mercy. All I see are the faces of my children...my people. I cannot do it."

Bronwyn nearly swore. "Would you really let your clan die for your revenge? Spare them, if you cannot care for anyone else!"

Tara added her own voice. "Lanaya thinks you would do *anything* for them. Prove her right. She trusts you. All your people trust you..."

Zathrian sighed deeply, his eyes dull. "Perhaps... I have lived too long. This hatred in me is like an ancient, gnarled root...it has consumed my soul. What of you?" he asked the Lady. "Your life is bound to the curse as is mine. When I perish, you will cease to exist. Do you not fear death?"

The Lady lifted her hand like one bestowing a blessing. "You are my maker, Zathrian. You gave me form and consciousness where none existed. I have known pain and love, hope and fear: all the joy that is life. Yet of all things, I desire nothing more than an end. I beg you, Maker, put an end to me... we beg you... Show mercy."

Humbled at last, Zathrian whispered, "You shame me, spirit. I am an old man, alive long past his time."

"Then you will do it?" Bronwyn asked wearily, "You will end the curse?"

Zathrian did not look at her, but at the Lady of the Forest, who was gazing on him with boundless compassion. The werewolves crowded close to her, whimpering and keening in anticipation of their inevitable loss.

"Yes." He nodded. "Yes. I think it is time. Let us put an end to all of this." He raised his staff and brought it down. There was no blast of magic. Instead, he toppled like a dead tree, and lay lifeless on the hard stone, his eyes open and unseeing.

A breeze stirred the air: a quiver of magic, and then a jolt of power. The Lady sighed and lifted her arms. The breeze became a whirlwind. In it, the smell of distant rain and growing things combined with the crackle of lightning. The womanly form dissipated into a swirl of leaves and the memory of sunlight.

"She is...gone..." mourned Swiftrunner. The werewolves raised a howl of grief.

The howls echoed through the chamber, and then grew higher, wilder; they became screams of agony. The curse was lifted, and its victims were regaining their human forms. Some shifted quickly and easily, some struggled and cried, resisting the change. There had been only about a score of them left, but their suffering filled the room. Bronwyn backed away.

"Come," Zevran urged. "We can do nothing to help them through this. Let us give them a moment." He walked over to Danith, asleep on the stones, and dragged her away to a safe

corner. Bronwyn scowled. She would have to deal with her, too, but first she wanted to sort out the werewolves.

They were all naked, of course. It was only to be expected. No infants or toddlers, but two very young and shocked boys and a teenaged girl were the youngest of the pack. There were more men than women amongst them. None were past the prime of life. Bronwyn suspected that one did not live long as a werewolf.

One dazed woman lay shaking on the stone floor, nearly convulsing. One man had slumped to his knees, staring at his hands in wonder. Another was grinning, rubbing his hands over his human form as over something long-lost and now found. He saw Bronwyn looking, and actually blushed, moving his hands to shield his crotch.

A red-haired woman babbled, "What shall I do? What shall I do? What shall I do?" until another woman grabbed her and put her arms around her, murmuring reassurance.

"I remember now," growled the tall man who stood where Swiftrunner had. He clutched at his head, face drawn in anguish. "I remember...my wife...my children...my name...We were traveling through the forest to Gwaren..." He paused. "They...died..."

Bronwyn looked closer. Certain signs of the curse remained. Each of the former werewolves still had curiously yellow eyes. Some were weeping, overcome with recovered memories. Some were bewildered.

"You must have had a name..." Bronwyn said. "A human name. I am Bronwyn Cousland."

"I am Dirk..." he stopped. "It doesn't matter. I am Dirk Wolf, now."

"Wolf!" murmured a woman. "Yes. I can still feel the wolf, deep inside me. I think I shall always feel it. I will be a Wolf, too."

"What will you do?" Bronwyn asked quietly.

"I...don't know..." the man shook his head. "I could try to go back to Oswin, but it has been a long time." He paused.

"What is the year?"

"It is the thirtieth year of the Dragon Age."

"So long!" He shook his head. "No. There is nothing to return to. And some of my brothers and sisters were born werewolves. This is...something none of us really ever expected. I cannot desert them."

Tara pulled Bronwyn aside.

"How will they live?" she wondered anxiously. "They are naked and unarmed in the middle of a wilderness!"

"But they need not be either," Zevran answered, grinning as the thought came to him. "There is loot here: there are weapons, there is armor..."

Astrid steadied herself. It was a wrench, for a dwarf, but —"There is gold," she said. "There is the dragon's hoard. They could take it with them to the nearest human settlement and equip themselves well."

Bronwyn nodded. She looked around at her people. "Do you all agree? Do you agree to let these people have the loot from this place and not keep it for ourselves?"

"Yes." Tara was insistent. "They have nothing. It's been horrible for them."

"Of course," pointed out Zevran, "they may not know how to use weapons—"

"I do," declared another of the men, whom Bronwyn thought must once have been Gatekeeper. "I know how, and I can teach the others." He laid his hand on Dirk's shoulder. "I am... Kellin Wolf, for you are still my brother."

Bronwyn cast a grim look at the unconscious Danith.

"She is *not* going to like this," she muttered.

"She need not know about it," Zevran shrugged. "Zathrian gave his life for his clan and perished. The beautiful Lady of the Forest evaporated, and the werewolves transformed and fled."

Bronwyn considered. "We'll want to take Zathrian back with us, and give the elves the news. Tara, keep Danith asleep a

little longer, while we make our plans."

Some of the werewolves—the ones who had previously been human—hurried to their sleeping quarters. Bronwyn followed, to see if they had anything of use.

There were rough cots there, to her astonishment, and even some ragged bedding.

Kellin explained. "I was part of a trade expedition. We were pretty well equipped. The cots were ours."

"I'll want one of them," Bronwyn said. "We can make a travois to carry Zathrian. His clan will want his body."

"I can do that," offered Zevran, and he set to work, hacking off the legs at the foot of the cot, so it could be dragged along behind them.

The wools and linens were snatched up quickly to create makeshift garments. There was some tugging and quarreling until Bronwyn raised her voice. The wolves shrank back in a fawning attitude, while Bronwyn tried to share the moth-eaten cloth out with some fairness.

Zevran pulled a little sewing kit from his belt pouch. "I have needle and thread. Scissors, too. Does anyone here know how to sew?"

"I do!" cried a woman. "I remember! It is so strange...a wolf is not naked like humans..."

"I'm cold," declared the teenaged girl. "Why am I so cold?" She stared at Scout, pointing. "Is he still cursed?"

"She doesn't understand," whispered the seamstress to Bronwyn. "She was always a werewolf. This will be very hard. My name is Lita."

"Greycoat," said the girl, shaking her head.

"Lita," the woman introduced herself to Bronwyn. To the girl, she said, "We are humans now. We must have human names. We shall think of a good one for you."

Astrid suggested, "Have them go through the place and bring everything here. Some of the boots I saw might still be usable."

It was a sound idea. Some of the former werewolves were able to pull themselves together and help. Others were still stunned and grieving at the death of members of the pack.

"I'll show you the dragon's treasure," Bronwyn said to Dirk. "There's quite a bit there. I think South Reach is your best bet. It's not more than two or three days on foot from here. You could buy wagons and oxen and go where you like. But you need to go soon, before the elves come back into the forest."

"I understand," said Dirk bitterly. "They will not let go of their grievance. We have shed their blood, and cursed or not, they will blame us. We cannot linger here. You are right."

Tara healed what hurts they had, and was very much an object of wonder to them. They watched Zevran's work with interest, and agreed that they, too, would make a travois to carry the bulkier objects. The best of the treasure was loaded into a single chest. Altogether, they had over fifty sovereigns in coin. There were some decent jewels that Zevran could roughly appraise for them. There were swords and daggers and axes and bows and arrows, some of very good quality. It would give them a very fair start, if they were prudent.

The armor and garb they found was a miscellany, and no one would be fully equipped. Some would have to wrap their feet in leather for the trek out of the Forest. Some would have boots, and some would have gloves. Others would have an old breastplate, or a rusty helmet. They would be a curious sight, out in the light of day.

Bronwyn found a tatty piece of old parchment and drew a crude map for them, showing them the quickest way to get to the Imperial Highway and north to South Reach. They might not be safe from bandits there, but they would be safer from the Dalish. Dirk, Kellin, and Lita were literate, and understood what a map was: most of the others could not read, and could not manage the concept of a little drawing representing a wide stretch of land.

"Once you get there," Bronwyn said, "Take the Imperial Highway north. Stay away from the south. I have summoned the Dalish elves to Ostagar where we are fighting the Blight."

"What then?" Kellin whispered anxiously to Dirk, who shook

his head.

"We'll find other humans," he murmured, "and see what's out there for us."

Bronwyn had an idea. They had lost so much in the attack on Highever...

"If all else fails," she said, "you can present yourselves to my brother, Teyrn Cousland. He is in Amaranthine, the last I heard, but you could go to his town house in Denerim. I shall add a note."

Bronwyn appended a message to the map.

Permit the bearers of this message quarters at Highever House, and find work for them.

Lady Bronwyn Cousland

In their secret code, she wrote:

Fergus-

These unfortunates were under a curse, and have had a hard time. If you could find something for them, I believe they would serve you loyally.

I can practically see the look on your face, but do it anyway.

Love,

Bronwyn

"The Teyrn of Highever!" exclaimed Dirk, peering at the note. "You are one of *those* Couslands?" He, Dirk, and Lita exchanged impressed glances.

"Yes," Bronwyn said briskly. "I am Lady Bronwyn Cousland. Teyrn Fergus Cousland is my brother. It might eventually involve a journey all the way to Highever, but he's a good man and will deal fairly with you. I realize simply being human is a shock to some of you, and that it might take time to deal with that..."

"It *will* take time," Lita agreed. She glanced over to the man who was still examining his now-human body with dazed curiosity. "And some, perhaps, will never adjust. At least we are no longer in pain. For that, we thank you."

Kellin murmured, "And now we have a chance at a future. He said earnestly to Bronwyn, "That makes all the difference."

"Yes," Dirk boomed. "Come, my brothers and sisters! Let us give proper thanks to this lady, Bronwyn of the Grey Wardens! Let us thank her and her companions, who have delivered us from the ancient curse!"

It was eerie. Some of them spoke in words, some yipped, some howled. Some wanted to touch her, too, and sniff at her. Scout cocked his head and wagged his tail anxiously. Gently but firmly, Bronwyn extricated herself. She hoisted Zathrian's slight body over her shoulder. It would be easier to get

it up those endless stairs this way, and then load him onto the travois once they were on the forest path. Between them, Astrid and Zevran dragged the comatose Danith.

"Maker turn his gaze on you," she said, by way of farewell. "Stay safe. Wait until we leave in the morning. We shall head west. As soon as we are out of hearing, go north as quickly as you can."

Zevran built a fire in the entrance hall and Astrid set about preparing food. Tara took a deep breath, and waved her staff over Danith. Bronwyn stood beside her, not looking forward to this. She had been lax as a commander, she decided: running the Wardens like a band of good friends and companions. To some degree, this must change. She could not expect to be "good friends" with every Warden she recruited. However, it was not unreasonable to expect all of them to obey orders and do their duty.

Danith was too dazed to be angry when Tara revived her. She also had little memory of the events just before Tara knocked her out. Bronwyn stood over her, glaring.

"You turned on us, Danith," she said shortly. "Perhaps it was the evil influence of the old blood mage. If Tara had not put you to sleep, I would have killed you as a traitor. You are very lucky to be alive. I shall give you another, last chance. Know this," she added, her face fierce and determined. "If you ever draw bow on me again, you will not live to regret it. Do you understand me?"

A sullen silence.

"Do you understand me?"

"I...understand," Danith spat out. She looked around the chamber. They were all very angry with her: even the dog; even Tara and Zevran, who should have understood.

But they did not understand. For them, loyalty to the Warden-Commander trumped loyalty to their own blood. They were not of the Dalish. They would *never* understand. She must accept this, and move on. After a moment, she asked. "But what happened?" She saw Zathrian, lifeless on the travois. "He is dead! Who killed him?"

"No one. He gave his life to end the curse," Bronwyn told her. "It is over. The Lady of the Forest perished as well, since she was his creation. The werewolves regained human form and ran away. Zathrian assured us that the elves would also be cured by his sacrifice."

"But—"

"No 'buts,'" Bronwyn said sharply. "We will sleep here tonight, and return to the camp tomorrow. You will stay here, will not wander off, and will *not* take a turn at watch, since we cannot be sure you will not knife us in our sleep."

Danith looked away from Bronwyn, and to Tara and Zevran for confirmation. Tara gazed back coolly, and Zevran shrugged.

"It is as she says. Also the part about you being lucky to be alive."

"Enough, " said Bronwyn. "Now that we have cleared out the werewolves, spiders, walking dead, demons, and the dragon, this place should be reasonably safe. Tomorrow, when we return to the Dalish camp, we shall secure the promise of this clan to fight against the Blight, which they were already obligated to do *by treaty*. You, Danith, will return to us to Ostagar, to fulfill your oath as a Grey Warden."

Danith scowled at Bronwyn, but the Commander had already turned away.

"Tara, can you put a spell on the body to preserve it?"

"I can do that. And we can wrap him in this piece of linen I found in the lair..."

The trek back to the Dalish camp was long and hard. Bronwyn's shoulders ached with the effort of dragging the corpse-laden travois over the rough path. She was tempted to order Danith to do it, but the elf was more useful as a scout and hunter, and Bronwyn was unquestionably stronger. Mentally she cursed Dalish elves and their absurd burial customs. Had Zathrian been an Andrastian, he would have been immolated, and his ashes retrieved far more conveniently.

They stopped often, refilling their canteens in the bright, cool

water of the river, snacking on jerky and dried fruit. Bronwyn lay back under an oak, and watch the play of light and shadow through the leaves of the green canopy overhead. At one stop, Danith darted in and out, and shot a brace of quail, stringing them together to hang over her shoulder, a feathered trophy. At another, she pointed out a strange tree to Zevran and Tara, and told them that it was ironbark. Bronwyn studied it. The bark was unusually dark and smooth, and the branches made a graceful urn-like shape. The leaves were large, and fell in dagged fronds. Bronwyn salvaged a leaf, and was fairly sure she would recognize the tree if she saw it again. Then they moved on.

Astrid and Zevran each took a turn pulling the travois, grimacing at Bronwyn in sympathy. Their prospective allies must be kept sweet, and thus this nonsense about bringing back the crazy old dead man.

Danith walked ahead and alone, her anger and outrage gradually fading. In their place blossomed uncertainty and remorse. Zathrian had cast the curse in the first place. He was a blood mage, which was something the Dalish had been taught to fear. She had heard that the mild-mannered Jowan had dabbled in blood magic, but she had dismissed that as nonsense. Jowan could not possibly be a blood mage. Blood mages were monsters: creatures who put themselves beyond the pale of all speaking peoples.

But Zathrian *had* been a blood mage. He had not denied it. He had felt that anything was justified in his pursuit of vengeance. Danith was no stranger to the concept of vengeance herself,

but to pursue it to the point that it harmed his own people...

That was the sticking point. Danith could not bring herself to care what Zathrian had done to a pack of savage humans; but the moment the first elf had been attacked, Zathrian's duty was to lift the curse and protect his people. His children had been dead for hundreds of years. Even if the humans had not killed them, they would have been dead of old age anyway. Zathrian, in the end, had failed to be a good Keeper. He had failed his people. If Bronwyn and the others had not forced the issue, how many more Dalish would have died? Forcing him to end the curse had been the right course of action, but Danith had been blind to it: blinded by her instinctive loyalty to a Dalish Keeper. She had made a fool of herself, and had nearly been a dead fool in the bargain. It was a bitter thing to acknowledge. Keeper Marethari would be so disappointed in her if she knew what she had done...

At length, the landmarks grew more familiar, and the camp lookouts spotted them.

Word of their success had already reached the Dalish. The afternoon before, a hunter had returned to camp, his werewolf-inflicted injuries already healing. As twilight fell, the wife of another hunter had made her appearance, naked and stumbling. She told a wild and terrifying tale of having been transformed into a werewolf. The other werewolves had not been unkind to her, and had urged her to accept her new nature and resign herself to life among them. She had refused, hoping to die, and had wandered away from the pack. Quite suddenly, she had been seized with agonizing

pains, and had regained her true form. Her husband welcomed her home with joy and relief. When they looked for Zathrian, in order to share the glad tidings, he was nowhere to be found.

Lanaya ordered everyone to stay in camp, and wait.

"It would seem that the Grey Warden has succeeded in her task," she said. "Perhaps she and our Keeper together!"

Thus, Bronwyn and her party were greeted with jubilation. That quickly soured to anger and mourning, when the linen-wrapped figure on the travois was revealed to be Zathrian.

The clan immediately turned accusing glares at Bronwyn and, to a lesser extent, at Astrid. Tara held up her hand, and stopped them with her words.

"Zathrian gave his life to end the curse. It was the only way."

After that, Bronwyn kept the story brief.

"It was his conclusion," Bronwyn told them, "that the curse could only be completely lifted with both his own death and that of the creature Witherfang. We cornered Witherfang, and then Zathrian arrived and performed the rite. The rest you know."

"And what of the werewolves?" a tall elf demanded.

"We slew many," Bronwyn said, mourning silently for the poor, hapless creatures. "A handful survived and fled east. Some of

our party were wounded, and we were in no position to pursue them."

"I can pursue them," an elf woman said murderously. "Those foul beasts killed my husband!"

Bronwyn grimaced. She did not bother to tell these elves of the ancient temple or the dragon they had found there, nor of their battles with the walking dead or the phantoms. If Danith wished to gossip, that was her affair. At the moment, the clan was much more focused on the death of their Keeper.

"He died a hero," sighed one woman.

Lanaya grieved more than anyone at the loss of Zathrian, but was consoled by the outcome.

"It is done, truly: lifting the curse has restored our hunters." She said, "I felt it...when he departed. I think he was ready to go."

"I'm sure he was," Bronwyn agreed blandly.

Maybe at the end...Bronwyn thought...maybe at the very end he *had* been. He had been a cruel, vicious, wicked old blood mage, who had cursed all humans within his reach without regard for guilt or innocence, but these people had loved him, and it would be stupid to rant on about her contempt for such a person. She swallowed her disgust, and concentrated on respecting Lanaya's grief, while not agreeing with opinion on her old mentor at all.

Lanaya had more to say. "It will be hard to replace Zathrian. He was our Keeper for many centuries. But / am Keeper now, and I hereby swear that I will uphold our ancient treaty with the Grey Wardens. Give me two handfults of days, and I shall gather the clan and send word to our kin. It has been a long time since the Dalish marched to war, but I trust that in the end we shall make a difference for you. We are coming, with great speed and purpose, and we shall strike at your foes. This, I swear."

There were murmurs of support, some willing, some grudging from the elves crowding around. Sarel shook his head.

"And so Zathrian is lost to us, after all these centuries! We must lay him to rest as is proper." More murmurs of assent. The black-haired hahren looked up sharply at Bronwyn. "And now Keeper Lanaya prepares to take us to war, to fight alongside the humans! I never thought to see such a day."

Bronwyn smiled pleasantly. "It is not the first time that humans and elves have fought as allies. The last Archdemon was slain by an elf: the great hero Garahel, a Grey Warden. We do honor to our ancestors to follow in their footsteps."

One young hunter spoke up. "I, for one, look forward to fighting these darkspawn creatures!"

Tara gave him a quick, encouraging smile. Sarel was not impressed.

"Do you? I hope you return to tell us all about it!" He looked at

Bronwyn again, "As for you, Grey Warden, I expect I shall someday tell tales of you. You will excuse us as we honor our fallen Keeper. You," he said with a nod to Danith, Tara, and Zevran, "are welcome to witness this."

Zevran and Tara exchanged looks, and knew it was politic to go. Danith had not imagined doing anything else, of course. Gratefully, Bronwyn and Astrid returned to their own little camp nearby. Scout turned his back on the unfriends, and trotted after Bronwyn, not neglecting to lift a leg as he passed an aravel. While Astrid gathered wood and Bronwyn tended the horses, the dog sighed deeply, flopped down, and rolled comfortably in the dirt.

"Leaving at first light, aren't we?" Astrid asked briskly. There was stone at Ostagar: good, dwarven-laid stone. She would cherish it.

"As soon as the first ray is over the horizon," Bronwyn assured her. "I'll speak to the Keeper later today, after the burial, and we shall talk about the practical aspects, but yes, I cannot be gone too quickly from this place. I hope those poor people get to South Reach before the elves catch them."

"Perhaps Lanaya will keep them too busy preparing for their march south for them to indulge in private revenge."

"Perhaps. I shall speak to her about that, too. We have more than kept our part of the bargain. The Dalish can bloody well keep theirs."

When Tara and Zevran returned from the funeral, Bronwyn snatched up her towel, clean smallclothes and her dwindling sliver of lavender soap.

"I'm off to have a bath downstream."

"What a wonderful idea!" Tara exclaimed. "My hair smells like werewolf pee."

"A *cold* bath," Astrid muttered, longing for Orzammar and hot running water.

"I shall stand guard!" Zevran swept a gallant bow. "I shall watch over you all most zealously."

"Look all you like, Zevran," Bronwyn said wearily. "I really don't care."

Scout, to his chagrin, was forced to endure a scrubbing as well. He was philosophical about it, knowing he could always roll in the dust later. Playing in the water was good fun.

As soon as they finished their baths, the women stood guard over Zevran. Or at least Bronwyn and Astrid did, since Tara's version of standing guard seemed to consist only of peeking and giggling. Bronwyn's hair was the longest, and she struggled to untangle the snarls.

"I give up," she finally said. "I've got to talk to Lanaya anyway."

She gave them a nod and set off to find the Keeper, her wet

hair soaking the back of her shirt. She passed Danith, who was chatting with the clan craftmaster. The ironbark they had found was apparently the topic of conversation. The man was promising to find the tree and send a ironbark bow to Ostagar for Warden Danith. How nice. Bronwyn passed without a word, and saw Lanaya near her aravel.

The conversation was brief and friendly. The Dalish had no need of maps, Bronwyn was told, for the location of ancient Ostagar was well known. It was large, unmistakable, and at the southern terminus of the Imperial Highway, after all. Lanaya said she hoped to be there soon, and added some words of gratitude.

"For a stranger—a human—to step in and save us from this dreadful curse! The Grey Wardens deserve their reputation. It is comforting, too, to know that the Dalish are represented among them."

"Thank you," said Bronwyn, thinking that Danith was an atrocious Warden and that she wished she had never been forced to recruit her. It was possible that a different Dalish elf might do better. It was important not to include a whole race in her dislike of one individual. That was where Zathrian had gone wrong, after all.

She added, "It is indeed important that you come as soon as possible. On that head, I must ask that you encourage your people to direct their energies toward preparing to march to Ostagar, and not delay your departure by tracking the last of the wretched werewolves. I'm sure that many feel wronged,

but the werewolves were themselves victims of the curse and can do no more harm. It is much more important to defeat the real danger."

"Of course," Lanaya agreed. "I shall give orders to that effect. However, you understand that many lost loved ones. When feelings run so high..." She saw Bronwyn's face harden, and said, "I shall do my best. I promise you."

Well, there was no more to be said, but Lanaya surprised Bronwyn by presenting her with a pretty leatherbound volume.

"*Uthenera*, the book is called. It contains the songs of the elves," Lanaya explained. "It was among Zathrian's possessions for many years. It is an oddity, as elves do not generally write their music, but pass it from ear to ear. Do you know the symbols?"

Bronwyn opened the book, and was pleased to see the notes she had learned in childhood. She was no great musician, but she could read this and learn the tunes and words, at least. And Leliana would find it fascinating...

"Yes," she said, smiling. "I know how to read music. This is a delightful gift, Keeper, and I shall treasure it."

Danith arrived in time to have a quick bath herself. She waited until Astrid went back to their camp to build up the fire, and then took a deep breath.

"My actions bring me sorrow," she said clearly. She had been wrong, and must confess it.

Tara did not recognize the Dalish saying, but Zevran did. It was a traditional ritual apology.

"And so they should," he answered, rather blithely. "I would have regretted having to kill you, my halla."

Tara scowled, "That was an apology? You're just apologizing to Zevran and me? Because we're *e/ves*?" She shook her head. "I don't think I'll ever understand the Dalish."

Danith bit back the hot reply. Zevran smiled at her. "It was a practice apology! She will first apologize to us, and then, as she grows more expert, she will also apologize to our doughty dwarven princess and finally to our fearless leader."

Speaking to Bronwyn was something that Danith would prefer never to do ever again, but she managed to say, "I shall apologize to Astrid as soon as we join her at the campfire."

"That's good," Tara said seriously. "You really scared me, Danith. I couldn't believe you'd betray us! I forgive you, I suppose, but you have to understand that it's going to take some time for the shock you gave me to wear off."

The performance was repeated on their return. The dwarf gave Danith an impassive, searching look. Feeling more explanation was needed, Danith added, "Obeying a Keeper is second nature among the Dalish. It is what one does. It did

not occur to me to go against him. However, I can now see that his actions were wrong, as were mine in supporting him."

Astrid considered this. "You are indeed lucky to be alive. I do understand the call of blood, but quite frankly, if the King of Orzammar commanded me to do one thing, I'm fairly sure I'd do the opposite to spite him. Of course, he's my brother, and I already know he's a swine. Besides, I am a Warden, and am not bound to obey anyone other than the Warden-Commander. Nor are you bound to the commands of the Dalish any longer. You are a Warden among Wardens. If it helps, perhaps you should henceforth regard this as your clan, and Bronwyn as your Keeper."

"She is not a mage." Danith frowned, taking the dwarf's words literally.

Astrid laughed. "Leadership is a magic of its own."

Bronwyn returned soon, carrying a thin book, her dog at her heels. Feeling the others' eyes on her, Danith stepped forward. Her carefully composed words seemed suddenly inadequate. Still, she must do this...

"Commander?"

A pause. Bronwyn looked at Danith, and cocked her head. The dog cocked his head at exactly the same angle. It would have been funny, had it not been so unnerving.

"Yes?" Bronwyn asked.

"I...apologize for my conduct. I was wrong to threaten you and my comrades. Zathrian erred in putting his vengeance before his clan. I erred in putting my loyalty to a Dalish Keeper ahead of my duty as a Warden. It will not happen again."

"Good." Not smiling, Bronwyn gave her a nod. "See that it doesn't. You have been difficult and insubordinate. We need to work *together*, not against one another. I am open to ideas and suggestions, but I will *not* have my authority questioned."

"I understand."

"I'm glad."

The uncomfortable moment ended with a stirring of the bushes at the edge of camp: a polite Dalish warning that someone was coming. The Wardens turned, and found a small group of young Dalish men and women approaching. The young hunter who was not afraid to face the darkspawn addressed Bronwyn.

"We wish to hear about the deeds of Warden Garahel."

A red-haired girl said, "The elves cannot have too many heroes."

Bronwyn smiled. "Nor can the people of Thedas. I am surprised you do not know of Garahel. I have a book about him back at Ostagar: I'm sorry now that I did not bring it with me. I remember quite a bit, however." She hoped she did, or

at least enough to give them the short version. How could they not have heard of Garahel? Of course, Zathrian had been their loremaster...

"Come and sit with us!" Tara said eagerly, pleased to have visitors.

Danith was pleased, too: very pleased to put an end to that awkward apology. She suspected her foolish betrayal would not soon be forgotten. However, if Bronwyn was willing to be distracted at the moment, Danith could only be grateful.

The young elves sat cross-legged on the ground around the fire, and Bronwyn began her tale...

Bronwyn's Tale of the Grey Warden Garahel

Three cities, all in the Free Marches, claim the honor of being the birthplace of the Hero Garahel: Hasmal, Markham, and the great city of Starkhaven itself. Whichever city it was, Garahel was born and raised in an Alienage, the son of free but impoverished elves. This was in the Black Age, a time of war, for the Chantry had proclaimed an Exalted March against the Tevinter Empire.

From what he confided in his friends among the Wardens, Garahel was a wild youth who ran away from home and made his way as a mercenary in this army or that; for the endless conflict was a golden opportunity for a gifted swordsman. As to why and how he became a Grey Warden, there is some

dispute. Some say that he fell foul of vengeful nobles, but others say that one day the Grey Wardens flew overhead on their griffons, and the young Garahel's heart was captured by the magnificent creatures. He journeyed far and long, for nothing would do but that he should make a pilgrimage to Weisshaupt: to the very seat of the Wardens, and lay his sword at their feet.

He was welcomed kindly. Not only was Garahel among the greatest swordsmen of his day, but he had a most winning and amiable manner, and it is said that his face was "fair as a day in summer." All his life, he was pursued by both men and women, and there are many tales of his romantic adventures. At any rate, he Joined the Wardens and served them with such ability and devotion that he rose quickly through their ranks. At one time he was Warden-Commander of the post at Ansburg, at another, of Tantervale. Wherever the need was greatest, there Garahel went. His steed was the griffon Meranth, greatest and cleverest of his kind.

The Exalted March against the Tevinters came to an abrupt and frightened end when the Archdemon Andoral arose in Exalted 5:12. Exhausted by years of war, Thedas was unprepared for their onslaught.

Like an evil tide, darkspawn swept across the north and northwest. The country of Antiva was overrun and its entire ruling family slaughtered. Unhindered, the darkspawn then poured into the Free Marches and Rivain. Darkspawn attacked the Anderfels as well, and the capital city of Hossberg was beseiged. It was Garahel who gathered an

army of Andermen and Wardens and broke the siege, saving the city. After great struggle and tremendous effort, it was Garahel who united the Wardens from all lands, and led the march east to Starkhaven. We can only imagine the difficulties he faced, or the indomitable charm and leadership he displayed, for there he succeeded in forging an alliance among the minor kings and teyrns of the Free Marches, something no one else has succeeded in doing before or since. This great army he led north, with the Grey Wardens flying before the host, riding their griffons.

It was at the city of Ayesleigh, on the shores of Rialto Bay, where Garahel's host met the darkspawn horde. For days and nights, heroes battled monsters. Garahel, on his beloved griffon Meranth, fought the Archdemon in the black and Blighted skies. Lightning crashed around them: the screams of the dying rose to the heavens. Garahel struck the blow that slew Andoral, but was himself slain; for Meranth was wounded mortally and crashed to earth with his rider. With Garahel's sacrifice, the tide of battle turned, and the darkspawn were trapped between the united army and the sea. It is written that so many darkspawn were slaughtered on that field that many thought they they were vanquished forever. They must have been sorely weakened, truly; for it has been four hundred years since Garahel's victory, and only now have the darkspawn recovered enough strength to challenge Thedas.

A song is still sung about that battle: *The Ballad of Ayesleigh*.

The wind that stirs

*Their shallow graves
Carries their song
Across the sands.*

*Heed our words
Hear our cry
The Grey are sworn
In peace we lie.*

*Heed our words
Hear our cry
Our names recalled
We cannot die.*

*When darkness comes
And swallows light
Heed our words
And we shall rise.*

The young elves seemed to like the story very much, and made Bronwyn repeat the song several times, fixing it their memory.

"What a pity the griffons died out," Tara sighed. "Everyone would want to be a Grey Warden if we still had griffons."

There was a general, wistful consensus around the fire that that was true. Understanding that the Wardens would be leaving very early in the morning, the visitors departed, with

warm thanks and some kind gifts: jars of *hallenansal* sealed with wax, and bags of dried berries.

Bronwyn went to check on the horses, and found Danith standing behind her. It was tempting to snap at her and tell her not to *do* that, but she simply said, "Yes? You wanted something?"

"Commander...when we return to Ostagar, may I borrow the book... the one about Garahel?"

"If you promise to return it," Bronwyn said lightly. She *hated* people who kept borrowed books.

Her bedroll beckoned invitingly. She was exhausted, and no Grey Warden stamina could conceal it from her. She might even need a rejuvenation spell on the morrow. Scout lay down beside her, cleared tired himself.

Mentally, she was already far away from the Dalish, her thoughts racing south to Ostagar and what the situation there might be. She would have sensed it if the darkspawn had made any major moves, but all sorts of other things could have happened. What were her Wardens up to? Were they safe? Were they well? Had Vaughan made any attempt to harm Adaia? Was Alistair overwhelmed? And there was Loghain...

Loghain would be furious and grieved by his daughter's letter. Bronwyn longed to see him: longed to be in the presence of one capable of shouldering his own burdens. Loghain was

before her in imagination: tall, fierce, imposing, his glittering eyes softening a little for her, his big hands gentle...

The pang of desire was sullied by dread. The Orlesians had attempted his daughter's life, and had succeeded in compromising it. They had attacked with secret malice, their agent penetrating into the Queen's private chambers. Such deeds called for vengeance, and Ferelden was manifestly unable to compass it. It was bitter to contemplate, but their country was in no position to threaten the Empire in any serious way. It never had been, and certainly now was not, with the darkpsawn boiling up from the south like pus from an ulcerated wound. There was nothing they could do but act in secret themselves, and foil Empress Celene's schemes.

What kind of people took advantage of a Blight to further their own interests? Brownyn felt a surge of loathing for the Orlesians. They spun their webs like fat, bloated spiders, smug in their superior power, convinced of their superiority...their right to rule the Ferelden barbarians. It was galling not to be able to slap the smirks from their faces.

Maker forbid that Anora should die! Cailan would be perfectly within his rights to remarry. What would they do, if Anora was gone, and he proclaimed the Empress of Orlais his choice? If they deposed the King, the country would fall apart. They already had one rebel to deal with. They could not cope with more.

What was happening to Fergus, anyway? How was he faring in his campaign against Howe? Bronwyn longed to be done

with all this dashing about the countryside. Once in Ostagar, she would be in a position to know what was really going on...

Bronwyn wondered if Loghain would shout at her, when she mentioned Brother Genetivi and the Urn of the Sacred Ashes. Probably. He was very good at shouting. All things considered, she would rather be with him, even when he was shouting, than apart. They were stronger together. Together, she felt they could somehow win through this time of troubles.

Her eyes closed, and she lay half-asleep, while the borders of the Fade crept closer. She seemed to stand on a mountaintop, a chill wind cutting through her, the kingdoms of Thedas spread before her feet. The harsh scent of dragon and a distant bellow reminded her that her worst enemies were not human. Morrigan was standing by a roaring fire, smirking at her, and was suddenly a hawk, flying away. Bronwyn blinked, and saw Loghain standing by a window sheeted with rain. He looked so sad that she wanted to speak to him, but no sound emerged from her mouth. On her other side, Fergus was climbing an endless rope, his face grim with inexpressible determination...

She sank deeper into dreams, and her blanket on the forest floor became a splendid, narrow bed, where she lay still and unmoving, surrounded by a sea of torches. Stars glittered silver in the dark-blue dome of Heaven, and around her rose the music of a thousand voices, blending into a single compelling chorus of triumph and grief.

Thanks to my readers and especially to those who reviewed: Sarah1281, callalili, Cobar713, MsBarrows, demonincargles, Kira Kyuu, RayneEthelwulf, cloud1004, ellechiM, Judy, SkaterGirl246, Menamebephil, euromellows, Costin, Josie Lange, Jenna53, Lehni, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Shakespeira, karinfan123, NorthernWarden, The Moidart, mutive, JackOfBladesX, Enaid Aderyn, TyaniIth, almostinsane, Dan, and mille libri.

I decided to make Garahel a city elf because in DAA, Velanna goes on about how the Dalish elves have no stories. This is complete rubbish, especially since the Warden might still have in her inventory The Tale of Illoren (which will be featured in the next chapter). However, the city elf in DAO also does not appear to know about Garahel until Duncan mentions him. Garahel should be Kind of a Big Deal Who Saved the World a Lot. Perhaps he still is in Hossburg and Starkhaven and points north. It's true that Garahel was never in Ferelden (as far as we know.)

Bronwyn has heard of him because she's highly educated and knows a lot of history. Also, she happened to "inherit" a biography of Garahel. It's possible that Garahel is not celebrated much because once he was gone, along with his charm and brilliant diplomacy and skill at arms, humans remembered mostly that he was very embarrassingly an elf. And perhaps he was not "elven" enough for the elves, since he was very much a unifier, who brought people together, and worked closely with humans (and probably with

dwarves).

45. A Thousand Dangers

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 45: A Thousand Dangers

The blow was struck as Loghain was totally focused on the darkspawn in the valley before them. Between the Dalish, the Wardens, and the Glavonak brothers, it was a maze of traps. All sorts of traps were there: trip lines for explosive traps, and pit traps lined with poisoned spikes. It was joy to see the creatures trying to rush them, and then going down, down, in a haze of smoke and flame, in screams and gurgles.

It was the Wardens the darkspawn wanted: the little band of Wardens led by Alistair. Wardens could sense the darkspawn and the darkspawn could sense *them*. Reasonably safe behind a palisade, the Wardens shouted taunts and insults. The darkspawn were drawn in, unable to resist: too witless not to follow their kindred to destruction. The Dalish archers loosed volley after volley, until the only darkspawn left alive were twitching on the sodden, bloody ground.

At first he thought someone had impudently slapped him on the back. There was no pain, but a curious numbness. Alistair was turning, eyes widening, mouth opening to shout. For some reason, he was running at Loghain, sword upraised.

Loghain tried to rebuke him for leaving the line, but his mouth would not obey his orders. The ground was coming up to meet him, which was very, very odd, and he was going to have to do something about that...

He awakened to find himself stretched out on his belly on the long council table. He was being discussed in low voices, which irritated him. Someone was working on him with gentle hands, soothing away the dull throb of the deep stab. Someone had removed his armor and his shirt. The breeze on his bare skin was unpleasantly chilly. Alistair was standing there, among the officers, his young Maric-face alarmed. Cauthrien was there too, her usually stoic expression strained.

"Lie still," a woman's voice instructed him. It must be that Healer: the mage Wynne.

"No joke," came the voice of the Warden mage Anders—the one who also looked like Maric. "At least the fellow who stabbed you wasn't joking."

From the corner of his eye, he could see Wynne's hands gathering blue light and spilling it over the wound. The torn flesh ceased to weep blood, and he could actually feel it knitting together.

"We won't seal it up yet," Wynne explained, her voice warm and soothing. "First, we'll draw out any poison that might have been on their weapons."

"Right," said Anders grimly. "Let's get to it."

This was even less pleasant, but Loghain was in front of his officers, and it behooved him to bear it without flinching.

"You know," said Anders, "at this point, it's customary for the patient to whine, fidget, moan, or make bad jokes."

"Anders, you forget yourself," Wynne rebuked him in a whisper.

"Did I? Oops. Anyway, it's just as well you were out of it when we drew the blade out your shoulder. Tricky business, that, when it was wedged so tightly in a chink of your armor."

"Anders!"

Loghain coughed and cleared his throat. "Let him talk. I want to know what happened."

"Very well," Wynne sighed, "but let me finish this first." She summoned her power again, Spell wisps seethed around the open wound and hissed over the blood trickling around the curve of hard muscles. The mist darkened and thickened, rising up in a sucking little whirlwind. Anders was doing something with a vessel in his hands: possibly gathering the poison.

"My, that's nasty," Wynne murmured. "I have no idea what that is, but between us, Anders and I should succeed in analyzing it. We'll make sure all of it is gone. Feeling better,

now, are we?"

"Yes," Loghain said, with heavy sarcasm, sounding out the the words carefully. "We *are*."

"Me, too," Alistair agreed fervently, from his perch on a nearby bench. "Those guys were *fast*. I almost didn't see them at all. And then you didn't say anything when you went down. I thought you were dead!"

"Not yet." Loghain added, "Have they said who sent them?"

A silence. "Well," Alistair said sheepishly. "Funny thing about that, but they put up quite a fight, and well..."

"They're dead," Cauthrien said flatly, with the faintest hint of satisfaction leaking into her tone. "Their heads are already decorating spikes on Ostagar Bridge."

Annoyed, Loghain growled, "You know, it would have been better if you'd taken them alive instead of killing them."

"Sorry," Alistair replied, not sounding sorry at all. Someone had brought him a hunk of bread and cheese, and he stuffed his face while Wynne and Anders worked their magic. "When somebody tries to kill me I just sort of naturally want to kill him back."

Loghain grunted at that.

Wynne muttered, "You're very lucky to be alive!"

A stir among the officers, and they moved hastily apart, leaving a space for the newest arrival.

"Loghain!"

Cailan burst out of the crowd of onlookers, surrounded by some half-dozen of his closest friends. He stopped and stared, unbelieving, at the sight of his invincible father-in-law prone on a bloody table, stripped to the waist and wounded.

"You're hurt!"

"I'm fine."

"No, he isn't—" Wynne, Anders, and Alistair contradicted him simultaneously. Alistair blushed, and deferred to the healers.

Wynne said, "As far as I can see, he's alive only because he's a very stubborn man. That knife was poisoned!"

Cailan gaped. "An assassination!"

"—*attempt*," Loghain said dryly. "As you see, the attempt was a failure."

"Your Majesty," said Cauthrien. "The assassins were killed in the attempt, but I am looking into the matter myself. They came here with Bann Loren's men, and we will be questioning everyone in that unit to see what they knew."

"Of course," Cailan agreed, still staring. "Anything..."

"Meanwhile, it would probably be a good idea," Anders pointed out, "for somebody to bring a stretcher and take the Teyrn up to his quarters, which would be a lot more comfortable than lying on a table in front of the army."

"Anders!" hissed Wynne, poking him.

The men on watch on the outer works did not even demand a password from Bronwyn and her companions. They arrived in the latter half of the afternoon, and Bronwyn found that her mind was already on food, drink, and a good wash. Scout panted at her stirrup, eyes turned longingly to the camp while the guards exchanged greetings with the Wardens.

"Well met, Girl Warden!" the shortest of them hailed her. The others stared at the party on horseback, openly curious.

"Well met indeed!" Bronwyn answered easily. "It's good to be back at Ostagar! How fares the King? And how is Teyrn—"

"Wounded!" shouted the men in excited chorus. It took a little time for them to calm themselves and clarify the situation. Their spokesmen told the story with terrified relish.

"Teyrn Loghain was wounded in the battle west of here, but the Healers say he'll be fine. Word is that the Wardens saved his life!"

"But it's not serious, you say?"

"He'll be fine," the short fellow repeated, as if repeating it would make it true and keep everyone safe. "We couldn't spare Teyrn Loghain!" The men around him nodded solemnly.

"Certainly not," Bronwyn agreed, rather alarmed. "Good day to you." She kicked her horse into motion and they clattered through the gate and up to the Tower of Ishal. Familiar people were already waving at her.

"Hey, Boss!"

Bronwyn grinned at the welcome sight of Brosca. Dismounting, she led the way up to the steps to the tower door and her friends. Brosca had turned away and was shouting something. Before Bronwyn reached the door, friends were piling out of it. Men were coming to take the horses. Bronwyn slid down from the saddle gratefully. A pleasant buzzing filled her senses, the awareness of more Wardens: her brothers and sisters. Her other friends, too: Oghren waved a sloshing cup at her, and Sten loomed behind, his face inscrutable.

Leliana hugged her, warm and comforting.

"Oh, I have missed you! There is so much to tell! Did you meet the other Dalish?"

Brosca grabbed her too. "Where's Jowan? Is he dead?"

"No!" Tara shouted past Bronwyn. "He's fine, back in Denerim, and all dressed up like a nobleman!"

Cullen was there too, shyly patting her shoulder. "Bronwyn."

Bronwyn gave him a quick, warm smile. "Is everyone all right?"

"Yes. Leliana and Oghren are just back from a patrol. Carver's gone to get Adaia. Alistair got some scratches when he saved Teyrn Loghain, but they're already healed."

"I want to hear everything!" Bronwyn said. "And I've got a lot to tell. Get everyone together and let's go upstairs!"

Brosca tugged on Bronwyn's arm, grinning, "Just wait til we tell you what happened to Bann Vaughan!"

"What happened to Bann Vaughan?" Bronwyn asked, concerned.

"Later," Cullen urged quietly. "It's not for everyone's ears."

More friends lined the stairs and fell into step on the way back to the Wardens' quarters. More and more people recognized Bronwyn and spread the word that the "Girl Warden was back!" The noise spread enough that Alistair heard it and came out of Loghain's quarters, shutting the door quietly. He glanced back frowning, but his handsome face lit up in a smile as soon as his eyes met Bronwyn's. In an instant, she was enveloped in a hug.

"Ow!" Alistair laughed. "You've got some pretty sharp edges there. The Teyrn was wounded—"

"Yes, I heard," Bronwyn said quickly. "How is he?"

"Sleeping, the last time I looked. Wynne says he'll be well enough to come to dinner." He dropped his voice. "And he will be, now that the King isn't there talking at the top of his voice." He breathed the next words in her ears. "It wasn't darkspawn. Assassins. Stabbed him in the back."

Bronwyn stopped in her tracks, horrified, an image of her bleeding, dying father in her mind's eye. "Assassins?" she hissed back. "Did you capture them?"

"They're dead." He shrugged. "They were pretty good." He grinned mischievously, his eyes traveling to Zevran, who was chatting with great fire and animation with Tara and Brosca. "No yelling that 'Teyrn Loghain dies here!' or anything of that sort. They just came out of nowhere and one of them stuck Loghain with a poisoned stiletto. You could hardly see the hilt. How it missed killing him is anybody's guess. We had to get his armor off to pry out the blade. Anyway, he went down and I saw it and I bashed one and whacked the other. Ser Cauthrien is looking into who they were. We don't know much right now."

"Maker's Breath!" She tugged on his arm. "Come on! Somebody gets us something to eat while everybody else starts talking!"

"Wait." Alistair caught her forearm and pulled her close. "Someone's got to tell you. Arl Howe is dead. He was killed by Crow Assassins the day your brother took his castle."

Howe's son and and daughter too. Your brother sent word to the Queen and she sent couriers south right away. They must have passed you while you were with the Dalish. So Amaranthine was taken and your brother was fine the last we heard. I know it's a lot to take in, but I knew you'd want to know right away."

"You're right." She swayed a little, and leaned on her trusty Senior Warden. "It's such a shock."

"Kind of a good one, isn't it?" he whispered anxiously.

"Yes...it's just...yes." She managed a brief smile. "The man who murdered my parents is dead. That's good, of course. Fergus is safe. That's even better. I just need some time to take it all in." She tried to understand the news. Howe's son and daughter? Surely not! Delilah was almost certainly innocent...

But no more innocent than Oriana and Oren, of course. What a cruel place the world was.

Between them, Brosca and Ogren yelled loudly enough for trays of tankards and bowls of stew to make their appearance as if by magic. Once those were passed around—and everyone was happy to join the travelers in an afternoon snack—Bronwyn readied herself to catch up on the news. Anders and Morrigan slipped into the room and nodded to her. Cullen was in the act of shutting the door, when Carver Hawke made his appearance, escorting Adaia back to the safety of the Wardens' headquarters. With them was a

handsome man who resembled Carver. A handsome man indeed. Bronwyn's eyes were caught by the charming, insouciant smile and the muscular arms and shoulders, set off attractively by the man's brown leather jerkin. With him was a big, well-brushed mabari. Scout trotted over to sniff the newcomer, who grinned doggily, apparently glad to meet another of his breed.

"And who is this?" Bronwyn asked, ready to be friendly with friends of her Wardens. She set aside her empty bowl, and focused on this new addition. Anders caught Morrigan's eye and gave her a wink.

Torn between pride and jealousy, Carver made the introductions.

"Warden-Commander," he said, "this is my older brother, Adam Hawke. Adam, this is the Commander of the Grey in Ferelden, Lady Bronwyn Cousland!"

The handsome warrior bowed gracefully. "My lady," he murmured, in a most pleasantly resonant baritone. With a sly grin, he added, "Hunter and I are glad to make the acquaintance both of you and the famous Scout."

Bronwyn smiled. That a mabari had chosen him spoke well of his character. "'Warden' will do," she told him, "or 'Commander.' Have you come to join us?"

Adam paused, admiring the attractive young woman with the unusual green eyes. He was an observant man, and caught

the curious way she said the word "joined," almost capitalizing it. Of course, joining the Grey Wardens was a grave undertaking.

"No...Commander," was the modest and manly reply. "Carver is the adventurer of the family. I have come down to see how he was..."

"He's been going out on patrol with us, Bronwyn," Alistair broke in. "He's good."

"He's the head of his family," Leliana said gently. "He is responsible for a mother, a sister, a cousin, and an invalid uncle." She gave Bronwyn a speaking look, which was understood instantly to mean that there was much more to say on the matter.

Not at all abashed, Adam said, "In fact, Commander, I was hoping to obtain your help in finding a position. Not with the Grey Wardens, but with anyone else of your acquaintance who could use a loyal officer."

He was very charming, but Bronwyn was not particularly thrilled to be put on the spot on her arrival—not when there were so many other issues claiming her attention. Still, he was Carver's brother, and had a mabari friend...

"I know heaps of people," she told him. "I'm sure I can come up with something. Let me give it some thought."

She noticed that Adam stayed with them through their

meeting, just as Zevran and Oghren and Sten did. Her Wardens clearly thought well of him.

"All right!" She lifted a hand. "I have things to say and I want to hear from you. To make the big news official: yes, we did find the other Dalish clan, and yes, they did agree to come to Ostagar to fight. We also ended up going to Denerim, and more about that later. What I want to hear now is what I *don't* know: all the news from Ostagar since I left, and the news from Denerim which I missed in my time among the Dalish. Senior Warden, report!"

She had used her time well on the return to Ostagar, thinking over how to make this informal association of Blight-fighters a more structured organization. First, she must make clear the bones of that structure: she was their Commander, Alistair was her second-in-command. There were other roles to be assigned, but this was a start.

Rising to his feet, Alistair blushed and grinned, and then gave a little formal bow.

"The Dalish arrived shortly after you left, and they've made a real difference. They're led by Keeper Merrill, and the King thinks a lot of her. Teyrn Loghain was really pleased to find some of his old friends among them, from the days of the Rebellion when he commanded the Night Elves. We've been able to penetrate to the big chasms the darkspawn have opened up. One of them is big enough for the Archdemon, and we're working on ways to damage it. We went out to the old Grey Warden outpost and skirmished with the darkspawn

there. Some of us thought it might be nice someday to rebuild it and have a place in the Wilds for training and...stuff..."

There were chuckles, and Alistair shrugged off his lack of eloquence. "And we had quite the adventure today, trying out an idea of Teyrn Loghain's. The dwarves rigged a dry streambed west of here and we were able to lure a pretty good-sized band of darkspawn out to chase us. The darkspawn couldn't resist a chance to hunt Wardens," he said, giving Bronwyn a meaning look. She nodded, understanding, and he went on. "Maybe Teyrn Loghain got the idea from what happened at the big battle in Bloomingtide, when the darkspawn targeted us. Anyway, this time we were ready for them. They were funneled down the valley and were caught in the traps. The Dalish took them out with arrows, and the dwarves disarmed the traps that were still active, so they wouldn't hurt anyone else. Completely wiped out the darkspawn, or at least that's what I'm told. Anders and I were helping Teyrn Loghain at that point. In all the confusion, these two soldiers came out of nowhere and one of them stabbed Loghain. I just happened to be looking his way that moment, because I was really pleased with how it was going, and I wanted to see if he was pleased, too. He was, and he didn't see the men coming up behind him. So I got to the assassins and there was a fight, and I killed them, and Loghain isn't very pleased about that. We don't know who they were working for."

"—but we can *guess*," Cullen put in, his face stony. "It was a cowardly, despicable attack."

"Hey! / can't guess," Oghren rumbled. "Who did it?"

"Somebody with a real gift for poisons," Anders said, "or who knows somebody who does. Luckily, the stuff was a little too old, and I'm guessing they misjudged the dosage for a man as big as Teyrn Loghain. Zevran! Do the Crows do anything with deep mushroom and scoriata?"

"No," Zevran spread his hands. "That is unknown to me. It sounds very vile."

"Most people would guess the Orlesians," Bronwyn said, frowning. "They would be the obvious culprits: they would have much to gain by killing Ferelden's greatest general when the country is under attack."

It was unnecessary to add that Loghain had plenty of other enemies. There were many in the Landsmeet who still bitterly resented that a commoner had been granted a teyrnir, just as they resented that commoner's daughter being Queen. Loghain had made many of them look shabby, pitiful, and incompetent during the Rebellion. His military talents had appeared out of nowhere, when the fortunes of the rebels were at their lowest ebb. He had been King Maric's greatest weapon against the Orlesians—he and Rowan, Maric's future queen, of course. Yes, it would not be beyond the realm of possibility that a disaffected noble would do this, even with the country under attack. People could be selfish, stupid creatures.

"Ser Cauthrien is looking into it," Alistair said. "The assassins

were with Bann Loren's men, so they're all being questioned."

"Bann Loren!" Bronwyn thought about it. He was the husband of her mother's unhappy friend, Lady Landra. She had never liked the man: not many did. He had never seemed to care whether he was liked or not; not even by his wife or son. What was his part in all this? Or had the assassins simply chosen at random? Some of the banns were not very particular about the soldiers they recruited.

Alistair shrugged. "So that's all we know about that for now. We had some dispatches from Denerim. I told you some of that, Bronwyn. Arl Rendon Howe is dead, and your brother took Vigil's Keep. It looks like the Arl was killed by Crow assassins. I didn't tell you this, but it looks like they were hired by the mother of your brother's wife."

"Oriana's mother!" It took Bronwyn's breath away for a moment. It was something startling and unexpected. "Lady Fortuny?"

"Ah!" Zevran's pointed ears positively perked up. "Your brother's wife was a Fortuny? I am impressed. They do indeed have connections with the Crows. It is all very ironic." He smiled. Irony did not much disturb him.

Bronwyn tried to find something good in all this misery. "At least the country will now be united. I daresay Fergus will want to pacify Amaranthine and then drive out the last of Howe's men in Highever." He would have to go home and see Highever Castle and the horrors visited upon them there.

Surely Howe's men had disposed of the bodies and washed the blood from the stones...

Alistair cleared his throat, and glanced over to Adaia. "And while you were gone, Bann Vaughan was killed by the darkspawn."

"By the darkspawn?" Tara burst out excitedly. "Serves him right!"

Some laughter followed. Bronwyn asked, "How did it happen?"

"It was because of me," Adaia croaked out. She ducked her head and muttered, "Well, it *was*."

Alistair scowled. "We're keeping that bit among ourselves. Teyrn Loghain figured it out, but nobody else knows that Vaughan and two of his friends grabbed Adaia when she was at work and dragged her out to the forest to—hurt her. Before they could get far, the darkspawn showed up and killed them. Adaia got away—"

"I ran and ran!" Adaia declared.

"Good for you," Bronwyn managed. This must certainly be causing a stir. The Arl of Denerim's son and heir killed...

"Anyway," Alistair said. "I was gone at the time, but Cullen and Morrigan and Brozca found out she was gone, and they followed and found her. Once she was safe, they tracked the

darkspawn down and wiped them out. Vaughan and his pals were a mess. Everybody else thinks they were up to something disgusting out there in the woods: so," he grinned, "it's absolutely *ruined* his reputation—"

"Oh, cry me a river," scoffed Brosca.

Astrid thought of something else. "Your cousin was betrothed to this Vaughan, was she not? You were concerned for her. Now, it seems, she is quite safe."

"That's true," Tara said. "That's another good thing." Danith nodded, in complete agreement. It would have been horrible, even for a shemlen woman, to be married to such a creature.

Bronwyn's breath was rather taken away, imagining Habren's reaction to the loss of Vaughan and her upcoming nuptials. All past tantrums would be eclipsed by her response to this blow. Bronwyn bit her lip, fighting inappropriate laughter. It was mean. Yes, it was mean of her. It was taking a shameful delight in the misfortunes of others. Habren had *liked* Vaughan. On the other hand, anyone who could like a disgusting rapist and murderer had something seriously wrong with her... So Habren would not be having her wedding. Bronwyn bit her lip again, forcing herself to think of serious things.

"So you are safe from Vaughan, Adaia. That is good news indeed. His plots will no longer endanger you or distract from the war against the Blight. With his death, and the death of Arl Howe, the country is now united against the Blight. The Blight

is the real danger. That is what brings us together in this place. We must be committed to the mission. To that end, I have given some thought to our own situation. As we bring more recruits into the Wardens, we must be prepared. That is to say, as our order grows larger, we need structure and discipline as well as the bonds of friendship and trust we develop as we serve together."

With that introduction, she laid out her future expectations. Some were already entirely with her. Cullen and Carver—and Astrid— were nodding in agreement.

She said, "I am your Warden-Commander. Alistair is Senior Warden. After that seniority is determined by Joining date. Since a number of people joined on the same day, I will also take date of joining our company into consideration. There is also the position of Senior Warden Mage to be appointed—"

Anders, alarmed, called out, "I don't want to be in charge of anything!"

Bronwyn frowned at him. "I shall take your wishes into consideration. You and Tara joined our company nearly at the same moment. Tara is therefore Senior Warden Mage. You may not wish to be in charge, Anders, but Tara is, and you will follow her orders."

"I guess I can do that," Anders allowed. Morrigan sneered a little, not because she disliked Tara—she did not—but because the idea of following orders was odious to her.

Tara, not surprisingly, was thrilled. "I'll be the best Senior Warden Mage ever!" Congratulations followed Bronwyn's announcement. Bronwyn was pleased, herself. She had more faith in Tara's commitment to the Wardens than in Anders'.

"I have no doubt you will be," Bronwyn said. "Now to less pleasant issues. We all need to understand what is expected of us. I will speak first to our brave friends who are not Wardens, and who serve with us as volunteers. If the day comes that you grow weary of our company, I have no authority to keep you against your will. I do hope, however, that you will not depart at a critical moment. While you remain with us, I expect you to follow orders. If you do not, we will not pay you. If you are particularly obstreperous, you will not remain among us."

"Fair enough," Oghren called back.

Zevran grinned wickedly. "I am yours to command, Fair One. And, it appears, everyone else's as well!"

"Sten?" Bronwyn asked.

The qunari's face knit together in ponderous thought. "Yes. Discipline is essential. I shall follow your commands, until your commands are contrary to the Qun. Then I shall give notice."

That was the most she could hope for, she supposed. Her eyes drifted to the handsome Adam Hawke. He grinned back at her.

"For the time I'm here, I have no problem with that."

"And Morrigan?"

"I shall follow reasonable suggestions. I can promise no more than that. I trust my service has not been lacking hitherto?"

"Not at all," said Bronwyn, inwardly wanting to give Morrigan a good, hard shake. "Adaia?"

"I want to be a Warden," Adaia croaked, very firmly. "Tell me about the hard stuff."

"Very well. I shall talk about the Wardens themselves. Grey Wardens are sworn to the order, and my expectations of their conduct are therefore higher. Here are the basics."

She took a deep breath, and recited the words she had practiced in her mind for the past two days. "Refusal to obey a direct order will be considered insubordination.

Insubordination is also conduct contrary to a superior's officer's clear purpose. Such an infraction will be punished. The first occurrence will be met with loss of pay, the amount depending on the seriousness of the offense. Further infractions will be punished by confinement to quarters, flogging, or execution, in that order. A combination of punishments may also be imposed. I do not wish to dwell on punishments for cowardice. All of you have proved your courage. However, desertion in the face of the enemy can happen for many reasons; some of them having nothing whatever to do with courage or cowardice. This offence will

also be punished, depending on the seriousness of the situation, and whatever mitigating circumstances may apply."

A brief, impressed silence followed. Carver's eyes were quite wide, and he was not the only one taken aback.

"Whoa!" Alistair breathed. "I mean—it makes sense. It's pretty much what Duncan told us."

Danith gathered her courage and stood up. She too, had had much to think about in the past few days. She could not like shemlens. She did not like the Warden-Commander. However, she must uphold the honor of the Dalish in this strange place.

"The Warden-Commander is forced to speak plainly because of me. My conduct and actions among the clan of Zathrian were lacking in honor and good sense. When presented with a conflict between loyalty to a Dalish Keeper and loyalty to the Warden-Commander, I chose poorly. My actions brought me shame and sorrow, and I have apologized to the Commander and my other companions on the mission. I apologize to all of you now."

Very pleased, but also feeling a bit awkward, Bronwyn replied, "Bravely said. I appreciate your forthrightness and self-examination. You will not be paid for the Satinalia quarter, and the matter is otherwise at an end. " To forestall the murmuring and gossip that rose up around them, she said, "I would prefer that nothing more be said of this. Instead, I wish each of you to consider *privately* how you would respond if forced to choose between the Grey Wardens and something

else that you hold dear. Our mission is clear—to destroy the darkspawn. Everything else must come second to that."

She knew herself to be a horrible hypocrite. Yes, she would do her duty and fight the darkspawn, but it was a fight complicated by family loyalty and loyalty to her native land. Indeed, she had chosen already, for the First Warden had ordered her to leave Ferelden and she had disregarded him. On the other hand, she was not entirely convinced that loyalty to the Grey Warden mission and loyalty to the First Warden were one and the same...

"I will also tell you more of our adventures, and this must not be spoken of outside this room."

Everyone nodded, even Sten, so she went on. Something of this was bound to leak, and it was better to have it in the open.

"In addition to visiting the Dalish, we went to Denerim. I wished to consult with the Master-Armourer Wade about dragon-fighting equipment. He had some interesting ideas, which I will be glad to share with you later on. Jowan has remained in Denerim for the time being, because he could use the libraries there to research the tactics of the Nevarran dragon-hunters. I also had a letter for the Queen. And I overheard you whispering about this already, but yes, Tara, Zevran, and Danith visited the Alienage, and it appears that Adaia has a new cousin."

"Who?" Adaia croaked out, excited. "Who had a baby? Was it

Eleria? Was it Trianni?"

"No!" Tara was grinning. "It's me! I mean, it's not me who had a baby! It's me who's your cousin! Really. Hahren Valendrian showed me his records. We're second cousins. Isn't that something?"

"You're my *cousin*? You're one of *those* Suranas?"

"Yes! I'm Nessa's sister!" Tara bubbled "It's so exciting! I never had relatives before!"

Bronwyn indulged the squeals and gossip, and wished she could tell them the rest of the news from Denerim, but it was simply too dangerous. Tara, Danith, Zevran, and Astrid had all been sworn to secrecy about the attempt on Anora's life. Bronwyn had decided she would tell Alistair, but no one else.

Instead, she blew out a breath, and smiled. "On that note, it seems appropriate that I bought presents for everyone!"

Bronwyn took some trouble with her appearance, getting ready for dinner. There was no chance of a real bath, but the servants brought enough hot water to wash very thoroughly. She unwrapped her new bar of lavender-scented soap, and the lathering and splashing—and her wicked satisfaction at Hahren's discomfiture—put her in a very good mood. Her Grey Warden gown was quite a hit with the other women of the party. Adaia stoked the fabric and insisted on helping lace it up.

"It's shiny," she admired.

"You look like a queen," Brosca said, unusually sober. "Like the Queen of the Wardens." Unable to keep her fingers to herself, she reached out to touch the embroidery. "That must be the fanciest gown in the world!"

"It very likely boasts the largest griffon ever embroidered on a piece of apparel," Morrigan remarked, one brow arching.

"Meow!" Bronwyn laughed at her, not put out in the least.

"I would not choose grey for you, but what lovely, lovely velvet!" Leliana bubbled. "The finest to be had in Val Royeaux! And it fits, too! It fits perfectly."

"That was Mistress Rannelly's doing," Bronwyn smiled. "And the gown is twenty years old."

"Who would know?" Leliana shrugged. "Is that the belt? Put it on!"

Tara had to tell them about the Compound, and about the niceness of Mistress Rannelly. Danith, when applied to, agreed quietly that the housekeeper was a most hospitable woman, and a purveyor of wholesome nourishment.

Tara laughed at her. "It was lovely. Danith makes it sound so serious! You're all going to love it at the Wardens' Compound. The bedchambers are so comfortable, and we have our own Great Hall with a long table and portraits and everything. And

our own kitchen, and our own laundry, and so much hot water that you can have a bath whenever you like!"

Astrid was calmer in her praise, but she too had enjoyed her stay. "All the more reason to defeat the Blight, and then savor the Compound's many delights. By then, we'll certainly have earned them."

"What was all that noise?" Loghain asked, waking reluctantly from a healing sleep.

Wynne hurried to his side and gave him another potion. "I believe, your lordship, that the Warden-Commander has returned."

That roused him a bit. He grimaced at the bitterness of the medicine and then grunted, "I want to see her."

"I think you will be able to get up for dinner. Perhaps then—"

"I want to see her *now*," Loghain growled, struggling up to a sitting position. "I'm fine."

"You're not *fine*..."

"I'm better." More civilly, he said, "I thank you for all your care. Your talents have made all the difference in this campaign, and not just for me."

"You are most gracious."

"Hmph. Have someone fetch Bronwyn. I want her report."

Wynne sighed, and gave the quiet servant waiting in the the corner a nod. "Very well. I'm sure she'll be here just as soon as she can."

"Give me a clean shirt, then."

In fact, Bronwyn arrived almost immediately, smiling with anticipation and frowning in concern. The combined expression looked rather odd. It felt odd on her face, too, and she tried to wipe it away into a more bland countenance. She cast a friendly smile Wynne's way, which helped. Loghain was slumped in a chair, looking very grumpy, but his eyes were intent on her.

"My lord. I am relieved to see you up. Anders was very impressed by the poison used by the assailants."

"I'm *fine*," Loghain insisted, glowering at Wynne. "But I'm thirsty. It must be the ghastly potions I've been ingesting all day."

"You may have one cup of wine," Wynne generously permitted, pouring for him.

"I thank you. The Warden-Commander and I need to talk in private."

Wynne pursed her lips, not liking to leave her testy patient unattended. "I'll be just outside," she whispered to Bronwyn.

"Don't let him overexert himself." She hustled the servant out ahead of her and the door shut.

"Bloody woman. Thinks she's my mother." Loghain waved Bronwyn over, and pointed at the footstool in front of his chair. He downed the wine while Bronwyn seated herself, mindful of her velvet.

Loghain noticed it and his black brows met over his high-bridged nose as he studied her appearance. "What's that you have on? I thought you didn't have a gown."

"This old thing? It's been in the Wardens' attics for years and years. Actually, twenty years. That's when Commander Genevieve brought it with her from Orlais. She apparently never had a chance to wear it, though. If you wish to mock the very large griffon on the front, you are behindhand, because Morrigan has already held it up to ridicule very thoroughly."

He snorted, and took her hand in his big one, his thumb caressing her palm in a startling exciting way. "Your report, Commander? How did Anora take the news of Cailan's double-dealing?"

"Bravely. It was a dreadful shock, of course, but she is soldiering on..."

"And the Dalish?" He squeezed her hand, and kissed it lightly.

Was he trying to throw her off-balance? He was doing an awfully good job of it, wounded as he was. She decided that

two could play that game. Her free hand touched his stubbly jaw and she leaned close to kiss him sweetly. He seemed to like it very much. If he had been entirely himself, he probably would have delayed the rest of her report. But he was not quite himself, and Bronwyn sat back, a little more confident. Her heart fluttered a little, remembering the truly terrible news she must give him, but she would try to soften it as best she could.

"More Dalish are joining us. I found the clan of Keeper Zathrian. It is now the clan of Keeper Lanaya, and she will be here with her people within the month."

"You didn't have to recruit a Warden to win her favor?"

"I had to do *plenty* to win the clan's favor, but I got no Wardens from it. It was ridiculously complicated, but now it's done. I met with Master Wade in Denerim, and he had some very interesting ideas, including a harpoon-like ballista bolt, which could be used to entangle and disable a dragon. Jowan is remaining in Denerim to research dragon-hunting lore, among other things."

"Ah. Have you been given the news about Howe?"

She smiled tightly. "I have. I know that he is dead and that Delilah and Thomas were murdered with him. It seems so cruel and unnecessary. It's certainly not what I wanted."

"Nor your brother, from his avowals to Anora. He sent her a hasty note. Apparently he's looking into some other of Howe's

misdeeds, but Anora wrote that she would say more about them once they could be definitely confirmed."

"Other misdeeds?"

"I daresay some other murders he was involved in. I'm willing to swear that the man never willingly or knowingly had dealing with the Orlesians."

"Perhaps not." Bronwyn was willing to let it go, now that the man was dead. "Perhaps he did not, but certainly others have." She gestured at his shoulder with her free hand. "That was a present from our western neighbors, don't you think?"

"Probably. Bastards. It's not the first time they've tried to kill me."

"Loghain..." She must tell him, here and now, when they were quiet and alone. He must have time to compose himself before others saw him. "Loghain...as you know, I met with the Queen..." She had thought about how to tell him, but nothing she had invented was good enough.

His face changed. "What is it? You said she took it well enough."

"I said that she was brave. As it happened, the news was not the only thing she had to bear. I visited, and we talked, and during that conversation, something quite awful came to light. She put it in her letter that I was to bring to you." She pulled the folded parchment from her pocket, reluctant for him to see

it and be hurt."We're keeping it as quiet as possible. Before you read it, I want you know that she was in good spirits when I left, and Jowan remained to help..."

"What has happened?" he snarled. Dropping her hand, he seized the letter, unfolded it, and scanned it quickly, his face taut with fury and anguish.

My dear Father—

Bronwyn has no doubt assured you that I am much better than I was when she first met with me. That is true. I hesitate to write these words, for you are certain to say "I told you so!"

Erlina, my trusted Erlina, was a spy, and had been for years. I discovered that she had been poisoning my tea for some time. Had Bronwyn not been there, it is likely she would have succeeded and escaped. Luckily, Bronwyn was there when Erlina was exposed, and knocked her down with one blow. I had been feeling so very ill and weak, and I believed it was some sickness. That was the plan, Erlina confessed. I was to fall into a decline, and no longer be in the way of the grand schemes of others...

He read it all, and then read it again. If Cailan had stepped into the room at that moment, Loghain would have killed him, whether he was wounded or not; whether Cailan was King or not. The idea that Cailan might have been a party to this was so painful that Loghain groaned aloud, and then tossed the letter aside and dropped his head into his his hands. Bronwyn

laid her hand on his arm, and gave him time to pull himself together.

"Bastard Orlesians," Loghain growled, sick at heart at what had been done to his child. There would be blood for this. That they had attacked him was nothing: a soldier grew used to people trying to kill him in all sorts of ways. But that they would seek Anora's life, for their *convenience*... "You should have brought that bitch to me."

Gently, Bronwyn said, "The Queen commanded otherwise. I believe we got all we could hope to get from her, and it gave Her Majesty some comfort and closure to know that Erlina would harm no one else."

"I suppose." He rubbed his hand over his face. His shoulder ached a bit, and he rubbed that too, grimacing. "She didn't hint at the attack on me, I take it?"

"No." Bronwyn wondered about that a little, and then said. "It's entirely possible that she would have known nothing about it. It would be safer, surely, to keep that plot as secret as possible. I suspect the Empress has yet more little schemes in store for us, but the worst have been thwarted, so far."

Loghain sighed. "Anora..." His voice trailed away. "Anora said she felt all right once that fellow Jowan worked some healing magic. Did she *look* better?"

"Much, much better. He agrees, though, that Wynne is the best choice to treat the Queen."

"I'll see to it. Wynne's a good sort, for all her fussing." He picked up the letter again and smoothed it out, hissing at the pain in his shoulder. "What's this Urn of Sacred Ashes nonsense that Anora's writing about?"

"It's not nonsense—not entirely, at least. We met a respected scholar near Lake Calenhad. Brother Genetivi is his name. He believes that that Andraste's funerary temple is out in the Frostbacks. His researches indicated that there is a village called Haven where he might find people who knew the exact location. I think there might be something to it, because someone is certainly interested in suppressing the information. When I was in Denerim, I went to call on this scholar, to see if he returned home safely. He had not, and there was someone pretending to be his assistant, rifling through his papers. He had killed the real assistant some time before. I took the notes and the other maps, and have them in my possession."

"Show me the map."

She had expected this, and had brought it along. Spreading it out on his lap, she said, "I brought everything else with me to Ostagar, too. It's in my saddlebag."

"Just the map for now."

His fingertips traced eagerly over everything unfamiliar to him. "Haven," he grunted. "Never heard of it. It's on the Ferelden side of the Frostbacks, though, so it's rightfully ours. They should be paying taxes. I suppose it might be considered part of Redcliffe...no...I don't think there's any overlord out there.

Interesting..."

It was interesting. Where there was a population center, there was a potential bannorn he could use as a reward for an outstanding soldier. Or Cailan could, properly primed. If they all survived the Blight, he wanted Cauthrien to have land of her own and a place in the Landsmeet...

"And Honnleath...I've not heard of that place either. Perhaps I'll go and have a look someday. So," he said, sitting back, "this Genetivi was going to Haven to find out about the Urn. No word of him since? Not even at the Cathedral?"

"I fear not. I went there, of course, when I interviewed Mother Boann about Adaia. She was telling the exact truth, by the way, though it's a moot point now. Anyway, as to Genetivi: he has friends at the Cathedral, but they've had no word of him since his journey west. I fear the worst, but I did warn him."

"It's all rather...far-fetched...don't you think?"

"I don't know," Bronwyn considered. "There was certainly an Andraste. Chantry lore tells us her faithful gathered her ashes. That much I think we can accept as true. Obviously not all her followers were killed, or there would be no Andrasteans today. It only makes sense that they would have honored her remains. It's possible that a party carrying them into the safety of the mountains might have met with misfortune, but it's also possible that they did not. The odd part of the story, I grant, is that the world does not know of this temple. Perhaps there was division amongst the followers...some sort of

dispute about how the remains should be bestowed. As Haven is not in the Anderfels or Par Vollen, but here in Ferelden, I don't see it as either impossible or inappropriate to investigate these clues."

Something unpleasant occurred to Loghain. "It is...possible...that the Chantry knows of this place and is trying to keep it secret. Perhaps they've known of it for years. Not the rank-and-file, of course, but the Divine and the high clerics. I've heard of Genetivi. He's been in trouble with them in the past for printing things they didn't care for."

That was a frightening thought, and the Divine was based in Orlais... Bronwyn considered it and shook her head. "I think if the Chantry were behind it, it would have been managed much more efficiently. There wouldn't have been just the one spy in the house, and the dead body would already have been disposed of. The Chantry could seal the house, anyway. I don't think the Orlesians are involved, either. If they thought they could lay hands on the Urn, they would have sent a far more experienced and dangerous agent. No. I don't think either the Chantry or the Orlesians knows about this."

Loghain considered it too. "Good. Let's keep it that way. Can your Wardens be trusted not to talk?"

Bronwyn felt a little nervous about that. Cullen and Leliana were so devout. "Only Tara was with me when I searched the house and killed the spy. She's extremely reliable. I did talk to my recent party about keeping this quiet. No one but me has read the notes or seen the maps. I'll tell everyone again that

they are not to discuss anything that happened in Denerim with outsiders."

Loghain leaned over the map again, fixing it all in his mind. "Intriguing. Ferelden soil. It seems...appropriate. I'm serious about not wanting this rumor spread about. The Chantry would claim it as a religious foundation."

"I understand."

"If there's a way to heal Anora, we must have it. My daughter will keep her life and her throne. Every scheme of that bitch Celene will be thwarted. We will defeat the Blight, and Cailan..."

There was a something in his face that Bronwyn had not seen before—or at least not when the son of his old friend was the topic of conversation. "Cailan.." he growled, the word bitter in his mouth.

"He may know nothing of any of this, Loghain," Bronwyn counseled him. "Nothing of the attack on you, and nothing of the poisoning of Anora. If I were Celene, I would tell him nothing at all."

"His ignorance makes him no less culpable," Loghain said grimly. "It's his dabbling in secret diplomacy that encouraged the Orlesians to do their worst."

"Yes, but we can't be the ones to say anything about it. We've succeeded in keeping the attack on Anora secret. Just as the

Orlesians have no idea that Marjolaine is dead and the marriage treaty miscarried, they do not know that Erlina is not still at her poisoning in the Palace. In a few weeks some agent may report that the Queen is still alive and healthy, and they will investigate, but I see no reason to tip our hands." She patted his hand, smiling wryly. "At the moment, your face, my lord, is a book that even our king could read."

He grunted at that, looking very weary. He folded the letter and then, the map. "Put these in the box over there," he said, pulling a key from a pocket. "And lock them up."

She did, protesting only a little. "It's my map."

"It's secret Fereldan intelligence. I'll give you another map. We know today of two Orlesian spies in the army. I can only presume there are more."

That was an alarming thought, but obviously true. The Empress was fabulously rich, and could afford many agents, most of whom probably knew nothing of the others' existence. And there was still the possibility of the King's involvement...

"Really," she said, almost to herself. "We'll have to be *very* polite to the King. A thousand dangers may beset us on every side, but we'll have to smile 'like innocent flowers,' as my mother used to say."

Loghain snorted a sour laugh. "If I smiled like an 'innocent flower' at him, he'd know his days were numbered. You'll have to settle for the usual bad temper, and so will he. Now come

back here to me."

Welcoming back the Girl Warden was made into something of an occasion. A rather festive dinner was readied for the King, the Wardens, and the leaders of the armies. Bronwyn came down with Loghain to find King Cailan's behavior to her was somewhat cooler than in the past. His eyes widened a bit at her newly green eyes and her long scar, but he said nothing about them, which was fine with her.

She also found that the place of honor at His Majesty's side was now occupied by the fey and fragile Dalish Keeper Merrill. On the other side was the dwarven commander, Lord Piotin Aeducan. It was appropriate enough, Bronwyn granted.

Merrill seemed unaware of any tension. She greeted Bronwyn in a most friendly way, and introduced her to her loyal advisors, Maynriel and Thanovir. "And they are old friends of Teyrn Loghain, too."

That seemed to be true. Loghain was at his ease with the greying elves, and they with him. It was a glimpse of his past to see him with some of his Night Elves.

Cailan leaned forward to ask Bronwyn about her travels. "Bronwyn! I do hope that your dealings with the other Dalish went smoothly. With...let's see...Keeper Zathrian's clan?"

Bronwyn smiled, picturing herself as an innocent flower. "It is now Keeper Lanaya's clan. Keeper Zathrian is, alas, no

more."

"Oh!" cried Merrill, huge eyes moist and wistful. "What a pity! He'd been their Keeper so long! Was it a sudden illness?"

Further down the table, Tara bit back a snort. "Pretty sudden." Zevran hid a grin. Astrid grimaced, and speared another slice of mutton. Danith was miserably reliving it all.

Loghain said dryly. "Perhaps it did not go *quite* so smoothly."

Bronwyn did not want to get into the whole awful story, lest she grow angry again. "Keeper Zathrian's death was a shock to his clan, but Keeper Lanaya has promised hunters. They should be arriving in a sevenday, or a little more."

Danith added, "The Dalish are true to their oaths. They will come."

"All the same," Tara persisted. "I wouldn't call it *smooth*. Not with an ancient elven temple, and curses and werewolves, and undead phantoms, and a dragon. And Bronwyn had to swim underwater to find the werewolves' lair. That was pretty horrible."

There was a growing stir at the tables, as people stared, their attention caught by "curses," "werewolves," and "a dragon."

"A dragon," Bryland nodded, unsurprised. "Bronwyn killed it, I expect."

Not wanting to go on about it, Bronwyn tried to wave it off. "It

wasn't a very *big* dragon..."

Zevran put in, "The werewolves were the real problem."

Cailan found it all quite exciting. "Werewolves? Really? What were they like?"

He was looking at her, so Bronwyn knew she must answer.

"Big, Your Majesty," she told him. "They were big. Quite impressive."

"Strong and fast," remarked Astrid, reaching for another chicken leg. "They needed no other weapons than their fangs and claws."

"And they could talk—" Tara began, and then saw Bronwyn's tiny headshake. "What? They could talk! It was creepy."

Cailan was entranced. "Well, what did they talk about?" He muttered, "What *would* werewolves talk about?"

"Mostly about how much they hated being werewolves," Bronwyn said. There was laughter, some of it very uneasy.

"Lanaya's very nice, though," Tara remarked. "I think she'll be a very good Keeper. Don't you think so, Danith?"

Without hesitation, Danith agreed. "I believe she will put her duty to the clan first, as a good Keeper should. And she wisely understands that there is no hiding from the Blight in the forest, but that the clan must stand with the other free

peoples of Thedas against the danger."

There were polite murmurs of approval from all the tables.

"Well said," Merrill enthused. "Oh, well said!"

"Well said, indeed!" Cailan beamed at the Dalish Warden. She seemed to him just what a Warden should be. "A toast to the alliance!"

The Wardens cheered loudest of all. Loghain glanced at them, and then glanced again, his eye caught by a remarkably handsome man he had not seen before. No. He had, in passing, seen that face today during the battle...

"A new Warden?" he asked Bronwyn, jerking his head in the direction of Adam Hawke.

"No. He's Carver Hawke's brother. He's come to see if his brother is all right...and mostly, I think, to try to get some patronage from me. He's looking for a commission. He's very nice: very well-bred. That mabari there is his."

Feeling eyes on him, Adam turned and smiled at Bronwyn. It was a remarkably white and engaging smile. The dog smiled, too. Loghain instantly said to her, "Anora wrote something about your brother needing good men in the north. With all the losses at Highever—and now Amaranthine, too..."

"What a good idea!" Bronwyn said, pleased at the suggestion. "Just the thing! Alistair thinks he's quite a sound fighter. I'm

sure Fergus will find a use for him."

"Well, that's settled then." Loghain sat back, smiling ever so slightly. "I trust Alistair's judgement. If you like, I can write young Hawke a recommendation, too."

Quite a bit of drinking followed, which did not much trouble Bronwyn, since she was eating enough to offset it. Loghain was careful not to overindulge, and was more interested in observing the antics of the diners, anyway. Cailan, however, was getting a bit pink with the wine. He spoke up, ready to be amused.

"My friend Lord Dace," he said, lifting his cup in salute to the dwarf, "tells me that you Wardens have a custom of telling each other stories. Would it be asking too much if we could hear one tonight? All of us? I should like it of all things."

Bronwyn opened her mouth, ready to negotiate some sort of entertainment, when Adaia, brave after four cups of good red wine, croaked out, "Your turn, Danith!"

Danith knew it was, and had been wondering how to get out of it since the word "stories," had passed the shemlen king's lips. Escape was impossible. All eyes were turned to her. To try to evade this duty would be cowardice. The shemlen king was friendly to the Dalish and to the Wardens. He must be kept so, for the good of all the People.

The Commander was looking faintly alarmed, as if she expected that Danith would know no stories fit for a shemlen

king and his chieftains. Danith would prove her wrong. The story she would tell was not an excuse, but it was a way of explaining herself. She rose to her feet, and bowed gravely in the king's direction. She was actually bowing to Merrill, her Keeper, but the shemlens would not understand that. She raised her voice so that all in the great stone chamber could hear, and know that a Dalish hunter feared them not.

"I shall tell a tale of the elvhen, for those are the stories I know. One of you once asked me 'What is a Keeper?' There are many answers to that question. Our Keepers are obeyed and revered, not only because they are the keepers of our lore and custom, of our heritage and song, but also because they are the Keepers of our people. It is they who keep us from harm: who lead us unscathed through the dangers of forest and plain; who guard us from the dark creatures of both the waking world and that realm beyond which the shemlen call the Fade."

She glanced briefly at Bronwyn, and then at Merrill, and said, ""For countless generations our Keepers have been our guides and heroes. I shall tell of one of them: the Keeper Iloren."

Danith's story of Iloren, the Dalish Keeper

In the days after the rising of the Archdemon Zazikel, the dark ones covered every corner of the land. The Archdemon drove all the nations of the world before him, shemlen and elvhen alike.

In the far north are the lands which the shemlen call the Anderfels. There the hills wander the plains, and the earth is eternally baked beneath the uncaring sun. There, too, a clan of our people once lived, struggling to survive the Blight.

Iloren was their Keeper. A hunter in his younger days, crafty as any wolf, he led his people always just ahead of the darkspawn who chased them. But the old hunter knew that even halla cannot run forever. They must turn and fight, or be run down.

At the foot of the white cliffs of the Merdaine, the darkspawn cornered Iloren's clan. That night, the moon was strangled by clouds. The earth was concealed by a dreadful mist that rose out of nowhere, so that the elvhen could not tell up from down. In the confusion, the darkspawn attacked.

But Iloren had prepared for them. All around the camp, the hunters had strewn dry grass, brush and brambles. When the sound of rustling footfalls began, Iloren and the other hahren called upon the old magic. They struck out with lightning, and though the bolts missed the darkspawn, they hit their target all the same. The sea of kindling lit, and not one of the dark creatures made it through the fire to reach Iloren's clan.

The firestorm raged through the night. The clan clung to the stone of the cliffs, their skins near to blistering from the heat. In the morning, it was over, and the darkspawn dead lay in bone and ash before them, their Taint cleansed by the purifying flames.

Carefully, Iloren's clan picked their way among the remains and headed south, finding respite at the little lake they called the Winter Water. There they drank deeply, and there they rested and considered what they should do next. Some were for going south, to join their cousins in the Dales. Others wished to stay in their ancient lands, hoping that they were now free of darkspawn. Iloren sat unmoving, deep in thought

At length, he arose and said, "Hear me! Shall we live as hunted beasts all the days of our lives? The Dales lie far to south. To win to them we must face a thousand dangers. The darkspawn are against us this day. Another day it will be the Tevinters, seeking slaves, and yet another it will be the lords of the Anderfels, of Nevarra, of Orlais, ready to quarrel over the dwindling game of the Blighted forests. Let us go west and find a new place, far from the troubles and quarrels of Thedas!"

Many rejoiced at his words, and others shook their heads. Hahren Rhonnar said, "Shall we leave this land, where the elvhen were the first to walk among the trees? Shall we leave the place where Arlathan shone like a star: greater than all cities since its time?"

"I shall leave," answered Iloren, "for my purpose is to walk beyond the sunset. Come, my friends, it is not too late to seek a newer world!"

Thus was the clan divided. One portion elected to travel south to the Dales. Their journey was long and hard; and many died, and many were taken by the darkspawn.

The other elves kept faith with Iloren, their Keeper. They turned west, and were last seen struggling up the merciless and cloud-capped slopes of the Hunterhorn Mountains, the wall at the end of the western world. Whether they perished there or found a land beyond is not known. From that day to this, no one has ever had word of what happened to those elves, or to Iloren, their Keeper.

Applause and chatter. The elves seemed pleased that their heritage had been honored. Cailan lifted his golden goblet again. "A fine story! I love hearing of the deeds of the elvhen!"

Some of the human nobles took note of that, and there were quiet mutters, too low to be overheard. Loghain's eyes swept over them. Cailan's interest in the beautiful young Keeper Merrill was causing some unpleasant comment. If he had not been so angry at Cailan, he would have taken it upon himself to give the lad some advice. Right now, however, he was sitting very comfortably with Bronwyn at his side, and was content to allow Cailan enough rope to hang himself.

The dwarves liked the story well enough, too, or at least the parts that dealt with killing darkspawn. The dwarves were very fond of stories that involved killing darkspawn.

Lord Piotin Aeducan said, "A clever strategem against the darkspawn. Fire traps... Isn't that something like the tactics you and the Wardens were trying out today, Teyrn Loghain?"

Cailan answered instead, his face glowing. "Indeed it is! We

can learn so much from the old tales!"

Loghain grimaced. More bloody legends and fantasy. Bronwyn caught his eye and smiled mischievously.

People went back to gossip and drinking, but the Wardens still had much to say about the story.

"Beyond the Hunterhorn Mountains," mused Tara, her eyes dreamy. "They say the world ends there, but maybe not. So should the elves have followed Iloren, do you think? I think I would have."

Danith bit her lip and nodded. "That is the crux of the story. Each must answer it for himself. The Dales were known to be a land safe for elves—at least in those days. No one knew—no one knows to this day—if anything lies beyond the Hunterhorn Mountains. Ought one to obey one's Keeper, or judge for himself, using the best knowledge available? Was the Hahren right? Or was Iloren a wise visionary, who led his people to peace and safety in a land known only to elves? My heart has always said that his clan should have followed Iloren, but I do not know if that is the ingrained obedience to a Keeper; or because the situation of elves in Thedas is so difficult and intractable; or even because I love the idea of finding a new land."

Bronwyn was silent, thinking it appropriate to let the elves have their say about an elven story. It was intriguing, though...the idea of exploring beyond the mountains. Received wisdom said that the western edge of the world ended at the

Hunterhorn Mountains and south of them, at the Tirashan. To the north it ended with the jungles of the Donarks and the sea that separated Thedas from the Qunari-held islands of Seheron and Par Vollen. To the south were the frozen wastes beyond the Wilds, too forbidding for even the hardest cartographer. To the east was the limitless Amaranthine Ocean, too powerful and treacherous for safe sailing. Was there an edge where the sea boiled over like a waterfall? That made no sense to her, for then all the water in Thedas would long since have gone. Was there a great wall at the end? Aldous had shown her a scholar's map of Thedas, a rectangle with neat, straight lines enclosing it. That seemed odd, since nothing in nature had neat, straight lines. Perhaps even the highest mountains or the broadest waters held secrets on their far sides...

Zevran considered. "The journey from the Anderfels to the Dales would have been long and perilous indeed. Of course, in those days, the Dalish could not have known that their possession of the Dales would be all too brief. I do not know what I would have done, without knowing Iloren himself. Were he the leader for me, I would have been his man, however mad his vision."

Loghain listened in silence, and then whispered to Bronwyn. "Don't listen to the elves. The Frostbacks are quite far enough."

Sorry it took so long to get this massive chapter out. Between the sorrows of RL and the complexity of fictional events, I

thought I'd never be done.

The opening chunk of Danith's story is from the Codex entry: The Tale of Iloren.

No one in Ostagar knows about the slavers, because Anora is waiting for further confirmation of Fergus' discovery that Howe was doing business with the Tevinters. Once the scope of his dealings gets out, the news is going to be explosive. With the letter Fergus sent Anora from the city of Amaranthine, it was indeed confirmed, but Loghain has not yet received Anora's dispatch about it. That's in the next chapter.

Thanks to my reviewers: Zute, Kra Kyuu, Shakespira, demoncnargles, What Ithacas Mean, karinfan123, The Moidart, callalili, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Draco664, almostinsane, JackOfBladesX, ziprath, Juliafied, derko5, KnightOfHolyLight, ellechiM, Blinded in a Bolthole, Northern Warden, Kamish88, euromellows, RaZoRMandiblez, Grey Jackett, Josie Lange, coud1004, Dante Alighieri1308, Menamebephil, Lehni, Judy, Jenna53, Shinkansen, mutive, chocolatebrownie, WellspringCD, mille libri, Mystricka, Have Socks. Will Travel, amanda weber, Tyanilth, Enaid Aderyn, and Gene Dark.

46. Testing the Alliance

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 46: Testing the Alliance

Dim light from the braziers, more red than gold, illuminated the Wardens' quarters just enough for Bronwyn to slip inside and find her cot. Scout was next to it, curled up on his blanket and sound asleep. She smiled vaguely, and moved to the other side of the cot to keep from disturbing him.

The velvet gown was discarded for the second time that night. She struggled with the ties to her underskirt, a little muzzy with wine and love and sleep. It was impossible, in this gloom, to fold her good clothes without creasing them. Instead, she draped them carefully over the foot of her cot, and eased herself under them cautiously. With luck, she would have a few hours sleep—if the Archdemon permitted it.

"Did you have a nice conference with Teyrn Loghain?" Leliana asked softly.

Her face burning, and glad of the mask of darkness, Bronwyn managed, "Yes, very nice, thank you," and felt an utter fool. She lay back, her head on one up-flung arm, and blew out a breath.

Leliana turned on her side and put on a gentle hand on Bronwyn's shoulder. "That's good. As long as he is nice to you."

Bronwyn, tired as she was, huffed with wry laughter. Loghain was many things, and quite a few of them were exciting and stimulating and even very, very pleasurable, but "nice" was not a word that came to mind when she thought of him.

"We're good together," she said. "We get along all right."

The gentle hand patted her shoulder. Bronwyn looked over at Leliana. Even in the dim light, she could make out the sad expression.

The bard murmured, "You deserve much more than 'all right,' my friend. You are young, and beautiful, and brave. Grey Wardens may have forsworn long life, but nothing in our oath compels us to forswear love."

"It's not like that," Bronwyn whispered, impatient and embarrassed. One didn't just declare one's inmost feelings to the world at large.

"Oh..." Now the bard's fair face was amused. "I see. It is the very upper-class thing of revealing none of the softer emotions to the lower orders. It does not matter if you repeat the words to me, my dear friend, as long as you say them to him. And he to you."

"We don't talk much about *feelings*," Bronwyn muttered. What

he said to her before, during, and after was no one else's business. "I've got to sleep now."

Another gentle pat on her shoulder, and the hand was withdrawn. In a few moments, Leliana's breathing changed to the even rhythm of sleep.

At least as even as a Grey Warden's could be. Bronwyn lay awake for some time, listening to the rustles and moans sifting through the smoky chamber. The embers dulled to dark red and the shadows closed in around her. Her eyelids drooped, and like a snap of black lightning, a hurlock rushed past, gibbering.

Bronwyn's eyes blinked open. Distant thunder rolled, and the scent of rain penetrated through the smoke. Brosca whimpered, and Danith thrashed out. Scout "*whuffed*," his collar making a faint jingling noise. Leliana twitched her head from side to side. Bronwyn sat up and peered over at Astrid. The dark shape of the dwarven princess seemed undisturbed. Astrid had learned to ignore the nightmares better than any of them.

Just a dream. Only the Fade. They were safe for now. Bronwyn lay back down and slept.

Adam Hawke was very pleased at the success of his petition. A few days in Ostagar had accomplished more than months of letters and audiences with Bann Ceorlic.

Bronwyn Cousland drew him aside first thing in the morning and told him of her generous plans.

"Our family lost a lot of loyal supporters when Highever was attacked. I know that my brother needs some good men to pacify the north. If the idea pleases you, I could give you a letter of recommendation to him. You could travel north with the next courier. My brother is probably either in Amaranthine, or heading west from there to Highever."

Adam smiled warmly, hardly able to believe that his luck had changed at last. Naturally, it would take some time to get to Denerim, let alone Highever. His funds would not run to a horse. It would be a long walk, but a worthwhile one. He might travel slowly, but in comparative comfort and safety, by joining the wagon train that was leaving in a few days, taking the supply wagons to be restocked in South Reach and Denerim. They would be glad of another guard.

He bowed, very gracefully. "My lady, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. An appointment like this will mean the world to my family."

"I am always glad to help my Wardens' families. I shall write the letter tonight. If you get on with my brother the Teyrn, you may wish to consider moving your family to the Coastlands, though I am sure it would be a wrench for your mother to leave her home."

Not if I'm in with the Teyrn of Highever, Adam thought, his imagination on fire with the possibilities. A noble patron would

mean better protection for Bethany. He liked the idea of them getting away from Lothering very much. Lothering was only two days from the darkspawn horde, and there had been occasional night raids. A major offensive could drive the united army back, and leave his little family to the whims of Fate. He would like them to be gone from Lothering as soon as possible.

Carver had been right—thought Adam hated to confess it—to be concerned about the journey through the Brecilian Passage to Gwaren. Traveling on the Imperial Highway, however, was an entirely different affair. He hoped Uncle Gamlen would either recover enough to bear the journey or not recover at all and cease to be a hindrance. Cousin Charade, of course, was welcome to remain a part of their family. Adam had a great deal of respect for his newly-found cousin.

"Lady Bronwyn, I shall go north with all dispatch. If you have other correspondence, of course, I would be glad to deliver it for you."

"That is most kind," Bronwyn said. "I do have much to say to my brother—and to some others as well."

This was his chance. This was what he had been waiting for all his life. Until her letter of recommendation was safely in his hand, and he was away from Ostagar, he must do everything possible to remain in Lady Bronwyn Cousland's good books. The golden opportunity was tantalizing close, and Adam Hawke would not hesitate to leap at it.

Anora's latest dispatch lay on the table, while the two men in the room debated what was to be done about it.

My dear Father,

I have news from Fergus Cousland that is now fully confirmed. Shocking as it may sound, we know now that Rendon Howe was financing his plots from the sale of Ferelden elves to Tevinter slavers...

"I can't believe it!" Cailan shook his head again. Loghain hissed impatiently through his teeth. If Cailan shook his head one more time, his brain would probably fall out and roll across the floor.

"Believe it," Loghain said flatly. "Or read Anora's letter again. We *must* brief the senior officers and the allies immediately. We *cannot* allow rumors to reach them first."

Cailan's eyes flickered with panic. "The elves might desert in a body!" He added, in a mutter, "And who could blame them?"

"They'll bloody well certainly desert if we try to keep this a secret. That's already impossible. Fergus Cousland has sent the surviving elves back to the Denerim Alienage. Word will spread. It's probably not a day or two away at this point. We must act first. I'll give the briefing. We'll go ahead and do it before the elves go scouting tomorrow. All you have to do is look grave."

Irritated in his turn, Cailan snapped, "Of course I can look

grave! It's monstrous—absolutely monstrous! In Andraste's own country, people being sold like cattle. If only Fergus had succeed in taking that madman alive!"

"Fergus Cousland is hardly to blame. Howe's schemes are at an end. The slavers' ring is broken and the accomplices dead or self-exiled."

"Bann Esmerelle!" Cailan spat. "I never trusted the woman myself. She should be hunted down and made to pay for her crimes..."

Good luck with that, Loghain snarked to himself. Esmerelle had got away with her gold, but she would be a stranger in foreign lands, forever cut off from her home. For himself, Loghain would rather die than be exiled from Ferelden.

"She and her friends are beyond our reach for the moment," he said instead. "It is the *army* that must concern us, Cailan. Fergus seems to be holding the north together. We must keep the alliance strong. Summon the officers and allies and let us tell them the truth. Delay would be fatal. It would give the impression we do not consider the matter to be of any importance, which could cause further offense."

Cailan took a breath. "Yes. You are right. We can apologize —"

"No!" Loghain shouted, and then lowered his voice. "We are not bloody apologizing for Howe! You didn't order him to sell the elves. He was a criminal and a madman, but neither you

nor the nation of Ferelden has any culpability for his crimes. To apologize would put us in a false position. You must distance yourself—*distance yourself*—in every way from this ugly business. Point out that Howe was in rebellion against you. Mention his murder of the Cousland family and the new Teyrn of Highever's role in his overthrow. Yes. Frame it that way. You ordered Fergus north. The Teyrn of Highever, acting on orders from the Crown, uncovered Howe's sinister schemes and brought him down. He has put to flight Howe's accomplices. He has rescued the survivors and has arranged for their safe return to Denerim. A tragedy, but not of our making!"

Cailan shook his head again. "It's all unbelievable." Loghain rolled his eyes.

"Unbelievable" was the first, general reaction, at least among the Ferelden nobles. Shouts of disbelief and disgust echoed from the stone walls of the closed meeting. Arls Wulffe and Bryland were outspoken in their denunciation. Other banns claimed long-time dislike and suspicion of the late Arl.

The dwarves listened rather impassively. None of it was their concern. Elves in the human cities were treated as dusters were in Orzammar. If the lords of Orzammar could have found a market that would pay good coin for the dusters, they would have rid themselves of them without hesitation. However, with Dalish allies, it was diplomatic to maintain a serious demeanor.

Loghain watched Merrill and her advisers for their reactions.

Cailan was most worried about them, and Loghain could not help feeling a pang of shame and sorrow, when his old comrades from the Night Elves heard the news.

The anticipated explosion, however, did not come. Merrill looked immeasurably saddened, while Maynriel and Thanovir seemed revolted.

"How terrible!" cried the Keeper. "What a cruel fate! Can nothing be done to save them?"

Loghain said, "Teyrn Fergus had no ships at his command to pursue the Tevinters. Many of their ships must have already reached Tevinter by now. He has done what he could to alleviate the sufferings of those left behind, and to send them home as quickly as possible."

Maynriel murmured to the Keeper, just loud enough to be heard. "This is what comes of elves sacrificing their independence and dignity . It is a sad thing for the innocent children, but their elders brought it on themselves."

Thanovir appeared to agree. "What kind of elf is so easily lured to his doom?"

Bronwyn, sitting among the senior officers, stirred at that, and fixed burning eyes on the elves. Loghain sat it and frowned at her, willing her to be silent. If the Dalish were not going to take it as a personal insult, he did not wish her to stir up hard feelings.

She finally said, "I can believe anything of the man who murdered my six-year-old nephew. There seems to have been no limit to his crimes. Is the Highever Alienage truly gone?"

"So it would seem," said Cailan, looking at her compassionately. "They were sold down to the last man, woman, and child, as far as anyone can tell. Howe wished to conceal his deeds."

"You don't think Bann Vaughan had a hand in this?" Wulffe asked bluntly. "He was in league with Howe to some extent. Did he know about the slaving?"

The room broke into loud talk at that. Vaughan's hideous end and the ugly rumors about it were topics of neverending interest. Bearded men gossiped eagerly, hoping for the worst and most exciting possibilities.

Cailan, properly primed by Loghain, was ready for this. He raised his voice, and the room stilled. "We do not. We believe he acted in good faith, when Howe offered work for the elves. There had been serious unemployment among the Denerim elves, which always leads to unrest. He merely thought this was an outlet for them that would earn them needed wages. He kept it secret because of the Crown's differences with the Arl of Amaranthine. There he did wrong."

Wulffe was not entirely satisfied. He turned to Bryland and remarked, "And what did Urien know about this? What did he know then, and what does he know now?"

Bryland shrugged. "Children don't always tell their parents everything. Sometimes they tell them nothing at all. Urien was here and I daresay Vaughan pocketed the money."

"Hmmp!"

The elves talked quietly among themselves. Loghain tried to read them, but found the fair faces inscrutable. They were not on their feet, denouncing the perfidy of all humans, which was something, he supposed.

Bronwyn, on the other hand, was horrified and distressed by the news. Her friends had guessed that there was something wrong about the elves leaving the city, but who could have foreseen such wickedness? Adaia, of course would be the most affected...but Tara was so excited about her new family...Zevran would be cynically unsurprised, she supposed, and the thought of that cut surprisingly deep. It was impossible not to feel soiled by Howe's dirty dealings. How horrible for Fergus to discover this, and how much worse not to be able to bring the perpetrators to justice! She must write to him and learn more.

Danith would not take it well, either. She had thought the Alienage a horrible place—an unsafe place, too. It did not help Bronwyn's conscience to acknowledge that Danith was absolutely right. How could she blame her for wanting to save that child she fancied from greedy, high-handed humans?

Even those among us who mean well can do nothing to protect them...not really. If I were an elf, I'd want to wipe the

human race from the face of Thedas!

Announcement and orders followed the shocking news. Bronwyn listened with half an ear, trying to find words to tell her own people that would not result in mayhem. Some would not take it well at all.

She was right. Her people did not take it well. She called them together immediately; for they must hear this news from her lips and not from some loud-mouthed ruffian.

Adaia's black eyes seemed to fill her face, and she fell utterly silent. Tara clutched at Adaia's shoulder, while her hand sought out Zevran's.

"They said that my family went north. Maybe your brother saved them?" she faltered.

"I don't know, Tara. I shall write Fergus directly. He has made arrangements to have those he rescued sent home. At this point, we don't know who in Denerim fell victim to Howe and his Tevinter associates. I do know that all the elves I knew from Highever—those who did not go to Ostagar with my brother's troops—all of them and all of their families were ruthlessly sold and shipped away. It is a terrible thing. We have not ships able to pursue the Tevinters, nor coin enough to tempt them to return."

To her relief, Danith said little, but to offer condolences and some words of hope to Tara and Adaia. Zevran said nothing

at all, fulfilling Bronwyn's expectations that he would expect no better of the human race. He gave the girls a shoulder to cry on, and did not look in Bronwyn's direction.

The other companions were sympathetic, for the most part, or at least denounced the Tevinters. Sten, of course, did not hesitate to give his opinions of the archenemies of the Qunari.

"A corrupt and decadent people, on the brink of chaos. We of the Qun will continue our struggle against them. It is not impossible that some of the ships may be taken by Qunari, and your people given a place among us."

Bronwyn supposed he meant well, though Adaia and Tara were not much comforted by the idea of the kidnapped elves being prisoners of the Qunari instead of the Tevinters. Most people mumbled some kind words. Morrigan stood apart, either because she did not like to hear pitiful tales of oppressed people, or because she simply did not care.

Brosca laid a hand on Tara's arm. "Maybe they'll get away! Yeah...when the slavers are asleep, they'll toss them into the water and get away! That's what I'd do! I bet some of them get away."

Cullen shook his head, wanting to comfort Tara, but unable to lie about the prospects of the unlucky captives. They had been taken by the vilest of blood mages and no doubt had already been enthralled by their arts. Soon, if not already, they would be mindless slaves, bound by forbidden magics. They might be taken by Qunari, true...or by pirates...or by

storms. None of those things were likely to result in living, freed elves.

"Arl Howe will prowl the Void for this," he muttered, for lack of anything better to say.

Morrigan sniffed in contempt. Anders nudged her, a little embarrassed, and whispered, "I'm so sorry," to Tara and Adaia.

Alistair saw it from a different perspective. "I'm glad Fergus was there to put an end to it. I always knew he'd take Howe down, but then to find out everything he was involved. It must have been a shock. I know he'll do everything he can to help the victims."

"Yes," Tara agreed, wiping her face. "Teyrn Fergus is a good man. Probably a lot of people wouldn't care about the elves left behind." A thought struck her. "We could write to Hahren Valendrian to find out who was lost and who came back."

"You mean *you* can write," Adaia croaked disconsolately. Since coming to Ostagar, she had learned to read a bit, but writing was a lot harder than it looked.

"That's a good idea," Bronwyn said to Tara, wishing somehow to ease the elves' distress and her own disturbing feelings of guilt. "I am writing to Fergus. If you have letters, write them, and we'll give them to Adam to deliver. He is going north to Denerim in a few days, and then will be joining my brother wherever he is. You could take a letter to the Alienage as

well, could you not, Adam?"

"I'd be glad to," Hawke assured them all.

The meeting broke up, and Bronwyn sat down to write her letter to Fergus. Danith lingered, watching her. After awhile Bronwyn spoke.

"You were quite right to want to take that child back with you to the Dalish. I admit it freely."

A silence. Danith said, "Perhaps Zathrian's clan was not the proper place for her at that particular moment."

Bronwyn nodded. It was something that they had reached even this degree of accord. "When things are settled, I shall do my best to assist you in finding the child and securing her safe placement. Given what we have learned, we must assume that the child's mother is either dead or enslaved. The likelihood of her returning to claim her daughter is next to nothing."

"So I think," Danith agreed. "My clan will cherish her." She gave the commander a nod, and went to join the little knot of elves at the far end of the room.

Adaia thin shoulders were shaking. "Father's safe, Shianni's safe, the hahren's safe. We can get through this. Father's *safe...*"

Tara whispered, "You can't tell me that *somebody* didn't know

about this! Didn't people see wagonloads of elves moving north? Didn't people see elves being forced onto the ships? If hundreds of elves were going to the city of Amaranthine, didn't people wonder why the city wasn't full of them?"

"My dear," Zevran said, arm comfortingly around her waist, "you know they did not. People do not see such things, because they do not matter to them. There were no doubt low-level lackeys at the docks...wagon drivers...guardsmen... Yes. Some knew, but were paid not to talk, and the lost were only elves, after all. It is something, I think, that this is being treated as a great crime. It would be far more painful, would it not, if this news were greeted by yawns?"

"That is true," Danith agreed unexpectedly. "The humans here acknowledge that it was wrong and evil. That is indeed something."

"It doesn't bring my family back," Tara said softly. "How funny... My *family*. I only knew about them a few days, but it meant so much to me. I was looking forward to meeting them again, hoping they'd be proud of me... Now—there's nothing. They've been swallowed by the Tevinter Imperium."

"We should go after them," Adaia hissed. "We should go after them and *get them back!*"

"Little one," soothed Zevran, "Tevinter is far away across the sea. You would need a ship, and warriors brave enough to face the Tevinters magisters. Even Andraste needed her husband General Maferath and a great army to defeat them!"

"I don't care," Adaia said, her voice cracking. "I'm going to save up my loot, and I'm going to get a ship, and I'll go to Tevinter someday, and I'll buy back our people, and if the Tevinters won't sell, I'll *steal* them back! We can't wait for anybody to do it for us. We have to do it for ourselves!"

Zevran considered this, amused, and then shrugged. "It is true that such a quest would require fewer numbers than Andraste's host."

"We're supposed to fight the Blight," Tara pointed out, already picturing a long, long...*long* journey. She had new abilities now: she knew things that would give slave-holding Tevinter magisters quite a surprise, for a few seconds before she killed them.

"Oh, we'll fight the Blight. We have to," agreed Adaia, lowering her voice again. "But when it's over, and we have a safe place here at home, we'll go get everybody. Does that sound all right?"

"I'll go with you," Tara said instantly.

"And I," Danith spoke up. "Many will come. We will be clever and cautious, and wrest our cousins from the humans. When the Tevinters first moved against Arlathan, our people retreated, unable to conceive of such malice—unable to resist it. By the time we understood that they meant to destroy and enslave us, it was already too late. We shall not make that mistake again." Her eyes turned to Zevran.

The handsome Antivan laughed. "It may be that when the Blight is over, our noble commander will release me from my service to her. If that day comes, then how could I resist such an adventure?"

"—and promise the elves, in my name, remission of this year's taxes," Loghain wrote to his steward.

The last thing they needed at the moment was for the city elves to riot. Loghain told his man in Gwaren of Howe's dealings with the Tevinters. It was important to spread the news that everyone *e/*se repudiated slavery, and that the surviving Alienage elves were in no danger from such a scheme. Gwaren's Alienage was not as large as Denerim's, but it was sizable enough to cause real trouble if the elves rioted. Remitting the elves' taxes for the year would not cut much into the teyrnir's revenues, but it would mean a great deal to the elves themselves.

The other matter at hand was seeing that his daughter had the best Healer possible. He was about to send for Wynne, when his thoughts were interrupted.

"My lord," his manservant bowed. "The Arl of South Reach wishes to speak to you in private."

"Send him in."

What did Bryland want now? The man had been looking distressed since the death of Bann Vaughan, his daughter's

betrothed. Lady Habren was a tiresome girl, and Loghain would well imagine that Bryland would like be rid of her, but one never knew about people's families...

"Loghain."

"Sit, Leonas. Some wine?"

"Definitely."

They drank together in silence a moment, and then Bryland came out with what was troubling him.

"Loghain, you're the father of a daughter. *You'll* understand me when I say how very difficult that is."

Loghain grunted. He and Anora had certainly had their moments. There had been that grueling time, when she was fifteen... "Lady Habren has not come to terms with the death of her fiance? I gather it was a blow to her."

"Oh, yes, yes...Maker, yes! She was...*fond* of Vaughan. Wrote to me that he understood her. Said he was a 'kindred spirit,' whatever that means. She *wanted* to be married to him. I don't think she's ever been denied something she really wanted before." Bryland wiped his mouth hastily and blundered on. "I've never understood her, but I've tried to give her a good life. The more I saw of Vaughan—you know how it is on campaign—you find out things about people that you'd never know otherwise. At any rate, the more I saw I saw of him and eyed him well, the more I detested him. And then that

sordid end, drunk in the hills, up to Maker knows what...well, between us I was relieved that the man was not going to be ther father of my daughter's children!"

"Umm..." Loghain said noncommittaly, not wishing to say anything to the man about Bann Vaughan that could be quoted someday.

"Wel, then, you understand," Brland went on, leaving Loghain wondering the arl had construed that from "Umm..."

Bryland pulled a letter from his doublet. "I've just had the most extraordinary proposal for Habren. I suppose I should have foreseen it really, with her wanting a husband, and..." He paused, and then said, "To put it plainly, Loghain, Urien no longer has an heir, nor Habren a betrothed. Urien has asked me to accept him as Habren's bridegroom in his deceased son's place."

Loghain blinked, then rearranged his thoughts. "Habren marry Urien? That's...er... well... What do you think your daughter will say? Does she know of Urien's intentions?"

"Maker's Breath! Yes, she does. She enclosed one of her 'Please, Pappa, I must have this!' letters with Urien's. Of course it's all dead easy to arrange. The dowry, the settlement, the terms for the heirs: it's just like it was with Vaughan, only Habren will be Arlessa of Denerim right away. She seems pretty keen on that."

"Well," Loghain said slowly, "if he wants it, and she wants it,

and the paperwork is all in order, why not go ahead with it? You must have wanted the alliance with the Denerim arling to arrange the match with Vaughan in the first place."

"Yes... of course. Still, Habren's very young, and a girl like that really doesn't understand what marriage *means*, don't you know?" He added, red with embarrassment, "Not that there's anything wrong with a bit of an age difference!"

Loghain realized that the Arl was referring to Bronwyn and himself, which was intolerable and absolutely none of Bryland's business. He glared, but the Arl did not seem to take the hint. "What," he ventured coolly, "exactly is your problem with such a match? Do you think Urien would be unkind to her?"

"No... not that. I don't think he would want to make an enemy of me. I've known him for years, and he's a far better man than Vaughan turned out to be. It's just that he's hardly some young girl's romantic dream."

"Perhaps Habren has other dreams."

Bryland sighed. "There is that. She really is keen on being an Arlessa."

"Then there you are."

Bronwyn came in later, to talk things over, and for other things...

Clearly, last night was not enough for her. It was a pity everything had to be so quick and rushed and surreptitious, but he did his best to make it sweet.

Afterwards, they had to dress quickly, for there was only so long that the manservant could keep out visitors, and there was no way to stop Cailan, if he took it into his head to drop in for a chat. Loghain called in his trusted manservant, and gave orders to bring the Healer Wynne to him, as soon as possible. He sat down at his writing table, sifting through the papers. Bronwyn perched on the table, impudently reading the dispatches over his shoulder. munching an apple.

She was constantly hungry, poor girl. He saw to it there was always something in his chambers for her.

"How did your people take the news?" he asked.

"Not very well. Luckily, Adaia's immediate family is safe. She saw them in Denerim, and they had been outspoken against the work crews. I daresay everyone will remember that they, as well as the Alienage headman, were proved right. Tara... well, she doesn't remember her family, but is understandably sad at their fate. They went north some months ago, and I daresay they have already been put on the auction block in the Minrathous city market. I thought Danith would be angrier, but she did not stand up and denounce me. She is no fool, and realizes, no doubt, that it would do no good. The Blight still needs to be addressed, before other quarrels can be pursued."

"No resignations, then? No desertions?"

"None, thank the Maker!"

He sat back and smirked at her, running his hand over her thigh. "Well, I have some news for you! Arl Bryland confided in me that Urien Arl of Denerim has petitioned him for the hand of Habren his daughter!"

"Habren... and Arl Urien?" Bronwyn cried, utterly stunned.

"Arl Urien and the soon-to-be Arlessa Habren, yes," Loghain assured her. "Her father was here, expressing some concern at the match."

"I daresay. Poor man."

"You are concerned for your cousin?"

"Cousin Leonas?" Bronwyn laughed. "No, I meant Arl Urien! He doesn't know what he's getting into!"

Loghain shook his head. "I'm not in the least alarmed for Urien. He is quite capable of dealing with a spoiled child."

"He didn't deal particularly well with his own!" Bronwyn observed tartly.

"Habren will not be his child, but his wife," Loghain pointed out. "Urien's past history... well, Arlessa Liadan did not have an easy life with him, but she died when you were a child, of course. He was also not very easy on his daughter, who as

you must know died in childbirth, along with her son. Vaughan was his pride, and he treated him very differently than he treated the women in his family."

"So the wedding is going ahead, only with a different bridegroom."

"Yes. Urien feels there nothing to gain by delay. Bryland will take a brief leave at the beginning of next month, and see his daughter wed at the Cathedral."

"A pity I shall miss it," Bronwyn said primly, struggling not to grin. "For I feel certain I shall have a prior committment."

Wynne was shown in, her mild face rather puzzled. Loghain ordered the door shut. He had considered how much information to entrust to this mage, and had decided to tell her as little as possible. She seemed a decent woman, but the matter was simply too important to be careless. Nonetheless, he would have to tell her *something*.

"The Warden-Commander here tells me that you have a document signed by the Knight-Commander, permitting you independent travel."

"Yes, my lord," said Wynne. "I am honored to have his full confidence."

"You have mine as well," said Bronwyn. "It's important that you realize that what we are going to say to you is a matter only for the three of us."

Her curiosity ablaze, Wynne looked at both of them in turn. "Of course."

"I wish you to go to Denerim," Loghain declared, without further preamble. "The Queen has need of your services."

Wynne's kind, middle-aged face lit with joy. "The Queen is with child?"

"No," Loghain replied, dashing the woman's hopes. "She is unwell, but that cannot be a matter of gossip. We need not only the best Healer available, but a woman of known discretion. Do not speak to *anyone* of this. News of the Queen's ill health could be used to harm her."

Wynne's eyes flashed, as she drew herself up proudly. "No one will ever know because of me! What is wrong with Her Majesty?"

Loghain grimaced. Bronwyn said, "Perhaps it is best that you make an independent assessment, without being prejudiced by my own observations. However, she was ill enough when I saw her in Denerim, that I was forced to leave Warden Jowan behind to give her regular treatments—"

"*Jowan!*" Wynne stared at her in horror. "Jowan is a *blood mage!* How could you—"

Bronwyn refused to take offence. "He was the only mage available with any kind of Healing skills, and as a Warden, I could trust in his silence. He felt himself that it was a matter

for your expertise, but he agreed to stay until you or someone of equal ability could be sent to relieve him."

"I shall go at once!"

Loghain said, "The day after tomorrow a wagon train will head north. Perhaps it would be best if you traveled with them. I shall give you orders, stamped with my seal, so the curious may know you are on official business. Say nothing to anyone until you are actually leaving, and then say only that you are being sent to train Wardens in Healing skills."

Bronwyn bit her lip, thinking. "I believe you've met Adam Hawke, Warden Carver's brother? He will be traveling at the same time. I shall ask him to be your escort."

Wynne's face was deceptively innocent. "I shall see that no harm comes to him, Commander."

Loghain started, gave the woman a hard look, and then snorted with amusement. Bronwyn laughed. "All the better for the letters he carries to reach their destination!"

Most of the Wardens were awake at first light. The noise level in the Tower of Ishal awakened anyone who had not the power to cast a silencing charm. Bronwyn rubbed her eyes, wondering why it was so dark.

That's right. The Dalish scouts are moving out at dawn. I remember hearing about that last night. Why is it so noisy

here in the Tower?

She sat up, wishing she had rebraided her hair before sleeping. Leliana was up already, splashing her face in the wash water. She looked over at Bronwyn and smiled mischievously. Bronwyn hoped she was going to have another conversation about her own personal life.

Leliana had plenty to say, but not about Bronwyn.

"You missed the romantic scene last night," Leliana whispered excitedly, "When Tara took Zevran by the hand and led him to her...er...private corner."

Ah, yes, the screen of blankets that gave Tara the same sort of privacy that Morrigan and Anders enjoyed in the corner opposite. So, Tara and Zevran were together, openly and more or less officially. They had been flirting...and Bronwyn suspected rather more than that..but in private.

"As long as it doesn't cause any trouble, I wish them well," Bronwyn said, fumbling for her comb. "And as long as I don't have to listen to them."

Adaia's croaking voice spoke up from the other side of Danith's cot. "I think it's *nice*."

Danith stretched, and groped for her shirt, "Your Hahren Valendrian will be disappointed. I think he wanted to marry Zevran off to one of the maidens of the Alienage."

"Well," Adaia said, after she had processed that thought for a little while. "Tara is *sort* of like 'a maiden of the Alienage.' She's an elf, and she was born there, so it sort of comes to the same thing."

"Except for the not actually being *married* part," Brosca pointed out, scratching her bottom. "Aren't you getting up, Astrid?"

"I am not going on patrol with the elves today," the dwarven princess said calmly. Her eyes were still shut, giving the impression that she was still asleep. She was not, but was very comfortable in her cot at the moment.

"But Danith is," Bronwyn said, "so I will get up and share a good breakfast with her."

Anders' head popped out from the corner he shared with Morrigan, eyes squeezed shut. He asked plaintively, "Can I come out? Is everybody decent?"

"No! We're not at all decent," laughed Leliana. "When has that ever stopped you?"

Loghain was awake at first light himself. Half-dressed and in the midst of shaving, he glanced out the window to see a tall figure towering over his elven friends, pretty Keeper Merrill at his side.

"Maker's Breath!"

Cailan was out of control. Completely out of control. Loghain threw down his razor and wiped the soap from his face. Shrugging on a linen shirt, he hurried down the steps, hoping to talk some sense into the fool. Cailan, his golden armor and golden hair catching the first shafts of sunlight, turned to see his fuming father-in-law emerge from the arched doorway.

"Good day to you, Loghain!" the king called out cheerily. With a sly grin, he added, "I'm surprised to see you risen from your bed so early."

"Do you plan to travel with the Dalish today?" Loghain asked coldly, ignoring the jibe.

"In the spirit of cooperation," Cailan assured him, turning his smile to Merrill. "In the spirit of solidarity. The mission is straightforward enough, after all."

That was true: a large party of elves was to sweep the narrow valley to the southeast for darkspawn stragglers. Then they were to lay a carefully designed web of traps, and look for any signs of tunneling.

Some Grey Wardens were going, of course. The Dalish Warden Danith and the boy, Carver Hawke, came out to join the elves. The boy's irritatingly good-looking brother seemed to be going as well. If the fellow wished to travel along and boast later of his acquaintance with the King of Ferelden, he was welcome to do so, since it would take him away from Bronwyn. Loghain distrusted the newcomer. He always distrusted men with too-bright smiles, and he knew a fortune-

hunter when he saw one. The sooner he saw the back of this one, the better.

Tomorrow, thank the Maker...

Cailan was surrounded by some of his usual honor guard, though only a half-dozen of them. A few dwarven apprentice engineers were rounding out the party, laden with equipment. Seeing Loghain's unease, the king took him aside and spoke with quiet confidence.

"After our news yesterday, this seems like the best possible way to assure our allies of our good faith. If the King of Ferelden himself entrusts himself to Dalish archers, it proves our respect better than any words could. I'm going, Loghain. You can't stop me."

"No," Loghain replied, his face hardening. "I cannot. Try not to die."

In spite of all he had done, in spite of his selfish treachery, in spite of his infidelity to Anora, Cailan was still the boy he had helped raise, the child of his closest friend. If there was any way to put everything right that would leave Cailan alive, well, and King, Loghain was willing to go with it.

Cailan patted Loghain on the shoulder, grinning. "I'm not going to die today, I *promise*."

While the tall men talked, Danith scowled at Merrill, and jerked her head in the direction of the smiling Cailan.

"You spend much time with the shemlen king."

"Yes, I do," Merrill admitted frankly. "I think he's very sweet. A little dim, but very sweet." She lowered her voice, huge eyes wide. "What would you say, *lethallan*, if I told you he's planning a land grant for the elvhen? He is. Really. A place of our own again, here in the south. So many of the humans have fled that there will be open land for us! He will declare the grant tonight!"

"The Chasind—"

"Word is that they have been decimated by the darkspawn. If the land is uninhabited, humans will rush to claim it. Why should the People not have it instead?"

Her head spinning with the sudden possibility, Danith caught Merrill by the arm, eager to hear more. "Where? Has he fixed on a place? How wide a territory?"

"He has not fixed the grant in his mind yet. He is still mulling over the scheme, but I would do anything to make it happen."

Danith paused. How could she disagree? To have a place of their own...

Even were much of it in the cold and inhospitable south, it would be a blessing beyond compare. Even they were to found...well, not a city, but even a village of their own, it would be a home to which they could welcome their lost kin of the foul Alienages. Danith considered it more. A pity they were

not being offered the land surrounding the great temple. That was a wonder. and should be known to all the elvhen. Perhaps it would be possible to build a permanent structure and move some of the artifacts to their new home. Or perhaps they should just keep the temple a secret place of pilgrimage. Bronwyn was feeling unhappy and guilty about the fate of the city dwellers who had been tricked and sold. It would not be difficult, surely, to persuade her not to divulge the location.

"You are right," she finally said. "To have a homeland once more, I would do anything necessary, too."

Bronwyn was lingering over another helping of porridge with her remaining Wardens, when Loghain stalked in.

"Don't get up," he snorted, waving the more courteous of the companions—Cullen, Alistair, Leliana—down. He motioned Bronwyn over to the windows, well away from the table, to speak to him. Then, he thought again, and summoned Alistair as well. Scout trotted over to see him. Loghain rubbed the dog's ears absently.

Very softly, he said, "Send that mage of yours out to the southeast to keep an eye on the Dalish party. Cailan's decided to go out with them."

Briefly puzzled, Bronwyn stared at Loghain. "You mean Morrigan? In bird form?"

Alistair whispered, "He means Anders!"

This was news to her. "Anders is a shape-changer, too?" Bronwyn whispered back.

Loghain rolled his eyes. while Alistair explained.

"Yes! It all came out when we went scouting. He can take the shape of a raven. It's dead useful for scouting and he's less sulky about doing it than Morrigan." Alistair's mouth twisted at the witch's name. "He can fly high enough that he's not in danger from either the darkspawn arches or spellcasters."

Loghain said, "It's how we've been able to map out the openings in the earth east of here. We've found an Archdemon-sized one, but there are more, too. Anders has made himself useful. Send him out. Cailan feels he owes it to the elves to show what he calls 'good faith.' In his current mood, he's likely to do something remarkably stupid if they come across the darkspawn." His eyes found Anders, sitting next to Morrigan on the other side of the table. The mage grimaced comically when he realized that he was the subject of the conversation.

"See to it," Loghain ordered. "By the way, you should encourage your other mages to learn the skill. I'll be inspecting the White River Militia if Anders has anything to report." Loghain was up and out of the room, before Bronwyn could formulate a reply.

Alistair said, "Actually, it was really interesting to go scouting

with Teyrn Loghain. I learned a lot. We got another look at the old Warden outpost. Loghain thinks the outpost could be rebuilt. What do you think? Wouldn't it be great to have a place of our own?"

Bronwyn could see the advantages in it. "It would be a better place for Joinings, certainly. Far more private." She raised her voice enough to be heard at the table. "Anders! we need to speak with you, if you please!"

In the end, Morrigan went with Anders, a little to Bronwyn's annoyance. Teaching Tara to be a shape-shifter sounded like a very good plan. Without Morrigan here, there was no reason not to let Tara and Zevran go off to visit the Dalish camp. Adaia was going, too. Bronwyn could not fault the elves for wanting to talk the situation out amongst themselves, but she did not want an elven clique forming within the Wardens.

Cullen was looking very depressed. Bronwyn suspected it had something to do with Tara, and she wondered if she should have a private talk with him. Brosca was sitting with him. Bronwyn could not make out the words, but the tones were determinedly cheerful and encouraging.

"We're going to the practice yard, Boss!" Brosca called out. "Everybody else already went down there. I bet Astrid wins!"

"Very likely," agreed Bronwyn.

"You coming?"

"In a bit."

She made some notes to herself, thinking about recruiting. The Ferelden Wardens now numbered eleven. Duncan had had twenty-five under his command by the end. Eleven was not enough, not even with Scout...not even with their five auxiliaries. Five, not six, since Adam Hawke would be on his way north tomorrow. Oghren was still waffling about becoming a Warden, and as for Adaia...the girl was willing enough, but Bronwyn doubted she had the skill to survive long enough to collect a vial of darkspawn blood.

She needed more Wardens, but was reluctant to pilfer from the army to do it. Well, she might very well have to pilfer, but she would prefer not to *conscript* anyone. It would not do any harm to make the rounds of the camp and talk to people. There must be soldiers here who felt their current situation did not allow them to achieve their full potential. There must be discontented young squires who dreamed of glory. If only they could survive the Joining!

Maybe some more Templars. Cullen had worked out well. She never saw him take lyrium anymore. That didn't mean he wasn't using, but at least he seemed to have the habit under control. Templars were trained warriors, and it seemed to Bronwyn they could be doing a great deal more to help against the Blight. Perhaps not the Templars *here*, because it would make trouble for the mages, but there had been some decent men in Lothering...

There were thousands of warriors right here in Ostagar.

Maybe she should have gone with Loghain on his inspection. Or maybe not. People were already talking about them quite enough.

"Come on," Brosca tried to urge Cullen from the bench in the practice yard. "Let's go beat on each other. It'll make you feel a lot better."

"I'm *fine*," Cullen muttered.

"No, you're not. You're all brooding and gloomy. I'll let you have the first hit free. Come on, it'll be fun!"

Sten and Alistair were squaring off against each other. The wooden practice greatsword struck Alistair's shield with a resounding "**BANG!**" It barely jolted Alistair, who had learned how to absorb heavy blows and come out swinging before the follow-through was done. His longsword rapped the Qunari smartly across the side of his left knee.

"Well done, Alistair!" Astrid called.

Cullen did not appear to be seeing the bout. "Tara went off to the elves, didn't she?"

Astrid sat down on his other side, and caught Brosca's eye. "Yes, she is visiting the elves. She said something about talking to some of the elven mages."

"She went with *Zevran*," Cullen muttered. "And Zevran didn't

sleep in our quarters last night."

"Cullen," Astrid said, very directly. "They're an item. Really. You're going to have to get over it. Tara doesn't find human men attractive. She finds you frightening. Your height and bearing recall unpleasant experiences. And with the slavery scandal..."

"—But I'm not like that!" Cullen protested, his face drawn in pain.

"Nobody says you are," Brosca said, trying to get him to look at her. "I think you're a great guy! I don't mind being loomed over. Tara does, though."

"In the Circle," he muttered, "it didn't matter if a mage was human or elf."

Astrid took a deep breath, bit back the first thing on her mind, and then said, "No, it didn't matter. They were all prisoners. If there's anything I've learned, it's that a prison looks very different to the prisoners than it does to the guards."

"That is so true!" Brosca agreed.

"The Circle isn't..."

Brosca clicked her tongue, annoyed. "Come on, Cullen. Get real. She hadn't been allowed outside since she was six years old! It was a place where any minute she could be killed, or be turned into some sort of mindless human golem. And she

was locked up and raped. By great big human guys. She's never going to want to do anything like that again. She's your friend. I think you'll have to settle for that."

"But Zevran's an *assassin!*"

"Yes, but he's *our* assassin!" Brosca shot back.

Alistair won his bout, and discarded his splintered practice sword. Astrid gave him a warm smile, and he grinned back.

"Oghren, you're up next!"

Hearing the raised voices, Leliana came over to join the gossip session. "You are talking about Zevran and Tara, yes?" she whispered. "They are such a charming couple...both so attractive." She looked at Cullen sympathetically. "She has made her choice. Her *friends* must support her."

Oghren walked by to join Alistair, swigging from his flask. He waggled his heavy brows at Cullen.

"*Women*, eh?"

The expedition was going quite well. Cailan found it pleasant to be out with his new Dalish friends, and not be cooped up behind stone walls. The rain from two nights before had soaked well into the ground. The clouds had swept away to the northeast, leaving the sky a clear and radiant blue. It was

just cool enough to make marching in armor not such a dimly sweaty business. And he had a pretty girl—no, *two* pretty girls to keep him company.

A shout echoed over the low voices of the Dalish.

"Let me through!"

Cailan heard it, and recognized the man's voice. The Grey Warden Anders, their Healer, was pushing past the elves, his face tense and alarmed. Cailan was faintly surprised to see him. Had he followed them from Ostagar?

"Let me through! Message for the King!"

"The King's here!" Cailan called cheerfully. "Is Loghain sending me another scolding?"

After what he glimpsed from the skies, Anders' sense of humor was hiding in a cellar for the duration.

"The darkspawn are on the move!" Anders reported. "They burst out of a new tunnel—over three hundred of them! They're coming up the south branch of the valley with a band of really big genlocks in front. The genlocks are carrying heavy shields. You wouldn't see them until they hit you from the right!"

"How far away are they?" Maynriel asked urgently, before Cailan could get a word in.

"Not more than a mile," Anders said, "and they're moving

fast."

"Right," said Cailan. "Lucky that we know they're on their way. We can meet them on more than equal terms."

"Cailan," Merrill said softly, "It would be best for the hunters to shoot from cover..."

"—and we should send word to Loghain," Thanovir added.

"It's been done," Anders assured him quickly. "I was scouting with Morrigan. She's gone straight to Ostagar to report."

"Well then," Cailan said, sweeping the landscape for a good vantage. Pity they had not had a chance to lay the traps. They could still leave some of them behind to trip up the creatures...

"There!" he said. "That hill! It's got some natural terraces. Archers up there and take your positions!"

Maynriel glanced at Thanovir, somewhat relieved. Not a bad choice of ground. A flat-topped hill, not as tall as some of its neighbors, but with a steep slope and some good cover. Perhaps the young shemlen was not a total loss. Quickly, they hurried the archers back and up. Faintly, in the distance, they could hear a low squawking rumble. Would they be able to get into position in time?

Anders saw Danith and gave her a yell. "Get up there with the Dalish! Where's Carver?"

"Here!"

"Stay with the King! I'm going to buy you some time!"

"Who says it has to be you?" Carver shouted, red-faced.

"Date of Joining!" Anders shouted back. "I know what I'm doing!"

Man distorted into bird: shrinking, blackening. shining feathers sprouting. Before the astonished King and the delighted Dalish, a raven took flight and sped off to the south.

"My, that was pretty!" Merrill declared. "If we live through this, I want to learn to do that!"

Note—Thank you to my reviewers: MsBarrows, Shinkansen, demonincargles, Have Socks. will Travel, Shakespira, KnightOfHolyLight, almostinsane, karinfan123, JackOfBladesX, Kira Kyuu, Josie Lange, Jyggilag, cloud1004, Judy, Notnahtanha, Enaid Aderyn, Juliafied, mutive, chocolatebrownie12, WellspringCD, mille libri, Mystricka, The Moidart, Herebedragons66, Tyanilth, Gene Dark, Zute, What Ithacas Mean, Jenna53, Costin, Blinded in a bolthole, Dante Alighieri1308, Syntia13, euromellows, BlackCherryWhiskey, and tikigod.

Please remember that if you disable your private messaging feature, I won't be able to reply to your review!

I expect that the next chapter fo The Keening Blade will be late, too. After arranging my mother's memorial and settling

the estate, I'll have to go out of state to bury her ashes. It all takes time, but I'll be back on schedule again fairly soon.

47. King's Mountain

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 47: King's Mountain

The hawk flew, creeling, through the window embrasure and pecked at Bronwyn.

"Morrigan?"

A quick, disturbing transformation. Morrigan was raging, yellow eyes afire.

"The King of Fools is under attack. And now my personal fool has stayed behind to defend him!"

Bronwyn had heard Morrigan on the subject of Cailan often enough to translate this instantaneously. "Where?"

"To the southeast, not five leagues. The darkspawn have come out of the hills in yet another place. It is a large force—over three hundred. Some of the genlocks appear unusually powerful. We must go!"

"Right!" Bronwyn pushed her notes aside, and slung on her weapons as the two women ran down the twisting staircases.

"You!" she shouted at a guard on duty. "Go to the training ground and alert the Wardens. We'll meet them across the bridge. I'm off to report to the Teyrn. Tell them we're moving out—and fast!"

Morrigan was all but wringing her hands. Ghostly feathers manifested and vanished as she tried to control her flight reflex. Bronwyn said, "Go on! Find Teyrn Loghain and give her your report. Tell him the Wardens are going to support the King. We'll be across the bridge as soon as possible, to hear what the plan is."

She was briefly buffeted by the forming wings. Morrigan was off, arrowing south across Ostagar Gorge, her high-pitched cries fading into the distance. Bronwyn trotted behind, not wanting to exhaust herself in a sprint before it was absolutely necessary.

Soldiers waved at her as she jogged across the long stone bridge.

"—Good day to you, Girl Warden!"

Bronwyn waved back, smile fixed in place, keeping her pace steady to avoid raising unnecessary alarm. She needed to send someone down to the Dalish camp, and find her people there.

Andraste's nightgown! There was the Revered Mother, looking as if she wanted to talk to her. Bronwyn sketched a hasty bow, and jogged on, trying to look much too busy to talk

at the moment.

"Bronwyn!"

It was Cousin Leonas, and she slowed a little, and veered over to him. She kept her voice to a low, urgent whisper.

"I've got to get to Loghain! A scout reported that the King's party is under attack."

He did not try to stop her, but fell into step, instantly concerned. His officers looked at each other, and followed them, a flying wedge that everything else on the bridge stepped aside for.

"There were over a hundred Dalish with him! How many of the enemy?"

"Maybe three hundred."

"Maker's Breath!"

There was just the ramp now before they were on the other side and into the upper parade ground. The southern camp was a hive of activity. Loghain must already be acting on Morrigan's report. Soldiers were running up to join their fellows. Shouts and orders echoed off the ancient stones.

Thank the Maker! There were her elves, hurrying up from the valley. Zevran's grin was gleeful and bloodthirsty. Tara looked ready for anything. Little Adaia was running to her workshop, probably to bring them some supplies. Good thinking. Some

of that improved deathroot poison was just the thing...

"Loghain!" Bryland called out. "We must go to the King's aid!"

Loghain, already surrounded by his officers, was in a curiously heightened state of calm: it was the controlled, powerful calm before the storm of battle.

"We shall, of course, but we shall do so sensibly. Cauthrien, take the first company of Maric's Shield, and move out along the Hill Trail..."

He had formed a plan, and was already putting it into action. Bronwyn felt intense relief that there was someone here who was never at a loss. As he laid out his strategy, more and more eager warriors were joining them. A shout, and Bronwyn glanced over to see Alistair coming toward them at a run, with the rest of the Wardens.

"Where is Morrigan?" Bronwyn asked Loghain quietly.

"Gone," he shrugged. "She gave her report, glared at me with burning impatience, and then flew away. Enough of her. She has played her part. It is more important that you remember that you cannot take all your Wardens with you today."

She did. It was an unpleasant choice. If disaster befell them in the hills, who could be trusted to carry on the mission? Theoretically, she should choose her Second, Alistair, but she knew he would never forgive her if she forbade him to go to his brother. And if the Wardens were to need a leader...

Pulling her people aside, she said, "We're going to the King's aid, but not all of us. Two of us must stay here. The Wardens were almost annihilated at the battle in Bloomingtide. We cannot risk that again." An anxious, unhappy pause. "Astrid, I want you to remain here with Leliana. I know, I know. But we're *it*, We have to keep *someone* in reserve. No other Warden in all of Thedas has come to stand with us. If things go wrong, someone has to do serious recruiting! Maker guide you."

"No!" Leliana cried. "Bronwyn! Wait!"

But Bronwyn was already turning away, not liking the look of grim understanding on Astrid's face any better than the one of pained disappointment on Leliana's.

In fact, Astrid had grasped the very great compliment her Commander had just paid her. It was she, rather than Alistair, that Bronwyn trusted to rebuild the Wardens and slay the Archdemon if today's battle went wrong. Reflexively, she began making plans, including a mental list of warriors she had seen who would be likely recruits. And of course, they would still have a mage: Jowan, up north in Denerim...

She glanced after her comrades, heading off to join the departing troops. Alistair gave her a wry, sympathetic grin, which she answered with a wave and smile.

"I can't believe it," Leliana mourned. "How could she leave me behind? *Us* behind?"

"She *trusts* us, Leliana," Astrid said, laying a hand on the bard's arm. "She trusts *us* to know what to do. She trusts us to know her mind, and not fail her."

"And we won't, but—what is *she* doing?"

Adaia was running from her workshop, belts laden with bombs and poison flasks criss-crossing her thin chest.

"What is *he* doing?" Cailan wondered, shading his eyes with his hand. Anders-turned-raven was only a dot now, dropping down behind a distant ridge. A hideous clamor rose up, drifting on the wind.

"Providing a diversion, Your Majesty," Carver called back.

"Oh. Well done."

Blood called to blood. Blood burned in them relentlessly, drawing them on with every heartbeat. The darkspawn spewed from the hole in the earth, howling. Even the bright yellow torture of daylight was no hindrance to their thundering advance. The strong trampled the weak: the genlocks in front smashed obstacles in their path with their shields. Stones were splintered and ground to powder under hundreds of iron-shod boots.

The Hurlock Vanguard who led them suddenly halted, causing chaos behind him. Shrieks of rage and agony rose above the

crash of iron and broken bones. Off to their right, not a hundred feet away, was one of the Tainted Ones; the enemies of their blood. He did not challenge them with drawn sword, or shout defiance. This Warden... waved.

"Cooo-eee!" Anders called cheerfully. "Over here, you scabrous pustules on the arse of Thedas! Fight me! You know you want to!"

The Hurlock bellowed unintelligibly, and lifted a crude, massive sword in command. Instantly, the flailing mob had purpose once more. Diverted from their original objective, they shrieked and gobbled, charging at the lone figure in their path. Their rush built up momentum: the genlocks bellowed and thrust forward with their iron shields, scraping the earth flat.

Anders raised his staff, and summoned the lightning.

Seconds later, the remaining darkspawn crashed to a halt. In a flash of black wings, the Warden was gone. Shocked, drained, and weakened, baffled darkspawn pounded after him, piling into the blind valley. The charge slowed to useless, milling fury, as genlock tore at hurlock, trying to find a way out of the cul de sac. At the back of the horde, a few of the darkspawn peeled away, heading toward the blood beacon farther on: the one they had first felt.

"I'm here!" High above them on a rocky ledge, Anders jeered at them. "Yeah! Over here!"

A flurry of arrows responded. Some of the darkspawn archers had a little longer range than Anders had predicted.

"Shit!" he snarled, pressing himself flat into the rocks, scraping his knuckles bloody. More arrows clattered around him. One ricocheted, and the arrowhead slashed a long ragged tear in his robes. "Not good!"

A few of the genlocks climbed up their fellows like ladders, scrabbling on the sheer stone face. More and more piled on them, lured irresistibly by the shared Taint.

But still more turned back down the wider valley, feeling the call of others of the hated kind. Once those were in motion, others mindlessly followed, excited by the chase.

Anders edged under an outcropping, and gathered himself for another blast of energy. Anything he could do to chip away at the darkspawn could mean life or death for King Cailan and those with him.

White-hot bolts of energy crackled from his fingers, shaking the ground. A crazy pyramid of darkspawn overbalanced and toppled back into the seething mass of monsters. Anders grinned wolfishly, and hoped no one had brought an ogre to the party.

The elves had withdrawn in good order, and climbed the steep slope with their usual agility. Humans and dwarves found it considerably harder going. The King's personal guard hovered

anxiously, wanting their charge up on the heights and out of the greatest danger.

"Your Majesty! Take my hand, ser!" cried Ser Elric Maraigne.

"Thanks, Elric." Cailan laughed gamely and struggled up, bracing his left foot on an exposed root. "Plate armor is not exactly the proper apparel for rock climbing!"—

"Too true, alas, Cailan," agreed Ser Landry. He wiped his face, his eyes burning from the salty sweat. "But we'll be glad of it if the creatures climb up after us!"

Above them, an elf cried out, "Mythal preserve us! I see them! They are coming!"

More calmly, Thanovir declared, "Fewer than we thought. The mage's distraction worked well."

Merrill was by no means the only mage in the Dalish forces. There were four others among them today, all of them younger even than Merrill, and they met with their Keeper, speaking softly among themselves, discussing what would work best against the horde racing toward them. Their range was no better than the archers: for many spells, not nearly as good. There were some wide-area spells, however, that would wreak havoc. They were not much used among the Dalish, but today was the day for them. The mages spread out, up and down the line, to give as much support as possible to the hunters. Merrill stood at Cailan's side.

The Hawke brothers, more lightly armored than Cailan's knights, were already on the summit and taking positions by the ranks of Dalish archers. Carver was cursing himself for not bringing his bow. A curious sensation scratched at his senses.

He shaded his eyes. "Elves have better eyes than I do. Do you see them, Adam?"

"I see a lot of dust. Look here, Carver," he lowered his voice. "You told me that the Wardens can sense darkspawn."

Carver whispered back, "We can. We do. I feel them in the distance. A *lot* of darkspawn, but it's kind of vague."

"Well, then, does that mean that the darkspawn can sense *you*?"

The boy gaped, unsure how to answer.

Adam pressed him, "—because if they do, maybe it's not a good idea for the Wardens to bunch up around the King."

"We can't go off and leave him!"

"Of course not. I'm just saying that maybe you and Danith shouldn't stand right next to him and attract unwanted attention his way."

Danith drew closer, hearing her name. "What are you saying about me?"

Carver leaned down to speak in her ear. "Darkspawn are attracted to us. Maybe we shouldn't stay really close to the King. It might make them target him."

Danith cared little for the shemlen king personally, but Merrill had great hopes of him. "Very well. I shall make my stand further down, with Maynriel's hunters. You may come with me, Carver. It may be that there is a bow you will be permitted to use."

"Thanks!" The boy followed her, and then turned to see his brother going the other way. "Adam?"

Hawke shrugged. "Well, *I'm* not a Warden. I'll stand with the King."

Their little band of dwarves was still near the base of the hill, setting up what traps and tripwires time would permit.

"Come on, durgen'len!" Maynriel shouted. "The darkspawn are closing in!"

Longer-legged hurlocks were in front of the pack. It was a mindless mob without organization or leadership. They saw the dwarves at the base of the hill and howled with bloodlust. Instantly the dwarves dropped what they were doing, and began a clumsy uphill scramble.

"Help them!" Merrill called out in her clear voice. "You there! And you! Pull them to safety!"

Very surprised dwarves found themselves seized in strong, slender hands and hauled up the hill, with little regard for dwarven dignity.

Carver grinned at the sight, and then grew grim as the darkspawn grew closer. He could throw rocks, he supposed...

"Here!"

Danith shoved a worn but serviceable longbow into Carver's hands. "Do you know how to use this?"

He had hunted from boyhood; and while not a legendary Dalish archer, he had done his part to feed his family. "I can get by."

"See that you do," she said primly. She tossed him a quiver of heavy, steel-tipped arrows, and busied herself with her own weapon.

"Ready!" shouted Maynriel. In startling unison, arrows were nocked, bows were bent, and a hundred elves took aim at the creatures rushing their way. More were in range; more were bursting from the hidden valley and rushing toward their makeshift fortress. Cailan and his knights watched the coming attack with excitement and frustration, every one of them wishing he had brought a bow.

"Steady...Wait for them!"

The darkspawn pounded on, their ugly faces now distinct. The

trickle of of the creatures had become a storm.

"Loose!"

A black cloud of arrows blotted out the blue of the sky. The air hummed and vibrated. The volley slammed into the darkspawn. A good quarter of them dropped in their tracks. Some fell, thrashing and scrabbling. Others, feathered like strange, evil birds, ran on, insensible to pain. Standing at the end of the bluff, Merrill screamed a war cry.

"May the Dread Wolf take you!"

Fire exploded from her upraised staff, and rained down on the darkspawn. Screams erupted from the staggered monsters, enveloped in flame. Up and down the line, elemental forces were unleashed on the ancient enemy: fire and ice; lightning and earthquake.

The dwarves peered from behind stony cover, mightily impressed. The King and his knights looked at the spectacle in astonishment; some like Cailan, with an admixture of delight and wonder; some others with horror and dread.

A few of the attackers reached the base of the cliff and set off the waiting traps. Lyrium bombs exploded in clouds of poisonous shrapnel, taking darkspawn down within a twenty-foot radius.

But more darkspawn were coming, drawn on by their murderous nature. A pair of unnaturally big genlocks rushed

toward the hill, pushing heavy shields before them. At a distance, they simply looked like massive pieces of iron, scraping along the landscape like animated armor. Elven mages tried cold and paralysis spells on them in vain. The creatures barely broke stride.

"What *are* those things?" Carver shrieked at Danith, grabbing for another arrow. She shrugged, wide-eyed and busy. Another firestorm burst from Merrill's staff. Darkspawn spun and flailed. Some dropped, squawking; but the big ones with heavy iron shields kept coming, shrugging off Dalish arrows like falling leaves.

Merrill called out a freezing enchantment in her high, sweet voice. The big genlocks paused, slowing as if caught in tar. What turned others of their kind into blocks of ice was a temporary inconvenience, but at least it gave the archers better targets. They took aim, and shot at the faces under the wide-brimmed helmets. At exposed throats, too: a lucky shot changed one genlock's roar to a thick, slobbery whine. Still, they came on, and slammed into the base of the hill like farmboys hoping to shake ripe apples from a tree.

Rocks tumbled down on the attackers, dislodged by the force of the genlocks. Pebbles bounced off helmets; dust whitened the hideous faces. A frantic, frenzied mass of Taint swarm at the base of hill now: clucking, roaring, cackling.

More of the powerful, shield-carrying genlocks were coming. More darkspawn bowmen, too. They were hanging back, taking position. Arrows began whizzing up at the hill's

defenders. A bold dwarf broke cover to throw a lyrium grenade down the hill, and was promptly shot: a quick, high shriek, followed by sobbing. His friends hauled him back, tugging at the arrow. The grenade rolled part of the way, was trampled on, and exploded. Bit of darkspawn flew sloppily into the air. One of the big genlocks sagged behind his shield and slowly toppled under the stamping feet.

"Bring down the archers!" Maynriel shouted.

Carver spotted one—an ugly little skulking thing—and loosed an arrow at it. He missed it, and hit the Hurlock behind it just under the breastplate. Not the hit he had wanted, but not bad at all. The creature roared and yanked out the arrow in a thick spurt of blood. The blood kept spurting, and the bewildered creature sank to its knees and died. Carver grinned.

There's one down. Well done, Carver Hawke!

He nocked another arrow, and tried again for the bandy-legged genlock bowman.

The horde parted, a river divided; and up jogged a big Hurlock wearing a heavy horned helmet. It was the biggest hurlock most of them had ever. Cailan and his knights, however, had seen something just like this at the outset of the Bloomingtide battle. The Hurlock Vanguard bellowed unintelligibly, his sword pointed at the hill. With an answering roar, the darkspawn renewed their assault, smaller genlocks charging over the bodies of their dead, using the big shielded genlocks like stepping stones to leap at the hill and start scrambling up the

slope.

Archers shot straight down into the the attackers. Dwarves lobbed grenades from cover. More darkspawn came on, crawling heedlessly over their dead.

"Well, my friends," Cailan said wryly, "it seems our swords will be needed sooner, rather than later."

The darkspawn swarmed up like ants to a honey pot. Some fell, transfixed by arrows or ripped apart by grenades, but more and more were coming. They burst over the edge of the hill, shrieking, and threw themselves at the defenders. Some of the Dalish dropped their bows, drew swords and daggers, and threw themselves into the melee.

Wild hand-to-hand fights spread over the top of the hill. The king's knights closed in around him, back-to back, a ring of bright steel. Cailan's eyes brightened with the thrill of battle. He swung his heavy greatsword in a shining arc, cutting a genlock in two. Merrill froze an attacker, and Cailan's blade shattered it into bloody shards. The king whooped with joy.

Carver unslung his sword as well, fighting off darkspawn that tried to attack the archers from behind. It was all confusion. He tried to stay alert, and not accidentally behead an ally. It was going to be tricky...

The darkspawn had encircled the hill now. A triumphant roar arose, signalling their discovery of an easier path to the summit on the north side. The Vanguard bellowed a

command, and another wave rushed uphill.

Keen hawk eyes saw the crumpled figure on the high ledge. Below it surged a swarm of darkspawn baying for Grey Warden blood, their fingers clawing into rocky crevices. Unnoticed by the monsters, Morrigan alighted on the far end of the ridge and transformed.

Anders was moving only a little. He must have healed himself over and over, but his strength was nearly gone. Her lips a straight line of exasperation, Morrigan cast a fireball into the mob of darkspawn at the base of the rockface, and followed it with a firestorm. Darkspawn squawked and ran from the blind valley, fanning the flames with every stride. Some noticed Morrigan now, and a few arrows came her way. She knocked them aside contemptuously, targeting the darkspawn that were too stupid and stubborn to stop trying to attack Anders.

Anders was *hers*. Anyone who tried to take him from her would regret it. These creatures before her would learn that lesson, and would pay with their lives for her inconvenience.

The survivors were already running away. Caught up in the call of Taint from the far hill, they joined the attack and forgot all about the lone Warden on the little ledge.

"Fool!" Morrigan snarled. The man was almost more trouble than he was worth. She called up her hawk form, and in a moment was at his side, working the limited healing magic she knew. As soon as he was well enough, they would fly back to

Ostagar, no matter how dire the Fool King's situation.

"Adaia, we are going into *battle!*"

For nearly an hour, nothing that Tara, Cullen, Alistair, Zevran, or Leliana had said had made an impression on the little elf. Apparently nothing Bronwyn could say made a difference, either.

"I *know*," Adaia said sturdily, keeping pace with the quick-marching troops with no visible effort. "I'm a *Warden*."

"That's right," laughed Brosca, slapping her on the shoulder—carefully, not wanting to set off any of the volatile trinkets the girl bore. "You tell her. All you have to do is stand in the middle of the horde, and you'll blow them all the way back to the Stone!"

Adaia grinned fiercely. "I've got lots of poisons, too. Everybody come get some. I've slathered my knives with them!"

"All right," Bronwyn said. Short of ordering her back to camp, there was nothing to be done. Adaia had been conscripted and wished to serve. "If you are determined to a Warden, you must do this: kill at least one darkspawn, and fill this vial with its blood." She reached into a pocket and thrust the container into Adaia's hands. "And don't tell anyone else about it. That's what you have to do. After the battle, give the vial to me and we'll have a ceremony."

"Yes!" shrieked Adaia, punching the air with a small fist.

Bronwyn shook her head. No one had time or energy to talk much, for Loghain kept his forces moving at the trot. The scouting party had not been traveling particularly fast, nor was it difficult to track them. If the King could hold out, there was hope that Loghain's forces could effect a rescue. If not, perhaps they would be enough to exact revenge.

A pair of new-model ballistae, broken down to manageable pieces, were carried by their dwarven engineers. If the machines could help bring down a dragon, perhaps they could help save a king.

His sword was unbearably heavy. Carver's blows were slowing, becoming sluggish. He used the weight of the sword to fight, letting it fall in controlled blows on his opponents. More darkspawn were coming up the north trail, now smoothed by dozens of darkspawn boots. Dalish bodies slumped here and there, hacked and bloody.

The shield-carrying genlocks had not reached them, thank the Maker, but plenty of their fellows had. The mages' voices were hoarse from shouting spells.

The earth shook: a deep vibration everyone felt from the soles of their feet to the top of their skulls. Darkspawn squealed and squawked and plunged out of the way of the monstrous being stamping up the hill.

"—Ogre!"

"—Bring it down!"

"—Shoot it! Shoot it!"

"—Make save us! Nooo—"

The ogre thundered toward them, boulder-like arms swinging; knocking elf, dwarf, and human aside like dolls. The mages did their best to slow it. Merrill had not finished her paralysis spell before she was thrown in the air, striking the ground hard.

"Merrill!" cried Cailan, rushing out of his formation to help her. Men cursed and leaped after him. The ogre pivoted, and mowed them down like wheat.

"To the King!" Ser Landry rallied the King's companions, and they charged in a body, shoving the ogre back with shields and pommel-strokes. The creature staggered, and then bellowed a challenge. A Dalish dagger, well thrown, struck it in the eye.

In agony, the ogre rampaged across the summit of the hill, smashing down anything in its path. Cailan stood his ground in front of the unconscious Merrill, and the ogre spotted him, reaching out with a giant fist. Cailan swung his sword, and it bounced off the ogre's breastplate. The ogre grabbed him and lifted the king up, looking him over with bestial gloating. A trickle of thick drool trailed into Cailan's face.

Amid the screams of horror, Adam Hawke launched himself at the ogre, his blade driving hard in the monster's groin. The ogre grunted in surprise and then pain. Tainted blood spurted from an artery. Slowly, its hand opened, and Cailan dropped and scrambled away, wiping his face. He groaned and slumped to the ground, hand on the his dented armor and cracked ribs.

It was a slaughter: the knights hacking, stabbing, slashing at the fallen creature. The ogre's death was a triumph, but the darkspawn came on, and kept coming. Instantly, the steel circle of warriors formed again, surrounding the fallen king.

An explosion crashed below. The air shone white, and sizzled briefly. The fighters paused, trying to assess the sound, and then the hill's defenders cheered.

Bronwyn said the King's people were still fighting, so they were not too late. They advanced on the darkspawn, hardly slowing their pace. Adaia followed her friends, a grenade in one hand and her good ironbark dagger in the other. She would help them fight darkspawn. Right. Some darkspawn were smaller than she was, after all.

On the edge of the battle, she found one of them: a short genlock archer, taking aim at the Wardens. Adaia crept up behind the creature and slit its throat. The poison on her blade mixed with the darkspawn blood, creating a sulfurous reek. Quickly, looking around for possible attackers, Adaia uncorked the vial and busied herself collecting the genlock's

blood. That was the rule. A vial of darkspawn blood. Whatever. Adaia hoped they weren't just playing a joke on her.

Another genlock spotted her and squawked. Adaia tossed her grenade its way, then threw herself flat. The squawk stopped abruptly. The elf grinned to herself, face down in the dust. If she was quick and careful this should be *fun*.

Ballistae creaked and thumped. Bombs exploded. Curses shattered the earth and air. Archers loosed volleys, and warriors caught the darkspawn between the anvil of the hill and the hammer of Loghain's attack. Yard by yard, the darkspawn were crushed and slaughtered.

Bronwyn led her people against the strange darkspawn commander: the tall creature in the horned helmet. From the moment she crossed swords with it, she knew it for something more than mere darkspawn. On however limited a level, this was a thinking creature.

And powerful. It swung a blade with as much strength as Sten. The Qunari side-stepped the blow, and slammed against the Vanguard in the midst of his follow-through. Not even Sten could knock the creature down, but he slowed it enough for other blades, sharp and envenomed, to reach its vitals.

Still the Vanguard fought. Its sword snapped in half, and the creature shoved the broken blade into Oghren's surprised face. The dwarf's helmet saved his life, but only just. Blood

squirted from the torn mouth. Big white teeth flew sideways. Tara screamed a healing spell, and the bleeding slowed to a trickle. Oghren fell back, while Alistair threw up his shield, giving the creature a smart buffet. Cullen followed up with a downward blow that smashed the creature's armor and broke its collarbone.

"Bastard!" Bronwyn snarled, stabbing at the thing's eyes. "I'm sick of you!"

"Me, too!" Brosca agreed. She dove behind the Vanguard and gave an ankle a hard yank. The creature stumbled, and the back of its neck was briefly exposed.

It was enough. Sten roared, and swung his blade. It cut part way through the spine, and the horned helmet was knocked all the way off the Vanguard's head. It cannoned into Zevran, who sat down, winded.

"Braska!" the elf swore. Then he laughed, as Bronwyn drove her sword into the thrashing darkspawn's throat. It twitched for some time, but finally was still. Brosca kicked it in the head.

With the Vanguard's death, whatever order and purpose the darkspawn had was gone. The horde disintegrated into mindless monsters fighting whatever lay before them. With no coordination, Loghain's forces mopped them up, and then advanced up the hill to the King.

The teyrn himself, his sword dripping red, was one of the first

to the wide summit. Loghain eyed the aftermath dispassionately. The darkspawn had lost more than he had, which was always a good thing; and his army was in possession of the field, which was the traditional definition of victory. He pushed through to see if Cailan lived or not. The king was on the ground, but Keeper Merrill was murmuring over him, and the king's guard parted to let their general pass.

Cailan grinned up at him, knocked silly: boyishly pleased with himself.

"So, Loghain...who's King of the Mountain?"

Loghain bit back dark anger at the sight of Cailan on his makeshift stretcher. The walking wounded were limping back, helped by their friends. The worst cases were lying out in the Wilds, waiting for the wagons to retrieve them, guarded by a handful of soldiers, and cared for by a few Healers. Many of them would die out here.

But it was good to be a King, even when squeezed and drooled on by an ogre. A mage named Petra was walking by the stretcher, waving her staff. Little Keili looked over anxiously, and cast a rejuvenation spell now and then, until Loghain's irritated expression gave her pause.

"Other soldiers need help," he growled. Of course she cast the next spell on him, but he wordlessly pointed at a dazed knight, staggering along with a bloody head wound. She nodded and sidled over to the man, her staff aglow. Then she

moved on to Adam Hawke, who would henceforth have a faint but dashing scar across his cheekbone.

Bronwyn smiled to herself. Loghain narrowed his eyes. Her smile only sweetened.

"You have a loyal admirer."

"Complete rubbish."

"I should say, 'another loyal admirer,'" she teased. She saw he was genuinely angry and upset, and could not quite understand why.

"A gift from the heart does not deserve scorn, whether from a despised mage or mighty king. The girl means well, and is trying to serve her country in the only way she knows. The Chantry has seen to it that she has nothing but her magic to give, and they allow little enough of that as it is."

"I don't despise her," Loghain snapped. "I just don't like people fussing over me. Or over other people who have the means to care for themselves."

She followed his glance over to the royal procession. Adam Hawke was now walking on the other side of the king he had saved. Cailan reached out to shake his hand. Carver's brother was likely to profit handsomely from this day's work.

Oghren had found most of his lost teeth. One of the mages was spelling them back into his mouth. It was a fairly

disturbing sight.

And Morrigan reported in: her face stony, her tone scathing. Anders had lured the darkspawn away with a diversion and had killed many of them. He had nearly been killed himself.

"And—" Morrigan noted acidly, "I did not see anyone coming to *his* assistance other than myself!"

Bronwyn laughed. "Who else would he need?"

Morrigan scoffed, only partly appeased. "We shall return to camp by ourselves, in stages, and I trust that Anders will be permitted to recover before performing any more ridiculous heroics!"

"Very well," Bronwyn assented smoothly. "And my congratulations both on your survival and all associated heroics. Very well done indeed!"

Another scornful huff, and Morrigan took to the skies in her hawk shape. She passed impudently close to Loghain's head, feathered wings ruffling his hair. Loghain glared irritably after the shape-shifter.

There was more fuss yet to be made over the king when they arrived at camp. Every Healer among the mages vied to do the honors, but of course pride of place went to Wynne. Loghain ground his teeth in annoyance. Who knew how long Cailan would demand the woman's attention? She was

desperately needed in Denerim. *Anora* needed her. Instead, she was likely to stay in camp, coddling Cailan; bandaging his insignificant cuts and bruises.

Cailan was in rather good spirits, and enjoyed making the most of his adventure.

"Well! Loghain! All's well that end's well, anyway! That's a few hundred of the creatures we'll never have to fight again! What shall we call today's battle? 'King's Mountain' sounds very well, I think."

"Indeed," Loghain answered dryly.

Cailan put out his hand to the Dalish Keeper.

"Merrill!" he said, eyes blue and radiant. "Your people fought most bravely—most honorably. I hope today strengthens the bonds between human and elf... between Fereldan and Dalish. I wish to say now, before all of you, that I mean to reward the courage and friendship of the Dalish with a free grant of land. It is time that the elvhen had a home once more, and I would be honored if they would consent to be our neighbors."

Merrill's delicate face was luminous with joy. "My King, nothing could give me greater happiness!"

There was a murmur of talk. Loghain felt his temper rising. What land was Cailan talking about? Where? Whose land was he giving away? Loghain hoped it was something actually

within the gift of the Crown of Ferelden. And a "free" grant of land? "Neighbors?" Did Cailan not mean to keep the overall sovereignty of that part of Ferelden soil?

"And Bronwyn!" the king called out, wincing as his gestures grew too taxing. "Come and drink to your Wardens' heroism! They've done their duty today!"

Bronwyn lifted her cup willingly enough. "I thank Your Majesty!"

"Yes!" Cailan drank with her. His eyes brightened with the first welcome swallow of good Antivan wine. "Danith and Carver! Our thanks to you!"

Bronwyn did not allow the frown inside to show. "And Anders, Your Majesty. His wounds, too, are being treated, but we shall not forget his brave deeds."

"Right. Warden Anders, of course. Elric, my good fellow, come over here..." Cailan whispered a few words in his friend's ear.

"Of course, Majesty," the man nodded, and went into the next room.

"For the three Wardens who stood with me today, a golden reward."

Elric returned, a small casket in his hand. He stood beside the king, and opened the lid. Inside gleamed rings of massive

gold. A stir of appreciation hummed through the chamber.

"Bronwyn, take this ring to Warden Anders, with my thanks. He saved many lives today—probably mine among them. Warden Danith, this is probably much too big for the delicate hands of an elf, but I tender it with the deepest respect. And young Carver, I couldn't forget you. You're well on your way to a noble life of duty and heroism. Take this ring as my tribute to your good service. Though I'm cannot be surprised at your deeds, when you have such a fine example to guide you. Adam Hawke, come here."

Carver stepped back, his face a study of suppressed fury and exasperation. Bronwyn only smiled and put a friendly hand on his arm, making a point of admiring the ring. Carver slid it onto a finger, clearly upset. Recognizing the lad and then holding up his loved and envied brother as a model must be beyond galling. Carver managed more of a grimace than a smile, as his brother approached the king.

"Kneel."

In the golden circle of candlelight, Adam dropped to his knees at the King's side. Cailan struggled up on an elbow and rested his hand on Adam's head. He coughed, and cleared his throat.

"Revered Mother, I call on you to bear witness."

The stern-faced old woman stood forth. "I am here, Your Majesty."

Cailan looked around the room, eyes flicking to each face. "And I call on you, Lords of Ferelden, Lords of Orzammar, brave Elvhen, and Grey Wardens alike. Hear me: in the name of Calenhad the Great, here in the sight of the Maker, I declare this man a Knight of Ferelden." He managed a lop-sided smile. "Rise and serve your country, Ser Adam Hawke."

"He got a knighthood. *A knighthood!* And all I got was this lousy ring!"

"Shh! Carver!" Leliana ran after him, trying to hush him. "Oh, let me see! It's a splendid ring, and from the hand of the King himself. Such an honor!"

"*'Rise, Ser Adam Hawke.'* I think I threw up a little in my mouth."

"What is wrong?" asked Danith joining them in the Wardens' quarters. "You do not like your ring? It is good gold. I shall wear mine on a leather thong around my neck."

"Can I see it?" Brosca asked eagerly. "That's a nice bit of treasure! I wish the King had given one to me—"

"You can have it. Here." Carver shoved it at the delighted Brosca. Bronwyn came through from the little cubicle where Morrigan was alternately nursing Anders and raging at him.

"You can't give that away!" she said sharply. "It's a royal gift. Someone is going to ask you where it is. Brosca, give it back."

"We cannot afford to offend the King."

"Sodding ring," Carver muttered. Even more quietly, he added, "Sodding *king*." Brosca made a face and shoved the ring back into the boy's big hands.

"Later, Boss," she said, making her escape from what she suspected would be a scene.

It was not.

"Excuse us. I need to speak to Carver. Over here," Bronwyn said, waving him over to the corner by the window. "Have a drink with me. Is it the knighthood? You already bear the title of Grey Warden. You cannot also bear the title of knight."

Carver exploded. "Adam manipulated the whole thing! He talked me into getting away from the King so I wouldn't attract the darkspawn to him with my Grey Warden-ness, and then he stayed and played hero, and now he's 'Ser Adam Hawke,' the perfect knight. I got a stupid ring."

"Carver," Bronwyn said thoughtfully, looking out the window, "I do know something about having an older brother. One of the first things I learned was that he was always going to be bigger and stronger than I. I learned that I was never going to be Teyrna of Highever, and that my brother would succeed my father. I learned that I would have to make my own way, by marriage or by politics or in the Chantry."

"Everyone says your brother is an decent man. Even Morrigan

likes him."

"Yes," Bronwyn said dryly, "Everyone likes Fergus. I learned that early on, too. Except not *everybody* did, or his wife and son would be alive today. But still, he's Teyrn of Highever, and I'm not. I'm a Grey Warden, and that's all the title I'm likely to have. But a Grey Warden can save the world, and that is not something that a mere knight can do, nor a teyrn, nor even a King."

Streaks of purple lay softly on the horizon, mixed with dove grey and radiant pink. Bronwyn wondered if all the dust and debris of battle in the air was making the sunset more beautiful.

"That's true, I suppose," Carver said, shuffling restlessly. "I always wanted to do something different—something important, and I guess being a Grey Warden is just about the most different and important thing there is. But..." he burst out, "do you think the King will take Adam into his personal guard?"

"Maker! I hope not!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "I hadn't thought of that! I was hoping he'd go to Fergus and help him in the North." Unwillingly she thought of Wynne going alone to Denerim with no protector. Except she might not go at all if the King claimed her services. "Such a tangle," she sighed.

Cailan was indeed inclined to celebrate the knighting of his new friend Hawke, and would have had all his knights to

dinner in his private chambers, had he been strong enough, and had Wynne not shooed all the visitors away, wanting her patient to get some sleep. Instead, Adam sat with the King's companions in the room just outside the King's bedchamber, matching them drink for drink.

Everyone else went down to the mess hall for their meal, celebrating the victory at what everyone now called "King's Mountain." Bronwyn smiled. It was hardly a mountain, but it was certainly a victory.

Most of the Wardens were cheerful as well. Adaia fidgeted, awaiting her Joining. The candlelit stone hall seemed to her more than beautiful. She had done something: really done something helpful and brave, and she was practically a Warden already.

They lingered long over food and drink. Leliana was persuaded to give them a few of the good old songs soldiers liked on these occasions. Bronwyn smiled at Loghain, who granted her a grave look that was not a scowl. It was the closest thing to a smile he could muster at the moment. He had thanked and congratulated his soldiers on a job well done. He had praised his allies, and commiserated with them over their casualties. The Dalish had performed superbly, and the Wardens had been in the right place at the right time, which was half the battle. A pity that Anders was not up to celebrating with them, for he had done more than anyone, but he would have a word himself with the man when he was feeling up to it. He had shown remarkable initiative and resourcefulness. Even that very shifty young witch had done

well, no matter how suspicious her motives.

"So you're going to let that little elf Join. Do you think she'll live?"

"I don't know. We've been very, very lucky so far with our recruiting. I do know it would wound and grieve her if I forbade it. If she doesn't make it—well, it will soon be over, and she will be have died a Warden, at least. I hope she lives. She was very brave today. One doesn't always appreciate how hard it is for the small and weak to be brave."

"I suppose not."

A guardsman made his way through the maze of table to Loghain, leaning close and speaking softly. "Beg pardon, my lord. The King's Healer craves a word with you and the Warden Commander."

Bronwyn glanced up. "Is something wrong?"

"That's not for me to say, my lady," the man answered, distressed. "Come as soon as you can, if you please."

The Wardens were moving up to the quarters, anyway, so they used that as a kind of cover. Loghain touched Bronwyn's arm at the top of steps and they slipped away together.

Wynne cracked the door open and looked out anxiously.

"What's wrong, Wynne?"

"Come and see for yourselves. He was so cheerful earlier this evening. He seemed to be healing well, but then... It's as I feared. One says as little as possible, of course. There's no use in frightening one's patient with dire possibilities, but..."

The king's knights were sitting over a card game, glum and red-eyed. Well-mannered men, they rose for Loghain and the Girl Warden. Loghain noticed Adam Hawke among them, already accepted as a peer.

Loghain asked harshly, "What is it?"

Elric Maraigne stared at the floor. "Blight sickness, my lord. The King is grey with it."

Bronwyn caught her breath in a startled gasp.

Wynne pressed her lips together, and shook her head. Ser Landry wiped his face and said, "There's no use in wishing and hoping and pretending otherwise. The King's going to die."

Loghain pushed through to Cailan's bedchamber to see for himself.

The candles had burned lower. A haze of smoke dimmed the light. Cailan was sleeping restlessly, his head turning from side to side, his brow sweat-slick with fever. None of those things were as ominous as the King's grey and mottled skin.

Bronwyn whispered to Wynne, "How long as he been like

this?"

"Not long. It came upon him suddenly. He was asleep when his breathing changed. I think he is having nightmares. I hoped it could be something else—"

"No," Bronwyn choked out. "This is Taint. I have seen it."

"Then he will die," Wynne sighed. She bowed her head, her lips moving in prayer.

"The Wardens know of nothing to help him?" Loghain demanded furiously. "After a thousand years, the Wardens know of *nothing* that will cure a man of the Taint? That Dalish Warden of yours was dying of Taint when you found her, and she still lives!"

"But she had to become a Ward—" She stared at Loghain at alarm "You can't mean... No! Loghain! It only works half the time at best. And he would be a *Warden!*"

A crazy, impossible vision flashed before her imagination: Cailan under her command, disobeying her every order, swaggering like a man destined to save the world, when he ought to be flogged regularly instead... She shuddered.

Wynne came forward, hope in her eyes. "You can save the King by making him a Warden?"

"Shhh!" Bronwyn shut the door tightly. "Sometimes it works, but over half the people who join the Grey Wardens *die* in the

process. And even at the best, it would make the King a Grey Warden!"

"He's going to die if you don't," Loghain growled. "And if it works, no one needs to know."

But they *would* know, Bronwyn thought despairingly. Cailan could not be kept from talking. He would boast to the skies that he was a Grey Warden. *Could* there be a Warden King? Would the Landsmeet stand for it?

Cailan stirred and opened his eyes. Bronwyn bit down hard on an anguished moan. The blue eyes Cailan had from his father Maric had faded, the irises turned a dull milky-grey. He was becoming a ghoul. A Warden King might be a political impossibility, but a Ghoul King was worse than an abomination.

"Loghain.." Cailan rasped out. "What dreams I've had...horrible..." He saw Bronwyn standing at Loghain's shoulder and managed a ghastly smile. "Hullo, Bronwyn. Is this what Grey Wardens have to put up with all the time? Duncan told me about the nightmares... What is happening to me?"

"Cailan," Loghain told him bluntly. "You've been poisoned by the Taint. There's only one possible way to save you."

A quick gasp, and the King's sweaty grey face lightened with unbelieving hope. He beamed—shockingly—at Bronwyn. "You want me to Join the Grey Wardens!"

"I know of no other way to save you," Bronwyn admitted.

"A Grey Warden!" Cailan murmured, rapt. "How strange Fate is! It's what I've always dreamed of."

"Your Majesty," Bronwyn protested, "It might very well kill you."

Cailan did not appear to hear her. He whispered, "*Glorious!*"

Bronwyn stormed blindly up to the Wardens' quarters. Would the King live? If he lived, what would they *do* with him? Did they even have enough darkspawn blood for the ritual? She might have some left, preserved by Tara's spells, but would it do?

Adaia. Adaia had gathered a vial of darkspan blood today for her own Joining. Could she possibly ask that poor little girl to stand aside for the benefit of an arrogant human king? It seemed cruel and outrageous...

And what, after everything, if *it did not work*? Would the Grey Wardens be accused of murdering the King?

She paused, overwhelmed by the horror of that. It *could* happen, if they were not very, very careful.

Taking a breath, she pushed the door open.

"Wardens! To me!"

Eyes turned to her, some more quickly than others. People were chatting together, washing, reading—all in various stages of undress. Leliana was trimming Tara's hair. Broasca was helping Cullen clean his armor.

The little dwarf called back, "Are we going to have to fight again? Because I really, really hope not..."

Alistair emerged from the other room. "Bronwyn? He took another look at her face. "What's the matter?"

She gestured them closer and called out. "I need to speak to all Wardens right away. Those of you who are not Wardens I must ask to step into the other room for a few minutes."

Zevran grinned wryly, and swaggered into the next room. Bronwyn thought of Anders, and walked over to the little curtained corner.

"Excuse me," she said. "Is Anders awake and well enough to come out?"

Anders poked his head out, "He is."

"You are not," Morrigan contradicted crossly, behind him.

"It won't be very long," Bronwyn said looking the blond mage over. "You seem much recovered, and I have news that concerns all the Wardens. By the way, the King says thank you, and here's a thumping big golden ring from him. As for you, Morrigan..."

"I am going nowhere," the witch sneered. "I know all your ridiculous secrets—and perhaps some that even you do not know."

Alistair glared at her. They had never taken to each other, "You know, we really don't need to put up with this..."

Bronwyn lowered her voice. "Morrigan, I ask you as a friend not to undermine my authority. I don't doubt that Anders will tell you everything, but for now, just go. Or join the Wardens permanently."

"Very well. 'Tis all one to me!" Morrigan said, drawing a shawl furiously around her shoulder. She stalked into the next room, her back radiating contempt.

Anders tossed the heavy ring from hand to hand. "I'll give this to her. She likes jewelry."

"Can't I stay?" Adaia pleaded. "I'm almost a Warden!" A hesitant smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Is this about my Joining?"

Bronwyn sighed. "I wish it were. It's something else, and rather awful. I promise to talk to you in a bit." Adaia went away, disappointed. Bronwyn asked Alistair, "Where are Sten and Oghren?"

"Next door. Oghren's already passed out."

"Good," Bronwyn said without thinking. Grins bloomed around

her like impertinent flowers. She grimaced, "Well...in this case, it is. I have something very serious to tell you. First of all: Tara, is any of the darkspawn blood we gathered weeks ago still viable?"

"I think so. Probably. There's not much of it—only a couple vials. The spells should have held all right."

Cullen caught on. "Someone else is Joining tonight? A volunteer?"

Bronwyn refrained from rolling her eyes. It was all too dire. "Not exactly. Someone contracted the Taint during the battle. We will have to perform an emergency Joining to save him."

Alistair shook his head. "It was Duncan's policy that we had to stand back from those cases. If we tried the Joining with everybody who had Blight disease, it would give away our secrets."

Bronwyn sighed. "It isn't just *anybody*. I have been asked to perform a Joining for King Cailan."

A brief, shocked silence followed. Even Danith's eyes were wide, very wide, taking in the enormity of the situation. Everyone took a breath, and looked ready to start talking at once. Bronwyn put up a hand to fend them off, and was only partly successful.

Astrid, alive to the political implications, asked, "And what exactly would be the King's status were he to Join? Would he

remain a King, or would he be a Warden recruit?'

"Andraste's bloody—" Anders began. Tara slapped a hand over his mouth, glancing at a stormy Cullen.

"Don't say it!" she hushed him. "Maybe... oh, Maker...this is big."

"It has never happened before," Leliana breathed. "Never. Not in all the history of Thedas. It has never happened that a King became a Warden. What a song it would make!"

"No songs!" Bronwyn interrupted sharply. "And no more political talk! I charge you on your honor as Wardens, never to reveal this to anyone! We don't even know that the King will survive! He's pretty far gone already, to tell the truth."

"It was the ogre," Carver said instantly. "The ogre drooled all over his face. Maybe he swallowed—"

"Shut up!" Alistair burst out, "Just shut up!" He walked away and leaned against a wall, breathing heavily. Carver was offended, but Bronwyn caught his eye and gave her head a little shake. Leliana whispered in Carver's ear, and the boy's face changed. Bronwyn groaned inwardly. She should have known that Leliana would ferret out Alistair's secret. At the moment, she did not much care how she had.

Instead, she went on, "I don't want any more comments or interruptions. Every minute counts now. Tara, I need you and Anders to put together a Joining potion immediately. Then we

will go to the King, but not all of us, because I think it would be very, very bad if things go wrong and people start speculating about a crowd of Wardens at the King's deathbed. Alistair and I will go, and no one else. We'll go as soon as the potion is ready. If the rest of you can manage to keep this secret, you can let everyone out of the other room. You can tell them that the King is sick, and to keep quiet about it. I'm going to put on a fresh tunic."

She walked away to rummage through her belongings. Tara followed her, and looked around to see if anyone else was listening.

"Bronwyn—maybe we should ask Adaia for her vial. It's fresh. It might work better than the old stuff I've got. I don't know, of course. Nobody seems to really know much about how the process works. What do you think?"

A long pause. Then Bronwyn made up her mind, while tossing off the old tunic and donning the new. "I thought about it on the way up. All of you were Joined with preserved blood, so we know it works. Besides, asking Adaia for hers would be cruel. Not only are we delaying her Joining, but we would ask her for the vial she gathered after showing great daring and personal courage—which was, by the way, not noted or rewarded by the King. Would we then ask her to gather another, or force *her* to make do with the old blood? Humans have done her so much harm. I don't want to ask this of her. If the King were any other man we would not even consider it. He wants to be a Grey Warden recruit. Demanded it, in fact. Therefore, I shall treat him like any other recruit as far as

possible. Mix the potion, and we'll find a way to take it to the King's room in secret. We can hardly walk past the King's knights carrying a steaming cup of darkspawn blood, for Maker's sake!

"Right," Tara said, a little distracted. "We'll mix it, and then we'll put it in a vial, so you can pour it into the cup in the King's own room. I imagine he has something fancy enough for a Joining."

"Maker preserve us!" Bronwyn groaned. "I can't leave the dregs of a Joining for anyone to find! They know we'd poisoned him for sure!"

The document lay on the King's writing table, signed, witnessed, and sealed. Loghain regarded it with loathing, torn between the desire to beat the wretched, dying boy over the head with it and the desire to throw the infuriating document into the fire. The king's sickbed was a carnival of visitors and confusion. Loghain glanced again at the parchment, a sour taste in his mouth. *"This is the last Will and Testament of Cailan Theirin, King of Ferelden..."*

Cailan clearly did not really believe he was going to die, or that it was even a possibility. He had consented to reason only so far as to leave Anora, as "Dowager Queen"—a term that enraged Loghain—on the throne as a caretaker for three months after his death.

"—at which time a Landsmeet shall be called to choose a

new sovereign as it shall see fit—"

He refused to name a successor—whether Anora or some other—at all.

In fact, he gave Loghain a conspiratorial grin. "Are you hoping I'd name Fergus?" he nearly winked. Luckily he was too weak, for Loghain would certainly have knifed him for it. "That would certainly please Bronwyn," the King went on, fatuously. "Not that Fergus wouldn't be a sound choice," he added, more and more patronizing. "Don't worry about Anora. She's the Heiress of Gwaren, after all."

And what about the vague bequest to the Dalish elves? Merrill, luckily, was busily caring for her own people and had not been notified of the King's sudden illness. Loghain would keep it that way. Cailan was in no shape to call for a map and be specific: he had merely designated an area southwest of Ostagar to be granted to the Dalish clans *"in perpetuity."* Could a king give away a portion of his kingdom without the consent of the Landsmeet? Or could he give away land that was beyond the borders, that was territory claimed by the Chasind tribesmen, protected by a prior treaty? What would happen when the Chantry insisted on sending missionaries there? In fifty, a hundred, two hundred years—it would be the Dales all over again. The King's will was a bomb, waiting to explode.

And there was no more hope of keeping the will a secret, than there was of keeping the king's condition secret from the nobles. Loghain knew he had to summon Wulffe and Bryland

and some of the senior banns, and had done so immediately. It was no longer possible not to send for the Revered Mother—the interfering old hag.

In addition to Loghain and the arls, Cailan had insisted on having his friends Elric and Landry witness the document—and also his new favorite, Adam Hawke. That done, many wished to make their farewells. As each individual or group had their audience, Loghain took the precaution of closing the door behind them. When Bronwyn arrived for her bit of Warden ritual, it would not seem so odd that the door would be closed, giving her privacy.

Loghain eyed Hawke. Bronwyn was sending some letters north with him. There was no opportunity to speak privately with the man. He needed someone reliable to take the news to Anora, no matter what happened. It might be best to send a man of his own, anyway. Or a woman...

He hated the idea of losing Cauthrien, even temporarily, but she was the one person he could trust to follow his orders in the teeth of any opposition. And she was personally loyal to Anora as well, having grown up with her practically as a foster-sister.

Bryland and Wulffe were serious and concerned, as was proper; but they were also whispering to each other urgently, trying to stay on top of the situation. While Loghain awaited Bronwyn with growing impatience, the arls cornered him.

"So. That's Blight sickness, that is," Wulffe rumbled. "The

King's sure to die."

"Maker forbid!" Bryland whispered. "But if he *does*, Loghain, we need to make sure the country doesn't fly to pieces. I thought that the King would name Fergus Cousland his heir outright, but it seems not so."

"*Anora* is Queen—" Loghain began heatedly.

"—For *now*," Wulffe growled. "That bit about the three months is a mercy. Of course, she could stay Queen if she marries the new King. The Couslands have the best claim by blood. Fergus is a widower now, and maybe that would be the tidiest solution all 'round."

"Yes!" Bryland agreed. "A bit of continuity and still a descendent of Calenhad on the throne. Unless—" he peered at Loghain intently "—you're backing another descendant of Calenhad. One whose claim is just as good as her brother's. Is that it, Loghain? You and Bronwyn? A lot of people would go for that, especially in the middle of a war..."

"Bronwyn is a Warden," Loghain countered.

Wulffe pursed his lips, considering. "No. No one's going to care about that with a Blight going on. The Girl Warden's that popular. Nice girl. Young. Probably good for a brace of heirs. Couslands always do their duty, after all. Make up your mind, Loghain, and talk to us. The three months will be over before we know it."

"Cailan's not dead yet," Loghain said sharply. "And I'd best get back to him now."

A soft knock, and Bronwyn slipped into the room. With her was Alistair. The boy's eyes met Loghain's, as if pleading to make everything better. Loghain put out a hand to still the murmurs of the grieving knights.

"Come, Wardens," he said. "The King wishes to speak to you." He stepped into the bedchamber and spoke to Wynne, "Privately."

The woman bowed in assent, understanding only in part.

The Revered Mother grimaced in distaste at the presence of a mage. Her droning prayers tapered off. Then she saw Alistair, and her eyes narrowed.

That's right, Loghain remembered. The Chantry hierarchy seems to know who Alistair is, somehow. I expect that Eamon told them when he palmed the boy off on the Templars. Well, the lad is well out of their clutches.

Loghain waved the Wardens in the King's bedchamber, and shut the door behind them. Alistair gasped at the sight of the King: half-asleep and thrashing on the bed, his face changing by the minute. The young Warden gave Loghain a quick, panicked look, and whispered to Bronwyn. "Is he staying? He can't stay! It's a secret—"

"Alistair," Bronwyn hissed back, "He *must* stay! Riordan *told*

us that heads of state are privy to certain Grey Warden secrets. With the King in this condition, Loghain is as close to a head of state as no matter. There is absolutely no excuse those men out there would accept for leaving a dying King alone with two Grey Wardens. With Loghain here, we are simply two more making our farewells."

Alistair turned anxiously to Loghain. "You won't tell, will you? I mean, I know we can trust you, but this is really, really important..."

"Alistair," Loghain said patiently. "Of course I won't tell. I already swore an oath to Bronwyn. She's right. This can't be done without my presence—especially if the King does not survive."

"He's got to," Alistair muttered. "He's *got* to!"

Bronwyn pulled a little silver cup out from beneath her tunic and then the large vial of Joining potion. Loghain grimaced, stepping back, as the stink of Taint in the room redoubled.

Cailan opened his filmy eyes. Alistair gasped. They were now almost white.

"Alistair!" Cailan croaked. "Brother! No...at last...brothers indeed." His eyes traveled to Bronwyn, a cup in her hand. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said gravely. "It is time."

They must make this good, not just for Loghain, listening and judging, but for the King, who might die, or who might live to serve with them.

Bronwyn cleared her throat, and spoke softly. "The Grey Wardens were founded during the First Blight, when humanity stood at the verge of annihilation. So it was that the first Grey Wardens drank of darkspawn blood, and mastered their Taint. You, too shall drink: as the first Grey Wardens did before us, as we did before you. This is the source of our power...and our victory. We speak only a few words prior to the Joining, but these words have been said since the beginning. Alistair..."

With a visible effort, the young man pulled himself together. *"Join us, Brother: join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant; join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. Know that if you perish, your sacrifice shall not be forgotten, and that one day... we shall join you."*

Bronwyn lifted the cup before her and said, "Cailan Theirin, you are called to submit yourself to the Taint for the Greater Good. From this moment forth, you are a Grey Warden."

Cailan smiled dreamily. "I always knew this was my destiny."

He struggled to sit up. Alistair put an arm behind his back, while Bronwyn put the cup to his lips. The king shuddered a little at the first swallow, but forced himself to drain the cup. Bronwyn stepped back and nodded to Alistair, who gently lowered Cailan onto his pillows. They watched, hardly

breathing, wondering what would happen next.

The king's eyes rolled back. He jerked up convulsively, his entire body wracked with spasms. A deep cough shook him, and then another.

"No..." Alistair moaned. "Oh, no! No!"

Loghain did not need more than a second to interpret that look of despair on Bronwyn's face. The cup dropped from her shaking hands and rolled madly under the bed. Loghain threw open the door and shouted, "Healer!"

Wynne dashed in at once, ahead of a surging mob of knights and nobles.

"Oh, Maker!" she cried. "Hold him, one of you. I can try this..."

The Revered Mother pushed her way to the front, indignant and suspicious. "Let me through! What is that mage doing to the King?"

Healing blue light surrounded Cailan, but it could not stop the dreadful, violent coughing. Cailan groaned horribly between the coughs, as if coughing out his very life.

It was, indeed, exactly what he was doing. It *hurt*, Loghain realized. He had been angry—so bitterly angry at Cailan—but it hurt horribly to see him—to *feel* him—die. He held Maric's son close, trying to offer whatever comfort was possible at the end.

"My lord," Bronwyn pleaded, "Stand back, I beg you. You will expose yourself to the Taint. Alistair and I will care for the King."

The word "Taint" was enough to discourage most of the crowd. The rest shrank away from the terrible stench. Loghain held his friend's son, nonetheless; enduring the boy's last moments along with him, until a last, rattling gasp trailed away to nothing.

King Cailan was dead.

Thanks to my reviewers: Tikigod784, demonincargles, Juliafied, MsBarrows, Zute, Have Travel, BlackCherryWhiskey, Costin, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Judy, KnightOfHolyLight, ZarosKnight, The Moidart, Josie Lange, mutive, JackOfBladesX, Dante Alighieri1308, cloud1004, gabriella cousland, Jyggilag, tgcgoddess, Kira Kyuu, callalili, Shakespira, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Gene Dark, almostinsane, Enaid Aderyn, karinfan123, mille libri, chocolatebrownie12, SkaterGirl246, euromellows, Jenna53, Elissa, BladesoftheValkyrie, Tyanilth, and Menamebephil.

48. Funeral Games

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 48: Funeral Games

The world had changed in an instant. The men and women crowding around the king's deathbed stared at each other helplessly, wondering what they ought to do.

The traditional cry on these occasions was to hail the successor.

"The King is Dead: Long Live the King!"

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

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

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

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

"Get Wynne out of here," Loghain ordered Bronwyn, in a thread of breath. "Get her out of the Revered Mother's sight. Hide her with the Wardens and get her out of camp before daylight." He moved toward the priest, his voice commanding. "Revered Mother...if you would lead the intercessory prayers...? Shall we send for the archpriests and the incense-bearers?"

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

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

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

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

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

"The King is dead, and the Revered Mother was on the point

of having you arrested when Loghain caught her attention. We need to get you out of Ostagar and off to Denerim to care for the Queen."

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

"Everything will be in such confusion tonight that no one will notice. I'll have Anders get your things. Whom do you trust among the mages?"

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

Bronwyn clicked her tongue impatiently.

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

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

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

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

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

Bronwyn shooed them back into their quarters, and shut the

door.

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

"Against Wynne?" Anders was incredulous.

"*Wynne?*" Tara echoed.

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

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

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

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

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

to speak to the Wardens privately."

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

Bronwyn gestured the Wardens closer and lowered her voice.

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

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

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

"Anders..." Cullen said, reddening.

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

quarters and have Petra pack Wynne's things up—*discreetly*—and give them to you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Find your brother and bring him here. He's downstairs with the King's knights. Don't say anything indiscreet. Just a word

in his ear that I require his presence immediately. He was going to leave tomorrow morning, anyway, with some letters for the Queen and for my brother. I always intended for him to accompany Wynne. They will leave a little earlier than we planned."

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

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

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

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

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

No. That sort of thinking would lead nowhere. Raising his eyes

too high could ruin everything.

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

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

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

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

Thinking of the ogre made him shudder. Was there any way he could arrange for a long, hot bath in this place? He had

been close to the ogre himself, though none of the creature's various fluids had come in contact with his bare skin. The squire who had helped him remove his armor had worn gloves.

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

"Adam!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it, Carver?"

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

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

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

"You can take two of our horses," Bronwyn said crisply. "Wynne may not know how to ride, but she'd better learn quickly, and she can heal herself, of course, if she's saddle-sore. Teyrn Loghain and I are entrusting you to carry out our orders. Wynne may be accused or threatened if she stays here in Ostagar, but she is needed in Denerim. The Queen's life may depend on it. There are those who would prefer that you not succeed, for many and varied reasons."

All the Wardens were listening breathlessly.

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

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

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

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

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

"At any rate," Bronwyn continued, "I left Jowan with her, ostensibly doing some dragonslaying research, but really to treat her for the poisoning. Teyrn Loghain knows, of course. Obviously we need the Queen alive and healthy. Her physical collapse now would mean chaos throughout Ferelden when it is at it's weakest. Wynne is the best choice to care for her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's enough!" Bronwyn broke in. "Adam is taking Wynne to Denerim. He will deliver her to the Queen, along with some letters. If Wynne can cast Haste, that would be most desirable. Get something to eat and some rest. Carver will pack your things, and we will awaken you before dawn. The Queen may have tasks for you, Adam; but as soon as possible I want you to ride north and find my brother. He needs this news, as well."

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

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

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

That made everyone laugh a little.

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

The late hour, sorrow, weariness, confusion: all these worked in their favor. The King's remains were infected with Blight sickness and could not be returned to Denerim for a state funeral. Tomorrow the laborers would be set to work on a suitable pyre, and the funeral would be held at sunset. Loghain told the senior officers that there would be a council in the midmorning to consider their options in the light of today's loss. Bronwyn gently encouraged everyone to get their rest, the better to face the morning.

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

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

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

And based on the whispers she was catching, there was enough blame being cast about without the inclusion of one elderly mage, anyway. Suspicion had fallen on the elves, for

not fighting well enough at King's Mountain. Loghain did all he could to silence that kind of useless talk. And he sent Bronwyn around to smooth ruffled feathers. It helped if both of them were visible and calm.

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

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

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

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

"Couriers going to Redcliffe," the young man told the guards,

waving a pass with Teyrn Loghain's seal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A burst of murmurs and shocked whispers. The elves leaned close to each other: the grizzled old trackers explaining the oddities of the shemlen religion to a horrified Merrill. Her

protests were inaudible, but her sad eyes told the story.

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

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

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

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

"Perhaps," the Revered Mother suggested, her manner

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm fine," Wynne said patiently, removing the heavy, uncomfortable helmet. "I *have* ridden a horse before, young

man! Not often and not recently, I'll grant; but I'm managing. We must get to Denerim as quickly as possible."

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

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

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

Inside his jerkin, Hawke carried two precious documents: his letters patent of knighthood, of course; and an official letter of transit, signed and sealed by Loghain himself, giving him (and whatever companions he had) leave to travel at will through Ferelden without question or hindrance. It was his pass through the gates of the Palace and into the Queen's presence.

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

His private interview with the great man himself had been brief

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

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

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

"There it is!" Bronwyn cried in relief, as her fingertips found the Joining cup where it had rolled under the bed. "I'd forgotten about it completely!"

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

body as best they could, and wrapped it in the fine linen shroud.

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

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

The royal litter was nothing more than a simple stretcher with folding legs, draped in black and purple silk. Alistair held himself together with visible difficulty as he and Cullen eased Cailan's lifeless, enshrouded body onto this makeshift bier of state for the king's last trip down the staircases of the Tower of Ishal.

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

the seal. The wedding ring and the amulet would go to the Queen in due course.

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

"Make way for the King!" she cried.

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

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

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

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

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

"I see," Wynne answered politely. Actually, she did not. She had no idea what it would be like to live in a family. Long ago, she had come to the Circle from a village not very different from Lothing; but she had been a homeless orphan, a despised beggar child provoked by relentless bullying into a moment of magical retaliation. The boy whose hair she had set afire had not been badly hurt, but the entire village had been terrified to discover that there was a monster among them. Many people hated and feared the Templars, but to Wynne they had been saviors: stern and dutiful, perhaps, but not men who would allow a child to be stoned to death or burnt alive in the barn where the villagers had locked her in. The Circle had given her shelter and meaning. It was home to her, however far she traveled.

Hawke quickly unsaddled their horses, gave them water and forked over some hay. Wynne cast a rejuvenation charm on the beasts, and a healing charm on her own abused posterior. She took up her backpack and followed Ser Adam to the little house. Women were piling out of the door: a sweet-faced

woman Wynne's own age, and two attractive young girls. One had a cloud of curly brown hair; the other, shorter girl's hair was dark and softly waving. The mother's name was Leandra, Wynne remembered. The sister was Bethany, of course, and the cousin...oh dear. Perhaps the girl would say her name. Their faces shone with joy at the sight of the young man, too absorbed in him to do much more than glance in brief curiosity at Wynne.

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

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

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

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

Leandra studied their guest carefully. This Senior Enchanter Wynne might be traveling on official business, but steps had

been taken to disguise her identity. Thus, this official business was clearly *secret* business. What was Adam caught up in?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Charade!" Bethany giggled.

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

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

"What is it, Adam? What happened?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wynne wanted to say something to reassure these people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Standing among the Wardens, Alistair's face was wet with

tears; nor was he the only one. Bronwyn blinked away her own grief. She had not expected Loghain's speech to move her so. He had been angry with the King, she knew; to some degree he must have regarded the young man as a traitor and a double-dealer—as a bitter disappointment. In the end, though, it seemed that he had loved him. The speech was brief but moving; the final words the kind that remained engraved on the heart. She wept for the King, yes; and then for her family, for Delilah and Thomas Howe, and all those laid waste by the unforeseen and unforeseeable storm that had swept through Ferelden.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, to each his own...

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

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

"Of course."

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

"Fergus would never fail in his duty—"

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

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

"Of course. Of course. But *soon*."

Thanks to my reviewers: I was absolutely blown away by the response to the last chapter. I so appreciate all your input and insights.

So here's to you: mutive, Menamebephil, Aoi24, Costin, Halm Vendrella, MsBarrows, Herebedragons66, Lehni, Josie Lange, SkaterGirl246, demonincargles, Juliafied, Zute, dyslecksec, Have Socks. Will Travel, wisecracknmama, JackOfBladesX, almostinsane, Redhand, Cobar713, KnighOfHolyLight, tgcgoddess, karinfan123, Blinded in a bolthole, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Syntia13, Persephone Chiara, Jenna53, Shakespira, Shinkansen, Psyche Sinclair, WellspringCD, Judy, The Moidart, Revan, Enaid Aderyn, Dante Alighieri1308, Remenants, Kira Kyuu, Eva Galana, euromellows, cloud1004, Death Knight's Crowbar, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Edward Cullen's Girl, ByLanternLight, Silent Storm, graydevilforever, Oleander's One, CynderJenn, mille libri, and Aryk von Straln.

Loghain's words at the funeral paraphrase those of Alexander the Great.

We see Fergus in the next chapter...

49. High and Low

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 49: High and Low

"Not long now!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As if it were nothing, he had been given gold coin for his traveling expenses, first by Bronwyn and then by Teyrn Loghain. Hawke well understood that the purpose was to get Wynne to Denerim safely and in good health. He suspected Wynne had been granted funds, too. Nonetheless, Hawke did his best to save every copper he could. His noble patrons were unlikely to ask for change, after all. Even if the Queen gave him nothing, Hawke would finish the journey a far richer man than he had been a week ago. That coin Hawke would invest in the best helmet and finest pair of boots available. Mother always said that people judged a man by his boots.

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

"Denerim! At last!" cried Wynne.

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

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

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

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

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

"You're lying!" a man shouted. "Ought to be a law against

people making up lies like that!"

"Might even be treason," another man agreed.

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

"I don't believe it!" the first man exploded, fists clenched. "You can't trust a dwarf!"

His wife, a tired woman burdened by a heavy pack, spoke up, "We're going to Denerim, anyway. We'll hear the truth there. No need to bandy words with him. Let's *go!*" She tugged on her husband's arm. The man scowled at the dwarf over his shoulder.

"Ought to teach that short mouth a lesson!"

Hawke caught Wynne's eye. The Queen, it seemed, would definitely have received the bad news already.

A fog of gloom and anxiety permeated the city of Denerim. In the Gate District, people gathered, heads down, talking in low, urgent voices. Hawke and Wynne rode past one such group.

"But who's *King?*" one man hissed. "That's the question!"

"There'll be a Landsmeet," another said, determinedly hopeful. "It'll all get sorted out. I hope it's Teyrn Loghain!"

"He's a *commoner...or was!*" protested a harried-looking merchant. "Not a drop of royal blood there. We need a King of the good old Theirin line."

"Well, you won't *get* one," a middle-aged woman shot back angrily. "They're all *gone*. King Cailan was the last, and he should have stayed at home and got an heir on the Queen and let Teyrn Loghain do the fighting. Instead, he rushes off and gets himself killed! Just like my own silly poor boy—" the woman burst into tears and ran away, down the street. The rest of the market-place politicians shook their heads.

Another woman spoke hesitantly, "We *have* a Queen already..."

"A Queen *Dowager*," a man broke in officiously, better informed or better educated than the others. "She was only Queen-Consort, and with the King dead, she's nothing but the king's widow. Queen Dowager. That means she's done with ruling. They're just keeping her on as a steward, like, until the Landsmeet votes. Margit was right: it's a pity the King didn't give the Queen a bellyful before he went to war."

"Say, Jorgis, aren't those Couslands the next in line? They've got Theirin blood..."

The talk faded as they rode on.

"I've never been in the Palace District," Adam said, his cheerful voice a trifle hollow. "I'm looking forward to it."

Wynne shook her head. "I suppose I am, too. It's a shame that it's at such a time. The Queen must be heartbroken."

The glass exploded with a satisfying crash. A musical tinkle of little shards shivered to the floor. Anora stared at the gout of wine, red as blood, trickling down the oak paneling. What a silly thing to do. What would the maids think of her? She clapped her hand over her mouth and bit into the heel of her hand, stifling the sobs of grief and howls of rage that bubbled up from her deepest heart. Two days since the news, and the pain of loss and new betrayal had not subsided.

Oh, Cailan! How could you do this to me, on top of everything else?

"Queen Dowager." Cailan was dead: killed by the darkspawn; his dreams of glory reduced to ashes. He would never ride back to her in triumph, or tease her with silly jokes, or put his dirty boots on her embroidered footstool. He would never make love to her again. And now he had written a will, dismissing her to the role of caretaker for the next three months. After that, she would become a nothing...a has-been...someone who no longer mattered in Ferelden. She would have to move out of the Palace and find lodgings elsewhere... *Queen Dowager*. It sounded like a fat old white-

haired woman with too many jewels and a mind only for Chantry, charity, and needlework.

Father had sent her a brief message by fast courier, warning her of the will. It was impossible to conceal or suppress it. Too many of Cailan's knights had seen it. The Arls of South Reach and West Hills had seen it. Everyone had talked to everyone else. Messages had been sent to friends and stewards. The news was traveling the length and breadth of Ferelden: the news that King Cailan did not consider Queen Anora fit to rule Ferelden in her own right. No, worse than that: Cailan had made clear that he never even considered it. Someone else would wear the Crown. *Her* Crown.

She had urged Cailan to grant her the Crown Matrimonial so many times! It would have given her sovereignty in her own right, even if Cailan died. When they were first married, he had been close to agreeing, but then that Maker-cursed uncle of his, Arl Eamon, had advised against it, citing precedents in his prosing, pompous way. At the start of the war, she had urged it again, as a prudent, sensible move. Cailan had laughed at her, asking her if she really thought so little of him as a man and a warrior...

Well, she knew now why he had refused her. He had already been planning to end their marriage and become Empress Celene's fancy boy. She pressed her forehead to the wall, fighting back burning tears of grief and disappointment. She must not be weak, but it was so very *hard*. Jowan was doing his best, but her body was damaged, perhaps beyond repair.

Perhaps she *was* no longer fit to be Queen, and that thought hurt worst of all...

There was a knock at the door: faint and hesitant. Anora scrubbed at her eyes and stiffened her spine.

"Enter!"

It was one of her new, human maids, Rona. Anora felt a wayward pang for the loss of Erlina. Her hair would never look as good again. Rona simply did not have Erlina's knack. Or was it Erlina's poison that had stolen the shine from her hair? Nothing...*nothing* would ever be the same...

"Beg pardon, Your Majesty, but there's a messenger from Ostagar to see you most urgent. Two messengers. A gentleman and a lady. Captain Moorcock says they have the Teyrn's seal, all right."

Father said he would write at greater length. This must be the letter. Who was the woman? Bronwyn had hinted at finding a more experienced Healer. Hope flickered anew.

"I shall see them in the Little Audience Chamber at once. You will attend me there," she said, dismissing the girl. She went to the mirror, and set about looking like a Queen. After a few minutes, she rose, not quite satisfied, but no longer able to resist hearing Father's news, bad as it must be.

Seneschal Revere called out as she entered.

"Queen Anora of Ferelden!"

Thanks be to the Maker, he did not use that odious title "Queen Dowager," but she supposed he would have to, very soon. She crossed the short distance and took the unpretentious throne, studying her guests: a nice-looking woman in late middle-age, and a strikingly handsome young man in decent leathers and deplorable boots. A big mabari waited at the door, admirably behaved. The young man bowed very gracefully, and so was better-bred than the appearance indicated. Interesting.

"Your Majesty," the seneschal said. "Before you are Ser Adam Hawke and Mistress Wynne."

Wynne! That was the name! Anora smiled at her. This must be the promised experienced Healer. She leaned over and whispered to Rona, "Fetch Warden Jowan to me at once." She nodded gravely at the young man. Ser Adam Hawke? She had never heard of such a person. A *very* recent knighthood, then.

"I believe you have a message for me."

"I do, Your Majesty."

He had the good manners—or the instruction— not to try to hand her the letter himself, but to give it to Revere, who would present it to her. Yes, it was from Father. Anora broke the seal and read the letter carefully, her face schooled to reveal nothing.

So. The young man carrying the letter was a new boon companion of Cailan's, whom Father allowed was braver and more resourceful than most of them. He had done his best to save Cailan, and had very nearly succeeded, but for the poison of the Blight sickness. Cailan had knighted him on his deathbed. Father suggested some reward, but not to keep the man with her on a permanent basis. He was the brother of a Warden, and Father believed that Bronwyn was sending him north to help her own brother, which would be a very appropriate use of his skills. Ser Adam had other letters to deliver in Denerim, and then should be sent on his way north.

Anora did not disagree with Father in the slightest. The fact that the handsome Ser Adam was one of Cailan's companions was enough to make her wish never to lay eyes on him again. Let him go and be charming elsewhere. Of course, she must be reasonable, and treat him decently until he left to join Teyrn Fergus. What to give him? She would give that some thought...

Yes, this was Senior Enchanter Wynne. She had attended Cailan in his last hours, and had attempted the impossible: to cure a man of Blight sickness. Her thanks for that was to be accused of murder by the Revered Mother. Bronwyn had spirited the mage away and given her into the protection of Ser Adam, who was sympathetic to mages and could be relied on to be silent about her identity. Wynne was considered the finest Healer in the Circle: very likely in all Ferelden. It might be best not to flaunt her status as a mage, though if things became dire, Bronwyn had said she would

conscript the woman into the Wardens. It would be best if it did not come to that. Anora might be able to reason with the Grand Cleric, who was not as impossible as the interfering old hag she had sent to Ostagar.

In the meantime, Bronwyn had said that the two of them were welcome to stay in the Warden's Compound as her guests, and that might indeed deflect some scrutiny.

There was more: about Cailan's death. Father gave her his condolences, for what they were worth, and spoke of his own sense of loss. Anora read quickly through those paragraphs, not wanting to feel any more grief for a man who had, in the end, prized her so very, very little.

As to the battle everyone was now calling King's Mountain, it had indeed been a convincing victory. Despite what others said, the elves had fought extremely well and loyally. The dwarves, too, were worthy, doughty allies. Their new tactics were most effective, when impetuous young men did not ignore them. Having *Ferelden* Wardens made all the difference as well. Bronwyn had been successful in gaining them yet more Dalish allies. Their great fear now was that the darkspawn would burst out of the Deep Roads in another place, one not so well defended as Ostagar.

"So there must indeed be a Landsmeet," his letter continued, "though that will be difficult with half the nobility in Ostagar. It might be best not to hold it in Denerim. I do not suggest Ostagar, of course, but I will discuss the matter with Bryland. Perhaps South Reach might be a more appropriate venue,

given the circumstances. Lothering is perhaps too close to the perils of the darkspawn.

"Painful as I know it is to you, it would perhaps be best to accept the title 'Queen Dowager' with good grace. The King's death in battle has softened many hearts toward him: hearts that will not like any defiance of his deathbed wishes. You rule Ferelden for the moment. It is you who will preside over the Landsmeet. It is important that all remember your rule with respect. Remember that whatever the outcome of this Landsmeet, you are still young and your day will come.

"Your loving father,

"Loghain"

She must not grimace. She must think about this quietly and in private. She paused, mastering her voice.

"We thank you for your courage and good service, Ser Adam. My father tells me of your deeds. And Mistress Wynne. You are both most welcome. Warden Jowan will be with us shortly. The Warden-Commander has invited you to stay in their Compound, which is part of the Palace. You have other errands, I understand, Ser Adam. While we understand the need for haste, we hope you will rest sufficiently before joining our faithful Teyrn Fergus, whom I believe is on the road to Highever. Whether you leave tomorrow or the day after, I wish you to call upon me first, so that I may reward your loyalty."

Hawke bowed. "As Your Majesty wishes."

So. Queen Anora was *not* requiring his services. The Couslands were still his best and only option. At least she was talking about rewards. That was something.

There was a stir at the door.

The seneschal announced, "Warden Jowan, Your Majesty."

Hawke glanced over and was startled. He had understood this Jowan to be a mage. The man entering the audience chamber and bowing with practiced ease appeared to be a well-dressed nobleman. A good-looking young man, too. Certainly not a monstrous, malignant Blood Mage.

His own surprise, however, was nothing compared to Wynne's, who stared at Jowan in disbelief. The young man saw Wynne, did a shocked double-take, and then blushed deeply. His embarrassment was noted by the Queen, who apparently thought highly of the man.

"Come near, Warden Jowan," she said kindly. "You have served the Crown well, and you will not be forgotten. As discussed, Enchanter Wynne has come from Ostagar, accompanied by Ser Adam Hawke, the brother of a Warden. They will be staying in the Warden Compound, on the invitation of the Warden-Commander. Enchanter Wynne's stay will be of some duration, and Ser Adam's of only a day or two. I trust they can be accommodated?"

"Of course, Your Majesty," Jowan said earnestly. "It will be no trouble at all."

"Then we would have you see to their comforts. After dinner, you and Enchanter Wynne will attend me. Ser Adam, do not forget to call before you depart. In addition to your reward, I would like you to deliver my own letter to Teyrn Fergus."

Once dismissed, Adam immediately gave Bronwyn's letter to Jowan, who read it quickly, nodding over it.

"Let's not talk here," he said softly. "Follow me. I'll have the servants fetch your things."

Hawke looked about with the eyes of a delighted tourist. Not many Lothering lads were give a chance to see the byways of the royal palace in Denerim. Down the passages, out to the courtyard, in at another doorway. It was something of a hike, but it was all quite interesting and grand beyond his experience. Eventually they were admitted to the Wardens' Compound, and Hawke looked about with equal interest, especially since these were Carver's rightful stamping grounds. He was going to like them, and Hawke resolved to write a letter to his brother before he left for the north, telling him all about it.

Mistress Rannelly and all the servants of the Wardens' Compound were only to happy to care for the Commander's guests. Even better, they quickly understood the Commander's order that none of them were to speak of

Mistress Wynne's presence.

"This is the Hall," Jowan told them, as they walked through the vaulted, echoing space. "We have our meals here. Through that door is the Wardens' council chamber and study, and I must ask you not to go there. Why don't we get you settled?"

Hawke was shown to a fine room—a private room at that—and told a bath would be ready in the laundry very soon.

"We'll set up screens for the lady in the kitchen," the housekeeper told him. "You'll feel better once you're clean. Give Nilda there any laundry you need done and she'll see to it directly. Dinner will be in two hours, but I'll have a tray of snacks brought to your room to tide you over. And water and food for your noble hound, too, of course!"

Well, this was all very fine. A bed, a bath, meals and laundry, and not a copper spent from his own purse. As soon as he was cleaned up, he would deliver the Teyrn's other letters: the one to the Commander of Fort Drakon and the other to the Arl of Denerim. Neither was far from the Palace. He should be done well before dinner.

His other errands could wait until tomorrow: a trip to the Market for armor, and the delivery of yet another letter: the collective letter mostly dictated by Adaia but written by Tara, to be taken to headman of the Alienage, Hahren Valendrian. The elves had given Hawke careful directions to the Alienage and then to the man's house. Hawke had no idea how he would be received, but the girls were pretty, and there was no

reason not to do them a favor since he was going to Denerim anyway. Naturally, they were worried about their friends and families, what with the repulsive crimes of Arl Howe and all.

The bath was wonderful. Hawke scrubbed body and hair with dispatch; and then, by dint of promised treats, managed to get Hunter into the tub after him. Shaved, and in clean linen, Hawke felt ready to beard the great of Denerim in their dens.

He grinned at his mabari friend. "This is the life, isn't it, old boy? Maybe we should have gone for Wardens after all!" The dog grinned back, panting, and gave himself another shake.

The walk to Fort Drakon did them both good. The housekeeper could tell them the quick way, and in short order they were there. Hawke presented the Teyrn's letter of transit, and he was ushered in the Commander's office without delay. It was all bracingly professional. The man took the letter, thanked him civilly, and Hawke was on his way to the Arl of Denerim's estate.

This was a little trickier, for it seemed the the Arl was entertaining guests, including his bride-to-be. Hawke sensed that his title earned him a little more consideration than a mere messenger would have enjoyed. Lots of important people seemed to be there. From the anteroom where he was seated, Hawke could hear a low, urgent rumble of talk. The King's death had obviously stirred up the nobles as well as the ordinary folk. After a brief wait, the jowly Arl made his appearance, irritable and short-spoken, and took the letter.

"From Loghain, eh? Well, you've done your duty, ser." Arl Urien looked Hawke over keenly, as if wondering if he might be someone important, and then deciding he was not. "Good evening to you."

No reward. Hmm. Perhaps it was the title, working against him this time. Perhaps an Arl might not wish to wound the pride of a knight by offering him coin. Hawke snorted. Coin was not likely to wound *this* knight's pride...

But at least he and Hunter were back in time for dinner. An excellent meal was served. Hawke told Jowan the bits not in Bronwyn's letter. Wynne spoke occasionally, giving Jowan hard looks throughout. The Warden was ill at ease, but friendly enough to Hawke. He, of course, wanted to know about his friends, and even asked after Carver. Still, there was too much tension for Hawke to want to linger at table. The two mages were obviously wanting a private talk, and then they needed to see the Queen. Hawke intended to have another look around the Compound, perhaps find a good book, and get some rest in his comfortable room. He bade them goodnight, and Jowan and Wynne were left facing each other over the table. They waited for the knight's footsteps to fade, and the recriminations began.

"Jowan," Wynne reproved, her face pinched with disappointment. "Blood Magic! How could you do something so foolish and wicked?"

"They were going to make me Tranquil!" he shot back instantly, ready for the attack. "That's just as bad! I had a

right to defend myself—to defend everything that makes me human! You all act as if I'll do it forever, but I haven't! It was only the one time. I used it to save myself and escape. I'm sorry that people were hurt. I'm really sorry that Tara suffered. I'm not sorry that I'm a free man and a Warden!"

It was true. The words had burst out of him in a flood, but as soon as they were said, he recognized their truth. He wasn't sorry. Blood Magic had bought him his freedom: being a Warden had given him a second chance at life. Wynne looked beyond shocked. He softened his voice.

"Of course the Chantry forbids Blood Magic. It levels the playing field. That's why for all their Exalted Marches, they've never been able to conquer Tevinter. No more have the Qunaris! I'd use Blood Magic again to save myself, to save other people, to fight the darkspawn. The Grey Wardens do not forbid Blood Magic, you know. They believe in fighting the darkspawn 'by any means necessary.' It's true."

Wynne shook her head in sorrow. "Listen to yourself, Jowan. This is contrary to everything you were ever taught..."

"Then I was taught *wrong!*"

He pushed himself up from the table, jarring cups and plates. "We can't keep the Queen waiting. Let's go. What are you going to do, Wynne? Report me to the Templars? Oh, right—if you do that, they'll find out who you are and arrest you for murdering the King!"

Hurt, she opened her mouth to protest, but he interrupted her, still fired up, "Of course you didn't! I know that! The Chantry is wrong about you. We can agree about that. Maybe someday you'll see that they're wrong about a lot of things. Anyway, let's go. The Queen's really not well, and that poison is pernicious stuff..."

Wynne pulled herself together, and took a breath. She rose, smoothing her gown, thinking hard. Instead of arguing, she decided to focus on what mattered most. "Tell me more about this poison..."

The day dawned blue and clear: a fine day for a walk to the Market District. Jowan had some business there—at Master Wade's, in fact. He was also perfectly willing to accompany Hawke and Hunter to the Alienage.

"I'll probably be the one taking the reply to Ostagar," he pointed out.

Hawke welcomed the Warden's company, though he was a little surprised at Jowan's appearance.

The fine blue doublet was gone. Instead, Jowan was wearing the trappings of a Warden and a warrior: extremely good light leather armor and excellent boots, and over it all the griffon tunic. In addition, to Hawke's astonishment, Jowan had buckled on a weapon harness bearing a longsword and what appeared to be a very fine dagger. Was Jowan so powerful a mage that he did not require a staff at all?

They fell into step, and Jowan obligingly pointed out the landmarks along King's Way. Hunter trotted just ahead, nose to the ground.

"I hope the Queen is well," Hawke remarked.

"Better with Wynne here. Wynne's amazing," Jowan answered, and changed the subject.

Hawke filed the comment away. Clearly the poisoning had not been easily dispelled. Queen Anora looked healthy enough—to someone who did not know her well, probably—but there must have been serious aftereffects. Bronwyn had been very concerned that the Queen be able to hold the country together in the three months leading up to the Landsmeet. Hawke wished the Queen well: it would be a shame if such a young and pretty woman were to leave the world untimely.

"What do you suppose she'll do, once the Landsmeet is over?" Hawke asked. "She's Teyrn Loghain's heir, no matter what else. Maybe she'll go to Gwaren and act for him, while he's fighting the war."

"I have no idea," Jowan confessed. "It's hard to imagine her as anything other than Queen. There hasn't been a Queen Dowager in a hundred years: not since the death of King Lochlann. His Queen, Gwenllian Voric, took vows in the Chantry and ended up as Grand Cleric after a few years. Somehow, I can't see Queen Anora doing that."

"I certainly hope not, anyway!" Hawke was impressed by

Jowan's knowledge of royal genealogy. "So who's the next king, do you think?"

Jowan pursed his lips, thinking. "Well...if you go by blood relationship, the Couslands certainly have the best claim. That's one reason that the late teyrn, Bryce Cousland, was put forward as King. That, and the fact that people thought Cailan was too young... Yes, if you went just with birth, I guess people would say that Fergus Cousland should be King..."

Hawke's eyes widened, and the street gossip he had heard yesterday suddenly registered on him. *The Couslands have Theirin blood.* He felt a wave of ardent loyalty to the brother of Bronwyn Cousland. That Teyrn Cousland might be the next king was beyond his wildest hopes.

"...Of course," Jowan pursued his thought. "Bronwyn's claim is just as good, since birth order and gender don't matter much in these cases. It's mostly who can get the votes in the Landsmeet. Bronwyn's a Warden, of course, which ordinarily might disqualify her, but she's very, very popular, and we're in the midst of a Blight..."

"Some people..." Hawke ventured, "would like to see Teyrn Loghain on the throne."

"It could happen," Jowan granted, after a pause. "He's the most respected man in Ferelden, and a bonafide hero. He's the man people are counting on to save them from the darkspawn. He hasn't the least blood claim, but Ferelden's

never endured a Blight—not since it was a united nation, anyway. This crisis might trump custom, at that. Nobody wants a change of command. Of course, he'd do better if he were married to a noblewoman with some royal blood..."

"Like Lady Bronwyn," Hawke guessed.

Jowan blinked, and gave him a nervous look. "I would be really, really, really careful about talk like that. Look, there are the Alienage gates..."

Suspicious stares and frightened whispers greeted them, but they met no resistance. The place seemed very thinly inhabited, and Hawke remembered Arl Howe's vicious treachery. How many elves had been lured away to a lifetime of slavery in a distant land? Valendrian's name and Jowan's Warden tunic soon gained them a modicum of trust. Neither Jowan nor Hawke had visited an Alienage before, and they looked about them with discreet dismay.

"How can the elves bear to live like this?" Hawke muttered. "Why doesn't the Arl of Denerim *do* something? It wouldn't cost that much for a bit of repair!"

Jowan frowned. "I don't think the elves are given a lot of choice. And I haven't heard much good about the Arl anyway. At least that rotten son of his is gone. Bronwyn put that in her letter. He's the one who tried to use the Alienage as his personal brothel. Elves are treated as badly as mages in some ways. What it's like for an elf mage like Tara is hard to imagine." A quick shrug. "It's nice to imagine that a new king

would do something about all the oppression and injustice in this country, but I don't see it happening. As far as I can see the nobility have got the people where they want them; and the Chantry doesn't mind people being miserable, since it makes them hope for better in the next life, and keeps the prayers and tithes coming in."

"Not all nobles are bad," Hawke pointed out. Jowan made some good points, especially about the Chantry, but fair was fair.

"No, but I'm not sure that the good can outweigh the bad. There are always more of the bad ones, just like there are more rotten Templars than decent ones."

Hawke hardly felt he could argue the point. The Templar Commander in Lothering, Ser Bryant, was a very decent man indeed, but in the end he was just another cog in the Chantry's machine.

Hahren Valendrian welcomed them politely, and then with some friendliness, when he saw the griffon tunic. He invited them into his humble little house. Womenfolk retreated to an inner room, and crowded at the doorway; huge, beautiful eyes watchful. Hunter sneezed, and Hawke himself nearly sniffed at the unfamiliar, not unpleasant odor. They accepted the offer of tea and biscuits and sat quietly while the old elf read the letter. A pretty little elf child crept out and peered at them over the table.

"Do you know Tara?" she asked.

"She's my best friend," Jowan said, smiling at the little girl.

A woman hissed frantically, "Come back here, Amethyne!"

The child stared at the last remaining biscuit. Hawke grinned, and nudged the plate her way with a single finger. Instantly the biscuit was in her hand, then in her mouth, and she was darting back to the safety of the women's skirts.

Valendrian gave the child an indulgent, tender look, and then sighed. "What is left of their family will be glad to hear this news. I must compose an answer to them, listing the lost and the saved. Is it possible for you to wait? I will not be long."

"No trouble at all," Jowan assured him, sipping his tea. It was quite good.

The hahren sat down at a rough writing table, and carefully prepared quill, ink, and a worn piece of a parchment. Hawke eyed the parchment with curiosity. Mother had been proud that they were not so poor that they needed to scrape the words from letters received in order to reuse the parchment. Valendrian, obviously, was far more thrifty. The old elf consulted a list, and shook his head as he wrote.

Very soon they had their letter, gave thanks for the refreshments, and took their leave, going on to the other end of the Alienage, which let out to the Market District.

Jowan tucked the letter away, reasoning that he would be in Ostagar before long. "Maybe Tara was lucky," he said, the

words troubling him. "At least at the Circle she had decent meals and a good education. I really don't know."

"Mages shouldn't be locked up. And neither should elves." Hawke was too excited by the prospect of visiting Denerim Market with gold in his purse to pursue the issue further. For the moment, the world was his.

It was still his the next bright morning, when Hawke rode out of Denerim to infinite possibilities in the north. On a horse borrowed from the Wardens—which no one had said anything about returning—in his good armor, in his magnificent new boots and shining silverite helmet, he felt a true knight at last. Wade's partner Herren had done right by him, letting him range through their stock of superb used armor, while Master Wade and Jowan had gone on about some strange new weapons the armorer was crafting for the Wardens. They had gone out in back of the shop, when Wade had demonstrated something that gruesomely involved an ox carcass. Jowan had seemed pleased, and talked about transporting the prototype to Ostagar on his return to the south. Meanwhile, Hawke had reveled in armor worthy of a noble lord—the sort of armor made for people like Mother's family.

Jowan was a good fellow, and had shown him all the best shops. Folded carefully in a saddlebag were a brocade doublet and velvet breeches, bought from a vendor of used clothes. A handsome cloak was his as well, for the weather would be turning cooler soon. The laundress next door to Wade had sold Hawke a pair of shirts of the very finest linen,

confiscated by her when the owners had failed to pay up. Paid with gold, a shoemaker had in a few hours cobbled together a pair of splendid soft boots to wear with his finery. Then Hawke had splurged on gifts for his family, securing Jowan's promise to stop at the house in Lothering on his way back to Ostagar. He smiled, imagining his mother's delight in the Orlesian silks...

And the Queen had come through with a first-rate farewell gift: an ivory-handled silverite dagger that had been the King's; the scabbard mounted in silver and set with malachite. It was a true nobleman's weapon, and Hawke wore it on his belt with pride. He kicked his horse into a canter and called to his hound.

"Come on, Hunter! Let's not keep Teyrn Fergus waiting!"

With Rendon Howe dead, his erstwhile vassals and supporters had some serious choices to make. Fergus reflected on the matter for some days, during the long and dangerous ride through Highever.

Some, like the defenders of Vigil's Keep and the city of Amaranthine, surrendered to Teyrn Fergus and made formal obeisance. This was the easiest group to deal with. It was necessary to sort out those who had participated in the Highever massacre, but very few of these had come to Fergus of their own accord. Having shown no mercy themselves, they expected none. Knowing how eager others were for the favor of the new regime, they could expect to be

informed on in short order. Most of them had fled; across the sea to the Free Marches, or west, first to Highever, and then dispersing, changing their names and vanishing into the population.

So it happened that nearly all those who surrendered in those first busy weeks could be put to some good use or other. Seneschal Varel, Howe's long-time right-hand man at Vigil's Keep, was kept on, and made Fergus' deputy for the arling' administration. He had denounced Howe's worst excesses, and had been demoted for it. Fergus thought he could be trusted for the most part. He would have an independent auditor go over the arling's books later, of course, just to be sure...

While some of the Howe loyalists had fled with Bann Esmerelle in her ship, other landholders threw themselves on Fergus' mercy. If he could uncover no signs of collusion in Howe's worst schemes, he was inclined to let them stay, if only to minimize the chaos that mass dispossessions would cause. The rest were told to leave. The Temmerleys had been stupid enough to dig in and put up a fight. It had been brief but ugly, and children had died with their parents when the roof of the manor collapsed under bombardment by the trebuchets. Fergus pitied the children, but the bombardment meant that his own men, many of whom had children of their own, would survive, instead of risking their lives in a bitter melee on the defender's home ground.

"The worst problem, of course," he said, thinking aloud, "are the renegades."

His squire nodded sympathetically. Seyton had been hurt rather badly a few days ago, thrown from his horse during a nasty skirmish with a band of soldiers-turned bandits on the North Road. Certain units of Howe's men had gone into business for themselves: especially the units that had taken part in the Highever attack and occupation. That was why they were marching on Highever now.

"Bann" Norrel Haglin was the man Howe had put in charge of the town. He was a old-time Amaranthine retainer and loyal as a dog to Rendon. The title was a fraud, of course, since Howe had no right whatever to grant Highever titles. Haglin could make things unpleasant, should he choose to defy Fergus.

Farmers on either side of the road stopped and waved their hats, seeing their young Teyrn. Some even rushed up to offer their respects.

"You're a popular man, my lord." Seyton grinned.

Fergus managed a bitter laugh. "So was my father. Much good it did him."

A band of scouts were riding their way. Fergus lifted his hand to greet Ser Naois. Bearded, gruff, and dependable, Ser Naois Gilmore knew his business. His young nephew had died in the massacre, defending the Cousland family. Naois was not inclined to be gentle with Howe loyalists.

"My lord!" he said. "It's not looking too bad. Some of the traitors have pulled out of the city. A large band, captained by

Roderick Crewe, is calling itself the White Company. They've taken ship for Cumberland to offer themselves to the Nevarrans."

"What else?' Fergus asked.

"They're pretty demoralized," Naois told him. "Even the loyalists now acknowledge that Howe is dead. Haglin is talking about his duty to 'Arl Nathaniel,' but not many are buying it. I think Haglin will pull out of Highever and go to ground to the west. Maybe he's hoping for a royal pardon. If he puts up a fight, he won't get it."

Fergus nodded, thinking about his old friend Nathaniel Howe. Nathaniel, to Fergus' relief, had not made an appearance. He was presumably still somewhere in the Free Marches. A search of Vigil's Keep had not uncovered Rendon Howe's will. It seemed bizarre that he would not have one, but perhaps he had been keeping his options open, waiting for his affairs to be more settled. He had not even set aside property or coin for Delilah's dowry. Not that it was an issue now. Fergus wondered if Nathaniel would respond to a summons from the Queen. If he did not, the Howes were officially finished in Ferelden.

"We'll move on toward Highever, but we won't exhaust the men," Fergus decided. "If Haglin pulls out, we can relieve the city at once. That's all to the good. We'll see what happens next. If Haglin and his men resort to banditry, we'll have to hunt them down. If he keeps quiet, it might be best to resolve everything peacefully."

Naois frowned at him, and Fergus grew impatient. "Ferelden is still in the grip of a Blight! That takes precedence over everything else. Howe did not survive to gloat over his victory. I've had vengeance—and all things considered, I'd rather have my family instead."

He had not had word from Denerim in several days. In the current state of unrest, it was all too easy for a courier to meet with a misadventure. He could only hope that things were under control in the rest of Ferelden. The North had to be his only concern for now.

The following afternoon, they were on the final approach from the south, where the Highever Road descended in a shallow grade toward the sea. Past the last hills, they could make out the misty towers of the castle, looming over the town.

More scouts reported back, the last galloping furiously toward them and hauling up in a cloud of dust.

"My lord!" the scout shouted, wildly excited. "The banner of Amaranthine no longer flies over the castle. There is no guerdon of any kind! I believe they are gone!" The boy caught his breath, patting his horse's neck absently. "There's a haze over the road west of here. It might be their column."

"Good riddance!" burst out Naois. The other captains agreed heartily.

"We'll see," Fergus said shortly. "We need to secure the

castle, and then take possession of the town. Maker alone knows what we'll find."

Castle Highever had seen better days.

Everything worth looting was long gone. That might have happened shortly after Howe's treachery, but some of the damage looked recent. Everything was in disorder: rubbish and ordure were scattered in the courtyard, along with torn rags and a litter of smashed crockery. The garrison had left quickly, and had not cared what the next occupants thought of them. Some of the narrow windows in the tower were broken. The place looked derelict.

A few of his knights insisted on going first through the open gate. As they clattered in, slowly, by ones and twos, frightened people emerged from the side doors and leaned cautiously from windows. Impatient, Fergus cantered into the outer courtyard, wanting to see his home for himself.

"It's Teyrn Fergus!" cried a woman. "Maker bless you, my lord!"

The few people here seemed glad enough to see him. A ragged cheer rose up. Some of these men and women Fergus recognized as Highever townfolk. From what Bronwyn had told him, he could not hope to find any of their old servants or retainers. They were gone: dead to the last man, woman, and child. Quietly he vowed that none of Howe's men, however unstained by Highever blood, would ever be

allowed to stay here.

Not that he saw any. They knew they had no right to expect anything but bloody vengeance from him.. He set his jaw and began giving orders.

"Naois, take a scouting party and go down into the city. See if any of Howe's men are still running things there. Seyton...we'll search the castle from top to bottom, and see what we find!"

They found little to please them. The Highever folk, many of them forced into servitude by Howe's officers, were full of indignation, and eager to show him everything.

"They came to my house, my lord, and told me I must cook and clean for them!" one merchant's wife shrilled furiously. "Took my daughters, too, telling me that they needed whores! Cowards, rapists, and thieves, the lot of them!"

The treasury was empty, of course. That was only to be expected. Bronwyn had saved the ancient sword and shield of Highever. The rest could be replaced, especially considering the immense fortune Fergus had seized from Howe's treasure chests. The clerks had taken days to count the gold. Howe's evil had been remunerative: Fergus now had over ten thousand sovereigns in his possession—blood money from the sale of Ferelden citizens. It was a vast sum. His own father had never had this kind of coin in their treasury. If he used it well and wisely, he could heal some of Highever's wounds, and assist those in need.

As to recovering the elves, Fergus was not sanguine. The Queen could put out diplomatic feelers, requesting the return of Ferelden's kidnapped citizens, but the Tevinters would probably laugh outright at that. Ferelden had no leverage of any kind over the distant Tevinter Empire. Perhaps they could offer money, but on the Tevinter market, the elves would be worth five times what the slavers had paid Howe. And offering to pay them could have serious repercussions. Ferelden was not much afflicted with the secret gangs of slavers that permeated the cities of Antiva and the Free Marches like rot in a bin a wheat. If the Tevinters were to get the idea that they could hold Fereldans for ransom, Ferelden would find itself beset by a new crime wave that would fasten onto the country's limited wealth—and suck it dry.

He glanced in at the library. It looked like the interlopers had intended to steal some of the books and changed their minds at the last minute. Piles of them had been taken from the shelves and then dumped onto the floor. In the study, someone had been at the maps. Fergus suspected that many had been stolen. The locking drawer that held the account books was open and the accounts gone. Fergus grimaced. It would be much harder now to establish who had paid taxes, and who had not.

"Well," he muttered to himself. "Perhaps I'll give the teyrnir a tax holiday for the year...maybe next year, too. Maker knows I've gold enough."

"That would be an extremely popular measure, my lord," Seyton agreed.

No silver was left in the cupboards: no tapestries on the walls. A woman named Velda, who was more or less acting as housekeeper in this wreckage, showed him some things that had been thrown haphazardly into an empty room for safekeeping. It was there that he found the portraits of his mother and father. Mother's portrait was torn along the side of the canvas when it landed on a rusted iron torchiere. Father's was damaged by mold and damp. They could be repaired, after a fashion, but they were not his first priority.

The invaders had taken nearly all the food in the larder with them, but Velda showed him where she had secreted some in a dungeon cell, unknown to "that Bann Norrel, or so he fancies himself." In the cellars, wine and ale pooled on the floor, bleeding from casks stoved in out of spite. Fergus set Velda and her helpers to clean up in here, preserve what they could, and start preparing a meal for everyone. He would think over what else needed to be done in due time.

Then there were the dungeons, filled with prisoners. There was no sign of any keys. Fergus' men would need to find a locksmith, or a blacksmith with a file and a very large hammer.

"My lord," a knight explained. "That lot left them down here without food or water. Some of them are petty criminals, and others honest citizens who fell afoul of the usurpers. And there is considerable debate amongst them on the matter."

"See that they are fed and not mistreated," Fergus said instantly, "but do not release them until we can sort them out."

Before he could do that, there was still more of the castle to see: a duty that he dreaded.

Up, up the ramps and stairs he climbed, his silent men following. He must go upstairs and see if anything still lingered...

The guest rooms were empty, of course. Howe's officers had been quartered here, and so the walls were not carelessly defaced nor the furniture too much abused. One of the chambers was very tidy indeed. Whoever had dwelled within was a person of meticulous habits. The other rooms were not so neat.

Seyton glanced at him, face tense with compassion, and opened the door that led to the family's private bedchambers. The two knights who insisted on preceding him in case of traps or ambushes slipped in and looked searchingly around the square stone antechamber.

Empty, indeed. Stripped bare as it was, there was nothing but the shape of the room to suggest that this was part of his family home—that people he loved had once lived here. Fergus bit his lip. Bronwyn's room, first. It was the one least likely to cause him pain. Perhaps it was cowardly, but there was only so much a man could bear...

The door was opened on cold light. The shutters were flung wide, and one banged carelessly against the stone walls. Here the inhabitants had left in a hurry. Chests and cupboards gaped open. A bookcase lay on the floor, front forward, the

books carelessly scattered about. Fergus picked up one, smoothing the pages, setting it aside on a wine-stained table.

It was still Bronwyn's room, more or less. The massive bed was still the same bed that had stood in the same place for generations. Someone had obviously been living here recently—someone who cared little for the place. A dirty plate and a litter of bones and crumbs indicated a last, hasty meal before vacating the premises. The linens were rumpled and unclean. The green velvet coverlet, lovingly quilted and embroidered by their grandmother, was torn and dirty, jammed down at the foot of the bed. Bronwyn's little personal trinkets were gone: her curious rocks and shells, her bronze jewel box bequeathed her by Great-Aunt Ada, her chess set of rock crystal and onyx...

Still, with cleaning and mending, this could be Bronwyn's room again. Fergus sighed, and turned away. Steeling himself, he gestured at the end of the hall, and within a few steps he was in his parents' private bedchamber.

Most probably, Haglin had used this room. It was decently made up, since the man had from all reports been elsewhere for the past few days. It, too, had changed.

Mother's dressing table had always been arranged with the beauty and meticulous care of an altar: lovely, costly objects laid out just so. Those treasures of silver, of amber and ivory and crystal and tortoiseshell were gone now: looted and sold; or given away to wives and mothers and sisters, women who were proud to own the plunder of Highever. Needless to say,

Mother's jewelry chest was gone as well. Fergus had found some of her pieces at Vigil's Keep, and had ordered Varel to keep his eye out for more. Father's jewels were gone too, but Fergus wore the seal of Highever on his hand, and that mattered the most. Naturally, the cupboards were empty of clothing: the silks, the velvets, the furs...

There remained now only the one room: the worst, most unbearable of them all.

The room stank of vomit and sex; of stale wine and stale piss. A girl was cowering in there, a frightened girl with tangled fair hair. She was dressed in one of his wife's gowns, now very much the worse for wear.

"Don't hurt me," she whimpered, hands out to fend off blows.

Fergus stared at her, shocked speechless at first. Oriana had worn that gown on First Day. He well remembered the pale blue bodice, the white flowers picked out with golden thread. He remembered, too, the skirt of the finest heavy turquoise silk, now sadly soiled and frayed at the hem. The girl had thrown it on over a dirty white shift. The stolen finery hung on her ungracefully, unbelted and unlaced. One of Oriana's big silk shawls lay spread out on the floor. More clothing and trinkets were heaped in the middle of it.

"What are you doing here?" Fergus grated out. "Who are you?"

The girl shrank back with a squeak.

"Answer his lordship, girl!" Seyton snapped.

She gaped at them, terrified. "I'm Violet, my lord. Captain Fenwick brought me here with him from Amaranthine. Going to make me a lady, he was. When I woke up this morning, he was gone!"

"She's a thief and a whore," sneered a knight. "A little late gathering your loot, aren't you?"

"This is *mine!*" she protested in a thin whine. "Fenwick gave it to me. He said I could have all the clothes and the silver jewelry. It's *mine!*"

Fergus stared dully at the things on the shawl, recognizing all too many of them. "What did Fenwick do with the other jewels?" he asked.

"Sent 'em home to his mother," Violet sulked. "She's the only reason he hasn't married me already. Afraid of what his old mum would say!"

Sickened beyond belief, Fergus turned to Seyton. "Get her out of here. Get her out of the castle. She can't have my wife's jewelry, but let her take the clothing. I don't want to see it again."

"It's worth quite a bit, my lord."

"I don't want to see it again!"

After the girl was gone, her cries and curses fading into the stone walls, Fergus looked about him briefly. "Have the women scrub this place out. Burn the linens. Then...keep the door closed. I'll be sleeping in my parents' room."

"Your room now, my lord," Seyton reminded him gently.

"I suppose so."

Before he could eat, there was yet another place to visit. Abruptly, he found a older manservant who seemed fairly responsible, "What did they do with the bodies?"

On his insistence, the servant took him outside to see the place. One of the old middens had been used to dispose of the waste of battle. Logs had been heaped up over the carelessly piled corpses, and the dead of Highever were roasted like pigs, half-burned and half-buried. By now, it was unlikely that anything would now be recognizable. Fergus walked the length of the scorched, ill-smelling place, thinking of what had happened here: of the evil men could do and claim they were merely following orders; or that what they did was for the greater good.

"Are you sure *everyone* was killed? What about my mother?" he demanded of the servant. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Coyle, my lord. I believe they were all killed indeed, my lord. I am that sorry to tell you. I didn't see the bodies myself, but one of the captains who was here—name of Chase—said that

the teyrn and teyrna were both there." He ducked his head, not wanted to tell the young man everything that the bastard of a captain had said about them. "The teyrna put up a brave fight, she did, he said. Wouldn't let them take her alive. Arl Howe wasn't best pleased, but so it was. And Howe was here and saw the bodies. If they hadn't been here, there would have been a hue and cry after them, and no mistake. He was already that angry that the young lady got away."

"Starting tomorrow," Fergus said slowly, "I'll give orders to the groundkeeper to build a mound here: good fresh soil for planting grass and flowers. There will be a hedge around it and a stone. I want due honor done to the dead. Has anyone from the Chantry been out here to give them the rites?"

"If they have, my lord, I never heard of it."

"Well, then perhaps I'll pay a visit to the Revered Mother, too." There had been ne'er a peep from the Chantry about the murders of their Highever patrons. Perhaps Howe or his creatures had threatened them. Perhaps they simply did not care who filled their coffers, as long as filled they were.

It was a grim, silent meal. Fergus owed it to his men not to show the degree of anguish he suffered, the horror he felt at being in the place, at what his home had become.

It would not always be like this. Since nothing could be worse than this, he reasoned that it would be better tomorrow. The falsely imprisoned would be freed. They would be given work rebuilding and restoring the castle. The guilty would be

punished, and not rewarded for wickedness. The castle would be cleansed, and the dead given due dignity.

"My lord," a soldier entered the hall, face filled with urgency. "I bring word from Ser Naois. There's trouble in Highever town. Quite a few of the invaders have dug in at the old Alienage, and seemed loath to leave or surrender. They're led by one Captain Lowan, and they say if you want Highever, you'll have to fight them for it."

There would be an ugly street battle, after all. Not much remained of the old Alienage. The shantytown was gone, and in its place was a half-finished foundation. Presumably Renden Howe had planned a palatial new residence with a splendid view of the sea. Low stone walls gave the enemy cover from which to shoot arrows and crossbow bolts. It would not, however, protect them from the missiles being loaded into the trebuchets Fergus was preparing to use against them.

"I don't care if nothing is left of that eyesore," he told his dwarven engineers. "Knock the whole bloody thing down, if you like. I want those bastards dead or flushed out. It's all the same to me. Kenyon, ready your archers. When they make a break for it, shoot them down. I've done with treating with rats."

This was not the only hotspot in Highever Town. Naois was leading an attack on another band; a strong, drunken, and furious one holed up inside the High Dragon Tavern. A pity. It

was a good place for a drink, and it likely would be a total loss. There were other little skirmishes all over the city: a few Amaranthine men here and there doing murder, robbery, and rape on their own account— too stupid to run, and too satisfied with their comfortable life as tyrants and parasites to give it over without a fight. Fergus had sent out a crier, telling the men they could lay down their weapons and surrender immediately if they wished to be shown mercy. A mere handful had done so. Fergus felt perfectly within his rights to kill the rest.

The trebuchets were brought up and assembled, as the sun moved across the sky. Archers shot up at a steep angle, letting their arrows fall on the other side of the wall. Another group was moving around to the north dock, where they would be able to target the renegades from behind. Fergus wanted these men dealt with before nightfall gave them a chance to escape. Eventually, one of the machines was ready and loaded. It creaked and thumped, and a heavy stone projectile slammed into the top of the wall, smashing it in, dropping a rain of stone shards on the men behind it. Fergus smiled grimly at the muffled screams.

"Again!" he shouted.

The other two trebuchets were nearly ready when there was a scuffle and a noise behind the wall. Suddenly, two dozen men burst out from cover, making a break for the street leading up out of the alienage to the east. The clever ones overlapped their shields. The others were shot down, and fell screaming and thrashing on the cobbles of the empty Alienage

square. A savage melee followed. Fergus led his men in a counterattack, but some the fugitives were already well ahead. More of them fell to arrows and blades, but a half-dozen reached a twisting alley, where they could cling to the sides, their shields still protecting them from missiles. In the lead was a big man in good armor, shouting orders, whom Fergus guessed must be Lowan himself.

"After them!" Fergus roared. "They're heading for the Chantry!" He waved at Seyton. "You! Take your men and finish off whoever's left behind the wall there! I'm going after Lowan!"

He pounded after the men, craving the relief that the physical act of revenge promised. His eyes were fixed Lowan's gleaming silverite armor. The enemy was on the run now. Two had thrown their shields aside and one howled, "Sanctuary!"

Fergus swore. The bloody Chantry would probably grant it, and shake pious fingers at him if he dared to drag those murderers out to be hanged. He pushed himself to his limits, gritting his teeth. Up ahead, the street opened out to the square facing Highever Chantry. A pair of Templars stood on duty by the doors. One of them seemed to be moving to open them.

"No!" bellowed Fergus. "You are *not* letting those murdering bastards hide from me!"

He was so close. One of Lowan's men was out of breath and flagging. "Get him!" Fergus ordered. and a pair of knights

crashed into the man, spitting him on their swords. Shrieks of agony tore the air, but Fergus ran on. An arrow hissed past him and brought down another. The man rolled, screaming, arching his back, trying to claw at the arrow lodged behind his knee.

Two turned to fight, and were quickly cut down. Lowan and another soldier were making a last desperate dash for the safety of the Chantry. The doors gaped open, held by faceless Templars.

"I'm the Teyrn of Highever!" shouted Fergus. "And I order you to *shut those bloody doors!*"

"Sanctuary!" howled Lowan. "Sanctuary!"

A clatter of hooves, a horse's scream, a mabari's fearsome growl, and a huge dark body knocked Lowan sideways. His companion stumbled back, clutching his head protectively. Fergus ignored horse and horseman and went for Lowan, his sword a blade of Justice. He caught Lowan across the left arm, cutting deep. The man howled again and scrambled away on all fours, trying to climb the steps of the Chantry. Fergus tore off the man's helmet and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, dragging him back. He was angry, very angry, and if those Templars said one word to him, he would probably kill them, too. Lowan right hand reached out frantically for the base of the steps.

And Fergus cut it off.

He could never remember too much of what happened afterward, other than the fact that Lowan was clearly and thoroughly dead, inches from the Chantry steps. Fergus threw a burning look at the Templars, who had come half-way down, preparing to interfere; and at the gaggle of priests and sisters at the wide doorway, looking variously shocked, excited, disapproving, and sick. He looked for Lowan's companion. That man, too, was dead; sprawled on the cobbles, blood trickling from his mouth. A handsome young warrior Fergus did not know was wiping his blade. Nearby a big mabari was licking his chops, grinning doggily. The man's horse had trotted off a few yards, but seemed all too accustomed to battle.

"Thanks," Fergus said briefly. "The bastard was getting away."

"Well, we couldn't have that," grinned the handsome newcomer. "Happy to help. You're Teyrn Fergus, I take it. I have letters for you from your sister and Queen Anora."

"About bloody time," Fergus said, wiping his own sword on the ruins of Lowan's leggings. "That's a good dog you've got. What's his name? And what's yours, for that matter?"

"This fine fellow is Hunter," the warrior bowed. "I am Hawke. Ser Adam Hawke. Don't know the horse's name, even though he did most of the work. Sorry."

Fergus laughed, further scandalizing the Chantry faithful. "Let's have a drink, and you can show me those letters."

Note: Thanks to my reviewers: Death Knight's Crowbar, MsBarrows, tgcgoddess, Aoi24, demonincargles, almostinsane, EroSlackerMicha, BladesoftheValkyrie, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Have Socks. Will Travel, karinfan123, Judy, JackOfBladesX, The Moidart, Josie Lange, cloud1004, Kira Kyuu, Zute, SkaterGirl246, Juliafied, Blinded in a Bolthole, KnightOfHolyLight, Jenna53, mutive, mille libri, Edgar Fizzlewhip, Redhand, APatchOfSunlight, Dante Alighieri1308, Shakespira, snowFrou, Enaid Aderyn, Amanda Weber, Tyanilth, and EpitomeofShyness.

*The **Crown Matrimonial** is a legal concept used to describe a person's right to co-reign equally with his or her spouse. It's not at all the same thing as being a King-consort, Queen-consort, prince-consort, princess-consort, etc. Those titles simply indicate that the person is the spouse of the monarch. They have no power of their own, and when their spouse dies, they have no right to rule. Francis II of France, who was married to Mary, Queen of Scots, was offered the Crown Matrimonial of Scotland, which would have in effect made Scotland part of France. However, he predeceased her anyway.*

Someone granted the Crown Matrimonial would continue to rule after the death of a spouse. They could even marry anew and have children who would be heirs to the kingdom, even though the king/queen had originally taken the throne as a spouse of someone with a superior claim by blood.

I don't think that the Anora was granted the Crown Matrimonial. if she had, there would have been no question about who was ruling the kingdom. Furthermore, it would have been IMPOSSIBLE for Cailan to set her aside and marry someone else, because Anora would have been his equal.

Because parchment is far more durable than paper, it was possible to scrape the words off and reuse it. The overwritten parchment is called a palimpsest. Archaeologists are sometimes able to decipher lost texts under the more recent writing.

Lowan is canon: the author of the codex entitled "A letter to Rendon Howe." He was one of the officers who led the attack on Highever.

50. Matters of Honor

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 50: Matters of Honor

"Should he be King?"

That was the theme of his restless thoughts, the matter of his anxious dreams. Loghain worked and fought and gave commands as was his duty and custom. Underneath it all simmered the unspoken words:

"Should he be King?"

He was becoming more and more unalterably convinced that he should.

Who could cope with the current crisis better? No—looking at it with eyes unclouded by tradition or fear, who could guide Ferelden though the Blight better than he?

Cailan's will had cut Anora out of the succession with cavalier ruthlessness. Anora was a fine Queen, but no warleader: hers were the gifts of peace. And with her questionable health, too...

Loghain experienced the usual pang of anxiety and distress

when thinking about Anora and the vile thing the Orlesian spy had done to her. Could Wynne make her right? Could anyone?

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to stop worrying about Anora for the moment. She must get through the next three months and get herself well. Then, in the future...

If they had a future. Thousands of darkspawn had erupted here at Ostagar, and still no sign of the Archdemon. Bronwyn told him that the Old God plagued her dreams. The thing was there, behind the scenes, gathering strength. Its defeats had confused and angered it. It would soon be seeking revenge.

He must consider the matter of the succession. Cailan, predictably, had been no help at all.

Many Fereldan nobles had a drop or two of the blood of Calenhad. No doubt each one of the swaggering, vainglorious fellows fancied himself a King in waiting. Very likely the Landsmeet would explode: cousin against cousin, brother against brother, in a series of angry squabbles and bloody duels. That could not be allowed to happen.

But how to prevent it? The only way to silence controversy was to present the Landsmeet with a King that all could support. The commoners of Ferelden would support Loghain himself. Of that, vanity aside, he had no doubt.

The nobles of the Landsmeet, however, were another matter. They had never forgiven him his ascension to the nobility. It would gall them like bleeding saddle sores to see him on the

throne. Unless...

Well, who had the best claim by blood? If one went strictly by the bloodline, the next candidates were Alistair, the bastard son; and then the children of Bryce Cousland— Fergus and Bronwyn.

Alistair was a fine lad. Loghain had come to like him very much, seeing some of the best of Maric in him; but Alistair would not do as king. Maric had not acknowledged him, and there was not a shred of real proof that Alistair was Maric's son: or at least, not the sort of proof that would pass the Landsmeet's jealous examination. And then too, the boy's mother made it impossible. Her status as a Grey Warden one could set aside. But an Orlesian, an elf, and a mage? No. And it was foolish to imagine it could be kept secret. How many people had the elven woman "confided" in? If Loghain declared for Alistair, the Orlesians would blab the truth to the world. Ferelden would be a laughingstock, right or wrong; and support for the boy would be cut out from under him. No. Alistair would not do.

Fergus had real potential to be a fine king, Loghain believed. He was a brave and intelligent man. Bryce had trained him well. He knew how to lead and he knew how to be patient. Could he deal with the Blight?

As long as there was the least question in his mind on the subject, Loghain felt he must say "no." Fergus would do his best, but it might not be good enough. Once the Blight was defeated, Loghain was willing to grant that Fergus might be a

very good king indeed.

And Loghain admitted, in his secret heart, that he was tired of deferring to some young upstart. It was beyond tedious to submit his views to be pawed at by someone unqualified to judge them. He probably could get on well enough with a King Fergus, but there would be the same delay, waiting for acknowledgement and approval. Why not remove that step, and hold the supreme power in his hands?

There was one way to do it: Bronwyn's claim was equal in blood to that of her brother. She was the Girl Warden; the Dragonslayer of Ferelden. The nobles might be easily swayed to accept her as Queen. It was possible that her brother, embroiled in the North as he was, might agree that his sister was a better choice in the current circumstances.

Why not? Why not join their courses and seize the Crown? Between them, they were the best hope for the country's survival...

Must she be Queen?

Bronwyn tossed restlessly on her cot, plagued by the idea. Many seemed to think that she must. That look in Cousin Leonas' eye vexed her beyond words. He and Arl Wulffe talked in low voices, always looking, looking, *looking* at her, waiting for her to do what they had decided would be best.

They were sensible, pragmatic men: men who prided

themselves on being free of foolish prejudices. They had made clear that they wanted what was best for the kingdom. They had also made clear what they thought that was.

Like most of the army, they wanted Loghain to be King. The army was big and powerful enough to force its will on Ferelden, but at a cost: the precedent of an army forcibly setting the strongest on the throne.

Cousin Leonas had couched his thoughts in a history lesson, speaking of the royal house of Antiva.

"Once the royal house was gone...once that golden thread of legitimacy was broken...it became a battle of all against all, the survival of the fittest. Once the army knew they had the power to make kings, they wanted to make them all the time, greedy for the bribes of gold and power and women each successful general would throw their way. Even the ones on the throne there now are in a pretty precarious position. They owe their thrones to the Crows or the nobles or the army: sometimes all of them at once, and everybody knows it. There's nothing to hold the people to the monarchy by the call of tradition. Tradition is a powerful thing, and must not be tossed aside recklessly."

He was right, she knew: horribly, infuriatingly right. It would be madness to defeat the Blight, only for Ferelden to fall into chaos. And there was another danger, too: if the line of Calenhad was broken, their foreign enemies would pounce, smelling the dissension as far away as Val Royeaux...

Father had wanted her to be Queen. It was true that he wanted her to be Cailan's queen, but he would be the first to grasp the needs of the time. Mother had not wanted her to marry Loghain, but if she had to choose between Loghain ruling alone, and Loghain ruling as the husband of a Cousland Queen—well, Bronwyn knew that there would have been no choice. Mother would have told her that it was her duty to be the Queen of royal blood who would bind together the ancient loyalties of the Landsmeet and the nation to the Crown in time of peril.

But what of Fergus? She had told him of the situation. Would he feel it best to take the throne himself? It was hard to guess. If he wished it, and felt it his duty, then she must do everything in her power to help her brother. But *was* he the best choice for Ferelden? If he were not, then was her loyalty simply the selfish grasping of a powerful noble family?

She was already so busy as Warden-Commander, and that was not a duty she felt she could palm off on anyone else. The Wardens here in Ferelden were key—nay, essential—to victory over the Blight. They had one more to their number now. Somewhat to Bronwyn's surprise, Adaia had survived the Joining.

That was something to ponder. Cailan, the big, muscular, sword-wielding king of Ferelden, had failed the Joining, but a half-starved, illiterate little elf, with the most cursory of arms training, had succeeded. Adaia was Warden Adaia now, with a new Warden's tunic on her back and a new spring in her step. Whatever the Taint was seeking out, it was not mere

size and strength; and it clearly cared nothing for class, or birth, or titles, or even species. Adaia would never be a melee fighter, but perhaps that was not necessary. In a large enough force of Wardens, there was need for support personnel as well as fighters. Adaia's bombs and poisons gave them an extra edge in battle, and she herself was no coward; though Bronwyn preferred that she stay behind the fighters and move in on disabled enemies as opportunity permitted. The girl certainly enjoyed being able to loot and plunder at will, now that the darkspawn Taint was no longer a threat to her.

All that said, Bronwyn felt that as long as the Blight raged, she must remain Warden-Commander, even if she was...yes, she must make herself dare to think the words...even if she was crowned Queen.

Must she be? It certainly seemed so. She must marry Loghain, and the two of them must bear the weight of the crown together. *A Warden Queen?* Perhaps that was the kind of Queen a Blighted land needed most...

Did he have to be King?

Fergus spooned up more stew, eating dutifully in the close silence of his private chamber. It saddened him, but also gave him strength to feel the presence of his parents here. Bronwyn's letter lay to his right hand. He would read it again when he was done eating. There was much there to think about.

The King was dead. Bronwyn was polite about it, but it was clear that she thought Cailan had been foolish, and let the country down badly.

How could he argue with that? Between the outrageous plot to ally himself with Orlais—to marry the Empress!—and his poor treatment of his admirable Queen...between his palpable contempt for Loghain's general strategy and his reckless conduct in putting himself in danger...between his disregard for Fereldan tradition and the feckless, heedless will he had left behind...well, Cailan had not done well by his family or his country. The will was an outrage, and had not even cited a preferred heir...

Things were bad. He had not yet made the public announcement about the King's death, because he had not decided what to do about it.

The Queen would be the interim ruler for the next three months, but Bronwyn had informed him about the Queen's condition. She had been slowly poisoned by that treacherous little bitch of a maid, under orders from Orlais. It was still a question whether Anora would ever fully recover. It made Fergus sick with anger to think of it. That brave, beautiful woman...

Fergus stabbed at his stew, outraged at the brazen viciousness of their old enemies. And there had been an attempt on Loghain as well. No one was safe, between the Orlesians and the bloody Crows...

"Dear brother," Bronwyn had written in their code. "It comes to this: either you or I must take the Crown. If you feel that assuming the kingship is your duty, I shall support you in every way possible.

"However, consider the alternative. If I wed Loghain, and we rule jointly, he will have the power of the throne to deal with the Blight. That I am a Warden I consider a lesser matter. I have the word of Wulffe and Bryland that it will be no bar to me. The Blight must be vanquished, and I see little evidence of help coming to us from the rest of Thedas. The Orlesians are hoping for our destruction, and as to the rest—well, it is merely an exciting spectacle. The First Warden has not indicated his intention of sending aid. Instead, he has ordered me to leave Ferelden and put myself under the command of the Orlesian Warden-Commander at Montsimmard. As you may imagine, I have ignored his order, and scorn it for the wicked foolishness it is. Perhaps there is some political understanding between the Wardens and the Orlesians to allow Ferelden to be destroyed. I set myself against it: it shall not stand.

"The following is a Warden secret, so do not share this with anyone. The fact that I am a Warden may mean that my chances of producing an heir are compromised. Obviously, with the Blight raging, it would be madness for me to try to bear a child anyway. If I assume the throne, you are my heir. That will be declared outright, and Loghain must accept it as a condition...

Fergus sighed, admitting that this proposal was a relief to him. Painful as it was, he wanted to be in Highever, among his own people. He wanted to put his home right. He wanted to give due honor to his parents. Dealing with the Blight and dealing with all the contentious nobles in Ferelden was a prospect that turned his stomach. He had plenty of contentious nobles already, here in the North. Just as galling was the condescending message from the Revered Mother of Highever Chantry, full of advice about forgiveness and accepting the Will of the Maker. He had rogue mercenaries to put down, and a good part of Highever to rebuild. He had Amaranthine to keep under watch. He had the coast to guard, for who knew what a foreign power might attempt, while Ferelden's army was engaged against the darkspawn?

In short, he did not want to leave. If he took the throne, what of Highever? If Bronwyn married Loghain, and Fergus were king, it would be very difficult to make the Landsmeet accept Bronwyn as Teyrna of Highever, when she would already be Teyrna of Gwaren. There would be tremendous pressure to appoint a new teyrn, and Highever would be lost to the Couslands. Fergus found the thought unbearable.

Let Bronwyn have her throne. And her hero.

How incalculable Fate was! All unexpected, both Father's dreams and Bronwyn's ardent wishes were likely to be achieved through the agency of Thedas' greatest menace. With the malice of the Archdemon ranged against her, Fergus hoped Bronwyn's prize would not prove a disappointment.

"My lord Teyrn!"

Fergus looked up and smiled at the man in the doorway.

"Come in, Hawke! I was just thinking over my sister's letter. I'll have to make the announcement of the King's death today. In fact, come with me to the Chantry. I'll notify the Revered Mother, which should stop her pontificating about the 'expressed intent to claim Sanctuary.'"

Hawke laughed. "True. She'll be much too busy planning the memorial service for King Cailan to give more thought to a few dead scoundrels."

Fergus was already striding out of the room, gesturing at Hawke to follow him. Useful man, this Hawke. Good company, too. He could see why Bronwyn thought well of him. Fergus needed all the good men he could get, and Hawke had no family ties in the North. His judgment would not be clouded by a desire for vengeance, which might make him a good choice to send to Amaranthine. He'd keep an eye on the man for the next few days and see.

He also had the letter from the Queen to think over. That poor woman. The next three months were likely to be a terrible trial for her, as she prepared to preside over the Landsmeet and hand over power. She must take care of herself.

What would Queen Anora do, when she was only Queen Dowager? Did Loghain plan to turn Gwaren over to her? That would be some consolation to her perhaps, though it would be

a lonely life, isolated in the far south. It was scandalous that the King had not provided for her more honorably, though that was all of a piece with Cailan's general treatment of his queen. What could one say of a man who had such a treasure of a wife— beautiful, wise, virtuous—and did not prize her?

Could she be Queen?

Plots and schemes whirled in her mind. She grasped at political straws in her imagination and they slipped from her grasp. Anora had considered herself a resourceful woman, but she could think of no way to persuade the Landsmeet to give her supreme power for life. She had never felt more alone.

She found that she missed Jowan. Wynne was soothing and pleasant company, but there was something about the unspoken admiration and loyalty of a man that gave a certain zest to life.

Wynne was an amazing Healer, of course. Anora could feel the difference. It was only very late in the afternoon that the fatigue and nausea set in; only in the early morning that it was so very hard to leave her bed. Wynne could not cure her, but she could make Anora capable of ruling, for the shortening number of days left to her as Queen.

And what then? Rustication in Gwaren, to mediate charcoal burners' disputes? Oh, how that hurt! There was no much yet unachieved!

How could she persuade the Landsmeet to give her the crown? More to the point...who else was in contention?

Her father, of course. Anora was not deaf to the mutterings in the palace and in the capital. They were threatened, and many looked to the Hero of River Dane to deliver them. He had not a drop of royal blood, and the only noble relations of the MacTirs were a long extinct family of cousins who had held the bannorn of Long Grove.

Of course, if one thought about it properly...Calenhad the Great had not had any royal or noble blood when he made himself the first king of Ferelden...

Was that it? Was he planning to found a new dynasty, born from the terror of the darkspawn horde?

Anora pounded the arm of her chair, as things became clearer in her mind.

Of course! Of course! That was exactly what he was planning. And he was not going to do it alone. Bronwyn Cousland had sunk her claws into Father, and would use him to win a crown. With a Cousland as his Queen... the next in line to the throne... She should have foreseen it. Father needed Bronwyn's blood claim, and Bronwyn needed Father to help her escape the Grey Wardens.

Anora told herself that she was not angry. She could not hate Bronwyn. In fact, she liked her very much. Bronwyn had been loyal and kind to her. She was something in the nature of a

friend, and Anora had had few enough of those in her life. Bronwyn had left Jowan with her, without whom Anora knew she would very likely be dead by now. She had treated her with perfect respect. Anora had to accept that Bronwyn was not doing what she was doing to spite Anora, but because she genuinely thought Anora had no claim to the throne. If there was no longer to be a queen in Ferelden, why should Bronwyn *not* seek the title?

Fair was fair. Was there any way to compete with Father and Bronwyn? The other claimant would be Bronwyn's brother. Teyrn Fergus, of course...

Fergus...

Her eyes strayed to the charming little music box he had given her. What a fine, fine man... and how considerate. He had done wonders in the North with few resources. Fergus Cousland had the makings of an excellent king. He would need a queen, naturally, after the tragic loss of his wife and son. Teyrn Fergus Cousland and Queen Anora Mac Tir might be a match even for the Hero of River Dane and the Girl Warden. Even were Fergus not king, he needed a wife...a teyrna...someone to stand beside him and help him. Fergus Cousland was the only man in Ferelden whom Anora could marry without a great loss of prestige. He was not just the premier noble of Ferelden, but a comely, brave, and sensible man. He was considerate of the feelings of others. He was as different from Cailan as a man could be. She would marry him gladly. Wynne would stay with her and keep her healthy. And perhaps someday... Father would not live forever...Bronwyn's

life was dangerous... not that she wished harm to either of them, but...

Anora walked to her dressing table and took a long look in the mirror. *Am I still pretty enough to win him?*

She pulled out a piece of parchment and was soon engrossed in her letter to Highever.

Keeper Lanaya arrived with her Dalish clansmen and received a formal welcome. After taking a look at the exquisite blonde elf woman, Loghain was somewhat relieved that Cailan was gone. He had made a fool of himself over Keeper Merrill: he probably would have wanted to *marry* Lanaya.

The Dalish at Ostagar greeted their fellow elves with great joy, listening in wonder to the tale of how Warden-Commander Bronwyn had saved the newcomers from a lethal curse. They had always thought well of the shemlen commander, but this was more proof of her good faith. There was a great celebration in the Dalish camp as the new landships were added to the great circle. Within was a pleasant fire, at which the Dalish leaders took counsel.

"Loghain and his young woman Bronwyn are not as other shemlens," Thanovir said. "I have known Loghain since we were young men together. He respects the elvhen, though without patronizing speeches. Bronwyn, too, has proved a good friend. There are whispers that they may soon rule in Ferelden. If that is so, perhaps we shall see new days for the

Dalish."

"Bronwyn is honorable," Merrill agreed staunchly. "She will see that the young king's words are not forgotten." She explained to Lanaya, and to their hahren Sarel. "King Cailan—the nice young man who fell to the darkspawn—has promised land to the Dalish. It is written in his will and witnessed by his nobles. Land to the southwest of Ostagar, to be granted to the Dalish 'in perpetuity.' That means for always."

This announcement was met with wonder and excitement by some, and with skepticism by others.

Sarel pointed out, "The woman Andraste was a good and honorable friend of Thane Shartan. Those that came after her, however, were no friends of the elvhen."

Maynriel steepled his fingers, thinking deeply. "Much of the trouble that led to the loss of the Dales," he said, "began with disputes stemming from the Blight of those days. The shemlens felt that the elves had abandoned them. That, as we know, was not the whole truth, but it was the truth as the shemlens knew it. We, however, are here: side by side with our shemlen and durgen'len allies. Some of the shemlens grieve over their king's death and some blame us for not defending them, but as Loghain had put down such mutterings, I do not fear them. If we are true, and stand with the other free peoples of Ferelden, I predict good of this alliance."

"What of the other shemlen nations?" Lanaya asked. "Will

they not come to help?"

Thanovir smiled cynically. "They will not. For now, they watch and wait, perhaps hoping to gain something by their neighbor's ruin. I remember the war against the Orlesian shemlens well. They used elves most cruelly during their occupation. You do not want Orlesian chevaliers here in Ostagar, I assure you. Loghain told me that their Empress has forbidden the Grey Wardens of her country to come to fight, unless her army—chevaliers and all—is also permitted to cross the borders. He believes it is a mere ploy to seize control of what they regard as a lost province. I think he is very likely right."

Another elf spoke up: a young mage woman. "That is not to say that all these shemlens are our friends. One of their nobles has sold city elves into slavery. Granted, Bronwyn's brother defeated him, and the man is dead, but the elves are still lost, gone to Tevinter. There was a great stir about it."

The newcomers were shocked at the revelations, and whispered among each other. Annoyed, Merrill said, her sweet voice sharp, "There was a great stir indeed, because the shemlens were horrified and ashamed that one of their number would commit so vile a deed. It is perhaps because of that wickedness that the young king wished to make reparation by way of granting elves their own land."

Sarel considered it. "It would be a great thing, if the elvhen had a home again—even if it were small, and a mere place for gathering and ceremony."

"One of the Wardens," said Merrill, "has even suggested that the poor city elves could build a village there. They are accustomed to living in one place, and it would be better for them to rule themselves than to live in the shemlen cities."

"Was that Danith?" asked Lanaya. "I know Danith. She is a fine elf. Or perhaps Tara? She is a powerful mage."

"Danith is a very fine elf," Merrill agreed, "and a splendid archer and a Warden beside, but it was not she. Nor was it Tara, who is also my friend. It was Warden Adaia, the newest Warden. She is a city elf of Denerim, but she was eager to learn the *Vir Tanadahl*. I am glad that the elvhen are so well represented among the Wardens. Bronwyn appointed Tara the commander of the Warden mages, over shemlens, so I think that is also a proof of her respect for us. I think that some of us should talk to Bronwyn and find out what is planned about this land grant."

Maynriel, amused at the impatience of youth, shook his head. "Nothing will be done while we are fighting. We do not know which lands will be polluted by the darkspawn. Nor could we ask the poor flat ears to join us in the south now, while there is so much danger. This is hardly the time to found a city!"

A silence greeted his words, but not of anger or denial, but of wonder, as the idea began to sink in.

"A city of elves," breathed Lanaya. "A city of our own once more. Even if it were but the poorest village, what a joy it would be."

"We will do it right, this time," Merrill declared. "We shall hide it from the shemlen with magic. We shall keep it secret and safe. There we shall teach our ways. There we shall recover the wisdom lost to us."

She added, "But I still want to talk to Bronwyn about it. Just to remind her."

Jowan was welcomed back to Ostagar by his friends... and received nods from those who did not approve of him. He brought a thick epistle from the Queen to Loghain, a polite note of thanks to Bronwyn, and a long letter to Tara and Adaia, along with assorted parcels and messages.

Obviously, he must first find Teyrn Loghain, but on his arrival, he was told that the Teyrn, the Dragonslayer Bronwyn, and some of the other Wardens were out on patrol. They were not expected back until the following morning. He went up to the Wardens' quarters and unpacked.

Things had happened in his absence. Everyone seemed dying to tell him the gossip. He could not miss Tara's changed sleeping arrangements.

"But is he kind to you, Tara?" he asked his friend anxiously, glancing over at the smirking Zevran across the room, who was busily honing his dagger. Jowan remembered Lily with a quick, urgent pang. He had loved the girl—or thought he loved her—but it had been a terrible, nearly fatal mistake. "He's not a mage. He doesn't understand us."

Tara gave him a hug. "He understands about being a prisoner. He understands about having no choices. He's good for me. He doesn't try to pressure me into anything. He's incredibly handsome. And he's a fellow elf. I'm sort of rediscovering my elvishness."

"Good luck with that," Jowan said doubtfully. He glanced at the letter from the headman of the Alienage in his friend's hands. In Jowan's opinion, being an elf in Thedas was simply not a good thing at all. He saw no advantage to Tara in identifying herself with elves and their sufferings. Tara and he were better off with the Wardens. Mages and elves were equal to everyone else in this fellowship—at least under a leader like Bronwyn. They had decent quarters here in Ostagar and luxurious digs in Denerim. They had purpose and an opportunity to use their gifts. They had respect.

He leaned over and whispered, "If he lets you down, I'll freeze his balls off!"

Tara laughed. "You'll be right behind me!"

Adaia was hovering, wild for Tara to read Valendrian's letter to her. Jowan moved on to give Carver the messages from his family.

"You stopped to see them in Lothering?" the young man asked, surprised. "That was very decent of you!"

"You have a wonderful family," Jowan said sincerely. He had admired the gentle, gifted Bethany very much. Personally, he

thought she should join the Wardens, too. "Adam was fine when I saw him off on his way north. He sends his best to you. I think the Queen must have given him a pretty good reward, because he bought presents for your family in Lothering, and I delivered them on my way through with the supply train. Here are the notes from your mother and sister. And here," he said, pulling out a parcel from his scattered baggage, "are some treats from your cousin. She stayed up all night baking so I could bring them to you."

Carver sniffed at the parcel.

"Fruitcake!"

He tore off the wrapping, thumped the liquor-drenched delicacy on the big table, and cut himself a big, fragrant slab with his dagger.

"Anybody who wants some fruitcake better get some soon, or I'll eat it all!"

There was a sniff from the window, and anxious murmurs. Carver looked up and realized that Adaia's letter from the Alienage could be nothing good. He lowered his voice.

"Uh...guys? There's cake..." He took himself off, deciding to read his letters outside.

Alistair passed through the outer room, talking with Cullen, when he, too, saw the group of elves, a tearful Adaia in the middle. There was no kind way to pretend ignorance.

The two men walked over. Alistair said, "The news is bad, I guess. I'm sorry."

Adaia wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. "Could be worse, I suppose," her voice even thicker than usual. "We've lost more than half the Alienage. More like two-thirds, the hahren said, and the only people Teyrn Fergus could save were the old ones that the slavers didn't want, and the sickly, and Maia and Kirri's little baby. The hahren says that Teyrn Fergus sent them home in a wagon, and gave a goat—outright gave a *goat!*—to Gammer Deranni so the baby would have milk. The only other good thing," she said bitterly, "is that there's plenty of housing in the Alienage now, and the slumlords had to lower their rents!"

Jowan reported to his superiors as soon as the patrol returned to camp the next morning. Everyone was dirty and tired, but it appeared to have gone well. Bronwyn saw Jowan waiting outside the Tower of Ishal, and pointed him out to Loghain. Scout recognized the pack member, and granted him a brisk wag of his stubby tail.

"Look!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "Jowan's back! Good day to you, Jowan! You look well."

"Commander...Teyrn Loghain..." Jowan muttered, preferring to look at his friendly and attractive commander rather than the fearsome general. "I bring new weapons from Master Wade and letters from Denerim."

The teyrn gave him a suspicious glance, but took the proffered letter at once.

"Come to my quarters, Warden," he ordered. "I'll want your impressions of the Queen and Denerim. The weapons we will see demonstrated later."

That should have made him thoroughly nervous, but Bronwyn gave him a wink, and he smiled back weakly. And after all, what did he have to fear? The Queen approved of him, and he had done his best for her.

She must have said as much in her letter, too, for Loghain, after reading through the letter, sat for a moment in thought, and then said, "I thank you for your good service to my daughter, Warden."

"It was my honor, my lord. I am proud to serve the Queen in any way."

That earned more approval from Bronwyn. She glanced quickly at Loghain and then gave Jowan a small nod.

Loghain went on, "She is impressed by the abilities of Senior Enchanter Wynne, but I gather that a cure is not likely. You must have conferred with the woman. What is her honest opinion?"

Jowan hated giving people bad news, but there was no escape. "No, my lord. I am very sorry, but there is no cure. The damage is done. A powerful Healer like Wynne can

ameliorate the symptoms and restore the Queen's energy, but she cannot undo the essential harm. With regular care, the Queen can expect a fairly normal life..."

"But not a long one," Loghain said, the words bitter on his tongue.

"With Wynne there, she may live much longer than I could manage..." Jowan admitted. He hated the truth of what he must say. The Queen deserved so much better... "But it is unlikely the Queen will grow old."

Loghain got up and paced to the window, looking out at the hills to the south. "And without magical Healing?"

Jowan hesitated, and looked to Bronwyn to support. He said quietly, "She could not live more than a month or two."

"But she *does* have Wynne," Bronwyn pointed out. "We shall see to it that she continues to have the best care Ferelden can afford."

Loghain blew out a long breath and turned briskly to Jowan. "You have done well, Warden. I am grateful to you, and I trust in your continued discretion."

"Always, my lord."

"Find the Glavonaks, Jowan," Bronwyn told him. "Have the weapons ready for a demonstration by mid-afternoon."

After he was dismissed, Loghain turned to Bronwyn.

"There is more to the fellow than I saw in him at first." He brought himself up short, remembering that Bronwyn did not know of his first dealings with Jowan—of the underhanded poisoning of Eamon Guerrin. Loghain felt a brief superstitious dread, wondering if Anora's fate might be some sort of divine judgment. He put the thought aside, and saw that he need not have worried. Bronwyn thought he meant Jowan's first, uncertain days as a Warden.

"He's grown into his duties a great deal. Conscripting him turned out well."

"Anora cannot continue as Queen beyond the Landsmeet," he declared, his voice harsh. "I would fight for it were it the right thing to do, but her health is too questionable. There is only one thing to do, and you know we must do it."

Bronwyn was silent, her eyes searching his face. In the morning light, he looked haggard and hard-edged; a far cry from the cheerful springtime king who had ruled Ferelden days before. And what was she? A vulture, swooping in to seize the crown from a woman who had been used cruelly and treacherously. If this was victory, it tasted of ashes.

She said, "I must know Fergus' mind in this. I cannot set myself against him. And there is another thing I must do to clear my way before I can be Queen with honor."

Briefly, she informed him where she would be journeying, and why. The Ashes of Andraste were Anora's only hope for life, and Bronwyn's only chance to salve her conscience.

Bronwyn was excited about the new dragon spears. They were reluctant to kill a valuable ox to show some of the new features, but the demonstration was still effective. The heads were razor sharp and of the hardest forged silverite, runed for penetration. The shafts were unbreakable by any tests Wade had been able to conduct on them. They were light enough to be thrown. Included was yet another prototype, spring-loaded. When the head was jammed with sufficient impact against a target, the spring was released, and the head on the telescoping shaft shot forward with great force. On an ox carcass, the head penetrated another two feet—in fact, entirely through the ox's carcass.

"I saw it done," Jowan told them. "It was impressive. You can fill the spear heads with poison or explosives. I've also done a lot of reading about dragon-hunting. I think the Nevarrans wanted to keep their secrets, but some of it slipped out. They worked in large teams and used traps quite a bit—"

"What kind of traps?" Loghain asked instantly, his eyes drinking in the new weapons greedily.

"Pit traps, mostly," Jowan said. "If they were just narrow enough, the dragon couldn't unfurl its wings to fly out. They also baited ambushes and used nets on the smaller specimens. Spider silk nets, I believe. for the big ones, they still used bait to lure them in. Dragons like blood, certain types more than others..."

"Well?" Bronwyn asked, seeing the man blush.

"They're very excited by..." Jowan grimaced "...er, menstrual blood. It's the prospect of maybe getting a virgin sacrifice, I think...either elf or human will do. They smell it and they'll attack."

"Jowan..." Bronwyn tried not to laugh. "Are you implying that the Archdemon is likely to be influenced into attacking me based on my time of the month?"

Loghain was staring at him, eyes icy chips of doom.

Jowan gurgled weakly. "Er...yes...maybe. Not sure about the Archdemon. Other dragons...probably. The Nevarrans always brought a girl along on their hunts, and the songs have a lot of references to the moon..."

"They didn't feed those girls to the dragons, did they?" Bronwyn asked, eyes wide.

"No...not intentionally...but sometimes things went wrong..."

He had lots more lore to share, and gained a bit more courage as they listened. He was a good researcher, and always had been. He had uncovered many secrets in the libraries of Denerim.

Loghain was nodding, taking in the information, but still focused on the weapons.

"We'll find an ogre carcass," he muttered. "And you and your Wardens can try the springloaded spear..."

"I may have to leave that you," Bronwyn said quietly. "Don't forget that I plan to leave tomorrow."

Loghain grunted irritably, not pleased at the reminder.

Merrill stopped her on the way to the Tower of Ishal, wanting to discuss the future of the Dalish land grant. Bronwyn told her that she was going on a long patrol the following day, but she also knew she could not simply brush off the Keeper. Cailan had pledged the honor of the Crown, and if everything went as she and Loghain planned, it would be left to them to fulfill Cailan's promises, one way or another.

"I know the King promised land to the west, but we're not sure what shape it's in." She thought about it. "Our patrol is going westward tomorrow, and perhaps we'll know more after that. Personally, I wondered if a grant in the Breciliian Forest, encompassing that amazing elven temple, might not be better. Perhaps you should talk more to Danith about that building and its significance to the elves...I promise to think more on the matter, but I must speak to my Wardens right now..."

They were no better pleased than Loghain with her plans. Nearly all of them were there, cleaning up, preparing for the evening meal. She made her announcement, and Alistair's jaw dropped.

"You want to go *where*?"

"It will not take all that long," Bronwyn said impatiently. She

took a deep breath, looking at the faces of her companions: faces doubtful and concerned, or curious and eager, or outright disapproving.

Sten was of the latter group. "I do not see," he rumbled, "what searching for an ancient shrine has to do with your mission against the Blight."

Bronwyn was prepared for that. "We cannot pursue our mission if the country falls apart. The Queen must rule until the Landsmeet. If her health fails, we'll have nobles kicking her aside and taking the interim rule into their own hands, because that would give them an advantage in claiming the throne." She saw the Qunari was not convinced, and added, "And it is a matter of my personal honor. I cannot simply allow her to die, when I have had word of a possible cure. She is still the Queen of Ferelden, and it is my duty to serve her."

Leliana moved to Bronwyn's side, blue eyes afire with the glory of it. "To seek out the actual resting place of the Prophet! I shall go with you, no matter how great the danger. Such a place would bring comfort to all the world!"

"It's true," Cullen said, his voice soft. "I'll go with you, Bronwyn. We must save the Queen. And it would be an act of worship to reveal the shrine of Andraste to the faithful."

Morrigan glanced at Anders, and he back at her. The witch spoke up, exasperated. "I have never heard such rubbish! You wish to follow the long-cold trail of that credulous dreamer Genetivi, who is undoubtedly by now only a pile of rotting

bones! All he had was a map—"

"—a map of dubious provenance," added Anders. "Besides which, the map only shows a village where you *might* hear about the shrine. It isn't even a map to the shrine itself!"

"If it is a false lead," Bronwyn allowed, "I shall return immediately. Look," she went on, her voice urgent, "I'll only be gone a few weeks at most. We can give out that there were rumors of darkspawn in the Frostbacks, and that I'm going to check them out."

"No!" Leliana broke in. "We mustn't let anyone know where we are actually going. Let us say that we are simply going west."

The dwarves muttered among themselves, very uneasy about the adventure's prospects.

Brosca, happily devouring a whole roasted rabbit, swallowed a bite, and then spoke up. "Boss, I'm with you whatever you decide. You *know* that. It's just... are you sure you want to go wandering off into the mountains right now?"

"You know," Astrid agreed, "that you might really come across darkspawn. Then what would you do, with such a small party? I also thought, that with the Fereldan succession unsettled, you would need to be close at hand..."

Oghren looked up from a tankard, and squinted at her. "Does Loghain know about this? What does *he* say?"

Should she tell them about her planned marriage? Should she tell them that she intended to be Queen? Bronwyn paused, her heart sinking at the prospect, and then she prevaricated. "Obviously, Teyrn Loghain is concerned for his daughter. As to the succession, I have already let the nobles know my views about it. A few weeks will not change things. If I am to go, however, I must go immediately, and get back before the Landsmeet."

Jowan was ready to volunteer, the words on his lips, when his eyes met Cullen's. The former Templar glared at him, and Jowan imagined an extended camping trip, and meeting that glare over the campfire every night...

And Tara had already stepped up. "I'll go. You need a mage. We're a good team."

"And if either of the ladies whom I serve wishes to take a restful holiday in the mountains," smirked Zevran, "then I must go too, if only to keep them out of trouble."

Leliana, Cullen, Tara, Zevran. With Scout it was quite enough. Bronwyn took heart at their support.

"Thank you. You four will come with me. Alistair, you're in charge while I'm gone. Anders, you're acting Senior Mage."

"My dream comes true at last," Anders snarked. Tara thumped him on the head. "Ow!"

Bronwyn swept crumbs from the table and pulled out her map.

Unrolling it, she showed them her proposed route. There was pushing and shoving as everyone crowded around to see.

"We are leaving at first light. Here we are at Ostagar," said Bronwyn, her finger on the tiny painted castle. "I plan to travel to Redcliffe along the hunters' trails...like so."

"That's the way they went when the King relieved Redcliffe," Alistair said, nodding. "Loghain showed me. It's still probably pretty clear."

"At Redcliffe," Bronwyn said, tracing a voyage across a painted lake. "I hope to find a boat that will take our party to the mouth of the River Sulcher. It is not far through the secret pass Genetvi marked to the village of—" her fingernail tapped on a scribbled 'X'—"Haven. That is our goal."

"Haven," murmured Leliana. "Such a pretty name."

Adaia's croaking voice was raised, the greatest contrast possible to Leliana's. "If you're leaving, maybe we'd better have a story tonight. Otherwise we won't have one for weeks!"

Bronwyn was pleased with her. A good idea to distract people from their discontent about her plans. "Yes, let's all fill our cups and have a story. Jowan, it's your turn."

"My turn!" the mage gasped. "But..."

Danith shook her head, smirking. "I was called upon by the

King himself, while you were idling in the fleshpots of Denerim!"

Jowan ran his hand through his black hair, trying to come up with an idea. The only stories he could remember at the moment were gruesome tales of dragon hunting; or the story associated with a little trinket belonging to Queen Anora...something he saw every day at the Palace...

"All right," he said, and tried to remember his favorite version. "I've got a story. Queen Anora has a music box that plays an old tune. I can't sing to save my life, but I can tell the story in words."

Jowan's Tale of The Princess on the Glass Hill

There was once, in a land far away, a great hill of glittering glass. At the top of the hill stood a castle made of pure gold, and in front of the castle there grew an enchanted tree on which there were golden apples.

Anyone who picked an apple gained admittance into the golden castle, and there in a silver room sat a princess of surpassing fairness and beauty. Locked in the castle, she had been awaiting a lover for a long, long, time. She was as rich as she was beautiful, for the cellars of the castle were full of precious stones, and great chests of the finest gold stood round the walls of all the rooms. Whoever could climb the glass hill would win the hand of the princess in marriage and half the kingdom besides.

Many knights had come from afar to try their luck, but none had succeeded. In spite of having their horses shod with sharp nails, no one managed to get more than half-way up, and then they all fell back right down to the bottom of the steep slippery hill. Many were maimed. Many more had died in the attempt. A heap of corpses, both of riders and horses, lay round the foot of the hill, and carrion crows had picked their bones clean.

The beautiful princess sat at her window and watched the bold knights trying to reach her on their splendid horses. The sight of her always gave men fresh courage, and they flocked from all over Thedas to attempt the work of rescuing her. But all had failed, and for seven years the Princess had sat and waited for someone to scale the Glass Hill.

One knight, cleverer than the rest, came to take up the challenge. He had heard of the beautiful Princess who sat in the golden castle at the top of the Glass Mountain. He listened to all he heard, and determined that he too would try his luck.

He came, and saw that many had died in vain, leaving their bones to rattle in their rusted armor like dried peas in a pod. He did not spur his horse up the hill straightaway, but instead walked all the way around it, looking and thinking. He stepped onto the side of the hill, and his foot could find no purchase on the slippery surface. The princess saw him, far below, and was disappointed when he rode away.

"He did not look like a coward," she sighed.

However, the knight had not given up the attempt. Instead, he rode to the closest village and spoke to a blacksmith.

Now the knight was poor, and had only his horse, his armor, and his sword. He was fond of his horse, and needed his sword if any enemy were to attack, and so he traded his knightly armor for iron claws that could be strapped to his hands and feet. With these, he rode back to his camp.

The next morning, he arrayed himself for the challenge. Leaving his horse tied below, he boldly started up the Glass Hill.

It was much harder than he had expected. The claws worked well enough, but only with great effort. Shards of glass broke off every time he dug in the claws. Some of the bits flew back and cut his face, and others became enmeshed in the claws themselves, tearing at his fingers and working their way into his boots.

All day he climbed, one hand after the other; one foot after the other. He could hardly draw breath he was so worn out, and his mouth was parched by thirst. The sun blazed hotly, and the light reflecting off the glass was so bright it hurt his eyes. He dared not move a hand to his water flask, for fear of falling to his death. He could not see the castle of gold above him, nor the pit under his feet. All there was in the world was the Glass Hill.

Evening closed in, and he was only halfway up. Exhausted, he sagged against the claw straps, but the claws, stuck in

deeply, supported his weight. The stars came out and were reflected in the glass like tiny jewels. The knight awaited death calmly, and fell into a peaceful slumber. He slept thus all night long, suspended between life and death.

Just before dawn, a huge black cloud gathered over the hill. Thunder rolled, and lightning split the sky. Rain poured down in a torrent, and the knight awoke, gratefully drinking in the blessed water. The storm passed, and the knight took new courage and strength, and resumed his climb.

The hill was no more merciful to him than it had been the day before. Soon the wounds on his face and hands and feet reopened and bled freely, the blood trickling down the hard glass, coloring it like a great ruby. On the knight went, slower and slower, panting and in pain.

The princess had awakened and looked out from the tower. To her amazement, she saw the knight clinging to the Glass Hill only a short distance from the summit! With horror, she saw the blood running from his wounds, and she feared that he would perish before he reached his goal.

"Ser Knight!" she called out. "Ser Knight! You are almost to the enchanted tree! I cannot come to you, but if you take a bite of one of the golden apples, you will be healed and can enter the castle!"

Nearly dead of exhaustion and loss of blood, the knight heard her as through deep water. He struggled to move a hand, a foot; moving with painful slowness, inch by inch. He was at the

summit now, crawling along, digging in the claws, for the hill was still slippery, even at the top. He reached the tree's trunk, and stopped, too weak to rise.

Terrified that her rescuer would die right then and there, the Princess hurled her silver cup at the tree with all her strength. An apple fell from a bough and rolled to the knight

The knight looked up and saw the glittering palace, lit by the early morning light. He saw the high window, and framed in it the Princess, her beautiful face full of hope and fear. He saw the apple, a hands-breadth away. With a great effort, he pulled his right hand claw from the glass and reached for the apple, catching it on the claw's sharp points.

Never was fruit sweeter or more juicy; never was food more welcome. The knight ate the apple and was restored. He got carefully to his feet and removed his iron claws, one by one. Then he plucked two apples, one in each hand, and approached the gate of the castle.

As he stepped onto the path leading to the gate, a great dragon flew down and roared, but the knight knew what he must do. He threw an apple at the dragon, and the beast vanished in a puff of cloud.

Instantly the gate opened before him, and the knight perceived a courtyard full of flowers and beautiful trees, and standing, her arms out, the beautiful princess.

"Have you come at last, my rescuer? All that I have is yours!"

The knight drew his dagger, and divided the golden apple in two parts. When the princess and knight ate the apple, their hearts were filled with love for each other.

"Let us leave this place!" cried the princess. "I wish to go out into the world with you and share your fortunes."

Now that the gate was open, nothing prevented her escape. Together, the princess and the knight knotted a long rope together. They gathered the treasures of the castle and let them down, down the Glass Hill to the ground. Then they climbed down together, and the princess and the knight rejoiced to feel the good earth and grass beneath their feet once more.

The horse awaited them, and together they rode to the palace of the king, that the knight might claim the promised reward: the hand of the princess and half the kingdom. Together they ruled wisely and well, and they lived happily to the end of their days.

"It's nice that the princess helped him," Adaia said. "I like that part best. I don't like stories where the princess sits around waiting to be saved. In real life, nobody ever comes to save you. Except for Teyrn Fergus," she amended, remembering that night. "He saves people."

"Bronwyn saved me!" Tara declared. "She saved Anders, too."

"She saved me!" Brosca declared, waving at Bronwyn. "But I agree about princesses. They ought to do something to save themselves."

"They certainly should," agreed Astrid.

Brosca laughed. "Knocked a apple off the tree with her drinking cup! Hey, Oghren! I challenge you! I bet I can knock more apples down than you!"

The red-hair dwarf chuckled, fingering his axe. "I'd win, Cutie! I'd cut down the whole sodding tree!"

Carver grunted, "I wish we would kill dragons by throwing apples at them!"

"We can throw bombs," Adaia shot back bravely. "They look sort of like apples..."

"It is a charming story," Leliana said. "You say there's a song, Jowan?"

Tara said hastily, "You don't want Jowan to sing. Really. Or me. I can tell you the song, but maybe somewhere private. When we're in the mountains and nobody can hear us."

Leliana laughed. "I shall hold you to that!"

"A curious way to choose a ruler," mused Sten, "but I suppose that resourcefulness and perseverance are not without value. Those, and the ability to endure pain."

"I'm just glad they didn't forget to take the treasure with them," Carver said. Adaia nodded back at him, very seriously.

The council broke up in general talk and drinking. Brosca lurked by the fire, casting hungry looks at the oblivious Cullen. Astrid whispered to her, and then punched her lightly on the shoulder. Brosca nodded, and swaggered over to the ex-Templar.

"Cullen..." She cleared her throat. "I need to talk to you!" She glared at the faint smiles on too many of her companion's faces. *"Privately."*

"All right," said the mystified Cullen, following her out the door.

Alistair laughed, and then turned to Bronwyn, the smile on his handsome face fading. "I need to talk to you, too. And privately."

"Fine," Bronwyn agreed. "And I can tell you more about Master Wade's experiments. We have only the sample weapons, but he'll make more if we approve of them."

"Let's go outside."

They walked down the stairs, through the Great Hall, past the bustling servants putting dinner on the table. Bronwyn chatted about springloaded spears while Alistair nodded dutifully. No sooner had they stepped out of doors than he pulled her over to a low wall.

"You're going to Redcliffe."

"Yes, we're going to Redcliffe. Would you like me to take Arl Teagan a letter? I know you're fond of him."

He looked at her blankly for a moment, and then sputtered. "A letter? Wait. Yeah. I suppose I should write him a letter. I know he's probably having a hard time... Sure. I'll write him a letter. And I suppose I should write some things about myself."

She bit back a smile. "That does make for a better letter."

He managed a self-deprecating laugh. "I've never really had reason to write letters. There was nobody...well. actually, that's not what I wanted to talk about. It's the whole succession thing."

Bronwyn looked at him in astonishment. Was he going to say what she thought he was going to say?

"I mean," he blundered on. "I'm Maric's son and all that, but nobody's going to try to make me be King, are they? Are they?" He saw her face and was genuinely alarmed. "Or are they?"

"Do you *want* to be king?" she asked.

"Maker, no!" he nearly shouted. He saw people looking their way, and lowered his voice. "I'd hate it! Loghain isn't thinking about putting me forward at the Landsmeet, is he?"

"Loghain," Bronwyn answered carefully, "got the impression from you that you did not *want* to be king. That is why he has not pressed you on the matter. He thinks you're doing a splendid job as a Warden. It seems to be what you prefer. If you don't want to be king, no one will force you."

He sagged against the rough stones with relief. "Thank the Maker! And when you see Teagan, don't let him talk you into making me king, either!"

They had discussed Alistair, of course. Loghain did like him, and thought that with more training, Alistair would be an excellent Warden-Commander. That was a position of responsibility worthy of a son of Maric. It would give the lad the public notice and respect he deserved. Loghain had also, in more veiled terms, broached the idea of giving Alistair the teyrnir of Gwaren, if something too terrible to speak of plainly were to happen to Anora. Bronwyn decided not to mention that. She would prefer that Anora live, and that her own conscience be clear.

Alistair had moved on to his next thought. "So who *is* Loghain going to propose as king? Fergus?"

"I'm waiting to hear from Fergus," she said honestly. "I don't know if he wants to be king, either. There is so much to do in Highever, and he loves the teyrnir. Fergus certainly never planned on being king."

"Then *who*?" he pressed. "You don't think...Anora? But she's not well enough is she? Or is that why you're trying to find the

Ashes for her?"

"No, Loghain isn't thinking of proposing Anora, either, though of course he wants her to live. Look here, Alistair, it all may be coming out soon, and I want you to think it over. Don't talk about it to anyone, all right?"

His face was already changing, as he leaped to the next possible conclusion.

"Loghain? He's going for the crown? Wow... I mean... Really? He's not a descendant of Calenhad, you know. People won't like that."

"No, he's not a descendant of Calenhad," Bronwyn agreed. "But I am."

Thanks to my reviewers: MsBarrows, Blinded in a bolthole, Jenna53, mutive, JTheClivz, demonicnargles, Aoi24, EpitomeofShyness, Halm Vendrella, Josie Lange, The Moidart, almostinsane, Jyggilag, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Kira Kyuu, Herbedrongs66, Mike, Juliafied, Zute, Have Socks. Will Travel, cloud1004, JackOfBladesX, EroSlackerMicha, KnightOfHolyLight, undeadyeti, Shakespira, Biannel, KCousland, Rexiselic, Tikigod784, Granoc, karinfan123, vertigomunchkin, Costin, Dante Alighieri1308, Ryvateil Songstress, Enaid Aderyn, sizuka2, Notnahtanha, euromellows, Sarah1281, and chocolatebrownie12.

And thanks also to anon for the beta. It's fixed now.

I think a goat would be a big deal in the Alienage, if the elves can keep it hidden from Arl Urien's men. I would think the elves could keep a few goats and some chickens, at least. There's a little hidden courtyard back of the apartments in canon, that in my opinion the elves should put under cultivation. The goat might be able to get a little forage there. Given the collapse of the elven population and the scandalous hints of Vaughan's involvement, I think that Urien is going to back off from the Alienage for some time—if only because there's no money in it at the moment.

I know the developers can't do everything, but the lack of sheep, goats, horses, pigs and a number of other animals, wild and domestic, is something of an annoyance in canon. One doesn't know if it's something they didn't bother with, or that Thedas simply doesn't have such creatures. I'll pretend they all exist. While we never see a rabbit, after all, we know they exist in Ferelden, because the dog hides a dead one in Morrigan's pack.

51. Arl Teagan of Redcliffe

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 51: Arl Teagan of Redcliffe

Bronwyn found it a relief to be riding through the Hinterlands, far from Ostagar. If nothing else, her mission to the Frostbacks would give her time to clear her head.

Alistair was deeply scandalized by her political scheming. Her good friend was not a schemer himself, and had swallowed his Grey Warden indoctrination in its entirety—even the most absurd, unpalatable bits.

"But you can't be Queen! Grey Wardens can't hold titles!" he burst out, looking in her eyes as if trying to make her understand. "We renounce everything about our former lives when we Join."

"Alistair," she replied, "what exactly has the order done for us since Ostagar? Have they come to help? We know that the Orlesians are playing games with us, but where are the Marcher Wardens? The Nevarran Wardens? The Antivan Wardens? Only two Wardens have attempted to help us: Riordan and your mother Fiona; and they had to do it in secrecy and stealth." She took a breath and then came out

with it. "When I was at the compound, I found a letter waiting for me. It was from the First Warden."

Alistair straightened, waiting intently.

Bronwyn thought about it, looked away, and then decided simply to tell him the truth. "It was an order for you and me to leave Ferelden and go to Montsimmard, putting ourselves under the command of the Orlesian Warden-Commander. The First Warden obviously did not know that we had been able to recruit."

"And then do what?" Alistair asked, brown eyes warm and innocent. Could he really not see?

"And then watch Ferelden die!" she bit out angrily. "I burned the letter. I am not deserting my country. I am going to do everything in my power to save it, in spite of Orlesians and assassins and an ancient order with a secret agenda they do not care to share with me."

"But being Queen—" He shook his head, trying to understand. "What about your brother?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I've written to Fergus. If he feels that he should be King, I will support him. I don't think that's what he wants, though. If he really doesn't want the crown, I don't see that I have any choice. I will marry Loghain, and we will rule jointly. I'll stay with the Wardens, of course, because the one thing this country needs is to defeat

the Blight. If we can do that..." she tried to imagine something beyond briefly, but failed.

"...if we can do that," she finally said, "I will have been Queen long enough."

"What if you can't...you know...have a baby?"

"Then Fergus will inherit!" she said impatiently. "I'm hardly in any position to have a child anyway, with an Archdemon to fight. Alistair, I didn't ask for Duncan to conscript me. He took advantage of a dying man and made a bargain I had no part in. I don't know what he had in mind. He isn't here to speak for himself. I have to do the best I can, and what we must do is save Ferelden, whatever it takes."

Whatever it takes.

They were moving fast along the old trails. Bronwyn had a copy of Loghain's map. A few months had not erased the tracks of hundreds of men marching to Redcliffe.

While her party was strong, she had felt some misgivings, considering Cullen's attraction to Tara, which the girl had manifestly rejected by her relationship with Zevran. Cullen was behaving well, though he clearly despised the Antivan assassin. Bronwyn knew he would have despised the elf anyway, but she thought Cullen was disciplined enough to work with someone he disliked. He must have had to do that often enough, when he was a Templar.

And he and Leliana, being very devout, were quite excited about the expedition for its own sake. They spent some time talking about it by the fire in soft voices. Bronwyn caught phrases from the Chant of Light exchanged. She was not a particularly pious person herself, but if it comforted those two, then she saw no harm in it. Zevran seemed to be a believer, in his own odd way. Tara, she knew, had reservations—unsurprising in someone forced to listen to endless sermons about her own corruption.

Bronwyn found the prosings of old priests tiresome, but Andraste herself was worth revering. A great leader...a great woman... a beacon of freedom and one who upheld the dignity of all races. It had always struck her as very odd that the center of the Chantry was in Orlais, when Andraste herself had been from the lands that would later become Ferelden. Orlais, in fact, had no part in Andraste's story at all. And Orlais, she thought sourly, with its chevaliers and their privileges, was hardly an exemplar of the kind of freedom Andraste had fought for.

She had certainly lived—a real, living woman. Having been real, she must have real remains. It was not impossible that her faithful disciples would have guarded her remains and placed them in an appropriate shrine. The real questions were: what would that be? Was it still there? How to identify it?

At their next camp, she took out Brother Genetivi's cryptic notes, and tried once again to make sense of them. The good brother certainly had not made it easy for her. Some of the

notes were in a curious shorthand that was as impenetrable as code. Some of the maps were not to scale.

Zevran was on watch. Leliana plumped down beside Bronwyn, sorting through the confusion of notebooks, scrolls, and codices.

"So this is what you found in his house?"

"Yes," Bronwyn laughed ruefully. "And it was as chaotic as you see here. Tara and I took everything, since we did not know what was important and what was not."

Cullen squatted down beside her and frowned at the title of a book.

"Flame and Scale: The Secrets of Dragon Cults," he read.

"What does that have to do with Andraste?"

"No idea," Tara admitted. "But it was there, and full of bookmarks...see... we left them in. He might have been studying something else at the same time, I suppose. I've been known to read more than one book at the same time, switching off between the two...but I don't think that's the case here. It was important for some reason. He was really obsessed."

"And who was that young imposter you fought?" Leliana wondered. "How does he fit in to the story? Was he an agent of another country? Did he have an accent?"

Bronwyn shook her head. "He sounded completely Fereldan to me. It was clear that he was there to collect Genetivi's papers and make sure no one else ever saw them. As he did make a point of piling that Dragon Cult book in with the notebooks and the rest, I have to assume it was important to him."

She took the book, and read aloud:

"Chapter Ten: On the Worship of Dragons..."

"Ugh!" Leliana made a face, disgusted. "What wicked heresy!"

Bronwyn smiled at her, and kept reading. *"Let us suggest, for the moment, that a high dragon is simply an animal. A cunning animal, to be sure, but in possession of no true self-awareness or sentience. There has not, after all, been a single recorded case of a dragon attempting to communicate or performing any act that could not likewise be attributed to a clever beast."*

Cullen broke in. "There's something in that. Remember Flemeth? When she transformed, she didn't fight with anything I would call cunning."

"Morrigan says that when she's in animal form, it's hard to think like a human," Tara agreed. "She has to really concentrate. Maybe just holding the dragon form took so much concentration, Flemeth couldn't think about being clever."

"But we're talking about real dragon," Cullen said, shaking his head. "Not mage's tricks. You saw a dragon when you were among the Dalish. Did it seem like anything more than a beast to you?"

Bronwyn thought about it. "No. A powerful beast, but only that."

"Read on," Leliana urged her, interested.

Bronwyn read, "How, then, does one explain the existence of so-called "dragon cults" throughout history? It might be explained in light of the reverence of the Old Gods in the ancient Tevinter Imperium. In the wake of the first Blight, many desperate imperial citizens turned to the worship of real dragons to replace the Old Gods who had failed them. A dragon, after all, was a god-figure that they could see: It was there, as real as the archdemon itself, and, as evidence makes clear, did offer a degree of protection to its cultists."

Overhearing them, Zevran said, "Animals are wiser than people credit, sometimes. Our friend Scout here," he waved his hand at the dozing dog, who awakened briefly and wagged his tail. "Yes, our friend Scout understands human language and can follow commands. He even expresses displeasure and disagreement. Perhaps your Chantry scholars do not know much about beasts, to lump them all together as beings without cunning or understanding."

"That's an extremely good point," Bronwyn said slowly, thinking it over. Scout was a sentient being, in her opinion,

whatever this Chantry brother thought of *beasts*. "Scout certainly communicates in his own way. It's said that the Tevinter mages first bred the mabaris for intelligence and cunning as well as strength, and set them on the Alamarri tribes. But the mabaris hated the cruel Tevinters. They defected to the tribesfolk, and have been our friends ever since." She reached down with her free hand to scratch Scout's twitching ear. He uttered a doggy snore. Bronwyn took up the book again.

"Other dragon cults could be explained in light of the first. Some cult members might have survived and spread the word. The worship of the Old Gods was as widespread as the Imperium itself—certainly such secrets could have made their way into many hands. But there have been reports of dragon cults even in places where the Imperium never ruled, among folks who had never heard of the Old Gods or had any reason to. How does one explain them?"

"Dragons are impressive," said Tara. "And if they can be trained to protect people, it's not surprising that the people would care for them. So is it actual worship, or a kind of symbiotic relationship?"

Cullen frowned briefly, and opened his mouth to speak. Thinking again, he was silent. It was a very intriguing possibility.

Bronwyn read, *"Members of a dragon cult live in the same lair as a high dragon, nurturing and protecting its*

defenseless young. In exchange, the high dragon permits those cultists to kill a small number of those young in order to feast on draconic blood. That blood is said to have a number of strange long-term effects, including bestowing greater strength and endurance, as well as an increased desire to kill. It may breed insanity as well. Nevarran dragon-hunters have said these cultists are incredibly powerful opponents. The changes in the cultists are a form of blood magic, surely, but how did the relationship between the cult and the high dragon form in the first place? How did the cultists know to drink the dragon's blood? How did the high dragon convince them to care for its young, or know that they would?"

"Drinking dragon's blood?" Tara said eagerly. "But that's like —"

Leliana pinched her hard on the upper arm. Cullen gave Tara an exasperated look and jerked his toward Zevran, who was not a Grey Warden. Tara blushed, rubbing her arm.

"Sorry," she muttered. Zevran watched the exchange, his brows nearly rising to the top of his head.

Leliana repressed her smile, and said, "The legions of Tevinter were the most powerful armies in the world, yes? Perhaps the magister who commanded them used such magic. Then, when the dragons seem to become extinct, those legions no longer had access to dragon's blood."

"Thank the Maker they don't anymore!" Cullen agreed fervently. He caught Bronwyn's eye, sensing that they were thinking the same thing. The first Grey Wardens might have known this sinister lore. It might have given them the idea for the Joining formula...

Tara said, "Anyway, you see what I mean about a symbiotic relationship. Just because they live with a dragon, that doesn't mean the cultists really think it's a god. It protects them, and they care for the offspring and use some of them for a kind of blood magic. They might not even have to kill the dragonlings."

Zevran asked, "And how would the author know all this, unless he had lived among such people? Who wrote this book?"

Bronwyn turned to the title page. "Brother Florian. Never heard of him. But," she said, looking at the date. "This is a really recent book. *Flame and Scale*. It was published only two years ago."

"Where *did* Brother Florian learn all this about dragons?" Cullen asked suspiciously.

Tara laughed. "Very likely it's all collated and translated from some old Tevinter books in Arcanum, and he's passing it off as his own research! We see that a lot in the Circle library. Some 'Chantry Scholar' comes out with a new book, and those of us who know Arcanum can see where big chunks of it are lifted from old books we've already studied. Not that many people in Ferelden know Arcanum, after all. Just the mages and a few Chantry specialists who come to use our

library. You don't know Arcanum, do you, Bronwyn?"

"Hardly a word, other than a few old sayings," Bronwyn admitted. *"Na via lerno victoria..."*

"Ha!" shouted Tara, "I know that one. *'Only the living know victory.'*"

"Too true!" Zevran chuckled.

"There's a bit more here," Bronwyn said. *"Is there more to draconic intelligence than we have heretofore guessed at? No member of a dragon cult has ever been taken alive, and what accounts exist from the days of the Nevarran hunters record only mad rants and impossible tales of godhood. With dragons only recently reappearing and still incredibly rare, we may never know the truth, but the question remains."*

She set the book aside. "Obviously the Nevarran dragon-hunters must have fought these cultists in the old days. I wish we had access to the Nevarran Royal Library!"

"Interesting," agreed Zevran. "It sounds like some of the hunters must not have fought merely the dragons themselves, but whole villages devoted to the dragons."

Tara sniffed disapprovingly. "They probably slaughtered all the people to get their hands on the valuable dragonbone. That's not heroic. That's greedy and cruel."

"That is the way of the world," Zevran agreed, prepared to be

philosophical about it. "At least it sounds like the dragon cultists made them earn their gold."

They arrived at Redcliffe late the following afternoon. Bronwyn had never been there before. None of them had.

"It's scenic," Tara said cheerfully. "Very scenic."

"It's very nearly vertical!" Zevran pointed out.

"*A dramatic landscape,*" Bronwyn quoted from some half-forgotten geography tome. It was, too: Redcliffe Village was on a series of hills, descending toward Lake Calenhad. The famed Red Cliffs were punctuated by waterfalls, creating a spectacular climax at the mouth of the quick-flowing Rock River. The dirt path leading down the hills to the heart of the village and the docks was steep and precarious, and she noted with a certain contempt, not improved by any paving or even wooden stepping. In the distance, the battlements of Castle Redcliffe beckoned. It was clear where the Arls of Redcliffe had chosen to spend their coin.

They should go to the castle first anyway, and pay their respects to Arl Teagan. He was not officially Arl until the Landsmeet confirmed it, but as there was no other heir, it was not premature to call him such. It would be rude not to call on him and give him news. And then, too, there was Alistair's letter.

He had written a fairly long one, in the end. Astrid had helped

him, as she often did. Bronwyn wondered if the dwarven princess was interested in Alistair—personally interested. She was a very fine woman, and very intelligent. Bronwyn thought her friend could do far worse. King's by-blow or not, he had made clear that his life was with the Grey Wardens. As Astrid was also a Warden, who would care how they organized their private lives, other than those who wished them well?

There was more than one reason to visit the Arl, anyway. With luck, Teagan would be moved to offer them the hospitality of his castle, which certainly be preferable to that of the rather shabby inn Bronwyn had spotted, perched dizzily on a steep slope. Better for her companions, and certainly better for the horses.

The sentry on duty was daydreaming, but Scout uttered a loud bark, and brought the man to his feet, in a ridiculous pretense of military efficiency.

"I am Warden-Commander Bronwyn," she told the gaping man crisply, "here to see the Arl. Is he at the Castle?"

"You're the Girl Warden!" the guard blurted out.

Patiently, she agreed. "Yes, I am the Girl Warden. Is the Arl at home? I wish to see him."

The guard thought he might be. Or he might be out in the desmesne fields or orchards. Or nearby.

"I'll find him," Bronwyn finally said, ready to move on, if only to

stop Zevran from smirking.

Another hill, and then a long, long stone bridge that connected the dirt road with the entrance to the Castle. They trotted over it, too accustomed to Ostagar Gorge to be uncomfortable at the sight of the depths yawning below.

The guards at the courtyard gate were not quite such imbeciles as the sentry, and welcomed the Wardens properly, though with obvious curiosity. Both they and the seneschal who showed them into the Great Hall had a certain inexperienced air. That, of course, was only to be expected, since the demon infestation that Loghain and his troops had cleared away a few months ago had killed nearly all the servants in Redcliffe Castle, and many of the villagers as well.

Redcliffe, in fact, had been so damaged by that disaster that the arling was almost unrepresented in the army. Arl Teagan, of course, was needed to restore order to the place. Nonetheless, Bronwyn wondered that the Arl could spare none of his knights for the struggle with the darkspawn. Perhaps, if she came through on her way back, she might discover a likely candidate or two for the Wardens...

"Warden-Commander!"

Teagan had always been an attractive man; well barbered and well dressed almost to the point of being a dandy. Now he emerged from a door beyond, clearly having come straight from the harvest, dressed in a rough leather jerkin, heavy work breeches and even heavier boots. His hair was

disordered, and there was mud on his gloves and a smudge on his nose. He looked harassed and exhausted.

There were lines and shadows in his face she had never before seen there. It had been a bad year for the Guerrins, all around: Arl Eamon was dead; his son and heir revealed as a mage and slain. The unfortunate Arlessa Isolde was dead as well. The King, royal nephew of the Guerrins, had perished only a few days since. Loghain had sent word, she knew. What a painful loss for Arl Teagan Cailan's death must be.

He made a good show of welcome, but she sensed that he was not particularly glad to be burdened with visitors at such a time.

Except...

"You were with the King in his last hours, I understand," said Teagan. "It would mean a great deal to me to hear of them from you. Parchment and ink can only say so much."

No, he probably had not found Loghain's letter a great comfort.

"My lord Arl, I am at your service. If we might trouble you for a night's lodging, I shall tell you everything I know."

A courteous lie. She would certainly not tell him *everything*, but she would tell him the truth as far as she could.

"Of course..." He paused, eyes widening, as he noticed her

strange green eyes and scarred face. Politely looking away, he addressed his seneschal instead. "Laurey, see that the Wardens have the best we can offer." He composed himself and turned back to Bronwyn. " When you are refreshed, Warden-Commander, I hope you will join me in my study to talk over these sad times."

The guest rooms at Castle Redcliffe were very fine. Her own bedchamber was large and luxurious, with an immense fireplace and a wide and inviting bed. The maids were clumsy and talked too much; but they brought the necessary hot water, and resigned themselves to serving Tara and Zevran after Bronwyn gave them a short, sharp word or two. Tara was a *Warden*. *A Warden!* What did these yokels not understand about that?

She had not brought her gown, of course, but she had clean shirt, breeches, and griffon tunic to change into after her wash. She set off to find Teagan, glancing in at her people as she went downstairs. Cullen was being harassed by admiring maidservants. Leliana was ordering hers about, demanding a bath. Both of them had fine quarters. Zevran and Tara had been given the smallest and darkest of the guestrooms, but at least it had a good bed. That was all they were likely to care about.

The study was a noble place, clearly a room intended for one man only, and that the master of the castle. Perhaps it was the way the desk was positioned, facing the door, with no other place for readers. It could not have been more different

from the library at Castle Highever, that inviting, cluttered room packed with books and furnished with various tables and benches for the scholar or casual visitor. Father's study had been just off it, but even there, entrance was not forbidden. What was private was under lock and key, but people were in and out all day, with the books free to all in the castle to enjoy—as long as they were noted down in the librarian's lending register.

This room, however, opulent and well-lit, was the Arl's private retreat. Across from the elaborate Orlesian-style desk, a comfortable chair had been placed, evidently for her, or others deemed worthy of entrance.

Teagan had changed into a brocade doublet and brushed his hair. He was leaning on the mantel, staring into the fire, when the seneschal announced her.

"Come in, come in, Warden-Commander." He smiled handsomely, showing her to the comfortable chair and dismissing the servant. "I have mulled wine for you. Dinner will be ready fairly soon."

"You are a hero amongst hosts, my lord Arl," she laughed. "It has been a hard and chilly few days on the road."

"Too true. The nights are turning cold." He gave her a fine silver cup of the spicy liquor, steaming and fragrant.

Bronwyn breathed it in, warming her hands. She took a cautious sip. "This is perfect."

He poured for himself, and took the elaborate chair behind the desk, his smile turning melancholy. "You are the first visitor of note to come since the disaster here. I am well aware of the scale of the struggles at Ostagar, but the last few months have been difficult. And we get few travelers nowadays. Many fear trouble on the roads. We have have been left ourselves to ourselves."

It had not occurred to her that he might have felt deserted, with the King and his captains departing after destroying the demons, leaving Teagan to put Redcliffe to rights with no help.

She said, "It is appalling what you and your people have suffered, and at such a time. They say disasters come in threes. Indeed, I hope no more befall this country. There is the tragedy here in Redcliffe, and Arl Howe's treason in the north, which is occupying all my brother's attention. And then in the south we are holding the darkspawn back, but nearly nothing is left left over for troubles unforeseen."

Teagan did not know much of the events at Highever, other than the bare facts of the massacre. Bronwyn could tell him what she knew: that Arl Howe and two of his children were dead at the hands of the Crows, sent by the rather sinister Antivan noblewoman who was the mother of Fergus' late wife. Teagan spared some sympathy for Lady Delilah Howe, the unhappy innocent caught up in her father's treachery. Bronwyn wondered briefly if Rendon Howe had sent out some marriage feelers there. He had always wanted Fergus to marry Delilah, and the collapse of those plans would have angered him, certainly, but he would still have wanted Delilah married to his

advantage. Teagan was only a bann at the time, but the brother of the Arl of Redcliffe, whose only child was very young.

"But Teyrn Fergus was victorious, you say," Teagan said, taking another long draught of the delicious wine. "That is good news. Surely with their leader gone, the rebels will surrender."

"So I hope. And those who do not are welcome to go to the Void," Bronwyn said feelingly. "Fergus must secure the North, lest our neighbors see us as ripe for the picking."

"That is a consideration, indeed. I heard a rumor from a trader..." Teagan hesitated. "...that there had been an attempt on Teyrn Loghain's life."

"A pair of assassins," Bronwyn nodded. "They were killed before they could be made to speak, but we have every reason to believe they were in Orlesian pay. We will never know, of course."

"But the Teyrn was not badly hurt, I trust."

"I was not there at the time, but our excellent Warden Healer was, and he can work miracles. The Teyrn was in perfect health when last I saw him." Bronwyn felt her face heat, just a little, and hoped her blush was not apparent. In fact, Loghain had proved himself in very robust health indeed, the night before she left on her quest. Luckily, Teagan's thoughts were elsewhere. He gazed into the fire for a moment, and then

changed the subject.

"I am surprised to see you so far from the conflict with the darkspawn. You have been doing good work in the south. They call you Dragonslayer now, and not without cause, as I understand."

"I did not fight the dragon alone. Hard as the fight was, we were glad of the chance to practice and learn more about how to kill such a huge creature. Without griffons to take the battle to the skies, the Grey Wardens must develop new tactics."

"Very sensible of you." He set down his cup, and leaned forward. "So, if I may ask, why are you here?"

She must tell him something, and so told him the previously arranged lie, feeling a little sorry that she must alarm this decent man.

"We have had reports of darkspawn west of Lake Calenhad. I am concerned that they may be coming to the surface in a less defended place. I hoped to catch a boat here that would take me to the mouth of the Sulcher River."

She was right: he was *very* alarmed.

"I shall send my men to arrange a boat for you at once!" He was up and striding to the door, calling urgently for a guardsman. A brief conference, and the soldier was hurrying away. Bronwyn was ashamed of the lie, but also pleased that she would not have to track down a boat herself. Threatening

people with darkspawn was frighteningly effective.

"There!" Teagan said, taking his seat again. "It's all arranged. The *Lady of the Lake* can take you where you wish to go in the morning. I pray you, let me know as soon as possible what you discover!"

"I do intend to come through Redcliffe on my journey back to Ostagar," she promised. "You'll be the first to know. It may be nothing. I certainly hope so!" Her wine was gone. Teagan obligingly filled her cup again. "Thank you. Ferelden needs no more troubles than the ones we are already facing. I wish that Fergus was not forced to leave us, with all that has happened."

He gave her a fleeting, intense look, and then settled back casually.

"Amaranthine will need an arl, of course. Is there any word of Lord Nathaniel?"

"Not as far as I know. Rendon Howe sent him to the Free Marches years ago. I do not even know if he is alive. If he wishes to claim Amaranthine, he must come to the Landsmeet."

"Yes... the Landsmeet. It was in Loghain's letter. I must go to that myself, of course. Travel in the month of Haring will not be easy or pleasant for anyone. However, it will be the most important Landsmeet in many a year."

There was a long silence. Bronwyn decided to let the man ask his questions in his own time.

"Did you see the King's will?" he said, rather surprising her. It was not the question she had expected.

"I did. As you know, he declared that there was to be a Landmeet, to be held three months after his death. That took place on the sixth of Kingsway, which would make the sixth of Haring the date the Landsmeet begins. In the interim, Queen Anora is to rule. King Cailan also indicated that the Dalish elves were to be given a land grant as a reward for their loyal service."

"He truly did not name a successor?"

"He did not. Not a single name was mentioned in the document. I don't think that the King really believed that he was going to die, and so he did not take the making of his will as seriously as he otherwise might have."

"You were with him? You are certain it was the Blight sickness?"

"It was, without doubt. He rushed forward to personally engage an ogre in the battle that day and was grabbed by the creature. He must have been infected then. It progressed very rapidly, and there was nothing even the best Healer could do, in the end."

He was quiet for some time. Then he wanted to know every

detail of Cailan's death, however painful. Bronwyn gave him an edited version, telling him nothing of the attempt to make the king a Grey Warden. She included Cailan's rewards to the Wardens who had fought by his side, and the knighting of Ser Adam Hawke, who had saved the king— at least in the short term. Then she described the scene as the King began showing signs of rapidly advancing Blight sickness, the quick writing of his will, the brief farewells, and his death. She told him of the funeral the next day, and recited as much of Loghain's funeral address as she could remember.

"I am very sorry for your loss," she concluded gently. "He was not only your king, but a dear kinsman."

Teagan's voice thickened. "Cailan... such a scamp he was as a boy. Everyone loved him."

Bronwyn had never loved King Cailan, but said, "He had a gift for winning people to him. He was very like his father in that way."

"He was." His face contracted, and for a moment Bronwyn thought he would weep. "The thought of the ancient line of Calenhad coming to end like that... It grieves me more than I can say. The Theirins have meant so much to Ferelden. For that matter, there would be no Ferelden without them." He paused, and then said abruptly. "How is Alistair?"

Ah, here it comes... she thought.

She did not allow her thoughts to appear on her face. She laid

the folded parchment on the desk. Smoothly, she said, "He's very well, and here is his letter. I could not have a better Senior Warden. Now that he's had a chance to prove his worth and become known, he's gained a great deal of respect. Teyrn Loghain thinks very highly of him."

That made Teagan smile. "Does he? That's good hearing. Like fa—"

He broke off. Bronwyn knew what he had nearly said. *Like father, like son.*

"And who," Teagan asked, "is Loghain backing for King?"

"He has made no public announcement," Bronwyn said. "I think we're all in shock at the moment." She watched him, eyes carefully limpid, to see if he would accept that.

He did, not evidently conversant with Ostagar gossip, which would put Bronwyn so close in Loghain's counsels as to practically be sitting in his lap. "We'll see, I suppose. I daresay you have hopes for your brother."

"Couslands always do their duty, my lord. If Fergus is given the crown, I know that he will serve this country with diligence, courage, and good sense. Our family is the next in line to inherit, as you know." She also knew that Teagan, like Eamon, had voted against her father and for their nephew Cailan. Understandable but wrong-headed. The country would not be in the fix it was in if wisdom and experience had carried the day, and King Bryce ruled in Ferelden.

"Well..." he paused. "It could be that there is another heir, closer in blood than your brother..."

Bronwyn raised her brows in polite inquiry.

"He's such a modest lad," Teagan said. "I'm sure he hasn't confided in you, but if people knew..." He saw that she was still waiting, and then bit his lip and came out with it. "I'm speaking of our mutual friend Alistair. I wonder that Loghain hasn't marked the resemblance to Maric. Alistair is King Maric's son. On the wrong side of the blanket, unfortunately." He managed a melancholy chuckle.

"Yes, I do know," Bronwyn told him. "Alistair is a very good friend and confided to me what Arl Eamon had told him of his birth. It is a great pity King Maric did not choose to acknowledge him."

"He is a Theirin, and the nearest heir."

Bronwyn set down her cup. "Tell me, my lord: did King Maric tell you this personally?"

Teagan took a breath, and the corners of his mouth turned down. "No. My brother told me what the king told him when Alistair was given into his care."

"Well then, you see the difficulty," Bronwyn said mildly. "There is no one left in the world who can take oath that King Maric told him personally that Alistair was his son. Is there anything in writing? Did Arl Eamon," she pressed, "mention Alistair in

his will?" She saw the look on his face and raised a hand in a peaceful gesture. "I am not doubting Alistair's word, my lord. Not in the least. I *believe* him. However, think of how the Landsmeet will receive this claim. They will demand proof, and there is none—or at least none that will satisfy Arl Wulffe and his sons, or Arl Bryland, or Arl Urien, or even Nathaniel Howe, if he is present. Every one of them has Theirin blood to some degree or other. Do you think that any of them will stand aside for an unacknowledged bastard?"

"Eamon did not mention Alistair in his will, but that was written after Alistair became a Warden. He took Alistair into his household..." His words faded in the face of the expression Bronwyn turned on him.

"If we put Alistair before the Landsmeet, people will look into his years at Redcliffe. I do not wish to speak against your brother, but we must consider the matter rationally. They will discover that Alistair was not raised as Arl Eamon's ward, but slept in the stables, and worked as a dogboy and stablehand until he was sent to the Chantry. He was not given a bed or taught his letters or given the kind of training due a noble—not to mention royal—fosterling. When the Landsmeet learns of the treatment your brother thought appropriate, Alistair's claim will fall to pieces."

"Eamon feared that people would think Alistair his own bastard." Teagan winced, and put his head in his hands. "That doesn't sound any better, does it?"

"I'm afraid not. And there is another possible difficulty. Alistair

knows nothing of his mother, other than that she was a Redcliffe serving maid. Was she, in fact, human? Or not?"

Teagan, his head still in his hands, groaned aloud.

Bronwyn had more to say about that. "I bring it up, my lord, because King Maric's penchant for elven beauties was very well known. The Landsmeet will never support a claimant of half-elven blood, no matter who the father."

She decided not to get into the whole matter of the Orlesians apparently knowing who Alistair was. Arlessa Isolde must have let slip that bit of gossip, but a claim supported only by the Orlesians would be laughed out of the Landsmeet. Loghain, too, seemed to know all about Alistair, but Bronwyn had never asked him how he had come to learn about her friend. Possibly Maric had confided in him eventually, or Loghain had an agent in Redcliffe with his ear to closed doors. Loghain was certainly not going to support Alistair before the Landsmeet, so the point was moot anyway.

"Furthermore," she said. "Alistair does not *want* to be King."

He sat straight up and stared at her. "And how would you know that?"

"Because, my lord," she said, with some asperity, "I *asked* him. No doubt Alistair found it rather startling— being asked for once what he would like to do. I don't think anyone ever had before. I talked to him about his claim to the throne, and asked him outright if he wished to pursue it. He actually

shouted at me, which believe me has not often happened before. He was horrified at the idea. He hates being put in a position of authority. I have been trying to encourage leadership in him—with no small amount of difficulty, I may add. Somehow, it was ingrained in Alistair that he was nothing and nobody, and that terrible things would happen if he took command. Furthermore, he loves being a Grey Warden and does not want to leave the order."

Teagan rose from his chair and walked to the window, clearly upset. He turned on Bronwyn and said, "You do not consider him disqualified because he is a Grey Warden?"

He was no fool, certainly. She only said, "I think that would be absurd, as we are in a Blight. The Grey Wardens are going to be involved to some degree in Fereldan politics while the Blight lasts. No, I would not disqualify Alistair because he is a Warden, but because his claim cannot be substantiated to the degree that the Landsmeet will demand. It would be putting him through a hideous experience for nothing. No, my lord Arl: the Couslands have the closest, legitimate, *proven* claim to the throne."

Teagan chose his words carefully. "I may not know who Teyrn Loghain intends to support, but it is clear you prefer your brother's claim to Alistair's. I suppose it is only natural."

"Alistair is my dear friend, and we have saved one another's lives any number of times. My brother, however, is my brother. Not only is my support for a Cousland claim natural: I consider it rational, honorable, and having a good chance of

success." She pushed Alistair's letter in the Arl's direction, smiling sympathetically. "Alistair made a point of telling me not to let you talk me into pushing his claim. Read his letter for yourself: it may be that he touches on the subject."

The seneschal reappeared, making enough noise for them to notice him. "Dinner is served, my lord."

"Very well, Laurey," Teagan told the man. "We shall be there directly." To Bronwyn he bowed courteously. "We can agree to disagree, I hope. I cannot let go of the Theirin line so easily. I will read Alistair's letter, and then make my case to him. In the meantime, let us enjoy the finest dinner Castle Redcliffe can offer the Warden-Commander of Ferelden!"

It was a very fine dinner indeed. Redcliffe, Brownyn was told, was enjoying a most successful harvest; and because of the casualties months before, there were far fewer mouths to feed. People from smaller villages to the south had come to the arl's seat, and moved into the empty cottages, into the shops and the smithy. Some of the new folk had found work in the castle itself. It certainly explained the inexperience of some of the staff. Fortunately, the cook was sound.

Mother Hannah, the superior of Redcliffe Chantry, was among the guests, and proved a very pleasant and kindly old woman. One of her priests accompanied her, and her senior Templar, by name Ser Henric. As Tara was not carrying or wearing anything that screamed "mage," there were no suspicious or frightened stares. A remarkably pretty young woman and a

small boy were with the Chantry folk, dressed very simply. Introductions were made, and the girl's name was Kaitlyn Merton, a poor relation of the Bann of Whitewood Hills and a distant cousin of the Guerrins themselves. Her little brother Bevin was thrilled to dine in the Arl's Great Hall—and also to meet the famous Grey Wardens.

"Dear Kaitlyn is not taking vows in the Chantry, though I think it would be best for her," Mother Hannah whispered to Bronwyn. "She and her little brother are quite alone in the world, and have nothing but their little cottage and a small pension our good Arl has kindly granted them. He would have them move into the Castle itself, but I told him it would ruin the poor child's reputation, as there is no chaperone for her there. If Kaitlyn were to enter the religious life, then Bevin could be taken on by Arl Teagan as a page, and trained up to be a knight some day. As it is, the children cannot bear to be separated."

"I would hate to be separated from my brother, were I in similar circumstances," Bronwyn said. Young Kaitlyn seemed nice, and was certainly *very* pretty. Teagan had avoided marriage for years and years, but as the last Guerrin, he could avoid it no longer. If he disliked the company of the proud and highborn, perhaps he need look no farther than this appealing young orphan, who had at least had good looks and a bit of noble blood to commend her. At any rate, she could hardly be a worse Arlessa than the late Isolde, whose only child had brought ruin and death to the arling.

Cullen spoke up. "I wonder if Mother Hannah or her priests

know Brother Genetivi?"

As it happened, none of them did. The only person present who knew even the name was Teagan himself, who recognized it from the same biography of the Rebel Queen that Bronwyn had read.

"What is your interest in him?" the arl asked.

"I met him on my way to Orzammar," Bronwyn said lightly. "He was an old friend of my late tutor. I thought it a risky time to go traveling, and told him so; but of course he was unconvinced, having already traveled so widely around Thedas. I have been wondering what happened to him."

There was some grave discussion of the dangers of the roads. The most senior of the nights, Ser Perth, predicted dire consequences for any lone traveler.

For that matter, all of Teagan's surviving knights were well-bred men, and capable of being polite even to elven Grey Wardens and their companions. They were particularly gracious to Bronwyn, Cullen, and above all to Leliana, whose bright red hair and lovely face attracted a great deal of attention. She loved to dress up, and had talked the maids into finding her a gown from the cupboards. The late Arlessa had possessed so many gowns that Teagan did not recognize the expensive confection of blue and lavender silk Leliana wore to dinner. She had also brought her lute, which caused a stir of pleasurable excitement.

The general pleasure was even greater when she sang for them: *Black Fox and the Bounty Hunter*; *Childe Briony*; *The Battle of River Dane*.

Servants gathered at the back of the Great Hall to listen. The knights and Wardens grew mellow with good drink and the beauty of the music. Bronwyn felt herself relaxing a little; for the moment not having to deal with politics or war.

"A Warden Minstrel!" Teagan's pleasant voice rose above the cheers and applause that followed the last rippling chord. He lifted his cup in salute. "I did not know there could be anything so charming. Warden-Commander, you certainly run the Wardens on pleasanter lines than others have! Look here, Warden Leliana...I hope you won't take offense at a gift, but we've had so little cheer in Redcliffe these past months. Permit me to give you something as a keepsake of a memorable evening."

Leliana dimpled at him. "My lord, would it possible... to keep this gown?"

Light laughter and more applause. Teagan bowed graciously. "As you wish, Warden! It becomes you far better than it would me!"

"How about a story?" an over-excited young Bevin shouted. His sister blushed and silenced him, but there was support for the suggestion.

"Yes! A story!" A knight urged, and then others echoed him.

Leliana smiled and seemed willing. There was a pleasant air of expectation.

"An *improving* story," Mother Hannah prompted.

The expectant air deflated somewhat, but Leliana was not unwilling to oblige a priest. "I shall tell my favorite story. All of you know this...some of you *very* well...but I love to recite it and to think about it. I have heard many versions of it and put them all together for this. I shall speak of our beloved Prophet and her deeds."

Quite a few people actually looked pleased. It was a famously devout Court, after all. Bronwyn forbore to sigh, and took solace in the music of Leliana's voice.

Leliana's story of Andraste, Bride of the Maker

There is a great rock near the palace in the city of Denerim. That is the Birth Rock, where it is said that the Prophet Andraste first saw the light of day. In those days, long ago, the city was no more than a little fishing village. One day, a ship dropped anchor, and Tevinter soldiers stormed ashore. They captured and enslaved the villagers, leaving behind only the old and infirm. The prisoners were chained in the dark and filthy hold of the ship, and were taken far away, to be sold in the markets of the great city of Minrathous. One of the captives was the child Andraste.

She was raised in slavery in a foreign land. After some years,

she escaped, then made the long and treacherous journey back to her homeland alone. She rose from nothing to be the wife of an Alamarri warlord, the mighty Maferath.

Andraste's face was a shining light of beauty, and her voice the sweetest that ever has been heard in the world, from that day to this. Each day she sang to the gods, asking them to help her people in bondage. The ancient tribal gods of the mountains and the winds did not answer her, but the true god did.

The Maker spoke. He showed her all the works of His hands: the Fade, the world, and all the creatures therein. He showed her how men had forgotten Him, lavishing devotion upon mute idols and demons and dragons; and how in disgust He had left them to their fate. But her voice had reached Him, and so captivated Him that He offered her a place at His side, that she might rule all of creation.

But Andraste would not forsake her people.

She begged the Maker to return, to save His children from the cruelty of the Imperium. Reluctantly, the Maker agreed to give mankind another chance.

Andraste went back to her husband Maferath, and told him all that the Maker had revealed to her. Together, they rallied the Alamarri and marched forth against the mage-lords of the Imperium; and the Maker was with them.

The Maker's sword was creation itself: fire and flood, famine

and earthquake. The Blight, the judgement of the Maker for the wickedness of the magisters, had ravaged Thedas. Everywhere they went, Andraste sang to the people of the Maker, and they heard her. This was Andraste's March: the first and greatest of all Exalted Marches. The ranks of Andraste's followers grew until they were a vast tide washing over the Imperium. And when Maferath saw that the people loved Andraste and not him, and that she loved the Maker more than she did Maferath, a worm grew within his heart, gnawing upon it.

At last, the armies of Andraste and Maferath stood before the very gates of Minrathous, but Andraste was not with them.

For Maferath had schemed in secret to hand Andraste over to the Tevinters. For this, Archon Hessarian would give Maferath all the lands to the south of the Waking Sea.

And so, before all the armies of the Alamarri and of Tevinter, Andraste was tied to a stake and burned while her earthly husband turned his armies aside and did nothing; for his heart had been hardened by jealousy. But as the archon watched the pyre, he was seized with sudden, overwhelming compassion. He took pity on Andraste, and drew his sword, granting her the mercy of a quick death.

The Maker wept for His Beloved, cursed Maferath, cursed mankind for their betrayal, and turned once again from creation, taking only Andraste with him. And Our Lady sits still at his side, where still, ceaselessly, she urges Him to take pity on His children.

"My dear child!" cried Mother Hannah. "How beautifully you tell that greatest of stories! It is a blessing to hear it!"

Cullen leaned over, brown eyes warm, to whisper praise in Leliana's ear. She smiled back him, clearly in sympathy.

There was a great deal of applause, even a great deal from the back of the Hall. It occurred to Bronwyn that poor folk from the Hinterlands might never have heard the story told as a coherent whole. Even little Bevin liked it, but then it was full of fighting and Swords of Mercy and heroic adventure.

And since it was Redcliffe, and a famously devout Court, Mother Hannah blessed them, and they trooped upstairs to the chapel for evening prayers.

It was quite the chapel: far bigger and more elaborate than the chapel at Castle Highever. Bronwyn tried to keep her face a mask of bland piety, but after seeing the poverty of the little village nearby, it was difficult to approve of the luxury and opulence of Redcliffe Castle. Bronwyn sat, and knelt, and made the proper responses; but her mind was already on the journey ahead, and what they might find on the other side of the lake.

It was a two-day journey, north-northwest, from Redcliffe to Sulcher. *The Lady of the Lake* was not a particularly comfortable vessel, but at least they were safe from darkspawn when aboard her. The shoreline slipped past with

dream-like slowness; while Bronwyn and her companions used the forced inactivity to further study the maps, books, and notes left behind by Brother Genetivi, trying to draw out every possible bit of information from them.

The shoreline itself told them nothing. In time, the forbidding red cliffs of the south gave way to low-lying forests, dark green almost to black. Hills rose up behind the forests, and beyond them, in the far west, were the distant Frostback Mountains, misty grey and forbidding.

As day faded to twilight, they arrived at the the village of Sulcher, and docked.

They had thought Redcliffe a poor village, but Sulcher was even smaller. A few cottages, a merchant's little shop, a smithy, a mill, and a tumble-down tavern: that was the village in its entirety. There was no Chantry there, nor even the smallest chapel.

Of course they stopped at the tavern, and there they had a curious encounter.

"Brother Genetivi?" the innkeeper asked, eyes wide and blinking. "Never heard of him. Haven't seen any strangers around here but you lot and that trader Felix."

Leliana cleared her throat and caught Bronwyn's eye. Even without the bard's help, Bronwyn had no trouble seeing that the man was lying...and rather frightened.

"How odd," Bronwyn said smoothly. "For I saw the good brother when he took ship to come here some months ago. He was traveling to a village called Haven. Is it far from here?"

The man froze, knuckles whitening as he gripped a half-filled tankard like a shield. His lips moved, struggling to find words. He stuttered, "H-H-Haven? Never heard of it!"

Tara gazed up at him with her big elven eyes. "That's really peculiar, since our map shows it's only a half-day's journey from here as the crow flies. It's your closest neighbor, in fact."

The innkeeper slammed the tankard down, foamy ale slopping onto the bar. "I've never heard of it! And I'll thank you to leave my inn!"

"I don't think so," Bronwyn told him kindly. "We're staying the night, and our horses will remain in the shanty you call a stable. I don't know what it is about the name of Haven that frightens you, but I assure you that you are in no danger with a force of Wardens here to protect you."

Her companions crowded up to the bar. Cullen loomed over the innkeeper, his shadow falling across the man's face. For a moment Bronwyn thought the man would burst into tears.

"Please," he whispered, mouth barely moving. "Please. Don't talk about Haven."

No one else wanted to talk to them about Haven either. Faces folded closed at the questions, stubborn as locked doors.

At a table far from the rest of the regulars, Zevran expressed his opinion. "We must be very cautious here. These people are afraid. They are so afraid they will not even confide to us what it is they fear. That means that we cannot know what it is and guard against it."

Only one man approached them: another traveler. This individual was a trader with the improbably pretentious name of Felix de Grosbois. He sidled up to their table, oozed on to a bench, and began hawking his goods with impressive effrontery.

"An Ontraprenyure such as myself finds many a rarity. I can see that you're all the sort who can appreciate the finer things —" he leered at Leliana, who was amused rather than offended. "—so I must tell you straight out that this your lucky day. I have an Objay Dee Art in my possession which is far too extraordinary to show to lesser folk. I couldn't think of letting it go, 'cept to Grey Wardens and members of the nobility."

He showed them a curious short stick of metal: about the width of a finger, incised with dwarven runes, and gleaming dully in his dirty palm.

"Very nice," said Bronwyn patiently. "What is it?"

"Well might you ask!" replied the eager merchant. "Something which even a highborn lady like yourself has never seen! This, my friends, is a golem's control rod."

Bronwyn scowled, remembering the golems in Orzammar. If this charlatan had a control rod, did that mean that some golem was on a rampage somewhere else?

Tara was entertained, however, and gave the man the silver he wanted. Bronwyn got rid of him with a promise to look over his other goods the following morning, and the young mage was left to gloat over her curio.

"I suppose I can thump someone over the head with it," she laughed.

Bronwyn hefted it in her right hand, considering the weight. "If you held it in your hand and punched someone, it would probably hurt quite a lot."

It was a brief, bright moment in a gloomy place. In the end, they decided to stay in the same room and to take turns keeping watch that night. The inn was an edgy place.

But the night passed without incident. Bronwyn quietly paid off the innkeeper, and they left early, after a some quick purchases from amongst Trader Felix's foodstuffs. The villagers watched them silently as they rode west from the village, but shrank away when looked at directly. The sensation of being watched did not fade, even after the village was long out of sight.

Thank you, my reviewers: demonincargles, mutive, Zute, Mike, Kira Kyuu, Jyggilag, Tidigod784, EroSlackerMicha,

Reyvateil Songstress, Notnahtanha, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, anon, cloud1004, JackOfBladesX, Mystricka, Wedger, Blinded in a bolthole, Josie Lange, KngihtOfHolyLight, Jenna53, MsBarrows, SkaterGirl246, Juliafied, Shakespeira, Girl-chama, Ellyanah, GLCW2, Have Travel, Sarah1281, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Halm Vendrella, Ardonia-Servant-Of-Zeta, graydevilforever, almostinsane, Zikarn Kraiss, WhosAmandaPhillips, EpitomeofShyness, Enaid Aderyn, mille libri, Cobar713, karinfan123, Tsu Doh Nimh, Keralai Worthward, Tyanilth, and riverdaleswhiteflash.

Andraste's story is adapted from various codices. However, canon often contradicts itself, and I have tried to make sense of it. For example, one codex says that Andraste came from Denerim; another says a fishing village on the Waking Sea. Denerim is on the Amaranthine Ocean. It could be that the story about the village on the Waking Sea is the basis for the claim by the Orlesian city of Jader that it is the birthplace of Andraste.

52. Arrived today at the Village of Haven

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 52: *"Arrived Todaye at the Village of Havene..."*

A chilly wind whipped the brown leaves from the trees. Ravens croaked out warnings as Bronwyn and her companions rode up the steep and narrow path into the mountains toward Haven.

"At least the water is good!" Zevran called out, trying to be heard over the rushing water of the River Sulcher.

Bronwyn nodded absently, munching dried apples, while Zevran refilled their canteens. They let the horses rest and drink their fill. Cullen knelt by the muddy bank and splashed his face. Water down in the village of Sulcher had a flat taste and a muddy odor. The last thing they needed was to get sick bellies from bad water. Up here air and water were infinitely purer and clearer.

Cullen determinedly looked away from Tara and Zevran flirting together, and came over to speak to Bronwyn.

"I was wondering..." he began. "When we were at Redcliffe, some of the knights spoke to me. Arl Teagan..." He grimaced

then spoke forthrightly. "Alistair is King Maric's son, isn't he?"

"There doesn't seem to be any written evidence," Bronwyn temporized, "but that is what Arl Eamon told Alistair, and it would seem that King Cailan believed it."

"I know that Alistair is a Grey Warden, but would that make it impossible for him to be king?"

"No," Bronwyn said. She could hardly say otherwise, after all. "In my opinion, it would not. However, Alistair has made it very plain to me that he does not *want* to be king. I told Arl Teagan as much, and I could see he was disappointed, but really, I can't imagine what he expects. Alistair was not acknowledged by King Maric, which I believe would be necessary before his claim could even be considered. Arl Eamon did not raise Alistair as a prince, but as a servant—a stable boy. I don't know if King Maric ordered that or simply did not care. However, were Alistair put his claim before the Landsmeet, all sorts of unpleasant things would be said. Speculation would be rife. And Cullen, you *know* who his mother is. The moment that got out, it would all be over. An Orlesian? An elf? A *mage*?"

He nodded, his face falling into melancholy. "It seems so cruel...so unfair... Just because his mother... Our world is very unjust to elves."

Bronwyn studied him a moment, wondering if he, as a former Templar, was willing to grant the same for mages. "I agree, but realistically, Cullen, even if Alistair's mother were human

and the Redcliffe serving girl she was given out to be, many in the Landsmeet would sneer at him. If King Maric had acknowledged him and educated him, it would still have been difficult. I believe he would have been given a bannorn of his own, and that would have been that. Or he would have been used to make a diplomatic marriage abroad. Our world is unjust, and sometimes it seems to me that it is unjust to *everyone*."

He sighed deeply. "That's true enough. Arl Teagan was not pleased with what you had to say, I suppose."

Bronwyn had been thinking about that herself. "Arl Teagan is a very loyal man: loyal to Ferelden and to the ancient Theirin line. It is a great wrench for him to let go of it, and of course he is grieving for the king...and for his whole family. Also," she added, more carefully, "I believe he feels very guilty about Alistair, though I don't see how any of that is his fault."

Cullen agreed. "He was his brother's vassal, after all. The old arl would never have allowed him to take the boy in after he himself had kept him in the stables. There would have been a lot of talk. It's sad though. And Alistair's mother is a fine woman. It's not right that having elven mother would set so many people against him."

"As you say, the world is unjust to elves."

"Tara's suffered so much, too. I worry about her."

Bronwyn blinked, startled at the change of subject. Was this

what all the talk about elves and injustice was really about? "Tara is more protected now as a Grey Warden. As to her personal life, she has made her choice, and as her friends we must support her."

"I just wish... I don't want Tara to be hurt again."

Bronwyn groaned inwardly. Why did people think she wanted them to confide in her about their love lives? She could barely keep her own in order. She said, "I know you're disappointed, but there are lots of other apples in the barrel, as my old Nan used to say. Brosca is very fond of you..."

He smiled briefly. "Brosca...she's such a good comrade. But..." A sheepish glance. "Yes, I know she's interested in me that way. She made herself very plain. I was a coward, and I told her that I needed time to get over Tara."

"A coward?" Bronwyn felt she was not going to like what she would hear next.

"Yes. I was a coward, giving her false hope. I like Brosca very much. She's a brave, cheerful girl. I just could never feel about her the way she does about me. I don't find her attractive. I couldn't think of any kind way to tell her that, so... I let her kiss me instead."

"Then that was badly done of you," Bronwyn said sharply. "That was wrong. She's practically thrown herself at you for months. You don't want *Tara* to be hurt? I don't either, but I also don't want Brosca hurt. You think because she's tough-

talking and full of bravado that she doesn't have a heart to be broken?"

He turned very red. "No! Maker, of course not! I know it was wrong. I'm hoping that by the time we're back she'll have found someone else. There are thousands of dwarves in Ostagar. I thought it was a good idea to get away for while."

"Yes, it probably was," she said shortly, irritated with him and his bloody lady-like ways. Was he a grown man or a baby? "I want you to be rear guard for the next stretch," she said, swinging onto her horse. "Keep your eyes open. I'll take point. Come on, everyone! Time to go!"

The shallow streambed was rocky, and with the water so white and foamy, trying to ford it would be a serious risk. Instead, they followed along the river's edge, and when the path diverged from the river, they stayed on the path, and did not venture into the water.

Scout was restless and uneasy, sniffing the air now and then, lowering his head as he glared into the underbrush. Bronwyn took another look at the map. The bend in the river was not far now. From due west, their trail would turn more toward the north, and climb higher into the mountains.

The air was still, filled only with the arrhythmic clop-clop of the horses hooves on the stony path. Up ahead the earth leveled off briefly, a little green meadow filling the river's arc.

"I hope Haven has a inn!" Tara remarked. "It's getting too cold

to camp outside at night..."

A beating of scores of dark wings, and the sky suddenly darkened as a flock of crows took flight. They swept down, just above the riders' heads. Horses shied and whinnied, shaking their manes in fright. Tara's horse reared and tugged the reins out of her grasp. She jolted back and forth, and then screamed as her chin slammed against the horse's neck. She dropped her staff, and it thudded to the ground and rolled away. Cullen reached out to help her calm her mount. Leliana shrilled out a warning.

"In the trees! They are coming!"

With her right hand, Bronwyn drew her sword. With her left, she was hauling her horse's head around to face the big men bursting out of the woods, branches crackling and falling in their wake. There were a half-dozen of them. A gut-deep roar heralded them, a wordless howl of bloodlust.

Leliana's bow hummed. An arrow struck one of the men in the lead, a tall man wearing a horned helmet of an ancient style. The fellow seemed not even to feel it, and kept on charging.

"Maker!" Leliana cried, and loosed again.

Zevran leaped from his horse and threw a dagger in the same smooth move. With a meaty thunk, it buried itself in a man's eye. There was a whoop and a tumble. Zevran stared in brief surprise as the man actually tried to get up, even with several inches of steel in his brain. Another enemy rushed past,

headed toward him. Zevran was only half aware that the first man eventually crumpled, scrabbling furiously at the dying grass until he lay still.

Bronwyn tugged on her reins and Posy reared, brandishing her hooves in a surprised man's face. Clearly he had never faced a warhorse before. He stumbled back, off balance, and Scout leaped on him with a fearsome snarl, knocking him down, and ripping at his throat. Posy stepped on him with one hoof and flinched back.

Arrows whizzed past, thudding into the tree trunks. One glanced off Bronwyn's helmet, ringing it like a bell. With a snarl she brought Posy to order and bore down on the leader, who was charging at Cullen, battleaxe swinging.

Cullen side-stepped a blow that would have felled an ox, and smoothly brought Yusaris down, the blade cleaving through the enemy's collarbone. Another attacker shoved forward, and slammed the flat of his axe against Cullen's chest, staggering him.

Tara was looking around desperately for her staff, when Cullen's attacker barked a shout of laughter and swung his axe. Her horse screamed, a shocking, shrilling deathcry, as the blade missed Tara and cut through the horse's spine.

A shuddering fall, legs spasming. Tara went with it, dropping to earth and crying out in pain as flesh met stone. She scrambled on all fours, groping for her staff, while Cullen rallied and dealt the axe man a buffet with the pommel of his

sword.

Leliana had brought down an archer, not quite hidden well enough in the autumn-thinned forest. Another arrow struck a thin man with a pair of daggers, who had thought it would be clever to jump up behind Bronwyn. He stumbled and fell before he could leave the ground.

Bronwyn trampled yet another underfoot and followed up with a sweeping cut from her sword. Another bowstring twanged, and she followed the sound. Posy picked up speed, jumping easily over a fallen log. The archer saw them coming, threw down his bow, and reached for his sword. Not quite in time. Bronwyn's sword tip cut open the side of his throat.

There was another man she hadn't seen. Maker! He jumped at her from the left, trying to pull her off her horse. His gauntlets were tipped with claws, and one finger scratched painfully across her neck.

Scout ran after her, worrying at the man's flailing legs, and yipped as the man landed a hard kick. The man clung to Bronwyn, growling like a beast. She thrust her sword at him awkwardly, point first across her own chest, slashing his face open. The blade slipped and grated against the mail covering her upper left arm. Her attacker got to his feet, spitting blood, and then suddenly froze and fell backwards, an arrow in his eye.

Bronwyn galloped back to the fight to see Zevran wrestling with a burly man with a pair of hatchets. One was lost

already, sticking in a tree stump. The other was still in contention. The man grunted, and a slash opened redly on Zevran's arm. The assassin showed no pain, but simply brought up his knee with a sharp jerk. The burly man howled with pain. Zevran rolled away, drew another dagger, reversed the grip, and drove it into the man's heart.

Tara tugged herself free of the dead horse. She screamed with rage, fingers finding her staff. Shortly thereafter, the fight ended in an eldritch blast of bitter cold.

There was no helping Tara's horse, which was long past healing. It lay dead where it had fallen. Tara looked down at the lifeless bulk, eyes misting.

"How could they kill a poor dumb beast?" she protested. "That was rotten! That was cruel!" She kicked the nearest dead enemy, hard. "And we were getting along together really well now! I had really learned how to ride! It's not fair!"

Zevran came up, and squeezed her shoulder sympathetically. Her eyes widened at his wound. Immediately, she pursed her lips with effort and set about healing him. Leliana moved about the little battlefield, retrieving her arrows, while Cullen calmed the surviving horses.

The nearest dead man lay sprawled on his back, his broken teeth grinning up at the sky. Bronwyn wiped at her neck and succeeded only in smearing blood on her armor.

"Hold still," Tara turned to her. "I'm not a great healer, but I

can heal a scratch like that."

Bronwyn waited for the flicker of blue, and winced at the sudden throb as her skin knitted itself back into place.

"Thanks. Now I think I'll have a look at our new acquaintances. See to Scout. I think he got a bad bruise."

Zevran moved Tara's bags from the dead horse to his. Bronwyn scowled at the loss of a horse. Bastards. Not that they were moving fast anyway, but if they had to make a quick retreat back to Sulcher, they would be handicapped from the start.

Cullen moved up beside her. "Are these Avar tribesmen?" he wondered. "Look at those helmets."

They were an ancient, primitive design, covering the face down to the nose, the crest decorated with ox horns.

"The horns of power," Bronwyn muttered, half-remembering some old history. There were woodcuts of old chiefs wearing such helmets. The thanes of the Chasind wore them still. And now these people, whoever they were...

Leliana shook her head, stepping over another dead man. "I have traveled through these mountains before and met the Avar. I see no tattoos. If they are Avar, they are a tribe I have never heard of. The helmets could be loot, you know."

Bronwyn hunkered down by the leader, and traced the scales

of his elaborate armor. Over his shoulders he wore a rich fur cape that crawled with vermin. Mastering her distaste at the feel of the dead man's skin, she tugged at the thong of a gold amulet tied around his neck.

"A dragon?"

A very fine dragon it was: richly detailed in soft, pure gold.

"Maybe it's the tribe's totem," Cullen remarked. "I still think they could be Avvar. They favor the battleaxe, too."

"At the moment it matters little," said Zevran. "They are enemies."

"It's possible they followed us from Sulcher, waiting for their chance." Bronwyn stood up, pocketing the amulet. "We should move on."

"I'm not done yet!" Taraprottested, tucking one of the dead men's daggers into her belt. "I can't get this one's ring off!"

Cullen made a face. Zevran, however, came gallantly to her rescue.

"Here," he said. With a quick stroke, he severed the finger and retrieved the ring. "This is very nice. You have a good eye for value, *bella mia*." With a bow, he presented it to her, to Cullen's great disgust.

"Their weapons, too, are of good quality," Leliana said, fingering a blade. "Look Cullen, it is well-forged. These are

not savages." She yanked an arrow out of the ground and studied the head. "Good steel tips. I have never seen barbs like these, though."

They moved on, ever watchful. Tara rode behind Zevran, clinging to his waist and giggling. The assassin laughed.

"A more pleasant way to travel, yes? "

"Yes!" Tara laughed, kissing the back of his neck.

The river branched off, and the trail with it; but Bronwyn followed the southerly stream, as the map indicated. She stopped briefly, baffled, as it seemed to end, but Scout sniffed around some boulders, and the broken twigs behind were evidence that men had passed this way. Once past a dense bracken, the trail opened up again.

"Not much longer now. We'd best watch out. They may be waiting for us."

"Well, those men certainly were," Leliana agreed.

The trail grew steeper yet, and the pines closed in around them. Scout seemed to have no trouble following it, but people had gone to a great deal of trouble to keep this trail unnoticeable to the casual eye.

"We're going to have to dismount here," Bronwyn said. "Let's lead the horses for a bit."

Further on, the side of the trail opened up into another little

path. Bronwyn stopped, puzzled at which one to follow, and turned off to the left. After a few dozen yards it led to a broad, hidden meadow, where sheep placidly grazed. A young boy with a shepherd's crook saw them and froze briefly in alarm. Then he ran in the opposite direction, and vanished into the trees.

"This clearly isn't the way to the village," Bronwyn said. "We'd best retrace our steps."

The other path turned steep, but soon, looking up, they could see the end of it: a pair of posts at the top of the path that generally indicated the entry to a town of some sort. And, like most towns, there was a watchman there.

"Only one of them," Tara muttered. "That's good, isn't it? And he's not dressed like those others."

"He doesn't look very friendly," Leliana said softly.

He was not at all friendly. He did not appear fearful, and did not immediately go for his sword, but he glared at them with a mixture of suspicious and dislike.

"Is this Haven?" Bronwyn called out.

"We do not welcome intruders!" the guard shouted back. "Go back the way you came!"

Zevran moved carefully to the side, keeping his eyes open for an ambush. He smirked.

"That was a 'yes,' I believe!"

The guardsman shot him a quick, puzzled look, taking in the large eyes, short stature, and delicately pointed ears. His eyes slid to Tara, and betrayed equal curiosity there. It was clear that the man had never before in his life seen elves.

Tara noticed his stare, and gripped her staff a little more tightly.

Brownyn took a quick look about her. The view through the gateway revealed a broad expanse of level ground. The path widened out to a kind of town commons, and led on to a dock on the far side. As the map indicated, there was a small lake feeding the river here: probably the reason for the town's location. Another path branched off, and led on up the hill, presumably to the rest of the village. To the west, towering over all, loomed the mountains.

Leliana distracted the man with her most charming smile, while Cullen, simultaneously, gave the guardsman glare for glare.

Bronwyn kept her tone pleasant. "We've come a long way to find Haven, and to find a friend of ours: Brother Genetivi. Is he here?"

"Never heard of him," the guard said instantly. "We keep to ourselves, here in Haven."

A watchful atmosphere clung to the village. The dark little

windows of the cottages gazed on them like unfriendly eyes.

"Ah," Bronwyn said, still pleasant. "So this *is* Haven. Good. Could you direct us to an inn?"

The guardsman sneered at the visitors, and said, "There is no inn in Haven. There is no place for you here. If you must trade for supplies, there is a general store further up, but it's not likely you'll find what you're looking for."

"We're looking for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes," Leliana said, with disarming candor. "What do you know about it?"

"The Urn is a myth!" the man shot back. "Father Eirik could tell you better than I, if you are foolish enough to insist on staying where you are not wanted."

"*Father* Eirik?" Cullen said, frowning in surprise. "Your priest... is a man? That is...strange."

"It has always been thus in Haven," the guard replied stolidly. "We do not question tradition."

Bronwyn gave him a hard look. "It would seem not."

Some of the inhabitants of the little cottages had come outside, watching the scene in hostile silence. Children clung to their mothers, whispering.

"Come on, We'll try the store first." She led her horse past the man without further pleasantries. The path to the shop led up another steep hill. Bronwyn pressed her lips together,

wondering if she should have left the horses in Redcliffe.

"It's a pretty village, in its way," Leliana said. "The cottages are so neat and the gardens very well tended. What a pity they are heretics and doomed to the Void."

Tara cleared her throat and caught Zevran's eye. He only grinned.

They reached the top of the hill and once again found themselves on a flat clearing, surrounded by cottages. Nearby, a small and sallow boy was playing in the dirt with what looked like a knucklebone, murmuring a rhyme to himself.

"Come, come, bonny Lynne; we've a bed to put you in.

It is soft, it is warm,

It will shelter from the storm.

Come, come, bonny Lynne; we've a bed to put you in.

Dear, dear bonny Lynne sleeps the peaceful crib within.

"A mossy stone, a finger bone,

No one knows but Lynne alone.

Dear, dear bonny Lynne sleeps the peaceful crib within..."

"Hello, my lad!" Bronwyn called. "Can you point me in the direction of the shop?"

He looked up at them, his eyes wide, and pointed at yet another neat wooden cottage. "It's there, but you should go away," he told Bronwyn. "We don't like strangers in Haven."

"Why not?" Bronwyn asked him.

That seemed to puzzle him. "We just don't, that's all. I like your horses, though. I wonder if Father will let me have one."

"If you'll answer some questions," Bronwyn said, smiling. "I'll let you sit on my horse."

He was tempted, and drew closer. "You wouldn't carry me off, would you? Evil witches in the stories are always doing that."

"I'm certainly not a witch," Bronwyn laughed. "Come on! You can pet Posy, if you like. She's quite gentle."

Zevran smothered a laugh. Bronwyn glared at him. "*Quite* gentle," she muttered, "when people aren't waving axes in her direction." She smiled again at the boy. "My name is Bronwyn. What's yours?"

"Not supposed to talk to strangers," he said, almost to himself, coming a little closer, eyes full of the horses. "Your dog is really big," he quavered uncertainly.

"Scout, sit!" Bronwyn ordered. "Come on, lad! He won't hurt you."

The boy crept closer, detouring around the fearsome Scout. His hand, small and grubby, reached out tentatively to the horse's shoulder. Posy turned her head, soft nose nuzzling at him. "She's soft," was the wondering whisper.

Bronwyn's glance fell on the object in the boy's left hand. "What's that you've got there?"

Entranced by Posy, he did not look at her. "Something of mine," he answered. "Want to see it?"

He opened his left hand, and Bronwyn leaned over to examine the slender object. Tara's breath was a quick, startled intake of breath. Zevran raised a brow.

It was the shriveled remains of a human finger, the dried skin dark brown, the nail a worn stub. Scout sniffed at it and whined.

Leliana saw it, and said, "Maker have mercy!"

"Where did you get that?" Cullen demanded, his brow a thundercloud.

Bronwyn frowned at him and shook her head. "So you don't see a lot of strangers?" she asked the boy "Did you see a man called Brother Genetivi a few months ago?"

The boy shrugged, and stroked down the horse's forehead. "If I had a horse, I'd brush him every day!"

"Horses like that," Bronwyn agreed. "He was an older man, not very tall, in brown clothes with a checked shirt. He was looking for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

"If I tell you, can I sit on the horse? Can I ride him?"

"If you tell me, I'll put you in the saddle myself, and lead you all the way to the store."

He cocked his head, considering, and then said, "All right. There was a man I didn't know last summer. I don't know his name. The Reavers found him and took him up to the Chantry."

"Did he leave afterwards?" Bronwyn asked, wondering what "reavers" might be.

The boy bit his lip. "I never saw him leave. They took him to Father Eirik. He was asking too many questions."

A grim silence followed.

"Never let it be said that I don't keep my word," Bronwyn said quietly. She boosted the boy into the saddle and took the reins, walking slowly toward the store.

The boy seemed to like being up high, and sat straight and proud in the saddle, the master of all he surveyed. He noticed Tara, and asked, "What's wrong with you? What happened to your ears?"

"I'm an elf," she replied, trying not to be angry at a small, ignorant boy.

"And so am I," Zevran added, briefly doffing his helmet. "The ears are natural for elves."

"They look funny." the boy told him. "Your eyes, too. They're

too big. Are elves bad?"

"Not as a rule."

Blessedly, they reached the store at that moment. It was a cottage, like the rest of the them, probably with the downstairs devoted to the wares and their storage. With such a small village with few visitors meant that the storekeeper must have some craft or skill to fill up his time. He certainly could not spend all day idling behind a counter. He might be a weaver or a joiner. With any luck, he would be a brewer. It would make sense for the local store to double as the local tavern.

There was a garden in back, golden with ripening pumpkins. Bronwyn remembered Nan's pumpkin soup, and wondered if she could replicate it. Probably not, unless she had chickens, onions, and celery, and a day to simmer them into a proper stock. She sighed, thinking of Satinalia at Castle Highever in days gone by.

In front of the store was a hanging ring of iron with a stick on a string. It was very likely the town alarm, used to rouse the citizenry, or at least summon the folk to the store.

Leliana had mastered her distaste and walked on the other side of the boy. With a dimpling smile, she asked, "Have you heard of the Urn of the Sacred Ashes? Is it spoken of around here?"

"It's old," the boy said, bored. "Andraste doesn't need it

anymore."

"But you do honor Andraste here," Cullen broke in. "You know about her."

The boy clearly thought he was an idiot. "Of course I know about Andraste. Everybody knows about her. Here in Haven we know more about her than anywhere else. Did you come to see her?"

"Yes," Bronwyn answered, very surprised. "Yes, you could say that we've come to see her. Perhaps after we're done at the shop, we'll go up to the Chantry and talk to Father Eirik. Is that where people go to see her? To see her image in the Chantry?"

"She's not in the Chantry," the boy said, amazed at her ignorance. He broke off, looking past her. "Oh no!"

A woman had flung open the door of a house and screeched at the boy. "Trevin! Come here *right now!*"

"I have to go!" the boy said, trying to scramble down from the saddle. Cullen grabbed him and set him on the ground. The boy shrugged free of his grasp and ran to his mother.

The woman hugged him tight, her furious, terrified eyes never leaving the strangers; then she pushed him through the cottage door and shut it behind him.

"Go away!" she shouted. "Go away! We don't want outsiders

here!"

"We're on our way to the shop," Bronwyn said soothingly. To her companions, she muttered, "Come on. Cullen, I want you to stay outside and guard the horses."

"Bronwyn—"

"That's an order. We're just going into the store," Bronwyn insisted. "How much trouble can we get into in a store?"

The shopkeeper was not happy to see them. No...that wasn't quite right. He had looked up from a tally, a smile on his pleasant face, at the sound of the door opening. At the sight of unknown faces, unknown armor, unknown weapons—and a large wardog—he froze, as if not believing the unwelcome sight. The smile evaporated, and was replaced by wary tension. He was clearly relieved to have the counter between him and the unexpected visitors.

"What do you want?"

"This is the village store, isn't it?" Bronwyn replied gently.

"We're just stocking up."

"And as you might have noticed," Tara added pertly, "we are not from these parts." Leliana nudged her in mock reproof.

The storekeeper stared at Tara as if she were a mythical beast, and then frowned. "I don't have much...probably

nothing you'd want, but look if you like." He blinked, after his eyes found Zevran. He looked as much bewildered as horrified.

The place looked and smelled much like any other general store: dusty with flour, with a strange blend of sharp cheese and dyed wool in the air. There was little in the way of luxury goods here—in such stores one usually saw a bolt of bright, cheap silk, or a painted teapot, or something of that sort. Haven was such an insular community that Bronwyn suspected they bartered among themselves a great deal, and used this place for storage as much as anything else. The shopkeeper might act less as an entrepreneur and more as a middleman in such dealings. Smears of clay on his smock indicated that he was almost certainly the village potter. The workshop must be in back.

The companions strolled around the shop, fingering the merchandise. Against the wall opposite the counter was a large chest. Zevran flipped open the lid and whistled.

"Now *that* is where he keeps the good stuff, so to speak!"

"Look here—" the storekeeper protested.

Bronwyn did look. There were some very nice items in the trunk: among them a jeweled locket, which when opened revealed a miniature portrait encircled with seed pearls; a pair of rather small but first quality leather boots; two good daggers; a monogrammed canteen; religious amulets; a half-dozen books on various subjects.

"Creatore!" Zevran exclaimed. "Those boots! They are Antivan leather! And my size—or near enough! They are for sale, yes?" He snatched them from the chest, and breathed in the scent. "Ah! How I have missed that smell!"

"You like to sniff leather?" Tara laughed. "Has anyone ever told you that you're totally warped?"

"I am!" Zevran declared. "and proud of it!" He sat down on the floor and tugged his old boots off. Handling the Antivan leather with reverence, he murmured, "Let us hope these fit!"

Bronwyn smiled indulgently, and began putting together enough odds and ends to justify pumping the storekeeper for information.

"...Does that cheese keep well? I'd like a round of it, and a half-weight of the dried berries. That jerky looks good... a half-weight of that too...what's this in the bottles?"

"Perry," the storekeeper answered sullenly.

"I love perry! I'll take two bottles. It will be a treat for my friends."

Leliana poked through the contents of the chest herself, admiring the pretty locket, and then sorting through the books. When Bronwyn had finished collecting her supplies and had shoved them at the merchant for a tally, Leliana interrupted.

"Bronwyn, come here. This book is very interesting. Perhaps

you will want this as well."

"I really think—"

"You really *want* to see this," Leliana insisted, her voice full of meaning.

Bronwyn *wanted* to pay for the goods and question the storekeeper, who looked ready to jump out of his skin. Still, she walked over to look at the little green colume Leliana was holding out. It was not the title of the book—which Bronwyn saw at a glance was *Edible Plants of the Frostbacks*—that Leliana wanted to draw attention to, as much as the name inscribed on the inside of the front cover.

From the Library of Brother Ferdinand Genetivi

Her eyes met Leliana's, and she blew out a long, long breath.

"You're right. *Edible Plants*? That's a very practical book. We'll take that, too. What are the others? We might want them."

While Zevran bounded to his feet, rejoicing in his splendid new boots, Bronwyn and Leliana quickly thumbed through the books in the chest. Two others were Genetivi's: his own *In Pursuit of Knowledge: The Travels of a Chantry Scholar*, scribbled over with corrections for a new edition, and a monograph on social customs of the Avvars. The other books were a miscellany, some very old. One was a traveler's manuscript diary, the crumbling yellowed pages of which were

blank after the words "...Arrived todaye at the Village of Havene..."

Bronwyn set the book aside, and walked back to the counter, a smile fixed on her face. "How much altogether? Would this..." she dropped a generous handful of silver onto the counter..."cover it all? No doubt you're wondering why we're here. Actually, we've come looking for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes, which some say is a myth..." she waved her hand in mild deprecation, forestalling the storekeeper's protests. "... and we're also looking for a friend of ours. Brother Genetivi? He told us he was traveling to Haven. Have you seen him?"

The man stared at her, mouth working. He stammered a denial.

"Never heard of him!"

"Yes, you have," Bronwyn growled, opening the green book. "For here's his name, right in a book of his for sale in your own shop! Now *where is he?*"

He was shaking with fear, his eyes almost wobbling. Bronwyn clicked her tongue impatiently, and the man croaked, "Father Eirik can tell you. I don't know anything!"

"Where is he? In the Chantry? Where's that?"

"At the top of the hill. That's all there is up there. Father Eirik. I can show you..." He walked quickly to the door, and opened it, nearly walking into Cullen. He jumped back in almost

comical surprise at the sight of the big stranger. A briefly widening of his eyes, and then he darted to the side of the porch and began banging on the iron ring, clanging out an alarm.

"We're under attack!" he bellowed. "Call the Reavers! Reavers!"

"Stop him!" Bronwyn shouted, bursting out of the doorway. Cullen felled the man with his fist, but it was too late. People were rushing out of their homes, armed with anything that came to hand: hatchets, pruning hooks, hunting bows, gutting knives.

"Get back!" Bronwyn shouted. "We have not attacked this village. We are here—"

An arrow glanced off her pauldron. Another buried itself in the porch support next to her. More arrows followed. The shopkeeper staggered up and pulled a knife on Zevran, who promptly cut his throat. A shriek rose from the villagers...a woman's shriek of grief and horror.

Tara flinched back from another arrow and cast a fireball into the gathering mob. It exploded in red gold light. Villagers screamed, knocked off their feet. Children ran shrieking, their clothes on fire. A girl rushed away, and ran up to the uphill path, crying for help.

"I didn't mean to *hit* them!" Tara wailed. "I just meant to scare them away!"

"Well, they're pretty scared now!" Bronwyn snapped.

While the villagers surged away in panic, dragging the wounded with them, three armored men came rushing down the hill, axes whirling. A swordsman followed them, running up from the lower slope of the village. Bronwyn recognized him as the gate guard.

"Nothing to do now but fight!" Zevran shrugged. "Now, *bella mia!* Now shoot your pretty fireworks!"

Tara, instead, froze one of the men in his tracks. Leilana shot one in the throat, and another in the eye. The arrows barely slowed them down. Whatever "Reavers" were, they were tough and took quite a bit of killing. Not even the toughest opponent, however could keep on fighting when his skull was split open, or he was stabbed in an artery and bleeding out. A few villagers ran forward to try to help their warriors and were shot down for their pains.

It was soon over. Some of the people fled down the path to the river, and hid themselves there. Some ran into their houses and slammed the doors and shutters closed. A few lingered, fearful but defiant, shouting curses. Some were on their knees, arms open to the careless skies, beseeching divine intervention.

"—Andraste strike them down!"

"—Murderers! Bandits!"

"—Save us, Andraste!"

"Get back!" Bronwyn shouted, waving her bloody sword at them. "Get away from us! The next fool who attacks will get the same as the rest! Tara!" she ordered in a whisper. "Throw another fireball, but try not to hit anyone!"

Tara gulped, her eyes on the sprawled bodies littering the commons. "All right..."

A small fireball exploded a few yards from the villagers. A pandemonium of shrieks and wails followed.

"Get back!" Bronwyn shouted again. "The next one will be bigger! Back off or we'll set every house in the village afire!"

There was an ominous murmur. With sick disappointment, she saw that a lot of people in this little village were brave: the sort willing to die for their beliefs. Luckily, however, they also had children to protect, and it was late in the year and cold at night. The villagers backed away; hatred and venomous outrage in some faces, blank terror in others.

When they were far enough away, Bronwyn snapped, "Let's mount up! We'll find the Chantry. We're most likely to get answers there." She swung onto Posy, not liking to see what they were leaving behind.

A pair of small children rushed out, crying, and begged their dead mother to get up. An old man ran after at the riders, cursing, and shook a fist at them. A boy threw a rock.

Bronwyn gritted her teeth, wondering in what particular she differed from Rendon Howe, and led her companions up the steep hill, leaving the villagers to their dead and wounded.

"They may follow us," Cullen pointed out.

Bronwyn knew they might. "Do you really want to systematically hunt down and kill every man, woman, and child in the village? That's our only alternative at the moment. Would you call down the Right of Annulment, so to speak, on people who are not even mages? They are defending their homes from invaders, for Maker's sake!"

More resistance met them on the hill: another pair of axemen. Tara cursed them both into paralysis, and Bronwyn was tempted to leave them. But no, it would be foolish. Ordinary villagers were one thing, trained warriors another. These men could be dangerous: creeping up on them or lying in wait as they made their way down the hill. She beheaded one as she rode past. The other fell to Zevran's sword.

"We're making no friends here," Bronwyn muttered bitterly.

It was not far to the Chantry, perched on the hill's summit. No people were outside. Nothing impeded the magnificent view of the mountains surrounding them on two sides. To the south, the slope dropped off, and the river glittered up at them like a bright ribbon.

The Chantry was small, but well built of grey Frostback granite, with colored glass in the windows. It was old, and

incomparably the best building in the village; but so Chantries often were. Bronwyn looked for a place to leave the horses. She sighed. In back of the Chantry was a fenced garden—the priest's garden, no doubt. There was a tub of water there for the plants.

"We'll leave the horses there," she pointed.

A little scandalized, Leliana whispered, "They will eat the priest's cabbages!"

"Come *on*."

Inside, it was something like a Chantry, certainly, if not a Chantry any of them had ever seen. At the far end of the long chamber was a broad wooden platform, but there was no statue of Andraste, and no sacred fire.

"Do you suppose the Urn is here?" Leliana murmured wistfully.

Before a small group of worshipers stood a man, acting as priest. No, he *was* their priest. Only in faraway Tevinter were men priests. To Bronwyn and her companions a male priest was as bizarre and unnatural as a talking dog. It was so contrary to the normal order of things that it was hard to credit their eyes.

"Those are Tevinter robes the priest is wearing, or something like them," Tara whispered softly. "And he has a staff..."

"Wonderful," murmured Bronwyn. "A priest who is not only a man, but a mage. No one is going to believe this. Let's go meet the revered... *father*."

Cullen made a soft sound of disgust.

To the sides of the platform were stationed four armored warriors. None of them wore the ceremonial armor and horned helmets the companions had seen recently. Bronwyn felt faintly relieved at that. If it came to fighting, perhaps these would be only ordinary warriors and not the fearsome Reavers.

Kneeling before the priest was the young woman who had run ahead to give warning. She was shaking, not entirely calmed by the priest's hand laid reassuringly on her head. The priest was exhorting his flock.

"...We are blessed beyond measure. We are chosen by the Holy and Beloved to be Her guardians. This sacred duty is given to us alone. Rejoice, my children, and prepare your hearts to receive Her. Lift up your voices and despair not, for She will raise Her faithful servants to glory when—"

His eyes narrowed at Bronwyn and those behind her strode out of the shadows.

"Ah. Welcome. Lydilla told me that we had visitors in the village. Have you found your time in Haven interesting?"

"I think Haven has found it rather interesting, too," Bronwyn

said grimly. "We did not come to fight, but we are certainly not going to allow ourselves to be murdered. Perhaps you should calm your people, *Father*. We have come for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes, and to find Brother Genetivi, our friend. Produce the man and send us on our way, and your people need not suffer. If they attack us again, we will stop them."

Angry looks and words were the response. The priest quieted his people, and stood forth, eyes blazing with anger and contempt.

"And what right have you to force your way in here, full of your demands and your importance? Is this your village? Did we ask you to come to Haven? This is what always happens when outsiders invade our village. You have no respect for us: for our privacy, for our traditions. You do not understand our ways. You have brought war to Haven in your ignorance and greed. You will tell others about us, and then what?"

Leliana burst out, "The Urn would bring hope to all the world! It belongs to all who love and worship Andraste!"

The priest flicked a glance at her and frowned.

"You are devout but misguided. The Urn is irrelevant. We, who know the deepest mysteries of Andraste, know better than to worship Her mere ashes. Our duty is a higher one than that."

Cullen was looking very uneasy, and spoke up.

"Your people have tried to kill us since we left Sulcher! It's

hardly an act of devotion to kill travelers simply to keep your village hidden!"

"You know nothing of us," the priest countered. "Staying hidden means staying protected; and we must protect Haven and our charges at all costs!. We don't owe you any explanations for our actions. We have a sacred duty: failure to protect Her would be a greater sin. All will be forgiven."

"Where is Genetivi?" Bronwyn asked quietly, not wanting to involve herself in crack-brained theology. "We know he was here. We found some of his possessions for sale in the village. Was he alive or dead when you took them from him?"

"He is not far from here," Father Eirik answered calmly. With a look of contempt at Bronwyn, he murmured to the kneeling girl and pressed something into her hand. She rose and backed away from the strangers, trying to circle around and get to the door.

"Cullen, stop her!" Bronwyn ordered. "I don't want her—"

The priest roared, "Run to the temple, Lydilla! Warn them!" With that he raised his staff and a wave of pure energy knocked Tara, Bronwyn, and Leliana off their feet. The guardsmen leaped past the wooden platform, swords drawn, and attacked.

Most of the women fled, their cries shrilling out in the open air. Cullen swore, caught up with Lydilla, and knocked her senseless with a blow. He pounded back to the fight and

summoned a Holy Smite, hoping Tara would forgive him. The air around him coalesced, and then he could feel them, the wisps of magic; and he drew them in like a fishing line. Magic filled him, cleansed and ecstatic, and then faded in a warm glow of victory.

Father Eirik abruptly collapsed, eyes wide in disbelief. His staff dropped from nerveless fingers and rolled away. Cullen swung Yuseris and ended him there, on the stones of his Chantry.

Scout bowled a shocked guardsman over, tearing him apart. Zevran tripped another guardsman and cut his throat. Leliana bounded to her feet and parried another man's blade while Bronwyn stabbed him in the back. One by one, the enemy fell. Some of the worshippers tried to help their priest, but were soon cut down.

Tara staggered to her feet, furious and nauseated.

"Cullen!" she shrieked. "I'm going to kill you!"

"Don't kill him!" Bronwyn shouted over the noise. "He just saved us all!"

The girl, Lydilla, stirred and shook her head. She tried to crawl away from the massacre, but Zevran pounced on her.

"You there! What's your name...Lydilla!" Bronwyn shouted. She strode up and yanked the girl to her feet. "Where is Genetivi? Tell me or I'll burn the whole damned village to the

ground. I'm done with playing games with you crazy people! Where is he?"

"Dead!" The girl glared back at her defiantly, rubbing her purpling jaw. "He was given to Andraste, and that is more honor than *you* deserve." Her gaze wandered to the bodies on the floor, and she moaned with grief. Bronwyn gave her a shake.

"Given to Andraste?" Leliana wondered. "What do you mean?"

Lydilla flinched back a little from Bronwyn's strange green eyes and Zevran's smirk. "He was taken to the Temple and given to Her," she repeated slowly, as if to half-witted children.

Leliana picked up something from a the floor: a strange amulet of bronze: round, with curving points like a star...or like the emblem of the Holy Fire. It was large and heavy, and looked more like a device than an adornment.

"This is what the priest gave her."

The girl tried to snatch at it, but Zevran held her back.

"I know what that is," Tara spoke up. "I've seen illustrations in the Circle library. That's a Tevinter key. They still use those, and a stylized version of the design is often embroidered on Tevinter clothing."

"Hang on to it," Bronwyn said to Leliana. "If it's a key, there must be a lock or two it fits." She turned to their captive. "So where is the Temple?"

The girl looked away, and Bronwyn briefly cuffed her. "It's either the Temple or we go back and finish the village. Your choice."

Lydilla stared at her in loathing. "You're monsters. Savages from the outer world. You're everything Father Eirik warned us about."

"Temple... or village?" Bronwyn asked, with cool menace.

The girl was shoved outside and after some persuasion showed them the other path that curved around the hill's summit, and then up the nearby mountain that loomed over the village. "It is there," she said bitterly. "But they will be waiting."

"So be it," Bronwyn said grimly. "And now, I suggest that you return to the village. If you raise a hand to us again, you will be killed. In fact, I promise you that if your village offers us any violence, it will be destroyed. End of story. Stay in your houses and keep quiet, and we have no reason to do you further harm. Go home, and don't be stupid."

The girl twisted away, and spat on the ground at Bronwyn's feet. She ran down the path to the village, giving them one last backward look of scorn and hatred.

"Cullen, are you all right?" Leliana caught him by the arm. The

ex-Templar was pasty-faced and disoriented.

"Sorry..." he managed. "Bronwyn, I really, really need some lyrium. I'm sorry..."

"Me too," agreed Tara. She fumbled in her belt pouch for vials. "Here." She passed one to Cullen, who uncorked it and drank thirstily. Tara downed hers and took a deep breath. "Wow. Go easy on the Smite, Cullen. I thought I was going to die. What's a mage without her magic?"

"Why don't you rest a bit?" Bronwyn said to Cullen, patting him on the shoulder. "You did good work today. Sit out here at the doorstep and give a yell if you see anyone coming. Eat something. We need to search the Chantry, and then get some rest ourselves, if we're going to have to fight whoever is in this Temple."

"We can't rest too long," Zevran shook his head. "We'll just give the village time to regroup."

"We can't fight in the shape we're in. Besides, I think they're more afraid of us than we are of them at the moment. We'll do a quick search. We don't know that that girl wasn't lying. As soon as you feel better, Tara, cast some rejuvenation spells on all of us. Then we'll be fit to go."

To the left of the Chantry nave was a door that led to the sacristy and the priest's personal quarters. It was large and well-furnished. Large chests stood at the foot of the bed.

"A bed!" Tara sighed. "Can I lie down for a minute?" She curled up on the neatly spread blanket and moaned with relief. "Good bed. I wish I could take it with me."

Zevran grinned at her, and opened one of the chests.

"See this! Their Chantry is well-endowed!"

Inside were coins of various ages and nations, small ingots of gold and silver, rings and amulets and brooches. Zevran immediately pocketed some of the smaller items.

"We don't have time for treasure-hunting!" Bronwyn said sharply. "Look for anything pertaining to Brother Genetivi. From the shape of the Chantry there is another room. Come on, Tara! Don't fall asleep!"

The other room proved harder to access. An arched doorway appeared to be walled up, but it was clear that the other room lay beyond. Leliana found a hidden recess with a curious bronze shape built into it.

"The very place for our key!" she said, triumphant, and pressed it into the opening. A loud click, and a panel of wood faced with a thin layer of stone slid away almost noiselessly.

At first glance, the room appeared to be filled with tall bookshelves. The place smelled of old parchment and leather bindings.

Bronwyn looked to her left, around the corner, and said, "Was

this a library...or a prison?"

Many books. A writing table and chair. A bed—with manacles to chain the occupant down. The bedding bore ominous dark-brown stains. Scout sniffed at them and looked up at Bronwyn, whining.

"They kept someone here for a time, I suspect," Leliana said solemnly. "We know that Brother Genetivi was in the village. Perhaps they wanted fresh knowledge of the outside world..."

That made dreadfully good sense to Bronwyn. To this fearful, isolated community, a widely traveled scholar like Genetivi would have been a gift from the Maker: knowledgeable about all the nations of Thedas; current with the politics and culture of the day. He might have lived for weeks, hoping for help and rescue. Hoping, Bronwyn feared, in vain.

"And when they thought they knew enough..." Zevran shrugged. "I hope it was fast."

Leliana sorted through bits of parchment on the writing table. "Some of the writing...it does look like Brother Genetivi's..."

"I think we can be fairly certain he was here," Bronwyn agreed. "Everyone eat something, and then we'd better get going."

They had a choice: they could spend the night in the Chantry and face the Temple in the morning, or they could forge

ahead, though the sun was dipping behind the Frostbacks.

Bronwyn gave thoughtful, prudent orders, but was sick at heart. Whatever faced them at the Temple, it was clear to her that there she would have no opportunity for mercy. Once committed, they very likely would have to kill everyone they faced. Already she had lost count of the people whose lives she had ended today.

For what? So that one woman could live? Was Anora, Queen of Ferelden or not, really worth this slaughter? Was she worth the lives of the children killed by accident in the village, or the children who would die because Bronwyn had killed their parents? Yes, the people of Haven were heretics, but Bronwyn was not a Templar or a priest, who was given authority to execute those whose theology was insufficiently pure. Considering some of her own secret thoughts, she knew herself to be the worst sort of hypocrite in that regard.

Were the Ashes even in the Temple? The little boy had not thought much of them, nor the man-priest, for that matter. They talked as if Andraste was alive and walked among them. At that idea, a trickle of fear shivered through her. What if she was wrong, and these people were right? Mere numbers did not make right, or Ferelden should have meekly bowed to the Orlesian yoke.

She shook her head, fighting such dark thoughts. She must not fall prey to foolish superstition. A woman named Andraste had certainly lived: a brave, charismatic woman who rallied the subject peoples of Thedas behind her and fought for the

freedom of all. Andraste, however, was dead and gone, many ages ago. If anything remained of her, it was mere dust and ashes; the ashes they were here to find.

Still, if She were here today, what would She think of the powerful institution that advised and sometimes commanded emperors and peasants, nobles and freeholders, all in Her name? What would She think of that institution, if She knew that its holy warriors were addicted to lyrium to keep them obedient? What would She think of Tevinter, a place that claimed to worship Her while its capital city contained a slave market that was bigger than all of Highever town? What would She think of the Alienages in the rest of Thedas, where elves were treated as little better than slaves? What would She think of the Circles, where mages were imprisoned for life?

Not much, Bronwyn suspected. She wouldn't think much of any of them, Bronwyn herself included. Andraste had loved freedom and fought for it, and there was precious little freedom to be found anywhere in Thedas.

"You're brooding," Leliana said, sitting down by her on the Chantry doorstep. "You brood very well, but sometimes a little too much for your own good."

"I was thinking of all the people we've killed today, and the others we will kill. I'm hoping that the Urn is not a myth and that the Ashes will be all they are supposed to be; because otherwise all these people were murdered in vain, and we are no better than bandits."

Leliana stared at her, pretty mouth open, and then sighed deeply. "That is a heavy thought indeed! We must trust in the Maker. He knows that we mean well...that our intentions are pure..."

Bronwyn glanced over at Zevran who was presenting Tara with a looted trinket. She blushed, and touched his cheek. Leliana looked too, and squeezed Bronwyn's hand.

"We are sad, imperfect creatures. The Maker knows that. Those people would have killed us, if they had the chance. It is no sin to defend one's life."

"They wouldn't have attacked us if we hadn't barged in here. They haven't killed as many of us as we have of them."

Leliana put an arm around her shoulders. "Remember why we are here: to keep Ferelden stable and as peaceful as possible. To do that, its Queen must rule. To rule, she must be healthy. If there were civil war, many more would die than died here today. As for the Temple..." Leliana bit her lip. "That is in the hands of the Maker. I shall pray that the false priests and heretics see the error of their ways and let us pass in peace. Prayer can accomplish great things." She smiled ruefully. "And even if my prayer is not answered in the way I wish, the act of prayer will give me me the strength to accept what cannot be changed, and the courage to do what must be done."

Cullen called out to Zevran, and the assassin gave Tara a quick kiss before he walked over to join the former Templar.

Leliana rose. "I had better help them."

They were laying traps for any villagers brave or foolish enough to climb the hill to the Chantry. Bronwyn did not want to be attacked from behind, and also wanted to protect the horses, which must be left corralled behind the Chantry. A largest set of traps were at the top of the hill. The entry to the Chantry would be likewise rigged, as well as the garden gate.

The dead bodies had been hauled out of the Chantry and tumbled down the hill. In time, the villagers would find them and give them whatever disposal was customary here.

Bronwyn got up and tended to the horses, making sure they would have sufficient water and food for a day or two. If they were not back by then...well...the villagers would probably like having a few horses. Then she hauled their extra gear and any loot they wanted into the Chantry's secret room, and locked it away.

By the time everything was done, a blood-red sunset peered over the Frostbacks. Bronwyn hoped it was not an omen.

"To the Temple, then."

It was not terribly far, but uphill all the way: a long, well-worn mountain path that took them around to the south side of the mountain. As they went higher, it grew colder and darker. Snow whitened the path, and their boots crunched loudly, the noise echoing back from the towering slopes. Cold mist curled up from the deep valleys below. Icy patches lay in wait to trip

them. The snow grew deeper as they climbed. Bronwyn was relieved to see no recent tracks in it.

At first, the path appeared to end at the frozen south face of the mountain. Even as they drew closer, there was little to indicate the presence of any man-made structure, other than some long, low steps that led to an arched bronze door. It was decorated with low reliefs and inscribed, Tara told them, in Old Arcanum. Cullen tried to open the door, and found it locked.

In the middle of the door, however, was a recess: round, with curving points that made it resemble the Holy Fire...

Bronwyn pressed the ancient key into the recess, and turned. A heavy clanking noise vibrated through the door, and she pushed it open easily on its well-oiled hinges.

"Oh..." Leliana gasped.

She was not the only one. The companions, silent in awe, moved forward into a vast vaulted interior shrouded in ice. Pillars, painted and carved and glittering with frost, held up the dim and distant roof. Cracks in the roof let in the fading twilight. Doors led off the immense hall on either side, and in the center a huge fire blazed in a round pit as large as a bedchamber. At the far end was a grand double staircase leading up toward a smoky and mysterious vista. The chamber was truly enormous: bigger than any hall in the ancient elven tombs, easily as big as the mighty caverns of the Dead Trenches. And it was beautiful.

"I don't know if this is the funeral temple of Andraste," Bronwyn said, "but it's the most amazing place I've ever seen, and at this point, I've seen quite a few!"

"If it is not the temple of Andraste," Leliana declared solemnly, "then it ought to be, for nothing could be more magnificent than this. Not even the Grand Cathedral can compare!"

Prudently, the door was shut and locked behind them.

"We'll work our way through systematically," Bronwyn whispered. "We don't want people to sneak up on us from behind."

The place was certainly inhabited: all the side corridors were well illuminated by torches. They turned first to the right, and found no guards, but a rich treasury. The sight of gold was always pleasing, and Tara took in a quick, excited breath at the shine of it; but Bronwyn was weary of wonders, and simply shut the lids and relocked the chamber.

"We can't carry anymore than we're carrying. If we come back this way, we'll take what we can. No more treasure-hunting! I want to get through this alive."

Wise words, for the corridor to the left of the great hall was not deserted, and the first shout of alarm brought battle to them, and warriors charging...

Thanks to my reviewers: EpitomyofShyness, Hydroplatypus,

Jyggilag, Zute, demonichargles, Josie Lange, Kira Kyuu, MsBarrows, Have Travel, Blinded in a bolthole, KnighOfHolyLight, The Moidart, Juliafied, Aoi24, chocolatebrownie12, Judy, JackOfBladesX, Enaid Aderyn, sleepyowlet, Fulminis ictus, Mike, Shakespeira, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Ellyanah, almostinsane, mille libri, cloud1004, daab123, Jenna53, Crystal Night, StillDormant, and Nemrut.

Notes: Perry is an alcoholic drink made from pears. Cider comes from apples, perry from pears. They're both good.

After giving this a lot of thought for over a year, I just couldn't see poor Brother Genetivi still being alive. The cultists have zero reason to spare his life. Strangers come into Haven, but they don't go out. Nor are they kept as slaves or hostages. The cultists don't need the extra labor, nor would they hold anyone for ransom. Now, there are canon problems with Haven and the temple (in that the village seems very small to support all the faithful at the temple. Among other things- where is the food coming from? I am positing that there must be fields not presented in canon, and since there is a dock, I suppose they fish the river). Also, I can't see the temple being as distant as the canon map would indicate. They could never keep it supplied. As I see it, Haven is the servicing village for the temple, and would have to be very close.

News: a new story sold! It's in the anthology Horror, Humor,

and Heroes, vol 3. *The title is "The Widening Gyre." See my profile for the link.*

Also-I will be on vacation next weekend and the next installment of KB may well be late. Actually, I'm considering writing another chapter of VaO first, so I don't lose the flow.

53. The Air is Full of Gods

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 53: The Air Is Full of Gods

"Bronwyn!"

Tara's voice drew her out of her evil dreams: a blessed release. Her eyes opened to see a stone ceiling above her and stone walls around her. The stone floor she lay on was no softer than when she had first arranged herself on it.

Tara knelt down by her, and whispered, "I finished my watch. I guess it's time to go."

Zevran was already awake, grinning in the dim torchlight, setting out breakfast for them.

Leliana stirred. "What dreams! If only it were not all so ugly..." She rolled over and shook Cullen. "Time to rise, my friend."

Bronwyn sat up, aware of every bruise on her body. "Where's Scout? Scout!"

The mabari trotted into the little stone room: the chokepoint for the rest of the temple.

Bronwyn now regretted not getting a full night's sleep before tackling the temple. It was far larger than she had imagined, and had been contested nearly every step of the way. The dormitories, the chapels, the libraries, the private sleeping rooms of the mages: all of it had required endless fighting through a maze of traps. Even after healing and rejuvenation and hours of sleep, Bronwyn's whole body ached. They would need more spells before they could go on.

The temple, they had found, had another long hall, and after that diverged into two branches, both of which eventually rejoined at this choke point. As she had feared, getting this far had required the death of every inhabitant they met. None, thank the Maker, were children, at least. As of now, the bodies lay where they had fallen. They had cleared this one place, and nearly collapsed with exhaustion.

Cullen sat up, groaning, and groped for his canteen. At least they would neither thirst nor starve in this place: it was packed with supplies and had fountain-style wells for water. The best of everything Haven had to offer was kept here: grain in abundance as well as many different kinds of bread; fruit preserves and wildflower honey; meats both salted and smoked; barrels of ale and kegs of cider and perry. Nothing had been stinted where the temple was concerned.

"You know," Zevran laughed, "if we did not have to worry about whatever lurks beyond this door, we could live here very well."

"I know!" Tara agreed. "Those mages had really good beds."

It's too bad we couldn't sleep in them!"

"I'm just glad nothing came through that door," Bronwyn grunted, rearranging her armor.

"Come! Eat!" Zevran urged her. "There is some of that perry you say you like. Very agreeable at breakfast. There is good bread and cheese. These heretics know how to provision a stronghold."

"And there's butter!" Tara lavished some on her bread, and bit into it blissfully. "I haven't had such good butter since we were at the Warden Compound!"

"Leliana and Cullen have never been there," Zevran remarked. "They have much to look forward to."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed, helping herself to the remarkably good bread. Heretics or not, Haven bakers knew their business. "Let's see: Alistair has been there, of course, before the Blight, but not Anders or Cullen, nor Leliana or Morrigan, or Broasca, Adaia, Oghren, Sten, or Carver. Someday, though...someday we'll all be there together in the Warden's Hall, and we'll have the celebratory dinner to end them all. The housekeeper loves to spoil her Wardens and all their friends!"

Scout wanted his breakfast too. He wheedled Bronwyn into giving him some of her buttered bread and a chunk of good smoked ham. Bronwyn rubbed his ears affectionately, amazed at her dog's courage and resilience.

"I wish we had a few more of him," Cullen remarked. "The Wardens would conquer the world!"

"Maybe someday," Bronwyn said. "It's not a bad idea. The griffons of old are gone, but they were useless in the Deep Roads anyway. Not like Scout!"

The dog looked up from his breakfast, grinning and licking his chops.

No one hurried. The big closed door might lead anywhere, though Bronwyn hoped fervently that it would lead them to the Urn. They packed up with great care. Bronwyn fastened some grenades to her belt, thinking of Adaia. That thought made her mind turn to Ostagar, and she wondered what was happening there.

And she thought of Loghain, of course. He had been displeased with her, haring off on what he thought a fool's errand. If the person afflicted had been anyone other than his daughter, her departure very likely would have meant the end of their alliance.

But Anora was his daughter, and he loved her deeply, though undemonstratively. To him, her life was no doubt worth all the blood shed for her yesterday—and all that might be shed today. If Bronwyn could bring the Ashes back to Anora, and if they did all that legend suggested, then Bronwyn would need no other dowry to take to her husband. Not that Loghain had ever said anything about expecting a dowry. If anything, Bronwyn hoped for a bridal gift that would include a gown or

two... And definitely more hairpins. She struggled with her tangles, braiding them away a little more securely.

"Here," Tara said, handing Cullen another vial of lyrium. "Keep this on you. I have a feeling the next few hours are going to be rough."

They gathered at the doorway and Bronwyn nodded to Zevran. Cautiously, he pushed open the door. Like much of the temple, the next room was well-illuminated with torches and wall sconces filled with oil.

This, however, was not like the temple they had seen. What they saw now was a large chamber of half-finished stone and rough edges. Stalactites hung perilously from the ceiling. Of course the entire temple was essentially a cavern, but labor and art had smoothed and polished it like a jewel. This portion was left in a more... natural... state. More supplies were stored here, but mostly... it was full of rubbish. Trash. Even human waste.

"Well," Bronwyn said quietly. She hoped she would not do something appalling, like burst into tears. "This is disappointing."

Was this the end of the journey? They had not found the Urn in the temple, though they had approached each new doorway with high hopes. They had found treasure, and some admirable statuary, and precious, ancient texts by the score, but not the Urn, nor anything that could be construed to be an Urn.

"Look! There is a doorway leading off it. Perhaps there is a passage that connects with the rest of the temple," Leliana said, with forced cheer. "There must be something remarkable here...somewhere, for the people of Haven to defend it with such fervor."

Cullen nodded. "They spoke of *seeing* Andraste. Well, we haven't seen her so far. There must be more. I'm sure we didn't miss any other exits. Whatever is important must be further on."

Bronwyn turned to the others. "Zevran? Tara? Go on or go back?"

Zevran shrugged. "I am your sworn man. I go where you go, Noble One."

"Oh, let's go at least a *little* farther," Tara urged. "Maybe the temple was really more like a school... Yes, really. It had that big classroom place and those libraries. Maybe the real secrets are beyond the caves. We've got to try, anyway. We'd look stupid if we turned back now!"

Hoping for the best, Bronwyn slipped through the door quietly, and the rest followed.

They explored the chamber in silence. Aside from the one cave-like opening, they discovered no other hidden exits. It was not much more than a midden. There was nothing to be done but enter the tunnel.

It was a cave, but some work had been done over the years to make it easily passable. It was much darker than the temple. Oil lamps were set into the wall, but at long intervals. Bronwyn moved along, alert for any sound ahead of them. At her side, Zevran checked for traps.

After a short time, Bronwyn put up her hand. Just ahead, someone was...whistling. Whistling quite cheerfully, as they drew closer. There was a bend in the cave, and Bronwyn gestured everyone up against the stone, while they waited.

The young man was alone, and drew his blade as soon as he saw them. He was down and dead in seconds, and Cullen dragged the body out of sight. No one said anything. They simply moved on, deeper and deeper into the tunnels.

"At least," Tara whispered softly, "they're nothing like the Deep Roads."

That was true. That was something. Bronwyn felt a little cheered at Tara's words. The Deep Roads had been incomparably more horrible. Today they were moving down a rather clean cave tunnel, with a floor that someone had taken the trouble to smooth enough for easy travel. And whatever they found, it was impossible that it could be as bad as the Broodmother than had nearly blinded her.

They clung to the sides of the tunnel, moving along fairly quickly. The air changed, and up ahead they could see the sides of the cave open out to a chamber. Faint noise filtered back to them. This would be the first test.

"What it is?" Leliana whispered. "Some sort of work room?"

"Maybe."

A wide and high cavern, the roof supported by a single, massive, natural pillar. The pillar obscured the opposite side of the chamber. They could hear human voices, conversing in normal tones, and an odd squeaking and chittering.

"Some sort of machine?" Cullen guessed.

Scout sniffed the air, and then sniffed it again and growled, hackles rising.

"Shh!" Bronwyn gestured for silence, and the growl became inaudible, but Scout was no less alert. "All right... come on. Let's see what it is."

The faint squeaks exploded into high, horrible squeals, and around the pillar appeared a half dozen tiny dragons, running directly at them.

"Maker!" Cullen burst out. Everyone else said very much the same thing at the same time, with the occasional obscenity added.

Scout, who already had smelled what they were, was the first to know what to do. He barreled at the baby dragon in the lead and fastened his jaws at its throat, giving it a mighty shake.

"Come on!" Bronwyn shouted. "Tara! Watch out for—"

She stumbled, hit by a sickening green bolt of energy.

"—*mages*..."

Leliana was loosing arrows with astonishing speed at a pair of outraged warriors. Tara caught the opposing mage in a web of paralysis. Scout released the first dragonling, its neck broken, and leaped for another. More of the repulsive little monsters rushed at them, squeaking furiously. They were dangerous too: too young to flame, but big enough to kill with fangs and claws. Scout uttered an anguished yip as one of them raked him across the side. Bronwyn cut the dragonling's head off, and devoted herself to killing the rest of them, while the rest of the party killed the humans. Tara thumped her staff against the floor, satisfied, as the mage collapsed, frozen to death. One warrior tried to run, but Leliana's arrows brought him...her?...down.

Her, it appeared, on further inspection. The chamber proved to be quite interesting. There were many books, and various kinds of strange equipment, as well as some small flasks of blood, arranged on a very elegant set of shelves.

"No wonder Genetivi was interested in dragon cults," Tara whispered. "He must have figured out about these people. They really do live with dragons!" She reached for the book, but Bronwyn stopped her.

"Heal Scout first."

"Of course. Sorry, you good boy. You knew before we did,

didn't you? You are so smart..."

Everyone's cuts and bruises were healed as well, and Bronwyn agreed that they needed to reassess their situation. She drew out the book on dragon cults and had another look.

"All right... *"cultists... kill a small number of those young in order to feast on draconic blood. That blood is said to have a number of strange long-term effects, including bestowing greater strength and endurance... Nevarran dragon-hunters have said these cultists are incredibly powerful opponents."* Yes," she said wryly. "That certainly sounds like those Reavers."

"So they live with dragons," Cullen said thoughtfully, "but they don't worship them. They worship Andraste, however warped and confused their notions of her are."

Zevran thought they were missing the point. "They live with the *dragons*, my friend. They raise *dragons*. That means that somewhere soon we will come across *dragons* bigger than those little ones. Maybe *very* big."

"True." Bronwyn patted the grenades on her belt. "If they have young, then there is likely a mature female dragon and some drakes somewhere near Haven. These cultists bring the eggs here and care for them." She added slowly, "If the caverns contain a large enough chamber, some of the mature dragonkind might even live here. We had better be *very* careful."

"That dragon we killed in the elven temple wasn't so terrible," Tara recalled. "as long as you didn't let yourself get flamed. I've never seen a drake. They're the males that can't fly, right?"

"Right. But books say they can flame, so they're still dangerous." She patted the mabari's head. "If you smell dragon, Scout, let me know."

The dog yipped, nosing at the dragonling corpses. Dragons had a very strong, interesting smell. There might a good snack here later, when he was hungry.

"I wish Jowan were here," Tara said. "He'd be fascinated by all the new books."

"And the blood magic," Cullen muttered.

Tara made a face at him, and stuffed a thin volume into a pouch. "We don't know if we'll be coming back this way," she said earnestly, trying to excuse herself to Bronwyn.

"No more baggage," Bronwyn insisted. "I'm willing to bet everything I possess that we'll need to fight again—and soon."

Tara sighed to herself. There was so much here. Jowan would go wild for the books, of course, but so would Anders. Morrigan would pretend to be above it all, but she'd be cramming ancient tomes into her pack like everybody else. This was a treasure-house of knowledge, and no one but a handful of crazy dragon-fanciers had seen it. She played with

the idea of mages hiding out here. If those Haven folk could conceal themselves, why not mages? Niall, now—he was an Isolationist. He'd love the idea of a society of mages, living free and independent lives in this amazing temple, studying and researching whatever they pleased. Of course, someone would have to cook the dinners... and raise the food... and make the beds. Tara was not sure that the Isolationists had quite figured out the minutiae of daily life. How would they get by, when there were only mages about, who knew next to nothing about anything practical?

The cave branched eventually. Bronwyn stood at the juncture, with no idea which way to go. Scout liked the right hand tunnel.

"It's a bit...smelly," Leliana said, making a face.

"If it's whiffy, that's probably why he likes it," Bronwyn agreed. Scout panted innocently, brown eyes guileless. "All right, we'll try it."

It got very whiffy indeed as they moved further, but they met no resistance—in fact no sign or sound of any humans. They heard, instead, the distant, distinctive bleat of goats.

"Perhaps this leads outside," Tara whispered.

Zevran did not think so. "There would be a breeze. We shall see."

It was well lit, and the tunnel bent in several places. They

came to a widening of the path, and the way opened into a moderate-sized cavern.

A cavern that reeked of goat. Scout liked it very much, and trotted to a heap of dung, shoveled neatly into a corner.

"Well done, boy," Bronwyn snarked.

It was a cul-de-sac. It was evidently a place to store live food for the dragonlings. Other odds and ends were piled here and there, but mostly there were cages filled with wretched, frightened goats and filthy straw smelling of goat. The large pile of dung in the corner of the room, however, did *not* smell like goat...

Scout barked, and dashed to the tunnel entrance, growling.

Zevran grinned fiercely. "Someone's looking for breakfast, perhaps?"

Not human footsteps. They were heavier, and somehow scratchier—an unfamiliar gait.

"Dragons!" Cullen shouted.

Three of them appeared around the nearest bend, moving fast, the biggest nearly as tall as a man at the shoulder. The long necks undulated, and the fanged mouths gaped, ready to inhale deeply.

Tara leaped forward and cast a freezing spell. "They're drakes, actually!" she yelled, pleased as the creatures slowed

and whitened with frost. "No wings!"

Wings would have meant nothing under that low ceiling anyway. What mattered were the creatures' agility, their damnably hard scales, and their sharp edges. They were vulnerable where other dragons were vulnerable, though, and easier to reach than the bigger ones. One drake reared, lashing out with its formidable claws, but in doing so exposed a soft belly that Yusaris sliced open. Eyes and throats were pierced, and magic drained life from the hulking bodies.

The last drake standing, almost with its dying breath, loosed a blast of fire. Bronwyn and Zevran rolled out of the way, but only Tara's armor spared her a bad burn. The drake thrashed wildly, and then subsided. Scout trotted over to the one whose guts were spilled out, curious about what might be good.

"Watch out for the second stomach," Bronwyn warned. She pointed her booted toe at a black and glistening sac. "I think that's it. It's where their fire comes from and I think it would taste *really* bad."

So Scout snacked on a kidney instead, or what they thought was probably a kidney, though the size made it hard to tell. Scout liked it, anyway.

"It's so bloody," Leliana remarked. "Are you sure you want Scout licking up dragon blood? It might make him...well..."

"Like himself, only more so?" laughed Zevran.

"Come on, everyone," Bronwyn ordered. "And no, you can't bring the kidney with you, Scout. Drop it, ser! You've had plenty. I don't know," she said to Leliana. "The blood doesn't seem to be doing him any harm, and he hasn't had fresh meat in several days."

So it was back down the tunnel they way they came, Up ahead, they heard a man calling.

"Here, boy! Scorcher, where did you go this time? You are such a bad boy!"

"Oh, no!" Tara whispered. "We've killed someone's pet!"

The dragon wrangler had a pair of assistants, and all of them had maces, but they were ambushed and killed. As the companions followed the left hand tunnel, they came upon more and more people. They were always recognized as intruders, and all the confrontations ended in a final, lethal fashion. Further on was yet another branch in the tunnel, and once again Scout was interested in turning right.

"Oh, why not?" muttered Bronwyn. "We'll have to fight them all in the end, anyhow."

The right hand path led to a very large cavern, and they paused, looking it over carefully. Steam rose from the far wall, and it reeked of the now familiar scent of dragons. Scout's soft growl warned them in time to annihilate another mob of hungry, aggressive little dragonlings. A drake attacked, attracted by the smell of blood and strange humans.

And as they dealt with one danger, they moved on to another. A pair of Reaver guards came running, axes awhirl. They never reached the companions, between Tara's spells and Leliana's arrows.

"I am using a much heavier arrow for these men," Leliana informed them. "And poisoning my arrows, too. It is the safest way."

They all agreed that it was a very prudent practice; even more so when another drake came thundering out of a side chamber, and they were simultaneously hit with a burst of magical energy. Up some steps, a mage was casting from an observation platform.

"Deal with the mage, Tara!" Bronwyn shouted. "We'll take care of the drake!"

A good plan, if the mage Tara faced had been of the garden variety. Alas, this one was extremely powerful, with a long, long range. They hacked the drake apart with savage energy and then ran to support Tara against the this new danger.

Cullen did not dare summon a smite, for fear the enemy would finish Tara off before his own power was drained. Instead, he rushed up, and was promptly caught in a leg trap. Bronwyn swore, leaped past him. and found herself crossing swords with the mage.

"Andraste's Nightgown!" she shouted, fearfully startled. The mage was casting with the *sword*. And it was a real sword—

in fact, a splendid silverite sword_ and what was more, the mage knew how to use it.

He was a powerful mage, but no more than a competent swordsman. In moments, Bronwyn's point had found its way past his guard, and he was spitted on her blade. He fell slowly, face filled with astonishment, hands grasping desperately for the jeweled hilt of his weapon.

Tara puffed up the stairs, exhausted and indignant. "He was tough! I didn't know that a little backwater like this could train a mage that well. Or maybe he was just really, really powerful! Ooo! He had a sword!"

"You *have* a sword, Tara," Leliana said kindly.

"It's not really real. It's a staff disguised as a fake sword. His sword is real, and he could cast with it!"

"This is quite the weapon," Zevran agreed, eyes alight at the beauty of it. He bent down and reached for it, and then dropped it with a pained curse.

"Braska! What kind of sword is this?"

Tara knelt down to examine it. Unlike most things in life, it looked even better close to than from a distance: the jewels rich, the setting finely worked, the chasing exquisitely detailed. She touched the hilt lightly, and then gripped it with growing confidence. "My kind of sword," she whispered.

"A magical sword?" Leliana wondered, feeling a ballad in there somewhere.

"Why not?" Bronwyn shrugged. "Magic is everywhere."

"I know you said we weren't supposed to take loot," Tara said, "but can't I take this? Please, Bronwyn? It's a magic sword. I can cast with it and skewer people, too!"

"If you're going to use a real sword," Bronwyn said, "you'd best learn to use it properly. Zevran, see to it."

"With pleasure!" The assassin unbuckled the scabbard from the mage's corpse and slipped it over Tara's shoulder. Tara triumphantly sheathed the sword, feeling already that it was hers indeed.

"It will be extra weight," Bronwyn pointed out. "If it gets in the way of your casting, just drop it, and perhaps we can come back for it later."

"It's going to be fine," Tara promised. "I'll take off the fake and just wear this." With Zevran's help, she rearranged her weapons, and dropped the inferior weapon to the ground without another thought. "The sword's scabbard is gorgeous, too. Look! it even has a name! Yes, it does. It's written here in Arcanum: 'Spellweaver!' I like that!"

When in the ancient elven tombs she had communed with the spirit of long-dead arcane warrior. The visions they had shared rushed back, fueled by the touch of the sword. Tara

suspected she would need little teaching. Flashes of physical memory came to her: the clash of sword on sword, the edges charged with magic and purpose. She was stronger, and she would be stronger still...

Beyond this cavern they came upon what appeared to be a kind of hatchery of dragon eggs. Two mages and their assistants were working there, and put up a brief resistance. This was a strange place indeed: the huge eggs were set into beautifully made stands, and lamps were set up illuminate the long stone tables and the eggs. The companions shook their heads. The elaborate organization and tools were like nothing any of them had ever seen.

"They've been at this for ages," Cullen said in wonder. "Ages. They have devoted themselves to this horrible endeavor with all their hearts and souls. What a tragic waste."

"Leave it, Cullen," Bronwyn said. "There will be few enough of them left by the time this day is over."

They had to backtrack once again, and eventually found where the tunnel branched off.

"How long *are* these tunnels?" Tara complained.

Bronwyn wondered that herself. If they continued on and on like this, they would eventually have to camp, which was not a pleasant prospect. They had been making noise, too, and anyone else in the caverns must know that enemies were here.

Though how many more people could there be? The village of Haven, though it seemed prosperous enough, was not large. They could not hope to support many more warriors.

But a few more, certainly. There was noise up ahead: shouts and orders.

"They know we're coming," Cullen said.

Bronwyn smiled grimly. "They know *someone's* coming. They know nothing about us."

"Well said," Zevran agreed.

"Right!" said Tara. "They don't know about us being big damned heroes!"

An ambush materialized from behind a corner. Only two very strong opponents. A mistake, since they were facing six stronger attackers. The companions moved on, perceptibly higher and higher, and then Leliana exclaimed with relief.

"Look! Right ahead, the caverns connect with a finished corridor!" She whispered. "Perhaps that is the real temple!"

"If they know we're coming," Bronwyn whispered back, "we'll need to be wary for traps. Keep your eyes open."

So they saw the trip line, and Zevran disarmed it. A mage was waiting in a dilapidated chamber, along with some guards. They were dealt with, and the companions left only bloody corpses behind.

Bronwyn was wondering if they really would have stop and rest again. Not knowing what was ahead, she was not sure if she should let herself be tempted to see one more tunnel; one more chamber. Still, the longer they waited, the more advantage they gave to the defenders.

"Come on."

A chamber was up ahead. Bronwyn peered around the corner and at first thought it was obscured by steam, but then saw the fire burning in a big pit. A group of warriors were gathered around it, warming their hands. Others stood alert, waiting. Most interesting, however, was the shaft of sunlight breaking though an opening in the stone. Here was the exit to the surface!

Everyone had a look, and then they moved back to confer.

"I think these must be the last," Cullen said. "There's at least one mage there."

"I'm surprised they haven't laid any more traps," Bronwyn said. "They seem to be simply...waiting."

"Maybe they want to talk," Zevran suggested. "Considering what has happened to everyone else in the caverns, I would want to call a parley, were I in their shoes."

"All right." Bronwyn thought quickly. "We'll confront them. If they want to talk, we'll hear what they have to say. I may have to think on my feet. Tara, keep your eyes on that mage."

It was not the mage who stepped forward to speak to them, however, but a very impressive man with an axe.

"Stop! You will go no further! Who are you?" he demanded, bristling with anger, his voice booming in the enclosed space. He was tall: as tall as Loghain, with the same dark hair, but with a heavy beard and a darker complexion. Under black brows, dark eyes burned with rage. He glared at her furiously, taking in every detail of her appearance. "You have defiled our temple, spilled the blood of the faithful, and slaughtered our young! You will tell me now, intruder, why you have done all this!"

Bronwyn glanced around the chamber quickly, taking in the number of men and their weapons. She and her companions had been fighting all day, and these men were fresh. Perhaps a soft answer was best—at least to start with.

"I am Bronwyn Cousland, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden. We did not come to attack you. We did not come to kill anyone. We came for the Urn of the Sacred Ashes, and we will not leave until we have set eyes upon it."

The man was incredulous. "You have done all this for a worthless relic? The Urn has no value to us. It contains only the remains of Andraste's former manifestation. We, who are privileged to serve the living Andraste, have no time for such trifles."

"The living Andraste?" Cullen said, shocked and disbelieving. "You cannot mean that!"

"Andraste died many ages ago," Leliana said earnestly.

A scornful laugh. "You know nothing! So know this, strangers: the Prophetess Andraste has overcome death itself and has returned to Her faithful in a form more radiant than you can imagine. We are Her chosen."

"That's..." Bronwyn managed, trying not to gape like a fool.
"That's... an *extraordinary* claim."

The dark man seemed gratified by her astonishment. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Father Kolgrim. leader and guide to the Disciples of Andraste. She is no long-dead myth, but a living being of immeasurable power. Long ago we were chosen to serve Her, and so we have for these ages past."

"And yet you have kept her secret," Bronwyn said, "Why? All Thedas reveres Andraste and would welcome her return. Why does she not reveal herself?"

Kolgrim studied her, dark eyes considering. He smiled faintly.

"She is not yet ready to make Her power known. None but the Disciples may approach Andraste. When the time is right, She will descend upon the nations in fiery splendor, and all will know Her. I warn you: kill us, and you will face Her. She will smell our blood upon you and Her wrath will be great."

"I *told* you," Bronwyn said, an edge to her voice, "We are not here to kill, but to find the Ashes. What has become of them?"

Kolgrim scoffed, with a quick, strong gesture of dismissal. "They are still within the funerary temple, but we care nothing for them. Why would we need them, when Andraste in all Her glory walks and breathes among us? But you, who want the Ashes... Many have come here, but only you have had the skill and fortitude to pass the temple. Perhaps there is a way to atone for your recent transgressions..."

Bronwyn held up her hand to silence her own people. "What do you mean? Why would you wish to cooperate with one you consider an enemy?"

"Perhaps..." Kolgrim said, eyes intent on Bronwyn's fair face, "Perhaps I believe in second chances. All of us stumble through the darkness before being found and shown the light. Perhaps...through Andraste's mercy, Her greatest enemy could become Her greatest Champion."

Bronwyn frowned at him, waiting.

Kolgrim said, "The Ashes you seek are not a half-mile away, up through the cavern and in the midst of the next mountain to the east. An immortal guardian protects the shrine, but the being rejects us and refuses to recognize the truth of the Risen Lady. The Ashes are the merest remnant of a dead woman, but they prevent the holy Andraste from fully realizing Her new form. The Beloved needs to reclaim the Ashes, to make them Her own again. With a few drops of the Risen Andraste's blood, the link to Her old incarnation would be severed. Blood carries power, strength, knowledge. Through it, all the power that is held in the Ashes will be returned to

our Lady. Take a vial of Our Lady's Blood, and empty it into the dead Ashes."

Mutiny boiling behind her, Bronwyn shook her head. "I cannot promise such a thing. I need the Ashes to heal a sick woman."

"You need only a pinch for that," Kolgrim quickly assured her. "Take that pinch for yourself, then complete your quest, and release Andraste!"

"Why would this guardian admit me to the shrine?" Bronwyn asked. "You have... disciples...you have warriors. Why not go yourself?"

"The guardian knows us. We cannot overcome him, for he draws his strength from the Ashes. We cannot so much as enter the precinct. But you—you are unknown to him. He would take you for a pilgrim. You could deliver to Our Lady what is rightfully Hers. You could enter the shrine, perform this service, and then Andraste would be revealed to all the nations of Thedas. The rewards for performing such a service would be great indeed."

"Rewards are always good," Zevran observed softly. Bronwyn shot him a quelling look.

"What rewards do you offer?" she asked Kolgrim bluntly.

"There is great power in the Our Lady's blood. As Andraste's True Champion, you would be admitted to our ranks as an honored sister, sharing in the power of Her Blood. Through

Andraste's guidance we have learned to harness that power. All these secrets would be yours."

"Bronwyn!" Cullen burst out, "You can't consider this!"

Bronwyn lowered her voice, and spoke to Kolgrim in a show of agreement. "I think we can work together, but it will be difficult to convince my people. I must speak to them and make them understand."

"Be quick!"

Bronwyn turned her back to the man and walked away, gesturing her friends close. Cullen was bright pink, and Bronwyn thought he was about to pop a blood vessel. Leliana's eyes were wide with horror.

"Shhh!" Bronwyn hushed them, hardly moving her lips. "Play along. The odds aren't with us. Let him think we agree, and he'll show us the way to the shrine. Make a show of unwillingness if you like, but follow my lead." She spoke louder. "But would you really defy the will of Andraste?"

Leliana, as a bard, caught on immediately. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," she said distinctly, "to see Andraste with our own eyes!"

Zevran, too, played his part. "I am your sworn man. It matters little to me. If this is your path, I shall follow, as always."

"I don't know..." Tara's pretense of uncertainty was almost

overdone. "We really need the Ashes!"

"As long as we get a pinch first, that's all we need!" Bronwyn said, with more conviction than she felt. How did this Kolgrim know that only a pinch would do?

Cullen's acting was better. He bit his lip and said reluctantly, "If you're *sure* this is the right thing, Bronwyn..."

"I'm absolutely sure," Bronwyn said confidently, her voice pitched carefully for Kolgrim's ears. "We can save the Queen and serve Andraste at the same time. The power Kolgrim speaks of could be a new advantage against the darkspawn. Every weapon is permissible to a Grey Warden." She turned, her face a mask of calm intent.

"We agree. Give me the vial of blood. As long as I can secure a pinch of the Ashes, it seems that our purposes are not at odds."

The Disciples muttered, glaring balefully at Bronwyn. Kolgrim, however, seemed pleased. "Very well. Take this," he said. He pressed a golden vial into her hands, his touch lingering longer than was entirely necessary. "Now I shall go before you, and beseech the Holy Andraste to let you pass safely into the inner sanctum. Follow me, but at a distance."

Outside the caverns, they found themselves in a barren no man's land, flat and burnt off, separating the two mountain peaks. A long stone road connected them, with bluffs rising up

along either side at the far end. Kolgrim strode quickly away, with barely a glance behind to assure him that Bronwyn was coming. Further off to the right were the ruins of an ancient pavilion—possibly yet another shrine. The air was cold and unbelievably clear, hinting at things undreamed of.

"At last we see the sun again!" Leliana said in relief. "Those caverns suck all joy and beauty from life."

"They still weren't as bad as the Deep Roads," Tara insisted. "If it weren't for the people who tried to kill us, exploring them could even be fun!"

"We don't know that others won't try it...and very soon," Cullen pointed out.

"They won't—not if Bronwyn plays on 'Father' Kolgrim's manly feelings," Tara smirked. "I think he fancies her."

"He does *not*," Bronwyn growled.

"Don't, Tara," Cullen said, thoroughly annoyed. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"But he does!" laughed Zevran. "Tara is absolutely right. You, Noble One, are irresistible to irascible black-haired, black-hearted men."

Leliana touched Cullen on the arm. "I saw him looking at Bronwyn, too. He was curious about her helmet, but like Tara, I think he was softened by her appearance. It is not so

surprising, after all, is it?"

"He's disgusting," Cullen insisted. "He and his heretics. What vile people, to plot to sully the sacred Ashes in such way."

"Whatever his motives," Bronwyn said, tired of the discussion, "we are here to find the Ashes, not to fight heretics. If we succeed in finding the Ashes, I hope we can find another exit from this place, and avoid these madmen entirely."

Cullen grumbled, but did not disagree. "But someday," he said darkly, "we'll be back..."

Further out, the wind picked up, clean and bracing. Feathery clouds wreathed the peaks in white, and shadows were already lengthening across the valleys. In this golden light, spellbound and lowering, anything might be possible.

"A fine place to meet Andraste!" Zevran grinned. "The air is full of gods!"

"I'm quite sure they're not *our* sort of gods," Cullen muttered.

"Father Kolgrim says he's going to show us Andraste," Leliana said, with a hint of hope. "I for one would like that very much."

"It's not going to be Andraste," Cullen said wearily. "It's going to be some sort of ridiculous idol, and we're going to have to pretend to be impressed, to keep up this imposture."

Kolgrim was waiting for them under a sheer bluff, accompanied by two of his Reavers. A pair of archers were

off to the side. Bronwyn considered a surprise assault then and there, but was held back by a certain curiosity. Would it be a mere silly puppet-show, impressive only to inbred yokels, or would it be a true wonder?

The man himself was looking back at her with...well, not exactly a smirk, but an expression of satisfaction, as of one who held the winning cards. In his hands was an ornate horn, magnificent with gold mountings. The horn was a curious shade of rich lavender. Bronwyn wondered how they had dyed an ox horn such a beautiful color, until she realized...

"That is the tip of a dragon horn," she said.

"Blessed Andraste! You're right!" Cullen gasped. Then he calmed himself. "We know they raise dragons here. It is hardly surprising that they have some of their remains."

Kolgrim lifted the horn and blew into the golden mouthpiece. A terrible music rang up to the cloud-capped mountain peaks. An even more terrible roar woke the echoes in reply. A huge shadow detached itself from the top of the bluff, and with a deafening thunder of wings, descended upon them.

"Maker!" Bronwyn gasped. Running would do no good. No good at all.

The dragon soared lazily over their heads and settled onto the path before them, shaking the earth. It was a healthy High Dragon, considerably larger than the form Flemeth had assumed. Kolgrim did not flinch or retreat, but adopted a

servile demeanor. He crossed his arms before him, and bowed low.

Bronwyn, sword in hand, looked at her friends with a wild surmise. In their eyes she saw reflected her own sudden, utter comprehension.

This, then, was Andraste.

"You see now?" Kolgrim demanded, eyes riveted on the monstrous beast confronting them. "She has risen, and is more glorious than all the Old Gods combined. Not even the Tevinter Imperium could hope to slay Her now!"

Personally, Bronwyn thought the dragon-hunting expedition that had faced Flemeth could handle this creature quite well. Perhaps with more archers, and more bombs... but no, they could take her. Her own small party, however, was neither armed nor armored nor prepared to survive a battle with this creature. Tactful lies seemed the best weapon at the moment.

Kolgrim walked forward, straight toward the slaving jaws of the dragon. Bronwyn thought he deserved points for that, dragon-worshipping zealot or not.

"O Beloved Andraste! Most Holy Andraste! We praise Your name! I bring before You Your true Champion. Permit her to pass, Beloved One! Let her pave the way for Your glory!"

Andraste appeared to be thinking about it. If the dragon

decided instead that they all looked tasty, Bronwyn wondered if Kolgrim would put up a fight. Probably not. He would probably think being eaten by the "Beloved" was some sort of honor. And then she remembered the girl's words about poor Brother Genetivi.

"He was given to Andraste..."

Maker! These bastards had fed Genetivi to this monster! It was all she could do to keep a moderately worshipful look on her face. She supposed it was quite all right if she looked rather frightened, as well. She was, in fact, fairly terrified. Beside her Scout growled and backed away slightly, clearly thinking that it was time to leave. Bronwyn took a quick glance at her party.

Tara and Zevran looked as scared as she felt herself. Cullen was afraid, but filled with righteous wrath. Leliana looked frightened, too, but also bitterly disappointed. There was no holy mystery here, after all: just a pack of inbred lunatics who had backslid into Tevinter-style dragon worship, with the added fillip of naming their 'god' Andraste. It was horrifying and ugly and pitiable; not a vision of the Divine. This dragon was not Bronwyn's sort of god at all—or Leliana's, or Cullen's, or of anyone else who possessed a shred of sanity. The creature's strength, however, deserved the respect accorded any supremely dangerous enemy.

"You are right," she choked out to Kolgrim through numbed lips. "'Andraste' is glorious."

An endless, endless wait. Bronwyn momentarily expected a mighty inhalation that would signal a blast of flame, and readied herself to leap aside. Instead, the beast looked them over, and then suddenly flapped its wings, staggering them with the force of the downdraft. It took to the skies with a triumphant bellow, and flew back to its lair at the top of the bluffs. Kolgrim watched its every move, eyes glittering in rapture. After a deep, reverential sigh, he turned to Bronwyn.

"The Beloved Andraste will let you pass. Go, and may Her strength uphold you. You know what you must do."

"That was smart, Bronwyn," Tara babbled, as they walked quickly and rather unsteadily toward the door to the inner shrine, trying to ignore the ominous rumbling above their heads. "That was really smart to make them think we were going to do what they wanted. If we'd just killed those crazy men in the caves, the dragon would have come down right on us in the open, and we would have been roasted. Just roasted and eaten up like crispy bacon—"

Zevran put his arm around her shoulder. "Hush, *carina*. We will survive this, as always. Right now the big dragon is our *friend*."

Cullen wiped his mouth. "It is no dishonor to use guile when dealing with infidels. You were right to find a way past the dragon, but we must cleanse the world of this ghastly cult. Who knows how many innocent people have been murdered in the name of their false god?"

"Dragon cults," sighed Leliana. "Poor Brother Genetivi knew what waited for him in Haven. I wish he had made his notes clearer. I wish he had told us. He knew what he was walking into—"

"—Or thought he did," Bronwyn said shortly, not liking to ponder Genetivi's last moments. When the fanatics were done with him, he had been fed to a dragon. *A dragon*. What a cruel end for that mild-mannered, decent scholar.

"And I'm *sure* that Kolgrim is interested in you," Leliana went on, the words tumbling over each other, "and in your helmet. He looked at it again, as if he recognized it. Perhaps there have been Grey Wardens here before..."

That was not a pleasant thought, either.

They desperately needed rest and food, but they could hardly take either here, out in the open, with a dragon sitting atop the bluffs, and Kolgrim and his fellow maniacs staring at them at a distance. They would have to try to enter the shrine, and Bronwyn hoped they would not have to fight for their lives the moment the door was opened.

Thanks to my reviewers: Costin, Zikram Kraiss, demonichargles, Aoi24, Blinded in a Bolthole, MsBarrows, tgcgoddess, Have Travel, riverdaleswhiteflash, Zute, KnightOfHolyLight, Raxiselic, Nemrut, Shakespira, JackOfBladesX, Jyggilag, Enaid Aderyn, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Josie Lange, Girl-Chama, and Tyanilth.

I apologize if your name is not listed. FFdotNet was doing something strange last week, and I was unable to reply to some of your replies in the usual way. Since then, FFdotNet has dropped those reviews, and I can't even find the record of my reply! Your kind words and critiques are appreciated, though, as always.

A short chapter, but I was on vacation in Key West for most of the week with very little time to write. The next chapter will be the adventures within the Shrine and the conclusion of the Urn quest.

54. A Pinch of Ashes

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 54: A Pinch of Ashes

The architecture was the same, the decoration the same, but this shrine was in other essentials very different from the temple Bronwyn and her companions had gone through from end to end.

Other than a few footprints in the dust just inside the door, there was no hint that anyone had walked here in many years—perhaps ages. Dust lay heavy on the stone floor, trickling down from the joints in the roof. Light slanted in dimly from narrow openings in the wall. A perfect silence held the place spellbound, making it almost indecent to speak aloud. They had been warned of an angry spirit that guarded this place from the depredations of the dragon cultists. No sign of the spirit manifested, even after they had shut the door behind them. They waited in silence for an attack.

No attack came, however. Bronwyn thought about it, and then said, careful of the smothering quiet. "We must rest. I shall guard. The rest of you, get something to eat, and try to sleep."

"Er, Bronwyn?" Tara whispered, looking past her. "Something about that seem strange to you?"

She turned. Fire burned in sconces in the next hall, illuminating. Torches were lit, too. The light was blue-white, unwavering, and burned without consuming the torches or any substance in the sconces.

"That's beyond me," Tara said. "I can make magical fire, but it doesn't last like that."

"No one lit those fires recently," agreed Leliana, "There are no footprints in the hall."

"Well," Zevran said pragmatically, "it means that we shall not be stumbling in the dark. It is gracious of the Guardian of the Shrine to give us this light. I for one am weary, so I shall follow our leader's commands to eat and rest. Come, *carina*."

"It's pretty amazing," Tara said, turning away.

Bronwyn patted Scout's furry head. "Is there anything here, Scout? Anything I should be worried about?"

Scout did not seem to think so. Cullen poured out some water in a bowl for him, and the dog drank thirstily, then eagerly chewed on a hambone. After he had begged a few treats, he curled up and went promptly to sleep.

Leliana took note of the dog's complacency. "Our mabari Warden senses no evil here. If the Guardian of this Shrine

rejects the dragon worshipers, it could be that he is good—a defender of the true Andraste. We should have nothing to fear from him."

Zevran, snacking on fruit bread, laughed quietly. "Ah, my dear, virtuous beings are sometimes the most dangerous! I could tell you a tale about an incorruptible judge in my beautiful Antiva, and of all those frailer folk whom he sent to be hanged on the gallows or broken on the wheel..."

"Maybe tomorrow," Tara said sleepily, leaning against him. "After seeing that dragon, I'm exhausted, though personally I think we're all pretty heroic not to have fainted dead away."

Cullen ignored the conversation, eating hungrily in silence. Afterward, he found a corner, and fell on his knees in prayer, lips moving soundlessly.

"He is right," Leliana agreed. "That is the best thing right now." She slipped away and knelt at his side.

Bronwyn accepted some bread and water, keeping her eyes on the hall past the vestibule. She did not feel particularly like praying herself. What was the use? The Chantry itself taught that the Maker had turned his face from the world in disgust. Why pray to a being who had manifestly declared his disinterest? As far as she could see, the Maker had cut them loose, to live or die as they would. Some preached that deeds, good and bad, would have justice in the afterlife, but Bronwyn found that hard to believe. If the Maker cared nothing about the world, why would he care what was done

there? It would be pleasant to believe that cruelty and wickedness would be called to account before the Maker's throne, but Bronwyn did not believe it. Souls left their bodies, and what happened to them afterward, not even the Chantry knew, for all their claims.

Standing guard was very dull, and caused one's mind to drift along dark paths. Bronwyn roused herself and focused on listening to the silence. There was nothing to hear but the soft breathing and occasional snores of her companions. They looked very young and vulnerable, lying their asleep. She felt a surge of tenderness toward them all: all of them who had put themselves in her hands.

The hours wore on. In time she woke Leliana and settled down to a restless sleep, plagued by gibbering darkspawn. The Archdemon was there, too, but a silent presence. Bronwyn woke from time to time, and tried to put those familiar terrors out of her mind.

By the time light was penetrating into the cold little chamber, they were all stirring, rather curious about what the day would bring them.

"They can't have another High Dragon hidden away," Tara said, managing a smile.

They ate, and Bronwyn cracked the door open to see what lay outside. They would all prefer to go outside for their ablutions, if possible. Scout squeezed past her, but did not stray far.

Bronwyn could barely see the somnolent bulk of the dragon, high up on the bluff—the merest wing joint, folded in sleep, but it was, alas, there. There was a handful of cultists, but they were far away, down the stone path. If they were all quick, no one should notice them. She scrubbed at her face with a handful of fresh snow.

Refreshed and breakfasted, Bronwyn thought she should say a word before they went on.

"This is the shrine of Andraste. Whether the Ashes are really here or not, I don't want to see any looting. I don't think looting could be considered respectful by any measure, so just don't."

No one argued, perhaps because they all carried as much as they could manage, and still fight. Tara was still purring over her new sword, and trying to get everyone else to touch it, just to see their expressions. Spellweaver had a way of expressing strong dislike for anyone not a mage.

"All right," Bronwyn said, cutting off the byplay. "Follow me."

They stepped out immediately into a long and quiet corridor, which extended only to the right. At the end of it was a large, arched door.

As they moved down, they saw that it was guarded by a solitary warrior.

"Is that...? Tara whispered.

Cullen said, "Who else?"

Zevran murmured, "He looks very like our friend Kolgrim, only...paler..."

Leliana, bright and noticing, said, "And he has a helmet just like yours, Bronwyn!"

All of the observations were true. The man's ancient, gleaming armor was of a style not seen in ages, but his helmet, griffon-winged and shining, was indeed exactly like a Grey Warden helmet. No wonder that Kolgrim had found it interesting. Perhaps the man had come this far and seen the Guardian for himself. Bronwyn wondered if he noticed his own resemblance.

She took a deep breath and walked forward. The warrior's eyes gleamed at their approach, and he spoke, his voice at once mellow and unearthly, as different as possible from Kolgrim's incessant hectoring bellow.

Bronwyn said, "We were told that an immortal Guardian protects this place..."

"Yes, I am the Guardian of the Ashes. I have waited years for this."

Leliana asked, uncertainly, "For us?"

"You are the first to arrive in a very long time. It has been my duty—my life—to protect the Urn and prepare the way for the

faithful come to revere Andraste. For ages I have waited and still shall wait, until my task is done, and the Tevinter Imperium has crumbled into the sea."

"We hate the Tevinters, too," Tara muttered, thinking bitterly of the family she would never know.

"And who are these madmen who have taken over the rest of the temple?" Bronwyn asked. "Where did they come from?"

"When my brethren and I carried Andraste's ashes from Tevinter to this sanctuary, we vowed to forever revere her memory and guard her. I have watched generations take up the mantle of their fathers. For ages they did this, unwavering, joyful in their appointed task. But now they have lost their way. They have forgotten Andraste, and their promise. They have forgotten that Andraste was just a messenger. They speak no more of the Maker, but only of their false Andraste: an even greater sin."

Cullen asked softly, "And who were you—are you?"

"I am all that remains of the first disciples. I swore I would protect the Urn as long as I lived: and I have lived a very, very long time."

"The first disciples?" Leliana asked in wonder. With a shiver of excitement, she blurted out, "Did you know Andraste?"

"Did anyone really know her, save the Maker? She would sometimes spend weeks alone in meditation—often without

food or water. I cannot express in words my love for Andraste. You must seek her out for yourself. Everyone must."

Bronwyn glanced at the rapt faces of her friends, and said, "But what about the dragon cultists? Obviously that dragon of theirs isn't Andraste!"

"No. Our Andraste has gone to the Maker's side; she will not return. The dragon is a fearsome creature, and they must have seen her as an alternative to the absent Maker and his silent Andraste. A true believer would not require such audacious displays of power."

"How did the worship of the dragon come to be?"

"It began with an ancestor of the one you know as Kolgrim. He saw himself as a new prophet, preaching Andraste's rebirth. Some disagreed with him. I heard their cries of pain and death."

Red with anger, Cullen clenched his fists. "We shall put an end to this heresy!"

The Guardian gently reproved him. "The Maker will sit in judgment of them, when the time comes."

Cullen subsided, thinking that the time could not come too soon.

Bronwyn laid a calming hand on Cullen's arm, and decided

truth was best. "We have come to see the Urn."

"You have come to honor Andraste, and you shall...if you prove yourself worthy."

Leliana asked eagerly, "How can you tell if we are worthy?"

The Guardian, with unruffled serenity, said, "It is not my place to judge your worthiness: the Gauntlet does that. The Gauntlet tells the true pilgrims from the false. If you are proved worthy, you will see the Urn, and be allowed to take a small pinch of the Ashes for yourself. If not..."

This all sounded very ominous. Bronwyn began imagining all the ways that this could go wrong. Being tested was fair enough, but she was not going to sacrifice her companions to satisfy some ages-old relic. Before she could decide what to do, the Guardian spoke again.

"Before you go, there is something I must ask you," he said to Bronwyn, his eyes glittering oddly as they seemed to read her soul. "Your path here was not easy. There is suffering in your past: your suffering and the suffering of others. Bronwyn Cousland..."

Bronwyn stiffened in shock. "How do you know—"

"Bronwyn Cousland," the Guardian continued calmly. "you abandoned your parents to the mercy of Rendon Howe. Do you think you failed your parents?"

It was a body-blow. It was falling from the Cliffs of Conobar without a safety line. The raw pain of her family's loss was new again, and tore at her, leaving her incoherent. Bronwyn gaped at the Guardian, struck dumb at the blunt question that no one had ever dared to ask her. While she gasped for breath, her companions had plenty to say. Leliana and Tara were in the Guardian's face, and Cullen and Zevran had their weapons half drawn. Scout lowered his head, growling menacingly.

"—How dare you!"

"—How could you be so cruel?"

"I repeat the question," the Guardian said, unmoved by the tumult. "Do you think you failed your parents?"

"Wait!" Bronwyn said thickly, her hand up for silence. Quieting the guilt and rage and doubt with a fierce act of will, she forced herself to speak rationally.

"No. I did not fail them. I obeyed my parents, and my actions ultimately led to the rescue of my brother and the overthrow of the murderer of my family. I could have stayed and died with them, and my death would have been painful, prolonged, pointless...and stupid. Do you imagine that I have never thought about this? You think I did not relive that night a thousand times, wondering what I could have done— might have done? I have come to the conclusion that I did the best I could, even if others did not. It was not I who killed my parents, but Rendon Howe. It is not I who extorted an

agreement from my dying father that I would be a Warden, but Duncan. No. I did not fail my parents. Others did, but I had no control over their actions."

The Guardian seemed satisfied. "Then you do not dwell on past mistakes. Neither yours or those of others. And what of those that follow you?"

Zevran broke in, sarcastic with anger. "And now the self-flagellation! That is what comes next in these things, no?"

Impassive, relentless, the Guardian turned to Tara. "You, Senior Warden Tara Surana, once mage of the Circle... Jowan planned to escape the Circle with his sweetheart. You helped him, and all of you were discovered by the Templars. Tell me, do you regret your actions? Do you think you failed Jowan?"

Tara glared at him, already roused at the way he had hurt Bronwyn. "No! I don't regret what I did for a minute...except...yes! I regret I wasn't quicker and sharper. I regret I didn't run out the door with him. But that's not what happened, and there's no use worrying about it. I regret more what *other* people did to *me*. And by the way, I did not fail Jowan! I am his good friend and conscripting him was the best thing that ever happened to him, so there!"

"Thank you," the Guardian answered calmly. "That is all." Then he turned to Cullen, who scowled back, a little nervous.

"Cullen, knight and Warden, you have permitted blood mages

to live. You have kept the secret of rites that contravene the teachings of the Chantry. Do you feel you have betrayed your vows and defied the will of the Maker?"

Red with mortification, Cullen choked for moment. "It's complicated..." he protested, trying to find words. "When you swear oaths, and they contradict each other, it's complicated... I've thought about this a lot. Blood magic is evil, but the darkspawn are worse. They'll kill everything and everyone, so we have to fight them, and even ally with people who do wrong things. Sometimes you have to do things that are questionable in a good cause. Killing is wrong, but not if you do it to protect people. So Blood Magic is wrong, but saving lives is more important." His voice trailed off, and he gestured helplessly. "I've just had to use my own best judgment."

Leliana squeezed his arm, smiling up at him. "Well said," she whispered. But the Guardian had a question for her, too.

"Warden Leliana, Bard and one-time Lay Sister: the Maker spoke only to Andraste, yet you claimed to have revelations from him. Do you believe yourself to be Andraste's equal?"

Flustered, Leliana blushed and stammered. "No! no! I never said that!"

"In Orlais you were someone. In the little world of the Lothering chantry, did you fear that you would lose yourself? Did you seek to make yourself seem important?"

Distressed, Leliana denied it all. "You do not understand that when I make stories, I make them from bits of reality... No. Think what you like, but my visions were *real*. Is there not a Blight? Was I not called to fight against it? I never claimed to be like Andraste! You are trying to make me doubt...to make me fearful..."

"That is all," said the Guardian. "And the Antivan Elf..."

Zevran sneered, "Oh? Is it my turn now? Hurrah! I'm so excited."

"Many have died at your hand," said the Guardian. "But are there any deaths that you regret? Perhaps a woman by the name of—"

Zevran but him off, deeply disturbed. "How do you know about that?"

"I know much. It is allowed to me. The question stands, however. Do you regret?"

Tara put her arm around him, and Zevran stood straight and looked the Guardian in the eye.

"Yes. The answer is yes. If that's what you wish to know. I do. Now move on."

Inscrutable, the Guardian stood aside from the slowly opening door behind him. "The way is open. Good luck, and may you find what you seek."

He faded from view. Each one of the companions was startled when the others promptly vanished as well.

"Hello?" Tara called. "Bronwyn? Zevran? Anybody? Ser Guardian?"

She walked into the chamber beyond, complaining.

"If we had to be tested, why couldn't we be tested *together*?"

Another figure was waiting at the end of the hall, not pale but corporeal like the Guardian, but pale and ghostly. It was just a nice-looking human woman in peasant clothing. She looked mild and sad, and not at all dangerous.

Tara walked forward, and gave the spirit a tight smile.

"You must be the first test." Tara hoped this pleasant looking woman would not turn into a disgusting monster and attack her, but it would be just her luck. She waited.

The spirit looked at her appraisingly, and then spoke in a sweet and ethereal voice.

"Echoes from a shadow realm, whispers of things yet to come. Thought's strange sister dwells in night, is swept away by dawning light. Of what do I speak?"

"This is a riddle, isn't it? I hate riddles! I had to answer riddles when I was in the Fade during my Harrowing! I'm terrible at

them. Let me think... *Shadow realm...swept away by dawning light...* The Fade is the shadow realm... Oh, this isn't hard at all! I've got it! Dreams! The answer is Dreams!"

The briefest of smiles flickered on the spirit's lips.

"Yes. Dreams. I am Brona, mother of Andraste. A dream came upon me, as my daughter slumbered beneath my heart. It told of her life and her betrayal and death. I am sorrow and regret. I am a mother weeping bitter tears for a daughter she could not save. You may pass."

The spirit vanished. Tara frowned. displeased to be reminded of her own mother once again... a lost mother she could not remember. She swallowed tears and grief, and stalked toward the next door...

Cullen was alert at once, and drew Yusuf, easing into the chamber ahead. What strange magic was this? A tall shape awaited, ghostly, armored, but it did not draw weapon on him, nor did it seem hostile. Taking in the horned helmet, Cullen wondered if it was the spirit of a Reaver. Cullen drew near to the phantom, and it spoke in a deep, sonorous voice.

"A Poison of the soul, a passion's cruel counterpart; From love she grows, till love lies slain. Of what do I speak?"

Cullen stopped, at first not understanding what the phantom was talking about. *"Poison of the soul..."* Was this some sort of riddle game? *"Poison of the soul... love lives slain..."* And

the phantom was a man in old-fashioned armor. That was the clue that gave Cullen the answer, and a very uncomfortable one it was.

"Jealousy?"

The tall phantom bowed his head. "Yes, jealousy drove me to betrayal. I was Maferath, the greatest general of the Alamarri... but beside her, I was nothing. Hundreds fell before her on bended knee. They loved her, as did the Maker. I loved her too, but what man can compare with a god?"

The phantom dissipated, leaving Cullen to mull over the lesson to be learned here. Whatever dwelt in this place knew entirely too much about him, but it was only to be expected. The Maker knew the secrets of every heart, and had seen his foolish jealousy of a girl he could not hope to win. To be compared to the arch-betrayer Maferath, however... that was profoundly shaming. He must try harder to overcome these feelings. He sighed deeply, and moved on to the next door.

Leliana smiled down at the transparent little girl. Riddles were easy. She repeated the spirit's words.

"The smallest lark could carry it, while a strong man might not... A tune, of course."

A fragile, ghostly smile. "Yes. I was Ealisay, Andraste's dearest friend in childhood, and always we would sing, She celebrated the beauty of life, and all who heard her would be

filled with joy. They say the Maker himself was moved by Andraste's song, and then she sang no more of simple things."

The child faded away, and Leliana was left, feeling uneasy and rebuked; once more reminded that it was not for her to imitate Andraste. She left the room quickly.

Zevran found himself face to face with the spirit of an elf in armor: an elf not unlike himself. The spirit acknowledged Zevran, and spoke.

"I'd neither a guest nor a trespasser be; in this place I belong, that belongs also to me. Of what do I speak?"

"A riddle? You're asking me a riddle?" Feeling rather ridiculous, he considered his answer at some length.

"A home. Not that I have experience of such a thing. Crows have no homes."

Softly, the spirit replied. "Yes. A Home. I am Thane Shartan. It was my dream for the People to have a home of their own, where we would have no masters but ourselves. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, and thus we followed Andraste against the Imperium. But she was betrayed, and so were we."

The elf-spirit faded away. Zevran shrugged. Obviously this place was trying to tell him something. A home? Personally,

Zevran thought such considerations were ridiculous in such a place and at such a time.

I will take what comes. If I am permitted to stay at the Wardens' Compound now and then, so much the better. But a home of my own? Unlikely.

The phantom was a handsome and aristocratic man, dressed richly in Tevinter fashion and holding an impressive longsword. Bronwyn readied herself for a duel. Instead, the phantom spoke.

"She wields the broken sword, and separates true kings from tyrants. Of what do I speak?"

Storybooks were full of such situations. The hero or heroine was challenged in a riddle game. Bronwyn had always found the idea silly. Faced with the actual situation, she still found it silly, but found herself, in such a situation, even more so. All right, a Tevinter nobleman with a sword could only be one man, the notorious Archon Hessarian, and the Sword was clearly the famed Sword of Mercy: a larger version of the little necklace she wore. The Guardian of this place must be giving her a warning about being a tyrant. Bronwyn felt very strongly that she was nothing of the sort, and would continue to be nothing of the sort, even if she became Queen of Ferelden, but she was not on her own territory, and this was the Guardian's game.

"The answer is "Mercy," she said flatly.

"Yes, Mercy," agreed the phantom. "I could not bear the sight of Andraste's suffering, and Mercy bade me end Her life. I am the penitent sinner, who shows compassion as he hopes compassion may be shown to him."

The phantom faded from view. Very well. A warning against abusing one's power. An adjuration to be merciful. All very proper, she supposed. Still, she had never considered herself a cruel person. Uneasily, she wondered if the Guardian was predicting some challenging situation in her future. She walked past, wondering what the next chamber would bring...

At her side, Scout uttered a loud bark of joy and ran eagerly toward the richly clad figure in the doorway.

Bronwyn stopped dead. "No. This is wrong. Guardian, how can you *do* this to me?"

Scout sat down in front of his Bronwyn's sire, wagging his tail. He remembered how much he liked this man.

"My dearest child." Bryce Cousland, in the doublet he had wore on his last day of life, greeted Bronwyn, his face grave and unsmiling.

"This is cruel..." Bronwyn sputtered. "You cannot be...real..." In her heart, she hoped he was.

He look real. He looked like her real father. It was a painful joy to see him again. Whether his real spirit or an illusion, the being spoke with her father's voice.

"You know that I am gone, and that all your prayers and wishes will not bring me back. Pup, I know you miss me, but my death and my life must no longer have a hold on you. This is how it should be." The spirit paused, and then went on. "I was very nearly a King. I dreamed of greatness for you. But I must warn you, my child: you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity."

He reached out, a glittering amulet in his hand. "Take this, and remember me."

And he was gone.

Tara was startled to come face to face with Jowan: a cheerful, playful Jowan.

"Have fun with the riddle game?"

"Jowan, it's not you really, is it? You're not dead, are you? I'll kill you if you're dead!"

"I didn't think I'd fool you.. Am I a spirit? Are you in the Fade? Honestly, I don't know myself. I am part of the Gauntlet. I am Jowan. I am you."

"Why are you here?"

"To speak to you, and to offer advice.. You have often wondered what would have happened if you had not helped

me. I think you know yourself that everything that happened, the horrible and the wonderful, were all part of the fabric of your destiny. You're a mighty mage, Tara. Sometimes you've made me jealous, but you've always made me proud. Be brave, but be happy, too." He put an amulet in her hand. "I have something for you. Use it well."

He vanished.

"Jowan!" She slipped the chain of the amulet over her head, muttering angrily. "All right, but you had better not be dead..."

"Zevran! It's been too long!"

"Rinna," Zevran said tonelessly. The name was bitter in his mouth, but the girl's face was as lovely as ever—or rather, far lovelier than he had last seen it, smeared with blood and mouth open in silent protest.

The girl he had loved ran a hand through her dark curls and gave him a wink. "You should be careful who you listen to, Zevran. You *should* be sorry you killed me. They played you and Taliesin for fools, and you let them. So here you are, wandering the barbarian south, trying to commit suicide by Grey Warden. That didn't go so well either, did it?"

"Better than I could have known."

"Yes...well, you were lucky there. I admit." She leaned closer, and he found himself recalling a honey-sweet scent. "I know

you are haunted by shame and regret. Let the past stay in the past. Set it aside and be happy with your clever little mage. Take this amulet as a keepsake.. But..."

"But?"

"...Perhaps you could persuade her to make a *little* more effort with her hair?"

"Knight-Commander?" Cullen gasped, astonished to see the old Templar.

Greagoir smiled ruefully. "Greetings, my boy. Don't think I have forgotten you. I think of you every day, with some shame, I must confess. I thought to make a pawn of you—to place someone among the Grey Wardens I could control. An act of pride, but one that proved wiser than I could have known. I have heard good reports of you. You have done well. You have kept your honor and made a new place for yourself among people who call you friend. Forgive a foolish old man. I give you this..." An amulet was laid in Cullen's hand "...and my blessing."

It was only a spirit, Cullen told himself. Only a vision. Nonetheless, he kept the amulet.

"Marjolaine."

"Leliana, my dear! Here you are, saving the world. I confess

than when I plucked you from the gutter, I could not have foreseen such heroics."

"I am no heroine. I am only playing a very small part."

"But playing it so well. That, at least, is no surprise. You think of me often, do you not? I have warned you, again and again, against allowing nonessentials to distract you. I am part of your colorful past. As such, you really must learn to set me aside and concentrate the mission."

"Are you really Marjolaine?"

The handsome brunette cocked her head in thought. "I am Marjolaine, and yet I am not. I am the Gauntlet and I am part of you that will never let you go. Those who survive must go on living, after all. Take this, as a last little...token. It will serve you well, whether you deserve it or not."

In the next chamber, they found...themselves.

Each was faced by a phantom double, and it embodied the worst their natures had to offer. Each wondered, "do I really look like that?" Each resolved never to let another person see the face that double wore.

Zevran considered his twin, gratifyingly handsome and debonair, yes... but bloodthirsty, smirking, malicious, lusting for the kill. On reflection, he had no doubt that many of his victims had seen that face. It might be intimidating—which

was rather the point—but it was remarkably unattractive. He resolved to spend some time before a mirror and develop a new look. Then he settled in for a hard fight. He was the best, after all.

Leliana felt some distress at her sly and self-satisfied face—if partly because it was a little fuller than she pictured herself. It was very unpleasant to see herself draw bow...on herself. She dashed in, relying on speed, and knocked the first arrow aside with a gauntlet. Then she buried her daggers in her own kidneys, wincing.

Had he ever looked so cold? So merciless? Cullen was almost sure than he had never been as smug in his own righteousness as this disturbing phantom. The surprise of the powerful attack—with a double of Yusaris— nearly finished him before the duel could properly begin. He got a grip on himself, and focused on defeating this unpleasant enemy. It could be treated like just another demon. This one was trying to shake him by wearing his own face, but it was *not* Cullen, knight and Warden, and so it would discover.

Tara shook off the blast of cold and concentrated power, letting the memories guide her. This phantom with her face was a powerful mage, but that was all she was. Whatever had created her had not dug deep enough inside the real Tara to find the ancient lore of the arcane warrior. Spellweaver was in her hand, and felt good there. Her body was moving, twisting, lunging of its own accord. The misty image of her past was no match for the new Tara. Without a glance behind, she walked away from the dead doppelganger, charged with

a new confidence.

Bronwyn knew that this was not a face she wanted to show the Landsmeet... nor anyone else who knew her. Was she really that arrogant? Phantom Bronwyn was a formidable opponent, knowing every trick of swordsmanship she did herself. Perhaps the phantom was a little better... a little more focused... and far more indifferent to the pain and suffering of anyone who happened to be in her way. Beside her, Scout quickly finished off the weak double the power of the Shrine had created. They might penetrate the hearts of men and women, but they clearly knew nothing about mabarisi. Scout growled fearsomely and charged in at the wicked stranger who wore his Bronwyn's face. It was not his Bronwyn, of course. He could never be wrong about that...

Their duels won, each found a door. Each opened it and walked through, uniformly reluctant to talk about what they had seen.

"—Bronwyn! Where were you?"

"—*Carina!* You are well?"

"—That was... strange..."

"—Will we never be done with this place?"

Bronwyn felt unutterable relief to see her friends again.

"Everyone all right? Anyone need healing?"

The wounds were dealt with, and they all had time to look around. Behind them, through a single door, lay the empty chamber where it seemed each had fought a double. The chamber they were in now was something new, for an abyss gaped before them.

This was not a bridge broken by time, no longer spanning a pit. This was deliberate. The chamber was nearly filled with a circular hole, cutting off access to the next room beyond. In diameter it was a good fifty feet, and the edge was paved with decorative stones, incised with strange runes. The walls around the gap were round as well, adorned with carved pillars. Temptingly, the companions could see enough of the next chamber to guess that it was the one they sought.

Bronwyn walked to the edge and looked over. A long way down, and water at the bottom. Maybe a natural well, and probably deep. They could not simply climb down, walk across and climb up. In fact, climbing was not an option for them all. Scout could not climb, and Bronwyn was not going to leave him behind.

"There must be some way to get across," said Tara.

Leliana laughed. "We'll have to work together, and join hands, and sing a happy song to get across!"

"Very funny," Cullen growled.

Bronwyn said nothing, and walked around the curve of the pit. A ghostly span arced out from the path as she stepped on

one of the runic pavers.

"This is a puzzle!" Leliana exclaimed. "There is probably a combination of stones we can stand on that will cause the bridge to appear."

"You're welcome to try that," Bronwyn said agreeably. "I'm terrible at puzzles. Nor am I too excited about trusting myself to a 'magical bridge.' Possibly the Powers That Be would get a good laugh if it disappeared just as we were in the middle. They might consider it suitable punishment for overconfidence." She set down her pack and began rummaging through it. "As for me, I think a physical solution is called for."

"I have some tent rope in my pack," Cullen offered, "but not fifty feet of it. The pit is at least that wide."

"We don't have to cross fifty feet," Bronwyn said briskly, collecting her own thin, strong rope, and judging the length. "Anybody else have rope? Twine?"

"Not me, Bronwyn. Sorry," Tara apologized, "It's with the gear I left in the Chantry."

Neither Leliana nor Zevran had any either.

"Let's see what you've got, Cullen." It was narrow twine, but there was over fifteen feet of it. Not much, but enough to tie from tree to tree and support a piece of canvas. Bronwyn had a little more.

"All right. We may need belts, too. In fact, I'm certain we will. Leliana, give me a hand with my armor."

She stripped down to her long linen underdrawers and shirt, removing even her boots and gloves. Cullen walked along the curving wall, and began to grasp what she intended. There was a gap of less than ten feet between the end of the pavers and the wide and jutting doorstep of the next room.

"You're going to jump it?" he asked. "It's possible, I suppose, for you. I believe I could do it, too, but I'm not sure the others..."

"You could fall!" Tara protested.

"I'll have a safety line around me," Bronwyn assured her. "If I can't make it, I'll have Cullen swing me out on the rope and climb up. I know you can't all make the jump, and Scout certainly can't, so we're going to make a bridge you can slide down to the other side. We'll put together a sling for Scout, and do our best to persuade him to get into it."

"A sliding bridge?" Leliana said eagerly. "That sounds like fun!"

"Yes," Bronwyn said, with growing confidence. "We can do this. We tie the rope tightly around the top of that pillar there. See? Around the narrow middle of the capital, so it won't slip down. These pillars are about fifteen feet tall, and we'll tie the rope around the narrow bit that's about twelve feet up. Even if I tie the end to the far pillar at the doorway, we should have a

steep enough angle that we'll slide down the rope. We'll oil up some of the belts and throw them over the rope. Hang on tight, and we'll all be fine."

With a plan to follow, everyone dumped out their packs and looked for things that could be used. Cullen's spare shirt was the biggest, and that would go to make the sling for Scout, tied to Bronwyn's weapon harness.

"How do you know how much rope you'll need?" Zevran asked.

"I have to estimate, but I can guess the distance to that far pillar and the height of this pillar, and then use the Crotonian Theorem." She clarified, "the square of the distance plus the square of the height equals the square of the length of rope. I find the square root of that, and there you are."

"I have no idea what you just said," Zevran said, staring at her blankly, "but I trust you."

"That's mathematics," Tara said, impressed. "We don't learn that at the Circle. That's what the dwarves use for their engineering."

Exasperated, Bronwyn said, "Not *just* dwarves."

Leliana, whose education was exclusively in the fine arts—music, dance, and espionage—smiled sweetly. "You are so well-educated, Bronwyn!"

Cullen was staring at her in honest admiration.

Amused and vexed, and once again very much aware of her privileged upbringing, Bronwyn went back to work fashioning Scout's sling. While she twisted and knotted the torn shirt, she spoke in a low, comforting voice to her mabari.

"I'm going to need you to be brave, Scout. You're going to have to do what we tell you. It's going to all right."

Finished with her work, she tied the two ropes together and then knotted one end to the base of a pillar, and the other end around herself.

"Cullen, hold on to Scout's collar. Stay, Scout! You stay right there with the others!"

The area was cleared and she stood still, visualizing exacting where her feet would need to be at the end of the run to make the jump successfully. It looked seductively close, but the curved approach might throw her off. Then she took two deep breaths, and ran, bare feet slapping on stone. She picked up speed, the curving walls flying past her...there were two last steps, launching her into empty air...the pit gaped below her...

And she came down gracelessly on the other side. with several feet to spare. A clumsy landing, but she was across and unhurt. Her friends cheered. Bronwyn gave them an ironic salute, getting to her feet.

"All right! This much is done. The length is a bit short, just as I

thought. Throw some belts over that I can buckle together."

The belts were thrown over, and some of Bronwyn's gear, too. She tied the end of the rope to a sturdy dragonbone buckle, and looped the length of belts around the base of the pillar.

"Now fasten the rope to the top of the pillar!"

Leliana tied the best knots, so Zevran gave her a boost up to Cullen's broad shoulders. With some huffing and puffing, she tied the end snugly, pulling hard on it to make sure. Then Bronwyn, on her end, took the slack out of the line, buckling the belts tighter.

Scout thought the sling a very bad idea. He wuffed and resisted, and then growled at Zevran, trying to shake free. Tara distracted him with a bit of smoked pork, and the sling was strapped and tightened. Then came the task of lifting a sling full of massive, squirming war hound up to the line. Zevran caught the end of the harness and buckled it securely.

"Be good, Scout," Tara ordered, "Or I'll put you to sleep!" She stumbled, and in the confusion, they let go of the sling. Scout was suddenly sent down the line, ears back, eyes white and rolling, a howl rising high and indignant. The whole process lasted only seconds, and then Scout was scrabbling furiously on the doorstep, chewing at the hated harness.

"Good boy!" Bronwyn praised him, hugging him tightly. "Good boy!" She unbuckled him and helped him put his legs over the

ruins of Cullen's spare shirt. The mabari shook himself, wondering if his pride was wounded.

"I'll go next!" Leliana cried eagerly. Without much ado, she threw a belt over the rope and flew across the gap, landing with a dancer's grace. They applauded, and she gave them a little bow.

"What about the rope, Bronwyn?" Cullen called.

"Leave it for now!" she answered. "We may need to do this again going back. We can fix it then. Come on, throw me the rest of the gear and then come on over."

Cullen was the heaviest of them, and had thought it wise to remove his armor before trusting himself to a thin rope. In due course, the gear was bundled and tossed across the gap, and then first Tara, then Zevran, and finally Cullen slid down the rope to the other side. They rearmed as far as possible, leaving several belts, and advanced down a narrow hallway, draped with spiderwebs, into a high and broad...sanctuary, for that was what it was.

Light poured in from high clerestory windows. A high vaulted ceiling soared above. At the distant end of the chamber, up a grand marble staircase, a great statue of Andraste watched their every move.

Barring the approach to the staircase was a sheet of pale fire, cutting across the chamber from side to side.

"I think this is it," whispered Leliana.

Bronwyn thought so, too.

The wall of flame was fairly intimidating. Obviously it was a last challenge before approaching the holy of holies. A little in front of it stood a small altar. Perhaps an offering was required?

Dust had collected at the top of the altar. Bronwyn brushed it away carefully and found an inscription.

***CAST OFF THE TRAPPINGS OF WORLDLY LIFE, AND
CLOAK YOURSELF IN THE GOODNESS OF SPIRIT. KING
AND SLAVE, LORD AND BEGGAR; BE BORN ANEW IN
THE MAKER'S SIGHT.***

"Well," Zevran said briskly. "That is clear enough. We are commanded to get naked."

"Zevran!" Cullen hushed him.

"Actually," Bronwyn said slowly. "I think Zevran is right. 'Born anew?' That sounds unclothed to me. Anybody else have a better interpretation?"

"Maybe it's a— what-do-you-call-it? A metaphor!" Tara suggested, looking hopeful.

"'Trappings' certainly sounds like armor and weapons," Leliana pointed out.

"—and clothing, boots, and smallclothes," Zevran added. "Anyone here willing to die for their smallclothes?"

Bronwyn sighed. "It's yet another a warning against pride and vanity. It would be a piece with everything else I've been told here. Better to do more than they require, than not enough. Ladies and gentlemen, unarm and undress."

"I won't peek," Zevran assured them all gallantly.

"And Scout shouldn't wear his collar," Tara pointed out. "A collar counts as trappings."

It was very uncomfortable, but there was nothing else to be done. Feeling terribly raw and vulnerable, Bronwyn piled her armor and weapon together and then laid her shabby shirt and underdrawers on the top, avoiding everyone else's eyes.

"Follow me."

"Gladly," Zevran said instantly. Tara elbowed him.

Bronwyn was actually quite frightened. The spirits here knew entirely too much about her. Still, there was no way she could refuse to face the fire. A leader had to lead, and some of her people had a good chance of survival. Even if she perished, surely Leliana and Cullen would be left to take the Ashes back to Ostagar. Another wave of anxiety sapped her spirit. Surely an innocent dog like Scout would not be hurt? He did not seem to be afraid of the flames, as he would be of ordinary fire.

She was taking too long: her people might have second thoughts. She wondered if it would hurt very much. Better to walk quickly, and get it over with at once...

Flames roared up around her ears, enveloping her. There was nothing to do but keep walking as long as she could.

Abruptly, the flames hissed away, vanishing, leaving not a trace behind. The Guardian appeared, approving their success.

"And so, pilgrims, you have been found worthy," proclaimed the Guardian in his eerie, soothing tones. "You have endured the trials of the Gauntlet. You have walked the path of Andraste, and like her, you have been cleansed. Approach the Sacred Ashes."

Bronwyn, hardly believing herself alive, could still feel the tingle of magic fire on her skin. Refreshed, rejuvenated, strengthened, she took a deep breath, and went back to find her gear. Fumbling back into clothing and armor, she could not bear to look at the Guardian right away. The entire adventure had been replete with warnings against arrogance and pride, and she felt rather ashamed of how appropriate they were. Why had the fire not killed her? She was no faithful Andrastean, but a secret questioner.

"Perhaps," the Guardian said quietly, reading her mind in a most disturbing way, "you mistake Andraste for the institutions that claim to worship her. What do you think Andraste values? Rigid adherence to a dogma, or a brave heart and loyalty to

one's friends?"

She still did not look at him, and was grateful for the distraction of Cullen's shout.

"Leliana! Come back here and put your clothes on!"

"I want to see the Urn now!"

"Put your clothes on first! It's disrespectful!"

"I feel wonderful!" Tara declared. "Zevran, don't you feel wonderful?"

"I do!"

Bronwyn forced herself to speak to the Guardian. "So I can take a pinch of the Ashes now? It's all right?"

"Yes, you have all proven yourselves, and are entitled."

"What?" Tara nearly tripped on her boots. "*All* of us are entitled? As in each of us gets a pinch of Sacred Ashes?"

"You are all worthy pilgrims," the Guardian agreed calmly.

"That's...astonishing!" Zevran spoke out involuntarily, amazed to be anything but a henchman. It was an honor... a memorable honor, to be recognized as an equal among equals, and to be rewarded equally with them. A pinch of the Sacred Ashes! Someday, in some dark alley or bloody battlefield, he suspected he would be very, very glad he had

sworn his loyalty to the Warden Commander.

They were not alone in the great chamber. Piles of scorched bones and old armor were scattered here and there, relics of the unworthy. Bronwyn shivered, and then her eyes were drawn to where everyone else was looking: the tall staircase of white marble leading up to the extraordinary statue of Andraste. The Prophet's eyes were raised to heaven. One hand rested gently on her heart, pledging faith with all the world. From the palm of the other hand, upraised in prayer, eternal flames flickered, needing no fuel. On a plinth at the foot of the statue stood a large and wondrous urn of purest white alabaster, the rarest of stones. Deeply chiseled into the stone were the words they had most hoped for.

**THESE ARE THE EARTHLY REMAINS OF ANDRASTE,
PROPHET AND BRIDE OF THE MAKER**

Leliana glanced at Bronwyn, joy illuminating her face, and she squeezed her friend's hand. "I am...dizzy. I cannot believe that we are here at last. To be in Her presence! I have no words to express it."

Cullen looked very young. "I shall remember this until the day I die."

"It is indeed impressive," Zevran said, with a brave attempt at his usual suavity. "And the Urn is an object of true beauty."

"It is, isn't it?" Tara murmured. "I'm glad it's gorgeous, and not just big and gaudy. "I feel like I could always be a good

person here."

Bronwyn was feeling unusually humble, a novel sensation: rebuked by the honest devotion of some of her companions, and the loyalty and trust of the others. Perhaps they had survived simply because they had the deepest faith that Bronwyn could lead them here. Anyway, Andraste had seen something worthwhile in all of them. And in Scout, too, of course, who was as brave as any of them. He panted happily, ready to go wherever Bronwyn went.

"Are we all decent?" Another thought struck her. "The Guardian says we can each take a pinch of the Ashes. Does everyone have a pouch ready?"

"Oh!"

"Wait!"

There was an embarrassed bustle as they groped in pockets and belt pouches, looking for small pouches or purses. Coins were dumped in other places, and pouches carefully emptied and wiped.

"A pinch of the Ashes," Tara said. "That's...almost scary. I'd almost be afraid to use it."

Bronwyn already knew where her pinch was going, but she was glad her companions would have such a splendid reward. Later, away from this holy place, she would probably have to speak of ugly, worldly things: why they must not tell anyone

about the Ashes, which were priceless, and which could easily cost them their lives; why they might not want to discuss what had happened with more hardline officials of the Chantry, who, without proof, would call them frauds and heretics. This was not the place to speak of such things, or even to let her heart be troubled by them.

Instead, together, they walked up the marble steps and stood before the Urn of the Sacred Ashes.

"Maker," Tara whispered. "Don't let me sneeze." Zevran patted her arm. Scout sat down on a wide step and innocently scratched his ear.

Bronwyn lifted the surprisingly heavy lid. The Ashes were not the usual amalgam of soot, particles and bony lumps she was accustomed to from her experience of funeral pyres. Time, or long travel, or deliberate effort had pulverized the Ashes to a soft grey dust.

Cullen took the lid. "I'll hold it, Bronwyn," he said. "You go ahead."

"They're warm!" Bronwyn exclaimed, surprised at the sensation. Velvet soft, the ashes felt as if they had come only recently from the fire.

Solemnly, surreally, they took turns. Ashes were carefully packed away in various small pouches and then the pouches were carefully fastened and sealed. Bronwyn had brought a little waterproof Dalish pouch of bear gut with her, but

everyone had something. Fingers were carefully dusted off into the Urn, and the lid was replaced.

They stood there a little longer, hardly knowing what to do. The Guardian had vanished, to Bronwyn's distress. She had meant to ask him for more advice about the dragon worshipers outside, and if there was another exit from the shrine. There were doors, at least, leading out from either side of the grand staircase.

Slowly, they walked down the steps, leaving a life-changing moment behind. Tara shook herself, and took a look about the Urn chamber.

"Do you think we should...clean it up? We shouldn't just leave these bodies here, should we?"

Once she mentioned it, the condition of the chamber troubled others as well. Zevran was indifferent, having left many a corpse to rot, but he was willing to follow the will of the majority.

Leliana was particularly compassionate. "They tried to find their way, even if they failed. We should dispose of their remains with dignity." Tara vocally agreed.

Bronwyn wondered if Tara was simply looking for a chance to loot the bodies, but leaving skeletal remains did seem rather indecent.

"Let's take a look outside, and see what's feasible. Cullen,

hold the door open so I'm not locked out. I don't want to do this again!"

The shrine was not very big, after all. The door to the side opened out on the no man's land they had seen before. Bronwyn searched the landscape in vain for a way to avoid passing back under the bluffs. It did not look good. She did see a way southwest to the Temple that might allow them to avoid going back through the caverns, but with the sheer face of the mountain behind and to the side of them, a confrontation with Kolgrim seemed inescapable.

Well, they would be ready. They had had a good look at Kolgrim and the men he commanded. He would get no reinforcements. That meant...what? Eight men or so, at the most. Refreshed and strengthened as they felt now, Bronwyn knew they were more than a match for the cultists. The serious problem was the dragon. They needed to prevent Kolgrim from summoning it, if they could. Very likely though, the moment he spotted them, he would know that Bronwyn had not done as he wished.

They would worry about that later. They would show some respect to Andraste by clearing out the urn chamber. Bronwyn found a heavy rock and used it to prop the door open. Then they began gathering the remains.

"There a good place over there to burn them," she said, pointing.

Inevitably, they found valuables: coin, fine armor, jewelry—

including a sapphire ring and a remarkable gold necklace with a demon-headed pendant—some good weapons, and a traveler's journal scorched by the fire that had killed its owner. It was too blackened to read, and Bronwyn added it to the pile of remains to be incinerated. The plunder was arranged in a pile, and after Tara set the skeletal remains alight, they shared out what was worth taking. Tara got the necklace, Leliana took the ring.

Since they did not need to go back the way they came, there was the makeshift bridge to disassemble. With a stern command to Scout to stay, Bronwyn jumped over, followed by Cullen. The rope was untied from the top of the pillar and the two of them made the jump again. Tara took apart Scout's sling, and Cullen mournfully regarded the remains of his shirt. The belts were claimed and buckled on, the tent ropes untied from each other and stowed away, and they were ready to leave, though Leliana, at least, seemed loath to depart.

"I wish I could draw," she sighed. "I wish I were an artist who could paint this. I shall have to think about it every day, so my memory does not fade."

Then, they shut the door behind them and made ready to face the last of the Disciples of Andraste.

"They'll probably attack us on sight," Bronwyn warned. "We must stop Kolgrim from sounding the horn. Aside from the dragon, he looks to be the most formidable enemy. Tara, freeze him solid. Leliana, shoot him in the throat, shoot him in the hand. Whatever. Then we'll have to hope that the fight

won't make enough noise to attract the dragon's attention. If it smells blood, it might be attracted anyway, so let's finish it as quickly as possible."

"Give me a moment," Leliana said calmly. "I must freshen the poison on my arrows a little."

"Fine idea," Bronwyn approved. "Anything you can do to stop that insupportable ranting before it starts is a fine idea."

Thanks to my reviewers: Kira Kyuu, Nemrut, demonincargles, Mike3207, Zute, Have Travel, Blinded in a bolthole, KnightOfHolyLight, anon, Shakespira, Jyggilag, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, SnowHelm, JackOfBladesX, Josie Lange, Hydroplatypus, mille libri, Raxiselic, SkaterGirl246, Jenna53, Herebedragons66, and What Ithacas Means.

The US girls' high school record for the running long jump is over twenty feet, so I have no doubt that Bronwyn, even in less than ideal conditions, can manage ten!

55. Death in the Afternoon

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 55: Death in the Afternoon

Kolgrim was indeed waiting, and he was very, very angry. Bronwyn saw no point in listening to his insufferable ranting, and she owed him no explanations, anyway.

The moment his black-bearded mouth opened to denounce them, Bronwyn shouted, "Now!" and charged.

Tara threw her all into her freezing and paralysis spells, and Leliana began loosing arrows with incredible speed and precision. The two Reaver henchmen at Kolgrim's side were down, thrashing and screaming, before Bronwyn, Cullen, and Zevran could cross blades with them. Scout was on one of them already, ripping at his face.

More rushed up to support their leader, and a rat-faced mage cast spells from behind. Bronwyn shuddered as a bolt of lightning crackled down her arm, almost making her lose her sword. Kolgrim was quickly shaking off Tara's spells, and Bronwyn had to duck to avoid the first whistling blow of his huge axe. Cullen slammed him from the side with the pommel of Yusaris, staggering the big man. Zevran peeled off to

engage the other dragon cultists.

Bronwyn darted at Kolgrim and swung up, hand on his shoulder for leverage. She came down, slashing the side of his neck open. Blood bloomed over his chest. The big man roared and lunged at her, knocking her to the ground. Eyes filled with madness, immeasurably strong, he threw himself on her like a beast. Cullen wrenched at Kolgrim's axe handle and went down himself, wrestling for the weapon. The axe dropped to the ground, missing Bronwyn's face by inches.

She flinched, hissing in pain as Kolgrim's weight pressed down her. She tried to roll away, but his huge hands were groping for her throat. The big white teeth were bared in a rictus of bloodlust: even the whites of the man's eyes were suffused with blood. More blood, sticky and copper-smelling, dripped onto Bronwyn's face, and slickened her gauntlets as she tried to pry the irresistible, questing hands away. Above her, Cullen slammed the hilt of his sword into Kolgrim's head, again and again. Scout barked and growled, leaping at Kolgrim, teeth buried in his shoulder, worrying at him.

The meaty thumbs had slipped under her armor. Bronwyn pressed her chin to her chest to thwart them. Slowly, she was choking, choking: bright lights popped behind her eyes. A sudden blast of bitter cold took her breath away entirely.

It stopped Kolgrim for the moment, but did not kill him. Bronwyn, bespelled frozen, knew everything that was happening to her, though she was unable to move. Kolgrim was frozen to her, in a bizarre parody of love. Her friends

hauled at the leader of the Disciples, struggling to budge him. Bronwyn felt the spell dissipating, and tried to slide out from under, but the massive man was simply too heavy. Cullen crouched low, and managed to lift Kolgrim's left side.

It was all she needed. Bronwyn groped in the man's belt for his dagger, and when he grabbed at her throat again, she whipped her right arm out and stabbed him in the ear. He jerked back enough that Zevran could get his forearm around the bull-like neck. The moment it was exposed. Bronwyn stabbed again into the pulsing throat. Blood exploded into her face, blinding her. Kolgrim screamed, a horrible wet bellow.

"Get him off me!" Bronwyn sputtered, her mouth full of the man's blood. Grunts and shouts answered her, as the bulk was dragged away. She wiped frantically at her stinging eyes, until Leliana ran up with her canteen and splashed water into them.

"It's over," Cullen said. Bronwyn blinked, and looked about her. Bodies littered the landscape, including a drake that Bronwyn had been too occupied to notice.

"Your throat's a mess," Tara told her. "Here, Leliana! I can't tell how bad it is with all that blood. Wash her off a bit more."

"M'all right," Bronwyn croaked, and then spat out a mouthful of blood. "Just let me breathe." A healing spell made that a lot easier. Her heart was pounding as if she had a high fever.. She felt curiously light-headed...oddly invigorated. There was no time to puzzle over it. Zevran had a burn from the drake,

and Cullen a bloody lip. It was harder to tell how hurt Tara and Leliana were: they were black with soot.

She found her own canteen and took a long, long drink. She would have some pretty impressive bruises, Tara's useful spells notwithstanding.

A deep, rasping groan startled her. Kolgrim was moving, fingers inching toward her, muscles knotting and flexing as he picked himself up from the ground. Blood bubbled from the ruined neck, but he was unbelievably up and rushing them again, mouth open in a thick, wordless howl. Without his axe, he had only his Reaver strength, but that was still formidable.

"Andraste's nightgown!" Bronwyn rasped. "Just die already!"

Leliana nimbly avoided the rush and plunged her daggers into his back. Kolgrim, crazed eyes blind to everything but Bronwyn, did not appear to feel them. Scout leaped on him, powerful jaws clamping onto his left arm. The Reaver dragged the dog along, not even bothering to give him a kick. Tara's spells slowed him only a little.

But he was not immune to swords. Bronwyn pulled back and Zevran dropped to the ground as Cullen swung Yusaris down in a mighty blow, biting into Kolgrim's collar bone. Zevran sliced through the back of the man's boots, hamstringing his right leg and damaging the other. Kolgrim staggered, and toppled to the ground. Bronwyn thrust her sword up through the red, open mouth.

Tara remembered she had a sword, too. There was no time to summon up her arcane warrior skills, but she drew Spellweaver, and rather tentatively stabbed Kolgrim in his bloody throat. A shocking thrill ran up the grateful, responsive blade all the way to Tara's hand.

"Whoa!" she gasped. "That's...*interesting*."

Everyone else was too busy to see the look on her face. Bronwyn was twisting her blade, stabbing into the brain. Incredibly, Kolgrim was still alive, jerking spasmodically.

"Stand back!" Cullen roared. He dropped Yusaris, and grabbed up Kolgrim's huge axe. "I'm going to cut his bloody head off. *That* should make an impression on him!"

Zevran yanked Tara away.

"Cullen!" She giggled madly. "You said 'bloody!'"

Bronwyn laughed, too, and withdrew her sword with a bit of effort.

"He's all yours! Scout! Drop it! Heel!"

She grabbed the dog's collar and they stood aside. Kolgrim raised his head from the ground just as the axe swung down. Blood fountained once, twice...three times, and the spurts grew weaker, dying away into a pool spreading out from the body. The head rolled away, an unrecognizable ball of blood and dust.

"Well done!" Zevran nodded gravely. "That will indeed teach him a lesson!"

"Good axe," Cullen muttered. "Maybe I'll keep it." Nonetheless, he staggered back from the body and found Yusaris, wiping the blade conscientiously on the clothing of one of the dead Reavers.

Bronwyn stared down at the mutilated corpse, and automatically cleaned and sheathed her own sword with a emphatic clank of silverite. "*Nobody* should be that hard to kill..."

"Dragon blood," Tara said instantly, feeling like the head of the class back at the Circle. "He said it made them strong, just like in that book. I bet he's been drinking it for years!" She gathered her magic and cast another general healing spell on all of them.

Dragon blood. Still weary and a bit confused, Bronwyn laid a hand on her breastplate, thinking of the gold vial of blood the man had given her, put aside in her clothes. His words came to her, delivered in a ghost of that awful bellow.

"Blood carries power, strength, knowledge..."

Yes. It was still there, sealed for preservation. Perhaps someday...

"Blood magic!" Cullen burst out, scattering her thoughts. "Just another form of it! Disgusting."

Tara made a face and carefully wiped Spellweaver too, copying Cullen, trying not to cut off her thumb.

"Perhaps," Zevran suggested, his weapons already clean and sheathed, "we should move on soon, yes?"

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. They had not been very quiet, though Kolgrim had not had a chance to sound his horn. They had to get back through the Temple and to the defiled chantry: back to their horses and back down the path and away from this place with their precious Ashes.

Kolgrim's horn was still slung over the man's shoulder. It was quite a trophy. She tugged it free and took another look at it. The gold on it was pure and wonderfully fashioned, the dragon horn polished and gleaming, a rich opalescent lavender. The belt itself was studded with gold and jewels and spotted with blood. She wiped the blood away, and said, "You struck the final blow, Cullen. Do you want this?"

"Certainly not!" Cullen sheathed Yusaris. "I might keep the axe, though it's quite heavy. I want no part of dragons!"

"Well, for that matter," Zevran said pragmatically, rifling through the bodies, "neither do I. Of live dragons, certainly."

"Fine." Bronwyn ran her fingertips lightly over the horn, entranced by the play of light deep within it. Flashes of green and blue, gold and purple luminesced as she turned it slowly in her hands. Once, long ago, in her other life at Castle Highever, she had had a hunting horn of her own. It had been

nothing as splendid as this. "I'll keep it," she said, slinging it across her own shoulders. "One day I might need to rally the Wardens."

"Well, don't sound it now!" urged Leliana, slipping coins into her pouch. "Oh! What a *pretty* chain! I think—"

"Zevran's right," Tara interrupted her, very softly. "We need to go now."

Something in her tone caught Bronwyn's attention. She glanced at Tara, whose eyes were turned up, looking into the distance. Scout growled, backing slowly away.

"Go *now*," Tara whispered.

The dragon had evidently been watching them for some time.

Its massive head hung over the bluff. Eyes like vast, burning jewels stared into Bronwyn's, studying her as a scholar might study a bug— if he had absolutely nothing more interesting to do.

There was certainly an intelligence in those eyes, but it was an intelligence alien to human nature. It was ancient, arrogant, and cruel. It was an intelligence that saw no profit in diplomacy or compromise. This was not a being who would bother ask her riddles. It understood power, and put no limits on its own.

She thought all this in an instant, frozen with horror. Did the dragon care that they had slain its worshipers? Did it know they were strangers? They had, after all, been properly introduced. Or did all humans look alike to it? Kolgrim had not sounded the horn to summon it. Would it bother with them?

There was almost no cover to be had. About them was a flat landscape between the mountains, dotted with rocks and the odd heap of dragon dung. The entrance to the shrine was under the dragon's own bluffs. The arched door seemed a thousand miles away. No use to make the attempt. Behind them beckoned the caverns. The path was marked with broken pillars, rising out of the earth like rotten teeth. Beyond those, the arches and low side walls of the little bridge would not shield them long. To her right was the ruined circular colonnade. It was roofless, and offered little protection, either. Besides, once there, they might well be trapped.

The caverns, then. They were not far. How fast could a dragon fly? So far the creature had not moved, and was merely content to watch them. Uneasily, Bronwyn recalled something else that Kolgrim had said:

"I warn you: kill us, and you will face Her. She will smell our blood upon you and Her wrath will be great."

She licked her lips, afraid to break eye contact with the dragon. Hoarsely, she whispered, "Everyone start walking toward the caverns. Now. Walk like you belong here. The thing is still lounging up on the heights. Scout, that means you, too. Just trot along back the way we came. Go." No one was

moving. "Go!"

Bronwyn did not turn, but walked backwards, her eyes still on the dragon. Her companions walked slowly and stiffly away, as if their legs had grown unaccountably heavy.

Maker, what to do? What to do? What to do? They had no ballistae, no ranks of archers, none of Master Wade's fine new dragon-hunting spears. They had their swords and daggers. Leliana had a bow and some heavy arrows. They had poisons. They had a few bombs.

They had Tara.

Leliana whispered. "If it flies after us, we should run."

"We don't know how fast it is," Cullen ground out. "We might have to stand and fight."

"All right," Bronwyn said. "If we can't make it to the caverns, then Cullen's right. We'll have to fight. We mustn't bunch up. It just gives the thing a single target. Leliana, poison your heaviest arrows with the nastiest stuff you've got. Everybody else: poison your weapons. Get your bombs ready."

Zevran was already slicking his sword down with a nasty greenish-brown paste. "It would be useless to throw bombs at the dragon's feet. Remember Flemeth? They are well armored. Its eyes are better. If it opens its mouth, then there. Perhaps its nostrils. They are big."

"Its brain is vulnerable, too; just behind the skull," Bronwyn added. "If someone can get there." She stumbled a little, still watching the motionless dragon. No, not motionless. The tail was waving idly, back and forth. It reminded her horribly of a cat waiting to pounce.

"And we can try to damage the wings," Leliana whispered. "Maybe we can immobilize it, or even make it fall."

Bronwyn grunted agreement. She rubbed poison on her sword with a rag, as if she were only cleaning the blade. Her hand shook a little. Some of the poison in the flask spilled, hissing on the cold stones. "But don't bother with fire bombs. It's well armored against that."

"Bronwyn?" Tara asked urgently, trying to look over her shoulder. "Is it moving?"

Abruptly, the wind shifted. The breeze from the south stilled, and warmer air blew in from the east, to where the dragon lay, sprawled in the sun. Bronwyn, her back to the wind, did not feel it at first, but she could see it ruffle the ends of Leliana's hair...could see the bard's face tense in fear...

Up on the bluff, the dragon's nostrils twitched. Vast muscles flexed, and the bulk shifted quickly, ominously...

"Run!" Bronwyn shouted. She turned and ran herself, sprinting for the black hole of the caverns. Behind her, the light changed; the air was shattered by the first mighty downstroke of the dragon's wings. Bronwyn's boots pounded the stones

underfoot in what seemed like baby steps. And then a shadow fell over them, and was past, and the dragon dropped...

...Squarely in front of the the bridge to the caverns. Bronwyn could swear it was *smirking*. It inhaled languorously through its nostrils, in no hurry whatever.

"Scatter!" Brownyn shouted. Scout, of course, stayed right at her side, and her heart bled for him. How could any dog, however brave, challenge a dragon?

Tara ran left and forced herself to concentrate like never before. She summoned every memory, every bit of power in herself and in the sword Spellweaver, and *pushed*.

The dragon froze. Literally. In the space of one breath and another, it glittered with a light frost. Tara swayed and staggered, and then groped for a vial of lyrium.

It gave the rest of them a chance to attack. The wings were extended up and behind, far beyond their reach, but Leliana shot an arrow into one open, staring eye. The swordswielders dashed forward, forcing sharp points in between the interlocking scales, breaking the skin. Zevran hissed with effort, prying scales apart, and smashed a vial of poison into the exposed flesh.

Cullen stabbed all the way to Yusaris' hilt, seeking the monster's heart. Where was a dragon's heart, anyway? Pulling it out was yet another trial. He put his boot up on the dragon to brace himself, pushing against it to free his blade.

Bronwyn tried to climb up on the creature, but the frost-slick scales offered her boots no purchase. She slid back to the ground, swearing in frustration.

And then the dragon shook off the spell and all its attackers at once. The furious tail lashed at them, scattering stones like trebuchet shot. The companions scrambled away from the stamping, taloned feet. The dragon choked and then roared, interrupted in the middle of inhaling before engaging its second stomach. The serpentine neck twisted here and there, as the dragon searched for the annoyances that had dared to set blade to its flesh.

Yusaris was still stuck in the dragon's breast, infuriating the creature. Dagger-like teeth snapped futilely at the hilt, seeking to withdraw the splinter of pain. The dragon bit into its own flesh, raging, doing itself more harm than the sword had. Its right eye was bleeding, blinded.

Disarmed, Cullen ran in front of the creature, shouting to distract it. Leliana cursed as her arrows bounced off dragon scale.

Tara, crouched low to the ground, summoned up power for another spell. She felt Spellweaver twitch in her hands, eager for battle. She cast again, sucking life from the dragon. Only a fraction of the vast whole, but it filled her with renewed strength.

Attack and counterattack. Again and again, they closed in on the dragon: wounding it, irritating it; and the dragon fought

back with talon and fang and the power of its deadly tail. A section of the bridge and its soaring arches was reduced to rubble, partially blocking the way to the caverns. Scout was knocked flying. He fell with a meaty thud into a little hollow beside the bridge. Tara hastily shot a healing spell his way, but the dog did not move. Bronwyn looked at him despairingly, but he was on the other side of the dragon.

They were simply not doing enough damage. Bronwyn groped for a shock bomb. "Freeze the wings down!" she screamed over the unearthly clamor of a roaring dragon.

Tara succeeded, just long enough. While Leliana loosed arrow after arrow and Zevran stabbed at it, Cullen ducked under the long neck and fought to free Yusaris, twisting the blade, cursing.

The left wing was down just far enough. Bronwyn made a wild dash, nailed the shock bomb to the wing joint with her eating knife, and hammered at the hilt with her fist.

Tara thought she understood what Bronwyn was doing. "You want me to set it off with a fireball?"

"Not now!" Bronwyn shouted back. "When it's in the air. Preferably over something that will hurt to fall on. The higher the better!"

She rolled away just in time. The dragon shook off the spell and bellowed its fury, snapping at its puny attackers, raging at the pain in its eye, its breast, its wing. Cullen fell back,

Yusaris clutched to his heart. Zevran gave a shout to distract it, but the dragon had chosen its victim. The monstrous head struck, and the jaws closed over Cullen with a hideous crunch.

Every one of them screamed in horror. Tara dropped Spellweaver, clutching at her ears. Cullen's muffled, dying cries seemed more than she could hear and live. One of his leg twitched, and the other hung by a bloody sinew. Then he went limp. The dragon tossed the dead man aside, exulting. There would be leisure for feasting later. Now it was time to reveal its true power. It launched itself skyward: up, up, into the burning blue sky of a Frostback autumn. The surviving companions stood there, shocked stupid. Bronwyn ran to Cullen, but he was gone, beyond help, beyond even the Ashes' power to heal. His eyes were open, staring in pain and disbelief. Leliana ran up behind her, her face anguished.

"You bitch!" Tara screamed at the triumphant dragon. "Come back here! I'm going to kill you!"

"Come! Come!" Zevran urged her, pulling her away. He looked desperately at the piles of rubble blocking their way. "Perhaps we can..." But they could not, not fast enough.

Bronwyn blinked away tears, forcing down her horror. She clutched Zevran's arm, eyes on the dragon. It had reached the top of its climb and was falling away gracefully into a swift and smooth descent, bearing down on them.

"Stop!" she shouted to them all. "We're going to finish this. Stay here where the wall is crumbling. At the last minute, get

down behind whichever side of the bridge looks good for giving cover from the flames. Tara, hit that left wing joint with whatever will set off the bomb. Make sure Andraste lands *hard*."

She waved her sword at the dragon. It glared at her, its mouth gaping to flame them. A stream of yellow hell issued forth, crackling and roaring up the bridge.

Tara shrieked out a word of power, loosing a burst of raw energy. Zevran grabbed her, diving off the bridge and wrapping his arms around her. Leliana screamed and followed. Bronwyn looked only long enough to see the curse slam into the dragon's wing.

The spell alone would have staggering the dragon, but the detonation of the shock bomb tore the wing joint apart. With an unholy screech, the dragon lost control, the damaged wing flapping uselessly. It came in too fast and too low. With a shriek, it crashed into a broken pillar, and then plowed into the bridge's stone foundations. Bronwyn threw herself down, dragonfire sweeping just above her.

Earth and stone flew to heaven. The ground shook, toppling pillars and arches. The companions, battered by debris, huddled under their precarious shelter. Rocks banged out harsh music on their helmets and backplates.

An awful silence followed. Bronwyn gritted her teeth against the pain of her bruises, and got her legs under her. She forced herself into a staggering run, and took a look at the

dragon.

It was stunned, but still breathing. The pillar it had hit had caved in its chest. The ruined wing drooped awkwardly to the ground. Bronwyn guessed it might die in time. But why give it another moment?

"Come on!" she shouted. "It's down!"

The others ran after her: angry, vengeful, drawing their swords. They scrambled up on the heaving, comatose hulk and devoted themselves to the painstaking, complicated task of killing it. Leliana stabbed at its eyes. Zevran ran for Kolgrim's axe and devoted himself to chopping through the spine. Tara was about to stab it with Spellweaver, when Bronwyn pushed her away.

"No! Find Scout! See if you can do anything for him!"

Tara ran to where the dog had fallen. He was half-buried in dirt, but alive and whimpering. Tara choked back a sob. At least one of their number could be saved.

Bronwyn hacked away at the scales protecting the back of the dragon's skull. She slathered her sword with Adaia's vilest toxin, and then pressed the point downwards, carefully, lovingly; at the precise, necessary angle.

The dragon shifted under her feet. The tip of the tail twitched. A rumbling, agonized groan issued from deep in the bloody throat.

Bronwyn searched for something to say: something witty and contemptuous, something memorable. Useless. Misery and grief swelled painfully in her throat. She pressed down hard, and shortly thereafter all twitchings and groans stopped forever.

Scout was a battered, sore, and tired dog, but he was in good enough shape to be a presence at Cullen's funeral.

A Grey Warden's possessions were the property of his surviving brothers and sisters. That had been nearly the first lesson Bronwyn had learned about this secretive order. Cullen was laid out under the sky as decently as possible, his linen garments drenched crimson with his blood. His armor and other gear were removed to prepare for his burning. The armor was damaged beyond repair. Bronwyn did not like the idea of simply throwing it aside like trash, and decided to put it away behind the wall of the little round shrine. Someday they might be able to come back for it, and display it at the Wardens' compound. Cullen must not be forgotten.

Behind the little circular wall, she discovered the dragon's hoard. She sighed, too weary and sad to feel pleasure in it. She walked away without taking another look.

Her other companions sat in a circle, solemnly dividing Cullen's earthly goods. Tara scrubbed at her eyes, weeping silently in a kind of dull wretchedness, wishing she had been nicer to Cullen, who had always been nice to her—who, in fact, had been in love with her.

"We should take Yusaris with us," she said. "It's an important sword. Somebody can use it, I'd think."

"You're right," Bronwyn said, joining them. "It's certainly too big for me, but it's a splendid weapon. Maybe Carver..." Her voice trailed off. How was she going to tell the others that they had lost Cullen?

Coin and trinkets were shared out: the coin for practical use, the trinkets for keepsakes. They discovered that Cullen had an amulet exactly like the one they all wore.

"We'll never know, now, who he spoke to or what he saw," Leliana mourned. "May I keep his Templar medallion? It would mean so much to me. That one. Yes, thank you..."

"Noble one," Zevran said seriously to Bronwyn, a little pouch in his hand. "Here is his share of the Ashes. I think you should have it. We all know that you intend your own for the Queen. Why not take this for yourself?"

"I think that's a very good idea," Tara agreed thickly. "Cullen thought a lot of you, Bronwyn. He'd want you to have it."

"It's too bad there was no way to help him with it," Leliana said softly.

Bronwyn agreed entirely. She felt rather sick at profiting in any way from the death of a friend and comrade, but it would be idiocy to leave it behind—disrespectful, too. Cullen had given his life for it.

They stood back to set the body afire. Bronwyn steeled herself to watch the strong young body withering in flame; trying to take comfort in the words Leliana recited:

*Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow.
In their blood the Maker's will is written.*

*Though all before me is shadow,
Yet shall the Maker be my guide.
I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.
For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.*

Scout laid back his ears and howled. It was too much. Bronwyn began to cry in earnest.

"Let's take him home with us," Tara said, when the fire had utterly consumed their friend. "I've got this."

She held out a little silver trinket box. The ashes were cooled, and amongst them they packed the silver box with what it would hold. The breeze rose, and the rest began drifting away. Tara put the silver box in her pack, and Zevran helped her heft it onto her shoulders.

Bronwyn knew she must tell them about the treasure, and said, "The dragon's hoard is over there in that ruined colonnade. We must get back to the village, but if we can be quick about it, you can have a look."

They went and looked, because not to do so would be stupid.

It was quite the impressive hoard, but no one was in the mood, and they already had all they could manage. There was treasure enough back at the chantry, where they could pack it onto the horses.

Bronwyn closed the chests and said, "If we come back some day, we can claim this for the Wardens."

"And look... over there," Leliana said, pointing. Attached to the marble wall was a rusted chain and a set of manacles. "Perhaps that is where..."

Bronwyn winced, thinking of poor Genetivi. "Very likely."

They hardly spared a look at the other bodies: Kolgrim and his minions.

"Let them rot," Bronwyn said bitterly. "Let the ravens pick their bones. Crazy bastards."

There were the bones of the High Dragon and the drake to consider, too; but there was no way they could tan the hide or take the massive bones with them. Every part of a dragon was priceless these days, but the bones and horn, at least, would be going nowhere. Like the dragon's hoard, they could await other, happier pilgrims.

They marched away, and agreed to try the more distant door. This one, they soon discovered, led not through the caverns, but directly into the Temple itself. It had been hidden behind a large bookcase, and gave them a much quicker route out to

the mountain path.

The great entry hall of the Temple surrounded them with glory, but they had no eyes for it. The Temple door was closed and locked in silence. It was growing dark by the time they limped back to the chantry, weary with battle and grief.

"Scout!" Bronwyn murmured. "Any strangers up here?"

The dog, still not fully recovered, sniffed about, favoring his right side. Sometime that day, the big trap at the top of the path had been set off, leaving a gaping hole in the ground and various debris scattered about. It had apparently scared off any more prying guests.

"Good boy! Go inside and lie down," Bronwyn ordered. She muttered to herself, "I'd better take care of the horses."

"I will help you, Noble One," Zevran volunteered. "There is no need for you to do everything yourself."

Tara spoke up. "I'll stand here where I can look down the hill, so I can watch for the crazies."

"And I shall make us something good for dinner," promised Leliana. "Even Brona ate when Andraste was taken."

Bronwyn only sighed deeply, wishing that Andraste had stirred herself a little when they were doing battle with the dragon. Zevran smiled at her, guessing her thoughts.

"But it was ever thus," he agreed. "Come, the horses need

water."

The horses had made a hash of the neat little garden, and Bronwyn felt meanly glad of it. After seeing to Posy, she took extra time with Dax, Cullen's big Destrier/Traveler mix. She ran her hand over the smooth grey flank. Dax was too big for Tara to manage. Bronwyn would ride Dax herself and put Tara on Posy, whose smooth gait would be easy on the elf girl.

Zevran chirruped in a pleasant way to his horse, and remarked, "We should not leave the gold and silver in the chantry."

"Some of it should go into the Wardens' treasury, but I agree. We will talk it over after we eat. We cannot take everything of value, but we certainly won't leave the best for these lunatics."

They went into the chantry, promising to bring some dinner out to Tara. She waved them off, shivering a little in the chilly air, wanting to be alone in her thoughts. Involuntarily, her hand slipped down into her pocket and briefly touched the little pouch of Sacred Ashes, reminding her that this day had really happened. Cullen was gone, and with him a piece of her past.

The dinner was wonderful. The chantry's larder was full of good things, and Leliana had put together a delicious stew, rich with sausage, squash, onions, turnips, and greens. In the corner of the hearth, she had baked little round bannocks of barley. On the table she set out honey and cheese and butter,

cider and perry: all served in the gold and silver sacramental bowls and cups of the chantry. Wax candles burned brightly in big gold candlesticks.

Leliana tilted her chin proudly. "It is no sin to use the regalia of this mockery of Andraste. *'They are sinners, who have given their love to false gods.'* They do not deserve our consideration. This is Cullen's funeral feast. It is he I care about!" She added, "I washed all the dragon blood away first. It was so sticky!" She filled a silver bowl with water and another with the stew, and set them on the floor for Scout. The dog blinked an eye and rose lazily, shaking himself, and then began devouring his meal with gusto.

"It's wonderful, Leliana," Bronwyn said softly. "Zevran, go get Tara. I want her to see this. She can eat a bite, and then go back to standing watch." She changed her mind. "Or maybe we all need our sleep. Let's set another damned trap for the Havenites. If it explodes in the night, we'll know they're trying to visit!"

Tara came in and exclaimed over the beauty of it all. She pulled the silver trinket box from her pack and plumped it on the middle of the table. "So he can be with us," she said softly.

Silver chalices were filled. Bronwyn lifted her goblet in salute. *"Hail the victorious dead!"* She smiled into her cup ruefully, and did not add the rest of the saying.

Tara held her cup high. "Our brother, Cullen!"

"*Someday we will Join you.*" Leliana said, tears in her eyes.

"—but not today," murmured Zevran. "Not today."

Then they fell to.

Zevran and Tara shared the priest's bed; and after stripping it down and covering it with clean blankets, Bronwyn and Leliana shared the bed in the secret room. Another blanket was spread on the floor for Scout; and the night fell dark and silent. Leliana cried a little in her sleep. Bronwyn curled up at her back, and held her.

The bard stirred. and laid a hand over Bronwyn's. She whispered, "Just think! Our Cullen is with the Maker now! He was cleansed and purified by the fire of Andraste, and he never sinned after, so he would have gone straight to the Maker's side. What a welcome he must have had! That is something at which we can rejoice, yes?"

"Yes," Bronwyn sighed. She could hope, but she was not sure she could believe. "But he did say the word 'bloody' when he was fighting."

"Andraste would not care about that," Leliana assured her sleepily. "I think she would laugh!"

Just before dawn, Bronwyn awakened and went to the front door, looking out warily at the pale glow in the east. She made up the fire, poured water and oats into a pot for

porridge, and then while it simmered, began packing for their journey.

"Bronwyn?" Leliana asked, pale and sleepy in the doorway. "You are up already? Oh! The porridge must not boil!" She moved it away from the fire a little. "There are some common bowls we can use this morning. And I shall leave them dirty for the heretics, too!" she declared.

When the porridge looked close to being ready. Bronwyn knocked quietly on the door to the priest's quarters. Unintelligible noises answered, but she was fairly sure they were awake.

They all ate quickly and quietly, and then arranged the heavy packs. Anything they could not take, Bronwyn put in the secret room and locked away. They took enough. The Wardens would be eating off silver and gold in their quarters at Ostagar. Deliberately, they left the door to the ransacked chantry open.

It seemed a good idea to do a bit of scouting and see if the Havenites had rigged traps in their turn. Quietly, clinging to cover, the five of them walked down the hill and found a line tied across the path, at just the height of a rider's neck. Zevran sliced it deftly. "They might have more, lower down," he whispered.

Bronwyn nodded, rubbing her neck. It still hurt where Kolgrim had tried to strangle her. "Then we'll have to go down slowly. Anyway, I have something to say to them before we leave."

Scout, much recovered, nosed around, but sensed no lurking enemies. They went back to saddle and load the horses. Their packs were heavy with hard-won treasure. Bronwyn felt they deserved every silver cup and every piece of gold. She tied Yusaris to the saddle and slung Kolgrim's horn across her chest.

"Let's go."

At the base of the hill, Bronwyn sounded the horn. The powerful music woke the sunrise and the sleepers in their beds. The survivors of Haven crept outside to find their invaders mounted, armed, and ready for any threat. Some of the villagers ducked back inside instantly and peered out of their windows.

"Now listen to me!" Bronwyn shouted. "Your disciples are dead and your false god is slain!"

A moan of horror surged from the terrified people. Bronwyn shouted over it ruthlessly. "There won't be any more killing of travelers here! There won't be any more worshipping of dragons! I won't have it! If you try any more of your murdering ways, I'll come back. If you threaten me or anyone else, I'll kill every one of you, and all your friends, and I'll burn the village to the ground!"

She kicked Dax into motion, and went her way. Behind her, Leliana helpfully added, "You should beg forgiveness of the Maker and the true Andraste! Even yet she might forgive..."

"Oh, come *on*, Leliana," Tara called.

Scout sniffed out a leg trap on the lower hill, and Zevran quickly dismounted to disarm it. The lower cottages were shuttered tight. Bronwyn sneered, and put Haven behind her.

A group of terrified children, hiding in the woods from the monsters that had killed their parents, saw them last. When the hoofbeats faded, they made their way slowly back to the village, feeling that their world had come to an end.

It was a nasty journey back to Sulcher. They caught the stink of decay long before they saw the ravaged corpse of Tara's lovely Antivan barb. A black cloud of impudent crows rose up from their feast, cawing scornfully.

Tara sighed. "She was so beautiful..."

The bodies of the men who had attacked them were gone, presumably dragged off by beasts of prey. Bronwyn scowled briefly, and then dismissed the memory of them. They could rot too, for all she cared.

After an hour of thickening clouds, the rain came, cold and penetrating as needles. If there were bandits or wolves in the forest, they were even more demoralized by the rain than Bronwyn and her friends. The path was turning to mud, but they were anxious to move on. There was no decent place to camp here, and the rain and cold could make a lethal combination if they risked them overnight.

Instead, they pushed ahead, and at length were rewarded by the dull silver line in the distance that was Lake Calenhad. Sometime later, drenched to the skin, they descended the low hill below which Sulcher was spread out before them: grubby, impoverished, and unlovely.

But there was one beautiful sight. The *Lady of the Lake* was still docked there.

"Just got in the cargo of wool we was waitin' for," the skipper told Bronwyn. "We'll be headin' north in the mornin'."

"No," Bronwyn disagreed gently. "We are leaving for Redcliffe *today*." Before the man could protest, she thumped a thin ingot of gold, long as her hand, onto the ship's rail. The boatman stared at it, mouth open.

He licked his lips. "—to Redcliffe. Right you are."

"Is that *gold*?" asked his mate, eyes bugging in awe. "Never saw a piece of *gold* that big."

"We'll just be getting our horses aboard *right now*, shall we?" Bronwyn hinted.

The crude canvas shelters were erected on deck, and in a short time, the boat set out, sails heavy with rain. The horses were carefully unsaddled and unburdened, bestowed in the poor stalls the ship afforded, and curried thoroughly. The horses had been faithful friends and needed the very best care. At least there was hay in plenty, and no end of water.

Afterwards, the companions huddled dismally around a little fire on a tripod, wolfing down thin oat gruel. Cullen's death seemed more real than before, somehow: more a settled, inescapable fact. Scout crowded close between Bronwyn and Leliana, and the two women were grateful for the warmth.

The rain eased off at nightfall. The skies cleared, and Lake Calenhad reflected a dome of stars. Bronwyn lay out on deck, staring up at darkness, not looking forward to much of anything. She had lost a Warden and a friend. She had led him into a danger that had little to do with the immediate, pressing threat of darkspawn, and he had suffered a horrible death in consequence. Their friends at Ostagar would take it hard. And what of the Templars? Ought Bronwyn to write a letter to the Knight-Commander at Kinloch Hold? That courtesy would probably be appropriate. Cullen had once told her he was a child of the Chantry, and as such, he had no known family to contact. That was a sad thing to contemplate.

But he would be mourned. Bronwyn missed him keenly. Tara missed him too: and was quieter than usual, perhaps weighed upon by grief mixed with guilt at being free of an unwanted suitor. Carver and Alistair had liked Cullen very much, and Brosca had been mad for him. And of late, it had crossed her mind that Leliana might have begun to fancy him. Was she imagining things?

Bronwyn's mind drifted to others she cared for. What was happening to Fergus? Was Highever pacified yet? Were Howe's henchmen still causing trouble? Had Carver's brother found his way to Fergus, and delivered her letters? Was

Fergus going to hold fast to his rights to the succession?

And Loghain. Bronwyn felt exhausted just thinking of him. Yes, she had the Ashes for Anora. They must see if they did any good. Perhaps she would have to go to Denerim again. Maker help her! Perhaps Loghain could take them, and go himself, but Bronwyn doubted he would. He thought no one as cunning as himself, and probably could not bear to relinquish control of the army for that long, And then too, once she was back, would come the soul-sucking weariness of preparing for the Landsmeet, of smiling and campaigning for votes and approval. At the moment it seemed easier just to let the darkspawn *have* bloody Ferelden.

Leliana strummed her lute idly, a sweet accompaniment to the sounds of water rushing past the bow and the gently sougning of the wind. Then she began humming, and then singing a melancholy song Bronwyn had never heard.

My young love said to me,

"My mother won't mind

And my father won't slight you

For your lack of kine."

And she laid her hand on me

And this she did say:

"It will not be long, Love,

Till our wedding day."

As she stepped away from me

And she moved through the fair

And fondly I watched her

Move here and move there.

And then she made her way homeward,

With one star awake,

As the swan in the evening

Moved over the lake.

Last night she came to me,

My dead love came in.

So softly she came

That her feet made no din.

As she laid her hand on me,

And this she did say:

"It will not be long, love,

'Til our wedding day."

"It's sad," Tara murmured sleepily. "Why do people make such sad songs?"

"It's beautiful," Bronwyn thought she said, as she fell into the beckoning Fade.

Thanks to my reviewers: demonichargles, BandGeekNinja, Blinded in a bolthole, tgcgoddess, Herebedragons66, RakeeshJ4, Nemrut, Tsu Doh Nimh, kirbster676, vertigomunchkin, Jyggilag, Aoi24, Shaekspira, MsBarrows, KnightOfHolyLight, Josie Lange, SnowHelm, Verpine, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Girl-chama, almostinsane, Halm Vendrella, Costin, Enaid Aderyn, JackOfBladesX, Have Socks. Will Travel, Judy, EpitomyofShyness, Jenna53, Angurvddel, Chandagnac, mille libri, Zute, Kira Kyuu, and SkaterGirl246.

If you don't know the song, I really suggest you listen to a version of "She Moves Through the Fair." It's a haunting piece of music. I like Celtic Woman's.

56. Queen Rowan's Blood-Red Gown

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 56: Queen Rowan's Blood-Red Gown

Gently rolling waves lulled them to sleep for most of the voyage to Redcliffe. The rest was a welcome one, especially for poor Scout, whose injuries were still mending. Bronwyn had some remarkable bruises on her throat, handprints in vivid browns and yellows. The companions mourned and rested, and prepared themselves for the long ride through the Hinterlands.

They also did quite a bit of reading. Genetivi's *Travels* was passed around and proved quite the find. Bronwyn learned a very great deal from it. Genetivi had traveled as a common man, not as a noble nor even as a Chantry official, and learned much about Thedas that its rulers never saw.

All of them studied *Flame and Scale* to some degree. The mere mention of dragons was painful, but they must know all they could if they meant to survive another such encounter. When that subject grew too depressing, there was always the smutty novel they had found among the other books in the storekeeper's chest: an implausible romance in which a woman sell-sword won the heart of the Prince of Starkhaven.

Zevran enjoyed critiquing the naughty bits.

Tara had filched *Discovering Dragon's Blood* from the temple: only one of many treasures that were moldering on the bookshelves there. Yes, Blood Magic was forbidden, but this was not the blood of men or elves, but of dragons; and Bronwyn's eyes widened at some of the possible uses for the contents of her little gold vial. Truth be told, she now wished they had taken more. Some of the potions and tinctures were risky, but so was the Joining, after all.

They were not far from Redcliffe when Bronwyn called them together for a council.

"We've had an extraordinary adventure, and seen things no one has seen for long ages. However, I must ask you that they remain secret, at least for now."

"But—" Leliana protested instantly. Bronwyn held up a hand. She had expected this.

"We are in a Blight. The country is in chaos. To spread the news about the Temple and Shrine might incite people to go there, but how many would survive? They need no longer need fear being fed to a dragon, but the villagers of Haven will likely attack without warning."

"I see," Leliana nodded. "You think we should wait until the the Chantry can mount a proper expedition."

Bronwyn intensely disliked the idea of turning the place over to

the Chantry at all, but Leliana would not understand. "I think we need to defeat the darkspawn before that happens. We may need the swords of the Chantry before this is over. I think it would be a very bad thing for them to be distracted at this time. Also..." a brilliant excuse came to her. "It would be very wrong to gossip about this, instead of informing the Grand Cleric first. Surely the honor is hers."

To her relief, Leliana fell for it. "Oh! You are right! What an insult it would be, not to reveal this wonder to her first of all! But how to do it?"

Bronwyn said soothingly, "We must wait until the Blight is under control. Then, when I am in Denerim, I will arrange an appointment, and lay our proofs before her. She will know best what to do." Bronwyn devoutly hoped the Grand Cleric would think her mad or drunk, and have her escorted from her office at once.

Zevran only smiled, seeing through her, and Tara shrugged, displeased. Bronwyn wondered exactly what bothered the elf girl about this, as Tara was certainly not a devout Andrastian. Was she, like Bronwyn, not comfortable with the idea of telling the Chantry anything? Perhaps, as a mage, she would prefer to study the libraries and artifacts there at her leisure, without Templars in control.

Bronwyn loathed the idea of the Chantry turning that place of wonder into some grubby, money-making scheme. The Guardian would not tolerate the Chantry levying a fee for entering the Gauntlet, of course. More likely, they would keep

the true shrine hidden, and put up a huge statue of Andraste in the outer Temple, with a copy of the Urn and charge for pinches of some common wood ash. Perhaps she was too cynical, or too selfish, but the thought of exploiting the shrine sickened her.

And the people of Haven would submit or perish. There were unpleasant folk, to be sure, but it was, after all, *their* village, and it was not as if Bronwyn had been invited there. How many more would die if Bronwyn set the Templars on them?

At least she had gained her point for now. Leliana agreed to be silent about the Urn, until the proper time. There was another thing to be addressed.

"You each have a pinch of the Sacred Ashes, the rarest and most precious remedy in all Thedas. I urge you, just as we are saying nothing about the shrine, to say nothing openly about your own pinch of Ashes. In fact, say nothing about them to our other companions. I must tell Loghain about the pinch we obtained for the Queen. I must tell him in brief of our adventures and the shrine, but I shall ask him, too, to keep those secret. I think he would agree with my reasoning."

Loghain would, she was sure. He would not want the Chantry claiming any part of Ferelden territory for their own purposes. They would have to talk in confidence about Haven, because Loghain would probably think that the villagers ought to be paying taxes and answering to a proper bann. But relinquish control of it to the Chantry? Highly unlikely!

"Are you going to tell him about the other Ashes we got?" Tara asked, pert and direct.

Bronwyn thought about it, and then replied. "No. He was not there. He did not see what we saw. He did not face the Gauntlet with us. You must realize that once the secret is out, people would come from far and wide for the Ashes. A wealthy ruler would hire armies, pay any amount of coin to possess them. The secret of where they came from will be dangerous enough. Loghain can know about the pinch we obtained for the Queen. They will be administered to the Queen, and we shall pray that they are all we hope for. We do not need to boast of this, surely."

"If it becomes known that the Queen was healed by the Ashes," Zevran pointed out, "there will be a wild rush to track them down and seize them."

"Then we must keep the secret," Leliana said firmly. "No one must know before Her Grace the Grand Cleric can take the proper measures to safeguard them. Teyrn Loghain and the Queen will have to know, of course, but no one else!" Her eyes were very wide. "We must swear our friends at Ostagar to secrecy, too!"

After two days of inactivity, it was good to be back on dry land. Before they could present themselves to the Arl, there were errands to be run in the village. Two of the horses needed to be re-shod, so as soon as they stepped off the boat, they sought out the village blacksmith. There was

probably a farrier at the Castle, but Bronwyn was uncomfortable with putting herself too much in Arl Teagan's debt. While they waited for the horses, they stopped at the shops to restock their provisions. Afterward, they decided to while away some time at the tavern. Bronwyn hoped to pick up a little local gossip, not filtered through the Arl's own people.

They made the steep hike up to the tavern and found the door open to the mild autumn air. The pleasant scent of good ale drifted to them, luring them inside.

"The King's Pint!" Leliana smiled, pointing at the crudely painted portrait of a blond and grinning King Cailan quaffing from a foaming mug. "What a quaint name!"

"And as true and honest a name as ever a tavern owned!" A striking red-haired woman behind the bar smiled at them. The innkeeper, they guessed, or his wife. "The sweet young king himself was so good as to quench his thirst here, the day after we were delivered from the monsters. Drank his pint down like a man, and had another!" She noticed their tunics, and her smile widened. "Grey Wardens! Just fancy! What will you have?"

They had the ale, of course, and it was very good. The innkeeper's name was Bella, and she was glad to tell them all the news of this part of the world.

"Had business with the smith, did you? Fine fellow, that. He's new to the village, but who isn't, save me and the priests? The

walking dead thinned Redcliffe out, and no mistake!"

"It must have been terrible for you," Leliana sympathized.

That was all Bella needed to sit down with them and give them the whole gruesome story.

"...and I'm lucky to be alive. None of us would have got through another night if the King—Maker rest his sweet soul!—and Teyrn Loghain hadn't come marching to save us. The old Arl's son was a mage! A mage! And a bad one, too! Raised his father from the dead and turned him into a monster! Killed his own mother! They said he was born disfigured, with a crooked back and eyes like fire... They should have guessed something was wrong with him from the first. Mind you, I never laid eyes on the lad. His mother held herself and her own too high for that. Orlesian, you know. Arl Eamon ought never to have married her. Nothing good ever came from that lot."

Tara shifted on the bench, but could hardly argue. The arl's son *had* been a mage, and he *had* slaughtered the village and killed his mother. "But you were saved," she said, "and now you have Arl Teagan. He seems very nice."

"No finer man alive," Bella agreed. "He's put good people in the cottages and seen they had work. Helped get the harvest in with his own hands, and not too proud to come here afterwards and stand the lads a drink. You never saw old Arl Eamon doing the like for his folk." She lowered her voice to give them the best gossip. "There's talk he'll be taking a wife

soon...Arl Teagan I mean... and a proper Ferelden girl, too. When he does, we'll all be that pleased to wish him joy!"

"Naturally," said Bronwyn. "Everyone likes a good wedding. Any idea who the happy bride will be?"

"Well..." Bella's fine eyes glittered with satisfaction. "A girl right here in the village! No high-born Lady Muck for our good Arl. That little girl Kaitlyn Merton, and a sweet thing she is! But don't spread the word. It's a secret!"

"Of course not," Bronwyn assured the innkeeper, musing over the term 'high-born Lady Muck.' She supposed that was exactly how some people would describe her. "And what other news have you heard?"

Bella had heard plenty. Everyone was sorry about King Cailan, of course; and no one knew who was to be king. It was sad that the King and Queen had no children, and some said either blood mages or Orlesian trickery was to blame. Hard to say. There had been a rumor a month or two ago that the Queen was with child, but it didn't seem so. Anyway, there was that northern lord, Fergus Cousland, but nobody in Redcliffe knew him. Some were saying that Queen Anora should keep the throne, but others said that Teyrn Loghain should wear the crown outright, since he'd had the running of the country since the Rebellion.

"And with him and the Girl Warden," Bella said with satisfaction, "it's likely we'll be done with the darkspawn soon! They killed the Archdemon's chief captain, you know...a great

dragon hiding in the Wilds. The Girl Warden killed him herself, and now they call her the Dragonslayer. It's an Age of Heroes we live in, right enough!"

Bronwyn was slightly puzzled that the woman had not guessed that Bronwyn was in fact the Girl Warden herself. Perhaps Bella did not expect the Girl Warden to walk into her tavern. Perhaps Bronwyn was not tall and glamorous enough to live up to the legend. In fact, she knew she was dirty, smelly, and looked like she had lost her last fight. Her armor was good chainmail but not gleaming plate. And perhaps, too, the last few months had taken their toll. Perhaps she was not so obviously the "Girl" Warden anymore, but more a weary, battle-scarred woman warrior.

Then Bella took note of Zevran and Tara. "At least *you* were saved from that wicked Arl Howe! He sold elves to the Tevinters just like in the bad old days! They say the Alienage of Denerim is empty as a drained wineskin now. The Wicked Arl got a great chest of gold for them—blood money, I call it—and was struck down by the Maker for his sins."

"I hope that's true," Tara said fiercely. "I hope the Maker gives him what for!"

There was talk—strange talk—that King Maric had had another son, and that he had been kept in the dungeons under the palace from boyhood, fed on cakes and honeygrass tea. He was King Cailan's twin, and had been hidden away because two princes would have led to trouble.

"Mind you," whispered Bella. "I don't put much stock in that. I don't like to think that Good King Maric would have done that to his own son. If there were another boy, it stands to reason that he would have been raised up as a prince, just like his brother!"

"Yes," Bronwyn said quietly. "You'd think so."

They were greeted kindly at the castle, and the absence of Cullen was noted. The appropriate words of sympathy were expressed and acknowledged. Bronwyn could briefly assure Bann Teagan that they had found no darkspawn west of Lake Calenhad, and then there were blessed, blessed hot baths in the handsome bedchambers they had stayed in before.

"My lady!" a maid cried, aghast at Bronwyn's cuts and bruises. "You look like someone tried to strangle you!"

"Someone *did* try to strangle me," Bronwyn said evenly, soaking pleasantly in the perfumed and steamy bathwater. "He's dead, though, and there's an end."

A shocked, sympathetic murmur, and the girls went about their work. Bronwyn nearly fell asleep in the bath, hardly noticing as one of them cleaned and trimmed her battered nails. The door opened a little, and another serving girl slipped in, a wealth of scarlet silk fluttering from her arms.

"You're too tall for any of Arlessa Isolde's things, my lady," giggled the maid. "So the Arl said we were to look through the

trunk Queen Rowan left here years ago. She was a warrior, too, like you. We found this. It's old-fashioned, but very fine." Bronwyn managed a slight smile. It was blood red, and cut off the shoulders. The color disturbed her a little, reminding her of Cullen's blood-soaked body, the last time she saw him. It smelled of the herbs it had been kept in: rosemary and rue.

Remembrance and regret, she thought, *in the language of flowers*. An old-fashioned gown, yes, but in a soft, soft silk. She should not complain of the ominous color. No one here would understand.

"It's splendid," she agreed. It was kindly thought of, and she should be grateful to have something other than her Grey Warden garb to wear to dinner. It would be a pleasure to feel like a noblewoman again, and not so unworthy to be Eleanor Cousland's daughter. She dug through her looted jewels and resolved to wear as many as she dared: her emerald ring and some big gold earrings, certainly. Her ruby necklace was with her things at Ostagar. Pity. Well, she would wear it when she returned. As for her bruises, they were the marks of honorable combat, and she was not ashamed of them.

The maid combing out her hair whispered— in her very countrified way— "His lordship said you was to keep the gown 'an it please you, m'lady. No use in it sitting in an old chest 'til the next age, says he!"

"I shall remember to thank him. Such a bright, cheerful color."

Zevran and Tara had been quicker with their baths—which were only basins of hot water brought to their little room, after all. The maids also brought some fine clothes for them, assured them that they were theirs to keep, and then left, making stiff, uncertain little curtseys. Nevertheless, Tara liked the chestnut brown velvet dress, embroidered in sea-green, and liked even more Zevran's doublet of dark yellow satin.

"We look splendid, *carina*," Zevran said, helping her fasten the heavy demon-headed necklace. He turned her around, smiling, and gave her a long, sweet kiss. Then he offered his arm to her with great gallantry. "Come. We shall go down to the Hall, and see what entertainment there is to be had!"

There was entertainment there, of a sort. The knights and the Chantry contingent were there already, including a young sister who was Mother Hannah's new clerk. The young Mertons were here again, too. Perhaps presenting the Wardens with some of his vast store of rich garments had given Teagan the precedent to be likewise generous with his distant cousin. Kaitlyn looked very pretty in her sky-blue gown: a noblewoman rather than a mere poor relation. Zevran and Tara smirked at each other, remembering the innkeeper's gossip.

Little Bevin was insatiable in his hunger for stories. To while away the time before the Arl and the Girl Warden would make their appearance, the young chantry sister had agreed to tell them all a thrilling tale of wickedness punished. Tara and Zevran drew near to hear it, and found it...not at all what they would have chosen as entertainment.

The Chantry Sister's Tale

In the city of Val Royeaux there was once a school, whose teacher was a wise and learned sister. In front of this school was a beautiful image of Andraste. Many children of the prosperous went there to study their lessons and learn to sing the Chant of Light, as little children do. Among these children was a little boy seven years old, the son of the widow of a chevalier. On his way to and from school, day by day, wherever he saw the image of Andraste, he would sing a verse. Thus had the widow taught her little son to honor Our Lady, for "*a learned child is a blessing upon his parents and unto the Maker.*"

But in that very street, in a dark and crooked house, lived an apostate: a wicked maleficar. His evil heart was so filled with hatred when he heard the little voice singing the Chant that nothing would do but he should drive the child from the world. The mage had an ugly, squint-eyed daughter—young, but already tainted by the evil of magic. The mage told his daughter to lure the child to the house, where they could work their will on him. And so the girl did. She held out a sweet red apple to the child as he was passing on his way homeward, and said, "Come into my house, little boy, and I shall share this apple with you."

Thinking no harm, the child walked in, but never did the sun shine on his departure. Instead, the maleficarum used him for their monstrous rites. The child, crying for his mother, was stripped naked, shamefully abused, and locked in a cage of

iron. This cage was suspended over a cauldron.

The child still sang the Chant, praying to our Lady that She would take him up to Her, and the singing so enraged the evil maleficar that he took a great knife, and cut the child's throat to the bone. The blood flowed thick and red into the cauldron.

"Make sure you get every drop!" cried the maleficar's squint-eyed daughter. They drained the body for purposes of their vile blood magic, and then threw it into a public midden.

The widow waited all that night for her little child, but he did not come. Therefore, as soon as it was day, with her face pale from fear and anxiety she searched for him, until finally she learned that he was last seen in the street near the school. The good sister there called on the Templars, and the child's body was found later that morning, stabbed dead and gnawed upon by rats.

There was a great hue and cry throughout the city, and a good man who lived in the same street thought much on the matter. He watched the dark little house for some days, and then he went to the Templars and reported that those in the house were apostates, and probably maleficar. Who else would have killed an innocent child?

So it proved. The Templars boldly broke down the door and dragged the evil mage and his ugly daughter into the light of day. They were revealed to be mages, drained of their mana, and taken before the magistrates, where they were put to the question. At first the maleficar denied that he was a blood

mage, and claimed to know nothing of the child's death, but in the end he and his daughter confessed that they had killed the child just as described before, and then used the innocent blood for their evil rites. In time, after much close questioning, they gave the names of other apostates, and they too were captured and confessed to blood magic.

Every one of the foul coven was sentenced to further torment and a shameful death before the whole city. He who deserves evil shall have evil. Therefore, they were broken on the wheel, disemboweled, and after that hanged, according to the law.

The poor mother gave all her possessions to the chantry, and then herself as well; for she took vows as a sister. As to the good man who discovered the maleficar, he was richly rewarded on earth, as he will surely be in Heaven. Praise be to the Maker, whose gaze sees all!

Tara listened in growing horror and distress. While the rest murmured and applauded, Zevran took her firmly by the elbow and walked her away before she struck Redcliffe Castle and everyone in it with lightning.

"That's....disgusting...." she hissed in Zevran's ear.

"Disgusting! What a horrible story to tell a child! It could give him nightmares! Who are they calling 'vile?'"

"Yes," Zevran agreed patiently, "Very foolish, too, since it is obvious to me that it was most probably the informer who killed the child, and then denounced the apostates to cover his

crime. The mages confessed, of course, because in the end everybody does."

Tara considered this. "You really think so?"

"Yes. It is implicit in the narrative. But the people by the fire," he jerked his head toward the devout group, "are not ones to hear that which would not please them."

"That's a *horrible* story," Tara repeated, almost shaking with anger. "The only reason I'm not making a fuss is because I'm a guest, and I'm eating Arl Teagan's food, and wearing clothes he gave me. I hope you understand that. I don't want to ever hear that story again." She frowned, pondering it. "Or maybe I'll tell it the way *you* interpret it..."

Leliana floated in, clad in her lovely gown, intricate gold chain, and rich sapphire ring. Her bright red hair was neatly trimmed, and a single braid was bound by a gold ornament. She beamed at the sight of her friends in their grand garb, and came over to talk to them.

"What is wrong? Is Tara upset?" she asked.

Zevran murmured, "An objectionable story about the evils of magic. They do not know that Tara is magical herself."

"I don't want to make a scene, but it was *really* insulting," Tara said firmly. "And knowing that it's their honest opinion doesn't make it any better!"

Once again, Tara imagined the mages retreating to their own, hidden world, known only to them and a few trusted friends. Only the Grey Wardens valued mages, anyway. Finding a way to truly keep themselves secret and safe would not be depriving the rest of the world of anything it wanted. Except for Tevinter, and Tara felt nothing but hatred for them. There were ways for mages to create magical barriers to hide themselves, but those enchantments were frowned on as being inconvenient to the Templars. And there were the phylacteries. Perhaps Jowan had glimpsed a dusty corner of the truth. Maybe the first step really was the phylacteries...

Leliana's curiosity was roused about the story, but she was properly tactful. "Then we shall speak of other things. Come. We must pay our respects to the Revered Mother."

Bows and curtseys came first, then idle chatter followed: mostly about the wedding of the daughter of the Arl of South Reach to the Arl of Denerim, which was to be held in ten days' time.

"Is Lady Bronwyn going to the wedding?" Kaitlyn asked, dreamy-eyed. "It will be ever so elegant, I'm sure. Arl Teagan has sent a wedding gift of the loveliest silks and velvets!"

Bevin was disgusted. "The Girl Warden fights monsters! She doesn't have time for a stupid *wedding!*"

Leliana smiled winningly at the little boy, and sympathetically at his sister. "Probably the Warden-Commander *will* be too busy, even though Lady Habren is her cousin. I know that she

visited her when she was in Denerim recently."

"Oh," Kaitlyn sighed, disappointed. Then she brightened. "Maybe she saw her wedding gown then! I wish I were brave enough to ask her about it!"

Tara made bold to speak up. "I didn't meet Lady Habren, but we met her little brothers. They came to dine with us at the Wardens' Hall."

Bevin looked ready to burst with envy. The conversation was broken off with the entrance of the Arl and the Warden-Commander.

Altogether, they made a brave show at dinner, and Teagan seemed to relish the sight. He smiled and bowed deeply to Bronwyn, stunning in her new finery. She returned the courtesy, enjoying the sensation of silk against her skin, rather than that of leather and mail. Looking down the table, she noticed that Zevran and Tara were well-dressed, and that each wore a matching jeweled earring. As love tokens went, it was no sillier than others she had seen. And sure enough, there was the little Merton girl. She would make a very pretty Arlessa...

"So there were no darkspawn to the west?" Teagan asked Bronwyn again, visibly glad of the news.

"None that we discovered, my lord," Bronwyn assured him. "A violent gang of bandits, but all too human."

"I am sorry for the loss of your companion. He seemed a most gentleman-like man."

"He was." Bronwyn did not want to discuss Cullen with someone who knew nothing about him, and changed the subject. "Do you have a letter for Alistair, my lord? Or for anyone else at Ostagar, for that matter?"

Teagan smiled. "I already sent my own courier, but I thank you. Ah! It appeared dinner is served..." He offered her his arm.

Bronwyn smiled back, and with some ceremony they took their places at the great table. Toasts were exchanged, and a delicate broth of seethed mussels was set before them. Bronwyn spooned it up thoughtfully, glad for a chance not to talk. She was not much surprised that Teagan had already written to Alistair. She hoped that Teagan did not think her low enough to open his private correspondence, or even to "lose" it in transit; but perhaps it was best that he had taken the matter into his own hands. Possibly his letter had reached Alistair by now. Knowing Alistair, he would share it with friends—most likely Astrid. Possibly he would take it straight to Loghain. The two of them really had been getting on well lately. She could imagine pretty clearly what advice Alistair would get there.

She had considered openly raising the possibility of her own claim to the Crown—allied with Loghain—with the Arl, but had decided against it. He had already made it clear that he would not even support Fergus. How much less, then, would he wish

to support Bronwyn and a common-born consort. Let him think her duplicitous, if he liked, but she saw no profit in tipping her hand to him. If Teagan clung to Alistair as a candidate, he was in for a disappointment. Who was his second choice? Surely not himself! Other than the handful of banns sworn to Redcliffe, he would have little support either for himself or for a previously unknown bastard son of Maric.

Thinking of Alistair made her think of Cullen, and she sighed to herself. They would miss him. They would miss his sword and his courage and his company. Bronwyn was really going to have to bestir herself to recruit more Wardens. There were some decent men here. Many had been killed when during the attacks by the walking dead, but more had come to the village to replace them. That red-haired knight...Ser Perth? Bronwyn sipped her wine thoughtfully, mulling it over.

"Excellent! Rainbow fish in cream!" Teagan interrupted her thoughts. "Try this dish, Commander, I pray you..."

She savored every bite, her mind ticking through possibilities.

Not Perth, she decided. Too devout. He might well have problems dealing with the mages among us. Look at how hard Cullen struggled...

And bringing a replacement back to Ostagar might cause undue pain to those would mourn Cullen's loss. She finally decided that Teagan had too few men already. It would be best to go back to Ostagar, let her people mourn their brother, and then talk over the recruitment issue with them.

Perhaps they would even suggest names of likely candidates.

Then, too, the Landsmeet was less than two months away. She needed to see that the darkspawn were kept at bay long enough to settle the matter of the Crown. She could not do it here, in a gown of blood-red silk.

On the first day of Harvestmere, they saw the Tower of Ishal once more.

Only eleven days had passed since their departure, but the landscape had changed: already autumnal and cooler, the leaves turning yellow and brown, beginning to drift down onto the Imperial Highway. The snow line on the surrounding mountains seemed to swoop lower, misty-grey and forbidding. As they rode closer, the wind brought them the midden-stink of the camp.

They were seen, too. Little was hidden from the windows at the top. Some of their friends and comrades were there and waiting when they cantered up and dismounted. The greetings were broken by Tara's raised voice.

"Where's Jowan?" she cried, distressed at his absence.

"Where's Jowan?"

"He's fine, elfkins," Anders assured her, giving her a hug.

"We're all pretty much all right. He's off with Brosca and Sten on a patrol to the northeast."

"Where's Cullen?" Carver said, coming forward, scanning their number with concerned blue eyes.

A very brief silence. Bronwyn forced herself to speak. It would be easier in Broasca's absence.

"We lost Cullen."

A longer silence. Carver was distressed, Danith grave, Oghren curious, and Anders and Morrigan expressionless. Bronwyn was relieved that they decently refrained from smirking. There was no love lost there.

More needed to be said. "We found what we were looking for, and we have it; but it was guarded by a High Dragon."

"Nasty," Anders said, now more concerned. "How is everybody?"

"You should look all of us over, Anders," Tara said, "Scout, too. It was bad."

"Six of you against a High Dragon!" Oghren said, slapping his chest. "That's a fight for the songs. Lucky you only lost one!"

"We do not feel lucky in losing Cullen," Leliana replied, "but I confess I was surprised I survived. We fought madmen as well, and found—

"Let's take it inside," Bronwyn said, more tired than she wanted to admit. "And find something to eat. We'll tell you about it, but not here. Where's Alistair?"

"In council with the Teyrn," Morrigan said, "both he and Astrid. Loghain will wish to see you at once, you know."

Bronwyn called to a passing soldier. "Tell Teyrn Loghain that the Warden-Commander has returned and will report to him soon." She muttered, "As soon as I have dinner and a wash."

Morrigan did smirk this time. Bronwyn smirked back, happy to see her.

"Help us unload the horses," she said, "We've got enough loot to finance the Wardens for some time."

Alistair and Astrid with Loghain...Adaia at her workshop... Jowan, Sten, and Brozca in the field. She would have to repeat her tale of woe, again and again, but she was not going to make these friends wait. Bowls of unappealing mystery stew were put in front of the travelers, and other than Leliana they ate without taking much notice of it.

"We found Haven," Bronwyn said, in between bites. "We found Haven, and we found the shrine, and the Urn, and the Ashes. Genetivi is dead—just as you guessed, Morrigan, only worse. The village is hidden away because they worship dragons there in the old Tevinter way—only they called their dragon Andraste. They chained Genetivi up, pumped him for information, and then they fed him to their 'god.' The villagers told us all about it: they were proud of it. too."

"They tried to kill us," Leliana said indignantly, her voice cutting over the shocked, bewildered response. "They

attacked first. Their Chantry priest was a man and a mage! It was he who locked up the poor brother. Their warriors fought like madmen."

Tara cut in eagerly. "They called them Reavers, and they were pumped up on dragon's blood. It makes people red-handed killers, and awfully hard to put down."

Zevran pointed out, "—but there was much beauty there as well. The great temple was immense and glorious, though much dilapidated."

"—they had libraries you would not *believe*, Anders!" Tara told him, waving her spoon. "Maybe more books altogether than the Circle!"

Bronwyn swallowed, took a long drink of cider, and continued the story. "Behind the temple was a system of caverns. That's where the cultists raised the dragon young. I didn't keep count of all the dragonkind we faced there... heaps of dragonlings and at least four drakes..."

"Don't forget that other drake outside!" Tara reminded her.

"Wait!" Oghren protested. "They were *raising* dragons? For what? Food?"

"I'm getting to that," Bronwyn said. "Anyway, we were confronted by the leader of the cultists: a complete madman. He had drunk dragon's blood too, and it makes people very aggressive... He thought we could be of use to him. He and

his lot couldn't get to the Ashes. They were in a shrine across a barren plain and protected by a...well...sort of spirit. Kolgrim thought we could get past this spirit and reach the Ashes."

"And then," Leliana burst out, "he wanted Bronwyn to defile the Ashes by pouring dragon's blood on them!"

Bronwyn tried to calm them all. "That was because they thought that Andraste had been reborn and that the Ashes were holding her back from her full reincarnation. I pretended to agree, and we went out to meet their Andraste—"

"—and that's when we found out it was a dragon!" Tara declared. "The man sounded his horn and the dragon flapped down right in front of us. I have never been so scared, but the crazy man introduced Bronwyn to it and it didn't attack us then."

"Kolgrim gave our leader the title, 'Andraste's True Champion,'" said Zevran, with a graceful gesture of respect. "Unfortunately for him, it was more true than he could have guessed."

"So we went to the Shrine and met the Guardian," Leliana said, in a more subdued way. "And we were tested. Only the worthy pilgrims could see the Ashes."

"Stop!" cried Morrigan. "It is too complicated and improbable to take in so quickly." There were nods of agreement. Carver was visibly confused and distressed.

"I agree. What sorts of tests?" asked Anders, very curious. He moved from one traveler to another; examining them, targeting recent wounds with healing spells.

No one wanted to tell much about them in detail. "They were very painful and unpleasant," Bronwyn said. "The Guardian knew everything about us."

"Everything?" Danith raised a brow, clearly skeptical.

Bronwyn considered, "He knew more than any spy could know. He knew things that none of you know. At any rate, there were, indeed, tests."

"I don't think we should tell you any more about it," Leliana said. "Possibly the tests are different for everybody."

"Can't we tell them about having to walk through fire? Naked?" protested Zevran.

"My kind of people!" cackled Oghren. "All of you? Bare-arse *naked*?"

Bronwyn waved that away, unamused. "Being naked was uncomfortable. The fire was far more alarming. At any rate, we survived the tests and saw the Urn. I was permitted to take a pinch for the Queen. We have it. Then we had to go back and face Kolgrim and his henchman. We had a very hard fight of it, and then the dragon..."

"It was really big, and really hateful," Tara said softly. "It

caught Cullen in its jaws and killed him."

"It ate him?" Danith asked, horrified.

"No!" Leliana shook her head, distressed at the idea. "We did not allow that. Bronwyn and Tara damaged its wing as it flew at us, and made it fall. Then, when it was stunned, we finished it off. But poor Cullen was... killed."

Eyes filled with tears. Anders had disliked Cullen quite intensely, but he was sorry for his friends' grief. He patted Leliana's shoulder, and then squeezed Tara's. Morrigan pursed her lips, impatient with the display of sentiment for someone she had despised. Of course the man had been a useful sword, but all the other baggage that came with him had been extremely tiresome. He had never figured in her own private plans...

"He died bravely, I am sure," Danith said, feeling awkward.

"Very bravely," Bronwyn agreed. "We brought back Yusaris. He would have wanted you to carry it, Carver."

"Me?" the boy asked. "I mean...it's an amazing sword. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure. The possessions of a Grey Warden are the property of his brothers and sisters. You use a greatsword. You should have the best."

"Thanks!" Carver burst out. He picked up the sword and

cradled it in his arms. "I won't let you down...or him."

"Brosca's going to take it hard," Oghren predicted. "She was crazy about that big nug-humper."

"I know," Bronwyn said wearily. "I'll tell her privately when they come back. Let's try to keep all this to ourselves, anyway."

Leliana declared, "We have decided that it would be best not to reveal the existence of Haven, the Ashes, or the Temple until a proper expedition can be mounted. The Grand Cleric must be informed."

Bronwyn saw the rolled eyes: Morrigan, Anders...Danith, too. "It's a distraction right now. And we don't want to give the Orlesians any reason to cross the border to claim Ferelden territory, even for the Chantry. Besides, Haven is dangerous." She pushed her bowl aside.

"Now...tell me what's happened while I've been gone, and make it quick, since Loghain will be impatient to find out about the Ashes!"

"You have a letter," Morrigan said instantly. "From your brother. It came three days ago."

"Really!" Bronwyn got up to look for it. It was lying on her cot, along with some other papers. She wanted desperately to read it at once, but listened to the others first.

There had been fighting, of course. The darkspawn had made an attempt to tunnel beneath them again, only into the southern camp. The dwarves had detected it and there had been a vicious underground battle.

"Nearly got shortened by a head," Oghren admitted.

"A good thing you were not, dwarf," Morrigan sneered, "else you would have been too small to notice, and I should have stepped upon you!"

"Alistair got cut up pretty bad," Anders told Bronwyn. "He's still recovering." He noticed the sword strapped to Tara's back. It was not the fake she had been wearing. This was jeweled, and runed with magic, and *real*. "And what's this?"

"It's my sword!" Tara told him, glowing with satisfaction. "Look at it! You too, Morrigan! It's for mages. Let's see if you can touch it. It stings everybody else!"

"Have fun with that," Bronwyn said, "I must really look at Fergus' letter."

While the mages played with Spellweaver, and Zevran showed the others the golden plunder of the dragon worshipers, Bronwyn broke the seal of Highever, and her eyes devoured Fergus' words, written in their private code.

Dearest sister—

Take all the thrones of Thedas and welcome, as long as you

leave me Highever!

Yes, I am smiling, but not in jest. I considered your words and your schemes. I think it would be best at this time if I were your tanist, rather than leaving the North to be King. That is, until the Blight is over, and you and Loghain can make some fierce baby warriors to continue your line. Perhaps the Grey Warden lore is nonsense. Couslands do their duty, and never fail to breed. I would back Cousland fecundity over Warden superstition any day! But have it as you will: name me your heir at the Landsmeet. It will satisfy the fears of some.

Marrying Loghain may help you win a throne, but I wonder if it will make you a happy woman. That reservation aside, I am not going to tell you how to feel, nor how to give your heart. I caution you only to guard yourself and hold your honor high, as always. It is you who will be Queen by right of blood. Loghain and his sworn men in the Landsmeet may well insist on granting him the Crown Matrimonial, but you will always be the Queen. Father and Mother would be so proud.

I thank you for the gift of Ser Adam Hawke. He has done good service here, and from our first meeting. Someday I shall tell you about that, and we shall laugh. A fine fellow, and a pleasant companion.

The last of Howe's men fled west. Word is that they will sue the Crown for pardon. They may receive such a pardon, but

they will not travel through this teyrnir. I shall insist that they be shipped south to take part in the fight against the darkspawn, as they should have months ago.

Other Howe henchmen rioted in the town, and were slain. The North belongs to the Couslands once more. Howe left a great treasure of gold behind. That is the good news.

The bad news is that the gold will be sorely needed. Highever itself and the villages of the teyrnir were ruthlessly looted, as was the castle itself. The unhappy elves were sold and their Alienage leveled. Only a handful remain, hidden by kindly townsfolk. Howe was building some sort of pleasure palace for himself on the site of the Alienage. I will not be continuing that work, and am still considering what is best to do with the half-finished foundations. Perhaps I shall have some stone houses built there, or sell off the house lots. We may be getting a great many new people in town, with the end of fighting and so many coming north to avoid the darkspawn.

Your room will be ready for you whenever it pleases Your Majesty to visit. Much was lost, but not everything. I am erecting a marker at the mass grave where our dear ones and our good friends and servants lie together.

I will endeavor to put Highever and Amaranthine in such good order that it will be possible for me to come to the Landsmeet to support you. In fact, I would like to go to Denerim earlier than that. The Queen will need help as her

rule comes to an end; and perhaps it would be best to petition her in person and settle the matter of Howe's men before the Landsmeet gets its grubby collective hands on it. Some of the Howe's officers have kinsmen among the nobles.

So let us say that we shall meet again in Haring, and perhaps even sooner. I seem to recall that our Cousin Habren is marrying Urien Kendall in Harvestmere. I do not see how I can manage to attend the wedding, but I have sent a gift to the happy couple from the treasury of Rendon Howe: a great platter of enameled silver, patterned with the night stars. I wish them joy of it. You must send them something handsome yourself, or they will remember the lapse and hate you until the day they die.

All this talk of marriages wearies me. Do not say it. I know my duty and will do it, but I shall not marry only for power and influence. Love is the greatest adventure of all; and having known true happiness, and having seen it in our parents' marriage, I will settle for nothing less. Nor should you.

Your loving brother,

Fergus

"Dear, dear Fergus!" Bronwyn burst out. No one could have a better, kinder, wiser brother. Her friends were coming over, looking concerned, intensely curious about the letter. Bronwyn

mastered her face, and looked up with a smile. "He's well. Highever is his. Carver! Your brother is safe with mine, and Fergus is very pleased with him."

"Of course he is," muttered Carver. "*Everybody* loves Adam."

Bronwyn knew better than to talk Carver out of his resentment, and splashed her face with cold water and tried to organize her ghastly hair. She had Fergus' leave to pursue the crown. She had the Ashes, her debt of honor to Anora; paid for with the blood of her faithful Warden Cullen and the people of Haven. She would lay it all before Loghain, and they would take this kingdom for their own.

Thanks to my reviewers: demonichargles, Nemrut, Aoir24, RakeeshJ4, blinded in a bolthole, EpitomyofShyness, Oleander's One, Zute, Dante Alighieri1308, Hydroplatypus, Kira Kyuu, euromellows, Raxiselic, MsBarrows, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, JackOfBladesX, Girl-chama, Herebedragons66, KnightOfHolyLight, tgcgoddess, Judy, kirster676, Jenna53, Jyggilag, almostinsane, mille libri, Eva Galana, Josie Lange, Tsu Doh Nimh, Shakespira, Untamed of Wildwind, Costin, Gene Dark, SkaterGirl246, unlock. your. heart, and Enaid Aderyn.

*The chantry sister's story is derived from *The Prioress's Tale* by Chaucer. In her version the villains are Jews. Accusing despised groups of ritual child murder has a long and shameful history. I'm absolutely certain the chantry would*

promulgate stories like this to inculcate fear and suspicion of mages. I added my own twist of a "virtuous informer." I'm willing to bet that there is a standard bounty for information on secret mages.

Yes, the gown is THAT gown of Rowan's, worn in a critical scene in The Stolen Throne. Yes, Loghain is pretty sure to recognize it.

With this arc complete, I will turn now to a chapter of Keening Blade.

57. Winter is Coming

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 57: Winter is Coming

Ostagar stank.

The crumbling fortress was two thousand years old, but there was hard use in it yet. Tevinter legions had kept watch on the restless south here, holding back the barbarian tribes. Now Ostagar held back the darkspawn.

The valley floor below the bridge was filled with log barracks and ringed with defensive works. Ballistae were positioned up on the heights and down on the lower bastions. It had been some time since the darkspawn tried a frontal assault on the fortress itself.

Ostagar had probably stunk in the Tevinters' day, too: magic could only do so much to gloss over the squalider aspects of life. Now, men, elves, dwarves—dogs and horses—mage and mundane alike—they all contributed in their own ways to the odor of latrines and kennels and stables; of woodsmoke, wet leather, oiled steel, home-brewed liquor, and burnt porridge.

Bronwyn crossed the bridge impatiently, Scout at her heels,

her boots pounding a quick rhythm on the ancient stones. She felt agitated, restless, vaguely angry; she felt like she was going into battle. Soldiers looked up at her approach, saw her helmet, recognized her.

"—*Commander...*"

"—*Glad you're back, Grey Warden...*"

"—*Good day to you, my lady...*"

She nodded to them all. Loghain was meeting with Alistair on the other side of the gorge, in a structure built under the broken vaults of the old hall. It was cobbled together of fallen stone and heavy logs, but it was better situated for overlooking the valley and its fortifications than the room they had used in the Tower of Ishal. It stood where they had taken counsel, the night before the Bloomingtide Battle, when Duncan fell. Now of course, it had a sound roof of pine shingles to keep out the weather.

More buildings were going up. Winter was coming to the south. It was now the beginning of Harvestmere. They could expect snow by Firstfall. The supply convoys were coming in regularly. They must stock up; they *must*. What would happen to the army if the snow were heavy enough to make even the Imperial Highway impassable?

Much as she dreaded it, Bronwyn also wished that the Archdemon would just get it over with it and make its appearance. She was weary of its threats in the Fade; weary

of its smug gloating. Better to face the monster that walked her dreams in the light of day, sword in hand, and endure whatever came of it.

The guards at the big hut saw her coming and opened the door, announcing her. Bronwyn strode in, glanced around the rude log interior and then stalked toward the three people at the long table. Scout trotted in, tail wagging, and went directly to Loghain.

Alistair was already up, smiling broadly, delighted to see her. She was gathered up in a clanking bear hug that left her breathless. She laughed, feeling the sharpest edge of her anger slipping away. The left side of Alistair's head was bandaged heavily. Bronwyn remembered Oghren's words about the recent battle.

"You're back!" Alistair let her go, and looked her over. "You're all right? What happened?" He noticed the elaborate horn slung across her chest, and whistled. "Where'd you get that? Looks expensive!"

Astrid was up, too; also smiling. Not as unguardedly, true; but it was still sincere and friendly.

Loghain remained enthroned in his chair on the opposite side of the table, his face carefully, discreetly expressionless. He rubbed Scout's ears, talking softly to the dog. For a moment, Bronwyn's unfocused anger flared again. She removed the little bear gut pouch from inside her tunic and tossed it onto the table like a thrown gauntlet.

"Here's your Ashes, by the way."

Why was she so angry with him? Loghain looked her over carefully, and seemed pleased to find her unhurt. He gave Scout a pat and reached for the packet, while Bronwyn was distracted by Alistair's questions.

"Did you see it? Really? Did you see the Urn?" His grin was white; enormous. "Wow...Andraste's real Ashes..."

Astrid, more calmly, asked, "Did you have any trouble?"

"Some." Now that it came to it, Bronwyn felt some discomfort at telling them what had happened. "The Ashes were heavily guarded. There was a High Dragon...and Cullen was killed."

Alistair's face crumpled, the joy blown out like a candle. Loghain frowned, but said nothing. Bronwyn, with bitter resentment, wondered if he remembered who Cullen was.

Astrid took her by the hand, and led her to a chair. "Tell us," she said, putting a cup of cider in front of Bronwyn.

So it all came out. Bronwyn forced down her irrational rage, trying to tell the story more sensibly than she had to her comrades. The watching eyes at Sulcher, the ambush, The Reavers and their inhuman strength, Haven and its lunatic dragon cult, Genetivi's miserable fate, the vast Temple, the caverns and the dragonlings, Kolgrim and the "risen Andraste," the Shrine and the Gauntlet. She was brief about all of it, and about the Gauntlet she was not descriptive,

except to mention that "the Guardian knew everything about us. Everything."

She said nothing about her friends and their own reward of Ashes. They had agreed amongst themselves not to speak of it, and Bronwyn would keep her word. Nobody needed to know that there was more than one pinch of Sacred Ashes to be had.

Then there was the fight with Kolgrim and his minions. The horn was Kolgrim's, she explained, and used to summon the dragon. Alistair looked like he wanted to ask questions, but Bronwyn forged ahead, afraid that if she did not speak of it now, she never would. So she told them of the battle with the High Dragon, and how Cullen fell. Loghain leaned forward, hawk face intent, gleaning every word she uttered about how they slew the creature. Scout whined a little, sensing his Bronwyn's distress, and came over to put his head in her lap.

"That was clever," Astrid nodded. "Attaching the bomb to the wing joint ...that was very clever. Detonating it when it was in the air—also excellent. You let the fall and creature's weight do half the work for you."

"More than half," Bronwyn confessed. "We were making no impression on the thing at all. Our swords were as useless as straw against it, until it was down and stunned."

Alistair was slumped in his chair. "Cullen...that's horrible. Do you think he suffered?"

Bronwyn stared at him rather nonplussed, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask him, "*What do you think? He was bitten to death by a dragon!*"

"It was quick," she said sharply, thinking that however it quick it was, it probably seemed like forever to Cullen.

There was a long silence, while she drank thirstily, feeling foolish and emotional and off-balance. She buried her left hand in Scout's thick fur, needing the reassurance.

Loghain let her drink, and then said quietly, "I am very sorry for the loss of your Warden, but you must realize that it could easily have been the lot of you. I'm astonished that you found and retrieved the Ashes. Now, of course, we must get them to Anora."

"They need to be well protected," Bronwyn said. "Replacing them might be something of a problem."

He thought that over. "Two days ago you could have traveled with Bryland and his escort when he left for his daughter's wedding. There will be a supply train returning north soon. Perhaps that would do." He was dissatisfied with that, but could think of nothing better. If this was a cure for Anora, she should have it as soon as possible, but they could not risk it going astray.

"Who's taking it to her?" Alistair asked.

Well, that was the question, wasn't it? Bronwyn had already

given it a bit of thought.

"We'll need to send Jowan. The Queen knows and trusts him, and he and Wynne can work out between them the best way to administer the Ashes. I'd send Anders, but if Wynne can't cure the Queen in the ordinary way, then I presume Anders couldn't either. No. It should be Jowan. And they know him at the Compound, too."

"Not alone, surely," Loghain said. "Though, to be blunt, I'd prefer you not send the Orlesian."

Bronwyn smiled tightly. "I have had proof, time and again, of *Leliana's* courage and loyalty. I consider her a dear friend... and a sister. Though perhaps she had enough of travel at the moment. Perhaps Carver Hawke. They will be stopping in Lothering, and it would give him a chance to see his family. While they're in Denerim, I'll have them present my wedding gift to the Arl of Denerim and his new Arlessa."

They talked a little longer: mostly about the subterranean attack a few days before. It had given the camp something of a scare. The Wardens and dwarves were checking out the remains of the tunnels. There was a possibility that the ones they knew of were not all there were.

Abruptly, Loghain said, "And now I need to speak privately with your commander, Wardens. We'll meet again when your people return."

Alistair blushed, and then gave Bronwyn a naughty grin.

Bronwyn only gave him a mock-haughty look, as Astrid pulled him out the door. Scout sprawled lazily on the floor by Bronwyn's chair.

"Warden Astrid is an excellent staff officer," Loghain remarked, once the door was shut. "A very sound soldier." He gave Bronwyn an odd, inscrutable look, then rose slowly. "*Must* you wear that ridiculous helmet everywhere?" It was the wrong thing to say, he knew, as soon as he said it.

"Yes, I must," Bronwyn said, standing her ground, still unreasonably irritated with him. "It saves time. Everyone knows who I am, and I don't have to waste my breath arguing with people about my identity."

Loghain removed the helmet gently, and set it on the table. With a careful hand, he smoothed her ruffled hair. "I already know who you are. Why are you angry with me?"

She hardly knew herself, but the words burst out of her without conscious thought. "You weren't *there!* You didn't see how bad it was! I've lost a Warden, and we weren't even fighting darkspawn! Scout was almost killed!"

He took her in his arms, glad to comfort her. She was so young; so impossibly young. A quick, awkward kiss; and then a longer, sweeter, surer one. It is was unfortunate, but he could not take her here: anyone might walk in at any time. And they were both in armor, and it would take forever to take it off and then put it back on. Tonight, though...

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," he said, with unfeigned sincerity. "And don't imagine that I'm ungrateful. I suppose all we can do at this point is hope the Ashes cure Anora, but you've done more than anyone could...more than I have any right to expect. And I'm sorry for your Templar. He was a brave man. He was the one who threw you up onto Flemeth's back, wasn't he?"

"Yes." So he did remember Cullen. It soothed her anger quite a bit. "But I don't want to talk about that place anymore. Maybe someday. It was too much like the sort of thing you dislike—fantasy and make-believe, but horribly *real*. Imagine meeting dragon worshipers in this day and age! Anyway, it's done. I've asked my people not to talk about it—especially not the location of the Temple or the village. The Divine would order it occupied and have all the villagers massacred. And stupid fortune hunters would get themselves killed, rather than coming south to join the army. Yes, enough of it. I want to talk to you about Arl Teagan."

He drew her closer, and let her rest her head against his jaw. Embracing a woman in armor took some care, but was doable, unlike more serious intimacies. He had learned the art long ago with Rowan.

He told her, "Alistair came to me with a letter from Teagan. The worthy arl mentioned your visit, and pleaded with Alistair to assert his *'rights.'*" Loghain chuckled. "The boy was desperate for me to find a way for him to get out of it."

"I *told* Teagan that Alistair is no fit claimant for the throne. The

Landsmeet will never accept an unacknowledged bastard."

"Teagan was also peevish about your *'understandable bias in favor of a brother.'* Did you tell him you were supporting Fergus?"

"Not exactly," Bronwyn smiled to herself, "but I said my brother would do his duty. As it happens, a letter from Fergus arrived while I was gone. I brought it with me. It might be of some interest to you."

He pushed her away to arms' length, trying to read her expression. She produced the letter, and laid it in his hands.

"For brevity's sake," she said, "I shall translate the code. We are welcome to all the kingdoms of the earth, as long as we leave Highever to him."

Loghain's eyes blazed with a cold blue flame of triumph, but Bronwyn was oddly disturbed by her own words, remembering her father's phantom in the Gauntlet.

"...you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity..."

But Loghain was kissing her again, mouth hard on hers, and her father's voice faded, and was forgotten.

"We have much to do," he said afterwards. His expression was unusually tender. He cupped her cheek in a calloused

hand, and gave her a brief smile. It changed his face so much that Bronwyn's heart caught; it was a fleeting glimpse of the young rebel he had been, long ago. She smiled too, more so, when Scout thumped his tail in drowsy approval.

Bronwyn said, "So my cousin Bryland has already gone north. Fergus reminded me to send Habren a present, lest she hate me forever."

Loghain snorted. "Wise advice, especially at this time. Bryland's going to sound Urien about it all, but we still needed to find out where your brother stood. I'll send a courier to Bryland to bring him up to speed. Let's talk to Wulffe later. If we have Gwaren, Highever, South Reach, and West Hills, it doesn't matter what Teagan says—or even if Urien dislikes it. Obviously, though, it's best to have a consensus."

"Of course."

"And then," he frowned. "There's the matter of the wedding."

Bronwyn regarded him blankly. Surely he did not expect her to rush to Denerim to attend Habren's nuptial rites? All things considered, she would just as soon be fighting darkspawn.

"Wedding?"

He scowled at her, at once amused and vexed. "Yes. Our wedding. If we are to present ourselves to the Landsmeet as a couple, we have to actually...*be* a couple."

A wedding. Bronwyn's heart sank. What girl did not dream of a wedding? There was, however, no way that her wedding could be anything resembling her youthful dreams. She had always imagined a noble event at Denerim Cathedral, surrounded by friends and family, attended by the King and Queen.

How many of those people were dead and gone? Her guest list was grown sadly thin. Her father was dead and would not give her away. Her mother would not be there, iron will wrapped in velvet tact, to see that everything was perfect for her. Oriana would not kiss her and whisper secrets. Oren would not make silly faces and call her "Auntie."

Very likely, not even Fergus would be there. He was far away in the north, setting Highever in order. She had no kinswoman available to stand up with her and strew the bridal bed with flowers—if there *were* any flowers to be had this time of year.

Her only kinswomen close enough to count were her Bryland cousins: fussy, elderly Werberga and Habren, the soon-to-be Arlessa of Denerim. The image of *Habren* performing such a role was almost enough to put Bronwyn off the idea of marrying altogether.

Loghain was still looking at her, waiting for a response. "Yes. I see," Bronwyn managed. "The question is: when and where would be best? We could be married here in camp, I suppose, and the army might like it, but it wouldn't do us much good with any of the banns in Denerim."

"Bryland wants to put forward the idea of having the Landsmeet at South Reach. Urien won't like it, but it might be best."

"Urien won't be the only one. People are creatures of habit."

"People are fools, most of the time," Loghain sneered. "but I grant you that the stay-at-homes won't want to be any closer to the darkspawn than they need to be. Speaking of which: we need to strike hard against the darkspawn, and soon. We need to keep them at bay while we bring the nobility into line." He began pacing the floor, head down, deep in thought. "At any rate, we need to be married before the Landsmeet convenes. The actual wedding could be only a few days beforehand; however, we need to announce the betrothal fairly soon, to give substance to our claim."

"That announcement," Bronwyn sighed. "will be a public acknowledgement that we are seeking the crown."

"Yes," Loghain smirked. "Be ready for the storm to follow."

He needed to brief his trusted lieutenants and those of his sworn banners who were not already in his confidence; she needed to tell the Wardens. She shrank a little from the thought, but only a little. Alistair was always going to be the hardest to convince, and Alistair already knew her plans. Would the others care? Would they be offended? It was not as if she would be deserting them.

"I will not be stepping down as Warden-Commander, not while

the Blight lasts."

Loghain approved—and seemed unsurprised.

"Fair enough. The Blight is the greatest threat. Besides, if we need an administrator in Denerim, we have Anora."

Bronwyn thought that over, trying to ignore a faint stirring of unease. "You mean...keep her on as...? No. You want to appoint her Chancellor of the Realm..."

"Why not?" Loghain shrugged. "She's been doing the work for years. She knows all the Court and City functionaries. She knows the ambassadors. Yes. It's unconventional, but why not make good use of her skills? She'll have the title of Queen-Dowager to give her status. She'll be happiest, doing what she does best; and you and I can deal with the darkspawn. Unless you really want to trade the armor for silk and swan about the Palace?"

"Not while there's a Blight," Bronwyn said slowly. "But I may, *someday*. And there's the issue of inheritance. Fergus is my heir. He has a right of blood equal to my own. I won't have him set aside."

"And Anora is *my* heir," Loghain answered, his eyes hooded. "And I expect to receive the Crown Matrimonial."

There. There was a capital demand. Bronwyn was prepared for it.

"I expected no less, but Fergus is next in line after the two of us."

"You will want this in the marriage contract?"

"Absolutely."

A stiff, uncomfortable silence. Loghain gave her a long look, and Bronwyn braced herself for a fight. The Crown Matrimonial for Fergus as heir to the throne. At the moment, Loghain's expression reminded Bronwyn very disagreeably of cunning peasant freeholders she had known in Highever, forever looking for ways to get the best of a noble. The fight, however, did not materialize. Loghain cocked his head and then spoke briskly.

"We'll talk more of this, of course. I'll have my clerk start drafting the marriage contract. The first step is to secure the crown. The Landsmeet would no doubt be appeased by Fergus as the next heir. Still, Anora will want a secure place, either in the capital or in Gwaren. You can't expect me not to want her taken care of."

"I know that you must consider your daughter's honor and prestige, but let us see first if the Ashes will restore her health. If all goes well, I think Chancellor is a great honor."

Loghain kissed his difficult, proud young warrior again before she left, and then ticked through what else must be done. He must meet with Cauthrien and the other captains, he knew;

but first he must see to his correspondence. There were two letters to write, and his clerk could have no part in them. If the courier were quick and clever, he would intercept Bryland before he reached Denerim. And Bryland would see that Anora got her letter as well. He sat before the parchment, considering what to say and what to conceal.

Bryland—

Bronwyn is back in Ostagar and safe, her mission successful. No darkspawn west of the Lake, which is a relief, of course. A letter from Fergus Cousland arrived for her. She tells me that he has renounced his claim to the throne in her favor. Bronwyn insists that he be heir, however. Perhaps this is for the best. She has agreed to the Crown Matrimonial. We will announce the betrothal fairly soon, but after your return to Ostagar. Sound out Urien, and find out where his loyalties lie.

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He set it aside, and then pulled out another sheet of parchment.

My dearest daughter—

Bronwyn is back in Ostagar. She has the item, and it will be coming to Denerim, heavily guarded. We have high hopes. Very soon we will announce our plans to wed, and then to claim the throne. I will be granted the Crown Matrimonial.

Both of us will be deeply involved in the war in the south, and so I have suggested a central, vital role for you. As Queen-Dowager, you shall rule the kingdom as Chancellor in name as well as in fact.

Fergus Cousland has written to Bronwyn, renouncing his own claim to the throne for the moment. He will, however, be named as her heir in the marriage articles. It will, as you know, give us all the votes from Highever and Amaranthine. Forgive me for writing to you like a hard-headed politician, but I urge you to consider a marriage with Cousland. If Bronwyn and I have no children, he would be king, and you would once more be Queen. If you like, it can be made a condition of our alliance.

Your loving father,

Loghain

Adaia returned to the Tower to find that that the wayfarers had returned. It was a shame about Cullen, but she had not been close to him. She was very relieved to see Tara and Zevran, though.

"*Such* a lot a loot we got," Tara whispered to Adaia. "Though we should have got more to pay for poor Cullen."

Silver chalices and gold plates; jewels and coin in plenty. And Arl Teagan had given them all noble garments when they

stopped at Redcliffe and stayed at the castle. Adaia uttered a hoarse squeal of delight at Tara's new finery.

"What a beautiful dress!" She ran work-roughened fingers over the silken velvet and pressed it to her cheek. "This is lovely! Who would have thought a great arl would have something to fit an elf maiden?"

"It was probably something for a human girl. Who knows how he came by it? The servants at Redcliffe said Arl Teagan has cupboards and cupboards of grand clothing, and bolts of fine silks beyond count. The old Arl's wife put every penny the arling had on her back. Arl Teagan gave clothes to us all, and to his young cousin, too. I heard he sent silks and velvets to that cousin of Bronwyn's who's getting married."

Adaia rubbed her cheek on the velvet again, hoping that Tara might give her her second-best dress, now that she had this. Wistfully she remembered her own dress on the day of her wedding, the only fine clothes she had ever possessed: fine white wool and bright embroidery on the gown; shiny bronze studs on the belt. It had not lasted a day before it was torn and bloody. Even the boots had been ruined. "Can I see what everyone else got?"

They spent a pleasurable time admiring Leliana's blue and lavender ensemble, and Zevran's dark yellow doublet. Danith pretended to be uninterested, but her eyes were drawn to the rich colors and graceful lines. Even Morrigan granted the clothing her cool approval. Anders thought that perhaps the Wardens should check Redcliffe Castle again—very

thoroughly—for possible darkspawn infiltration.

"In the cupboards," he mused. "Wouldn't want the darkspawn to disguise themselves as noblemen."

Leliana sighed. "Laugh now. Before Brosca comes."

Morrigan muttered to Anders. "The dwarf girl is better off without that stiff-necked fool. Anyone could see he thought himself too fine for her."

Leliana hissed an angry breath, ready to take it up with the witch. Adaia dreaded the idea of a fight among her friends, and burst out with more clothes talk.

"What about Bronwyn? Didn't she get anything?"

When Bronwyn returned to the Wardens' quarters in the Tower, she found them talking about clothes, of all things.

"So let us look at this gown of yours, Bronwyn," Leliana urged her, as the companions admired the loot of Haven. "I have ideas about it."

"I heard it was red," Adaia said eagerly. "I love red."

Bronwyn had folded it very carefully and wrapped a clean shirt around it. She pulled it out of the saddlebag, and laid it out on her cot. All the women—and quite a few men—came to admire it.

"A good color for you," Anders said. "Very *bold*."

"You should wear it tonight!" cried Adaia.

Bronwyn shook her head. "It's too chilly for this. I'd shiver all through dinner with nothing on my shoulders!"

Leliana admired the gown, too, but in a business-like way. "Yes, yes, the silk is superb. Heavy...soft...a fine hand to it. Nonetheless, the style is hopelessly antiquated. Even in the days of Queen Rowan it would have been out of fashion."

"If it came into her possession during the Rebellion," Bronwyn laughed. "Fashion would hardly have mattered to her."

"That is so," Leliana conceded, "but it could explain why the Queen did not bother to take it with her after she was crowned. A sentimental relic of her adventures. Still, I think something can be done with this. The long train...no one wears them anymore. That is a good thing, since the worst wear shows here. Some little snips of the shears, and a new hem, and so!"

Zevran was intrigued by the project. "The style is Antivan. I recognize it. I fear, Noble One, that only very old ladies wear it now, which is a pity, since I like a fine pair of shoulders on a woman."

Bronwyn shrugged. Her own arms and shoulders were not parts of her body that she particularly cared to show off. Exercise and endless combat had left them scarred and

sinewy. Very good for riding and fighting, but not particularly *pretty*.

"Better to cover them up," she said. "Besides, it's too late in the year. I nearly froze, wearing this at Redcliffe."

"That is easy!" said Leliana. "Have one of those dear little capelets made...perhaps in black velvet. They are so in vogue now, and it will be warmer with winter coming. Yes, black velvet, with a high collar. And fastened with a big brooch..." She dug through the loot and found a brooch of gold, fashioned in the shape of a dragon encircled by its own tail, whose eye was a ruby cabochon. "This one! No one would see the old neckline that way, and it would be very dramatic. With a *very* high collar, to set off your long neck!"

Bronwyn let Leliana talk, amused and diverted by the talk of fripperies and fashion. Still, there was something in it. She would have to wear something other than armor at the Landsmeet—or that Warden gown—and it would not do to appear shabby or out-of-date. Perhaps, Loghain's words to the contrary, she should send Leliana north with Jowan with some commissions.

Astrid and Alistair arrived. They had taken a walk around the camp and stopped to talk with some acquaintances. They found their friends earnestly exchanging fashion tips.

"I can sew," said Adaia. "If I had some black velvet, I could make that capelet."

Leliana was quite intrigued by the project. "I sew as well, and it would not take more than three ells of fabric. Between us, we could accomplish it. Surely someone in this camp of thousands has some black velvet. We shall make a search. I might put some boning in the collar to make it stand up."

Astrid was amused, and remembered the chest in her old rooms at the Royal Palace of Orzammar, filled with garments of fine surface silk. There had been a gown of pale blue, with a sheen like an opal. Her favorite gown. Bhelen had probably given it to his concubine...Brosca's sister... The thought wrung a wry chuckle from her.

"Piotin Aeducan probably has some black velvet. He likes to be fine, and he favors black. Mind you, he'll want a good price."

And there was the plunder to admire. Some choice pieces had been claimed by those on the spot, but quite a bit remained. A fifth would be the portion of the Wardens, and sent to the Compound. Others pieces would be shared out to everyone. Bronwyn set aside the some big gold sacramental items: a chalice and a pair of candlesticks to enrich the Compound. Then she pondered over a shallow bowl hammered out of pure, soft gold in the form of a flower. She really must send something to Habren for her blasted wedding present...

After some trading and bartering and endless talk. Bronwyn got the bowl for Habren and the dragon brooch for herself. If she was going to present herself as a Queen before the Landsmeet, she must look like one; and she could not very

well dress as a Warden at *that* particular gathering.

The patrol returned at twilight. Brozca was so undone at the news of Cullen's death that everyone was ashamed of having spent the afternoon in trivial pleasures. Leaving Bronwyn to deal with Brozca, Alistair took Sten and Jowan aside and got the report from them; and then went to Loghain with them to discuss their findings—or lack of them.

They had not seen any darkspawn, which in a way was even more ominous than running into the horde. Where had the creatures gone? Had they disappeared into the earth again? What was the Archdemon planning? They had much to think about, but Bronwyn was too involved with Brozca to be any part of the discussion at the moment.

Tara hung back a little, uncomfortably aware that Cullen had preferred her to Brozca. Was she hard-hearted? Should she be ashamed of her own happiness? It wasn't her fault that Cullen had followed her around like a puppy, because she had certainly given him no encouragement at all. She gave Brozca a pat, and a "sorry," and then retreated to her cubbyhole with Zevran.

Leliana gave Brozca a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek, and murmured comforting words about Cullen's courage, eyes glimmering with sympathetic tears. Perhaps they were more than merely sympathetic, but Leliana, whatever she felt, was not speaking of it.

There were other kind words and gestures. Oghren muttered something incomprehensible, and shoved a stone bottle of home brew into Brosca's hands. Dwarves sometimes understood each other best, for Brosca seemed grateful. Bronwyn was left to talk with her, and heavy going she found it.

"When he came back, we were going to be together. I *know* we were," Brosca sobbed out, her sturdy back shaking. "The day he left we kissed, and it was *special*. We both knew then that it was meant to be. He just needed time to get over Tara. I could do that. I could give him time..." Her voice broke. "Did he talk about me?"

Bronwyn took a breath, and uttered the comforting lies she had prepared on the quiet nights afloat on the Lady of the Lake.

"Cullen *did* talk to me about you," she said. That much at least was true. "He smiled, and told me all about how you kissed. He said such good things about you... that you were a good comrade... so brave and cheerful...wonderful, really. He was only concerned that with all the dwarves in Ostagar you might find someone else while he was gone."

Brosca's nose was running. She wiped it on her sleeve, and shook her head. "Never! He was the one for me! I'd known a lot of men who called themselves noble in Orzammar, and mostly they were just big shitheads; but he was the real thing. He didn't need a title to be noble. He was decent and honest and...and...high-minded. He was so damned good-looking

that he was good-looking enough for both of us. I never met anybody like him before, and I never will again." She uncorked the bottle and took a long swallow.

"Don't give up on your future, Brosca," Bronwyn said, squeezing the girl's brawny shoulder, ashamed of her lies, but dreading how the truth would hurt this girl even more. "Don't give up. Cullen wouldn't want that. A man who gives his life for his friends doesn't want them to be unhappy. "

"I'm not unhappy," Brosca insisted, wiping her nose again. "I'm fine. I've got friends and I've got darkspawn to fight."

"Look," Bronwyn said, showing Brosca the gleaming amulet. "We were given these on the journey. This was Cullen's. I thought he'd like you to have it."

The dwarf girl seized it and put it around her neck immediately. "Thanks. I'll never take it off again—not even to wash. Did he have any last words?"

Bronwyn did not permit herself to shudder, remembering those awful agonized screams. She forced a smile, and said, "No. It was over in a flash. He didn't even have a chance to know he was dead."

"That's good," Brosca muttered, a little consoled, fingers tugging at the amulet. "That's always the best way." She took another drink.

Loghain was glad to see Bronwyn out of armor at dinner, though not thrilled that her only gown appeared to be in essence a Grey Warden uniform. Didn't the girl have anything else?

Probably not. He would be wise not to say that to her face, or it would make it even angrier than criticizing her helmet. He knew that the girl had escaped Highever with only the clothes on her back—which were not exactly clothes, but armor, anyway. Aside from shirts and breeches she had scavenged here at Ostagar, what else would she have? The Grey Warden gown at the Warden Compound was a twenty-year-old hand-me-down from Commander Genevieve, but it would be easier to remove tonight than her chainmail.

She had been traveling and fighting constantly since Bloomingtide. Not being an insipid spendthrift like Habren Bryland, she been too busy to waste her time at a dressmaking shop. She had her priorities straight, certainly, but Loghain suspected she might not object to wearing a fine gown now and then. Rowan certainly had enjoyed it, when the opportunity came her way.

She looked very nice, at any rate, and he was glad to have her sitting next to him once more. Had she lost weight on her Frostback adventure? She needed to eat more.

"Courtesy of Bann Teagan," he said to her as she sat down. The mess servants were setting bowls of dried-fish stew before them. "He sent us a good lot of provisions along with Alistair's letter. Nothing fancy, but not bad at all."

"Looks good," she said. "I'm starving." It was far better than the snack she had had in the Wardens' quarters. She applied herself seriously to the food before her, and let Loghain do the talking.

"We've been lucky with the harvest. The Bannorn has had a good year, though the freeholders aren't pleased at the share that goes to the army. It's much the same everywhere, as the wagons from Redcliffe indicate. Didn't Teagan feed you when you saw him?"

"He fed us heaps, and it was all wonderfully elegant. But that was two days ago, and I'm hungry again. This bread is really not bad. The bakers seem to have finally figured out the camp ovens. Aren't you going to finish that cheese?"

"Yes, I am," he said repressively. "But I am not eating like a dragon—like a famished wolf."

"You can say 'dragon' in front of me. Just not to Broasca. I just broke the news about Cullen to her. She's taking it hard."

Loghain glanced over to the dwarf girl, who was pale and silent, sitting between the Orlesian bard and the other dwarf. "It hasn't affected her appetite, at least."

Bronwyn glared at him. "Of course not. She's a *Warden*. It doesn't mean she's not grieving."

He took another look at the Wardens' Table. "The dragon folk apparently dressed in style. Did they capture all the guests at

an Orlesian masked ball?"

Bronwyn saw that he was looking at Tara and Zevran in particular. "No, that's from Teagan. He has heaps of clothing. Most of it was Isolde's, but there were some other items. I suspect the doublet Zevran has on is something Teagan wore as a boy. And some of the extra silks have been sent to Denerim for Habren's wedding present. How nice for her."

"You were not a recipient of Teagan's largesse?"

"Oh, he gave me a gown, but it needs a bit of work." She waved down a servant. "Another bowl, please."

"I'm glad to hear it. It might not be politic to wear your Grey Warden garb to the Landsmeet."

She took another bread roll, and it disappeared in seconds. "Believe it or not, that did occur to me. I'll try to make something of the gown Teagan gave me, but I suspect I'll need some other things. My Wardens can take an order to Denerim for me."

Arl Wulffe arrived, and flung himself onto the bench with a grunt. "Fish stew! Just the thing! The south hills were clear, Loghain. Bronwyn, my dear lass...good to see you!"

"And you. You look well."

"I'll be better for some hot food. What news from the west?"

"No darkspawn, and Arl Teagan sends his greetings."

Loghain leaned around her back, and said quietly, "Let's talk privately after dinner. Bronwyn had a letter from Fergus."

"All right then. Bronwyn, do you suppose that Warden-minstrel of yours might give us a song?"

"Generally, the problem is stopping her once she starts."

"Pretty woman. Always fancied redheads, myself."

Leliana was pleased to have a chance to perform, and whispered to Alistair, "I'm so glad I'm wearing my new gown." She left to fetch her lute straightaway, and was back in moments.

Bronwyn waved her over, and whispered, "Not the song you sang on the boat, though. It's lovely, but it's likely to do Brosca in."

Leliana smiled ruefully, and nodded. The hall stilled, eager for entertainment, as she strummed an introduction.

THERE were two sisters sat in a bower;

Binnorie, O Binnorie!

There came a knight to be their wooer,

By the bonnie milldams of Binnorie.

He courted the eldest with gloves and rings,

But he loved the youngest above all things.

The eldest she was vexèd rare,

And envied she her sister fair.

Upon a morning fair and clear,

She cried upon her sister dear:

'O sister, sister take my hand,

And let 's go down to the river-strand.'

The youngest stood upon a stone,

The eldest came and push'd her in.

'O sister, sister reach your hand!

And you shall be heir o' half my land.'

—

'I shall not give you hope nor hand,

For I am heir of all your land.'

—

'O sister, reach me but your glove!

And my sweet William shall be your love.'

—

'Sink on, nor hope for hand or glove;

Sweet William shall surely be my love.'

—

Sometimes she sank, sometimes she swam,

Until she came to the miller's dam.

—

Out then came the miller's son,

And saw the fair maid floating in.

'O father, father, draw your dam!

There 's either a mermaid or a milk-white swan.'

The miller hasted and drew his dam,

And there he found a drowned woman.

You could not see her middle small,

Her girdle was so rich withal.

You could not see her yellow hair

For the gold and pearls that clustered there.

And by there came a harper fine,

That harped when nobles came to dine.

And when he looked that lady on,

He sighed and made a heavy moan.

He made a harp of her breast-bone,

Whose sound would melt a heart of stone.

He took three locks of her yellow hair,

And with them strung his harp so rare.

He went into her father's hall,

And there was the court assembled all.

He laid his harp upon a stone,

And straight it began to play alone.

And then the harp sang loud and clear,

'Oh, farewell, my father and mother dear.

—

*'Farewell, farewell, my brother Hugh,
And farewell William, sweet and true.'*

—

*And then as plain as plain could be,
Binnorie, O Binnorie!*

*"There sits my sister who drownèd me,
By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie!"*

The Hall was silent, entranced. Leliana struck a chord, and said,

"And the harp snapped and broke, and never sang again."

Enthusiastic applause: shouts of "More!" As Bronwyn predicted, once she started, Leliana was as hard to stop as a ogre going downhill. No one complained. Wulffe was enchanted, muttering, "Aye, sibling rivalry is a terrible thing. Sounds like the Perrin girls..." He then asked what that song was that Bronwyn told the girl *not* to sing, because he wanted to hear it.

"Not tonight, if you think it will trouble one of your people, but later. I'll make it worth her while, too."

And then Leliana got them all singing along with one they knew: *"The Wild Rover,"* with its chorus of *"No! Nay! Never!* Fists pounded the rhythm on tables; boots stamped on the floor; hundreds of battle-worn voices shouted in unison. Oghren loved the song, and got up on the Wardens' table to bellow along. It felt for a moment like the Tower itself was shaking.

"Then it's "No, nay never!"

(Thud, ump, ump ,ump, crash)

'No, nay, never, no more!

Will I play the wild rover,

No, never, no more!"

It was all they could do to get Wulffe to come along with them to Loghain's quarters. Others were summoned: Bann Stronar, Ban Thorne, and Bann Carlin. It was a start. The mess hall was making so much noise they did not see them leave.

Scout followed up the steps, slipping through the door after them. The door shut on the song, and the nobles settled down to serious business. Bronwyn found that they were already prepared for the news. Scout sat by Bronwyn's chair, keeping an eye on the men.

"So..." Bann Thorne nodded sagely. "I can guess what this is about. King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn. You have my support, certainly. Plenty of people will think it's the right thing at the right time."

"Is Arl Bryland with us?" asked Bann Carlin.

"He is," Loghain said crisply, "and all his vassals."

Wulffe asked, "And what does Teyrn Fergus say to all this, Lady Bronwyn?"

They were being rather formal, so Bronwyn took the lead from them, "My lords, my brother has written me, giving me his blessing to take the crown. He is embroiled with setting Highever to rights at the moment. However, we have agreed between us that he is to be my heir."

"I like that," Stronar nodded. "Fergus as the heir presumptive? Yes, I like that."

Wulffe said, "Loghain's to be granted the Crown Matrimonial. But yes, Fergus as the heir of the two of them. Making Fergus the heir straight from the beginning makes clear that he's in agreement with this. We've got both teyrnirs, and two arlings—three if you count Amaranthine, which Fergus is ruling directly now. That should be more than enough."

"The Bannorn is a wayward animal," Bann Thorne remarked, heavy brows gloomy. He bit his lip, and asked Bronwyn.

"What about the Wardens? What are they going to say about

you taking the throne?"

Bronwyn replied coolly. "My Wardens will support me. The Wardens elsewhere have offered no Ferelden any assistance whatever, and therefore have nothing to say about how we arrange our affairs."

"No assistance *at all*?" Wulffe frowned. "I'm sorry to say that I doubted you, Loghain. You were right about them. In the Orlesians' pockets, most like."

Bronwyn did not think that was precisely true. However, she saw no point in defending the honor of those who had none.

Other than Riordan and Fiona, was her mental reservation. And what they had done was not to uphold the mission of the order, but for friendship and love.

"Bryland's gone to speak to Urien," Loghain said. "Bronwyn, tell them about your meeting with Teagan."

"After some idle conversation, I thought it best not to confide our plans to him. He's a very decent man, but still grieving deeply for his nephew. He assumed that I was supporting my brother, and while he understood my views, he is not inclined toward a Cousland king. His loyalties are with the Theirins, and he was unwilling to let go of the old royal line just yet."

"Well, he'd *better* let go," Wulffe snorted. "For they're gone. Who does he *want* for King?"

Loghain gave her a slight nod. Bronwyn took a breath and said. "King Maric had a bastard who was raised at Redcliffe."

When the amazement died down, Loghain said. "Maric never acknowledged the lad. Eamon raised him in the stables—"

"What!" Stronar gasped. "And Maric permitted it? That sounds pretty dodgy. Did Maric tell *you* about this boy, Loghain?"

"No," Loghain said flatly. "He never spoke of him. I came across some papers in which Eamon mentions raising a bastard at Redcliffe. However—" he said, raising his hand for silence. "I know the lad. He is not interested in the crown. Teagan wrote to him, and the boy showed me the letter."

"Who is he?" Carlin asked, but Wulffe was nodding his head and rubbing his beard.

"It's Warden Alistair, isn't it? He favors Maric quite a bit. Nice lad, though I can't say I know him well. You believe he's Maric's, then?"

Loghain grimaced. "I think it's possible. Proving it, however, is *not* possible. We don't even know if the mother was human or elf."

Stronar groaned. "That would go down well! So you're sure the boy isn't going to kick up a fuss?"

"He wants to be a Warden," Bronwyn assured them. "That's *all* he wants. He confided in me, and I discussed the

possibility of a claim with him. He was horrified. He was not brought up as a noble, and fighting is all he knows or wants to know. I told Teagan this. I also pointed out to the arl the utter lack of evidence and the probability that all this claim would do is embarrass Alistair and endanger him. It is *possible* that the Orlesians already know about him."

Loghain dismissed that. "I'm *sure* they know about him. Arlessa Isolde likely informed her family and they would have shared the rumor with the Empress. Still, Maric never acknowledged him. If he'd meant for Alistair to inherit anything, he would have provided for him."

"I've certainly provided for my own bastards," Thorne muttered. "I just can't see Maric abandoning his own blood like that, Loghain. I think Eamon made it up. Found a boy with Theirin hair..."

Bronwyn temporized. "Arl Teagan is quite sincere in his belief, but he admits that Maric never directly told him."

"But," Loghain pointed out, "belief is not proof. Teagan believes what his brother told him, and that brother is now beyond swearing an oath before the Landsmeet. Alistair is not interested in pursuing this claim, but you needed to know of his existence if Teagan mentions him."

"Well," Wulffe shrugged. "I don't see why Teagan would care all that much. It's not like the lad is his own blood. Cailan was his nephew, but Alistair is no kin to him at all. Wait...I tell a lie...maybe a fourth cousin or so."

"Actually," Bronwyn said, "I am more closely related to Alistair than Arl Teagan. If he is indeed a son of Maric's, then we are third cousins. I think it is possible, but it cannot be proved. There is nothing in writing that we can present to the Landsmeet. The sooner Arl Teagan drops it as a lost cause, the better."

"I agree," Wulffe said heartily. "Now let's talk about reality. When are you two getting married?"

Thunder rolled in the distance. Bronwyn went to the window to see the clouds thickening to the east. "It will be rain tonight."

The room grew colder. Scout padded over to the warmth of a brazier and curled up to sleep. Bronwyn knelt to give him a good-night pat, and his only response was the flick of an ear. He had had a hard few days. Sighing, Bronwyn got up to rejoin the conversation.

They talked a little longer, solidifying their plans. The betrothal would be announced at Satinalia at the end of the month. The wedding would take place shortly before the Landsmeet, and would be solemnized wherever the Landsmeet convened. Wine was poured, and they pledged faith together; and the others drank solemnly to the King- and- Queen-to-be. Then, with some insufferable winks and nods, the nobles departed, evidently thinking themselves very discreet and tactful. The door opened, and music rose up along the stairs. The door shut, and there was silence again.

"That went well," Bronwyn said, swirling the last of the wine in

her goblet. Rain was coming down hard, sheeting the mullioned windows. The thunder was closer now.

"The idea was not new to them," Loghain said. "We'll have the rest of them in over the next few days. The army will support us, no matter what Urien or Teagan or those stubborn fools in the Bannorn say. And we've taken care that there is no one else."

"No," Bronwyn sighed. "Just us. I suppose we're committed now. To everything."

Loghain came over to her, raising a quizzical brow. "It's a little late for second thoughts."

"No second thoughts. This is what must be. I'm just taking in the finality of it all."

"Good. Because there is no turning back now." He took her hand, pressing a kiss into her palm. Lightning flashed outside, briefly turning the window to a harsh white square. Catching by her wrist, Loghain pulled Bronwyn along with him into the dark bedchamber beyond.

On the other side of Ferelden, Fergus Cousland was finishing dinner in the Great Hall of Castle Highever, when he received some excellent news.

"Haglin's agreed to obey the Queen's orders!" Ser Naois announced. His grin dimmed somewhat as he added. "Mind

you, the man's not fool enough to turn down a full pardon for himself and his men. He's already withdrawing toward West Hill, and he says he'll be in Ostagar in ten days, Maker willing."

Fergus sighed. "So much for Haglin. Bastard. I'd rather have killed him."

Adam Hawke lounged easily at the table, feeding his mabari tidbits from their meal. "And his five hundred men? They've essentially surrendered. Let the darkspawn have them!"

Fergus scowled, unsatisfied, and Hawke glanced at Naois. Of course they wanted their revenge, but Hawke thought they should set bloodlust aside and accept that the Queen's solution was for the best.

"Really, my lord," Hawke smiled. "They were supposed to have gone south to fight for Ferelden last spring. Now they will. Even men of that sort can be useful. And the Queen ordered that they march along the west shore of Lake Calenhad, so as not to raise discontent in the Bannorn. The only people they're likely to plague are the hillsmen and then Arl Teagan in Redcliffe, though they'll not make an enemy of him if they have any sense. You said Haglin was loyal in his own way. Let him give his life for his country, so some other poor sod doesn't have to!"

Naois barked an unwilling laugh. The other men shifted restlessly, but Fergus could see they were in agreement. Highever did not need more battles, but peace. At least Haglin

and his men had not been party to the Highever massacre.

Fergus put up a hand in surrender. "Have your scouts keep an eye on Haglin for the next few days, Naois. Keep lookouts posted along the Neck, in case he tries to double back. If he's really going, let him go. It's past time Amaranthine sent troops to Ostagar. The Queen's a wise woman."

Very wise. And a good idea, sending Haglin's men out of the way when feelings were still so high. The Amaranthine men would cross the Neck, and take the Imperial Highway southwest along Lake Calenhad. They were to bypass Orzammar, and then report to the commander at Gherlen's Halt, just to make certain they were moving in the right direction. They were then to proceed south and march through the Hinterlands, to join the army under Loghain's command. The journey was three or four days longer than the eastern route down the Lake Road, but it would prevent a large armed force from disturbing the Bannorn during harvest time. And Haglin, self-proclaimed Ferelden patriot that he was, could not possibly object to Loghain's authority. Fergus swore to himself that neither Haglin nor any of his company would ever set foot in the north again.

The Queen's most recent letter was on the table before him, telling him pretty much everything she had told Haglin. Fergus had received Anora's first letter a few days after he had written to Bronwyn, renouncing his claim to the throne. The Queen was unhappy, of course; bereft of her King and husband, even if had not been everything to her that he should. Her letter was very kind; flattering even. She

expressed complete faith and trust in Teyrn Fergus, and hoped to have the benefit of his company and counsel as soon as his duties in Highever permitted. He had written back, explaining his difficulties with the renegades, and she had resolved the matter very neatly. A wonderful woman.

In veiled terms, she spoke of her improved health. However, it was as yet not perfect, and she could use a strong arm to aid her. She sounded lonely, as leaders always were. And clearly, she wanted something from him. Fergus was no fool, and understood that she had an agenda of her own. Only natural, of course. Somehow, he seemed to be part of hers. Once the matter of Haglin was cleared up—and if the bastard truly kept his word—Fergus might be able to consider a trip south to Denerim, to see what he could do to serve his Queen.

Word of the death in battle of King Cailan had reached Val Royeaux on the twenty-first of Kingsway—or Parvulis, as civilized people called it. The Empress and her Court went into mourning for the brave young king. The bells in the towers of the Grand Cathedral tolled mournfully. Despite her grief at the loss of one so young and charming, the Empress performed her duties with admirable energy. There were many people to see; many orders to give. With the demise of the king of Ferelden, there was great speculation as to how the poor savage provincials would govern themselves. The line of Calenhad was broken, alas. It was very vexing; very unfortunate. Plans had been made for a lasting, honorable

peace, and now...all was over. *Quel dommage!*

No one, knowing his reputation, could be entirely astonished at how Loghain Mac Tir had brought the darkspawn invasion to a standstill. He was a formidable man, without doubt. Some surprise, however, was expressed at how efficiently the junior Grey Wardens had forged alliances with dwarves and elves. They had even persuaded the Knight-Commander of the Circle to release a number of mages to support the army. The Divine, when consulted, professed herself uneasy, though the Grey Wardens were certainly within the letter of the law. Perhaps the Knight-Commander had grown too old and...well...*infirm* to bear his responsibilities any longer.

It was the doing of *le Prince* Cousland's daughter, apparently: a remarkable young person. While for reasons unknown she had not played much of a role at Court, she had stepped out of the shadows to prove herself a leader. She had quite disregarded the commands of the First Warden to come to Orlais and put herself in the hands of those older and wiser. Many shook their heads, hoping that the young lady's pride would not have too hard a fall.

The other young Warden, it was said, was a bastard child of King Maric himself. How very unfortunate that *he* had not come to Orlais, where his royal blood could be honored, and he could be trained in the arts of war and peace in a way befitting his rank.

While Wardens were not supposed to involve themselves in politics, nor hold high office, young people could be very

impulsive. A Warden King and his Warden consort? Shocking. Romantic, perhaps; but still shocking. Not at all *comme il faut*. Wiser heads must take counsel, and correct this.

So Empress Celene saw many people; gave many orders. By the first of Harvestmere—ah, no—*Fru mentum*, riders were galloping east and south; swift galleys on the Waking Sea sailed toward the rising sun; and permission was granted for some amusing and completely deniable adventures.

Thanks to my reviewers: Nemrut, EpitomyofShyness, Kira Kyuu, Psyche Sinclair, MsBarrows, Hydroplatypus, demonincargles, Costin, Raxiselic, anon, Zute, JackOfBladesX, Blinded in a Bolthole, KnightOfHolyLight, euromellows, Jenna53, Josie Lange, mille libri, Aoi24, Gene Dark, Herbedragons66, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Shakespeira, Tsu Doh Nimh, Eva Galana, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Mike3207, SkaterGirl246, Tyanilth, Chandagnac, and Have Socks. Will Travel.

The song has many variants. Chandagnac suggested the Twa Sisters version, and then I modernized the spelling of one of the the English versions, Binnorie. Thanks for the suggestion, Chandagnac!

Quel dommage: *What a pity*

Comme il faut: *In accordance with convention or accepted standards.*

58. A Breathing Space

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 58: A Breathing Space

Jowan, Carver, and Leliana reached Lothering on a late autumn afternoon, riding with a convoy of nearly empty supply wagons bound for Denerim. There was nothing much in the wagons, other than some boxes of human cremains, returning home to their unhappy families.

Leliana was tired, but rather excited about the opportunity to go to Denerim. Bronwyn had told her candidly that Teyrn Loghain did not want Leliana to go, but with so much happening, Bronwyn needed Leliana to run some errands for her in Denerim that only she was qualified to handle. Given the nature of the commissions, Leliana agreed. If Bronwyn needed the items on the list, she could hardly entrust them to Jowan or Carver. And she had taken Bronwyn's measurements very, very carefully, so there should be no inconvenient mistakes. They would stay overnight in Lothering with Carver's family, and then continue on. Jowan had vital business in Denerim, but Leliana thought her own errands were not without value.

Lothering was in good shape. The lookouts were posted in

towers and on the walls. Everyone seemed busy with the aftermath of the rye harvest. Smoke rose from chimneys, and the smell of haystacks blended with incense floating from the Chantry. The Wardens told the wagon-captain that they would see him in the morning, and sought out the Hawke cottage.

They found it, of course, without trouble, but were puzzled to see a covered wagon drawn up in front of it. A pair of oxen were tied up next to the shed. The door of the house stood open.

"Mother?" Carver slid off his horse, and stood in the doorway, staring about him. "Bethany? What's going on?"

Jowan and Leliana looked at each other, and dismounted, following their friend.

Inside, the house was in chaos, the big kitchen filled with trunks and crates and bizarrely, a dressmaker's dummy. Charade's curly brown head peered up over the table. She was filling a box with crockery. "Hello, Carver. We're packing."

"You're packing?" Carver asked, bewildered. He stood in the midst of bedlam, wondering what had happened. "Where are you going? You're not still going to Gwaren, are you?"

Charade clicked her tongue impatiently, and then swore under her breath when she closed a lid on her finger. "No."

Bethany scrambled down from the loft, and gave her brother a fierce hug. "Carver! I'm so glad to see you. Did you get my

letter?"

"No, I—"

She burst out in a rush, her cheeks uncommonly pink. "We're not going to Gwaren! We're not going to Kirkwall! We're going to Denerim and then to *Highever!*" She saw Jowan and Leliana standing uncertainly outside the door, and apologized. "Oh, I'm sorry! Please come in. Of course you can stay with us. I'm sorry everything is such a mess. We're packing up to join my brother Adam in the north. The Teyrn gave Adam leave to have his family join him. We're to live at Castle Highever! At least for the time being. Adam says it's very nice."

Carver stared, his breath taken away.

"Thank you," Leliana said softly. "We'll care for the horses. Come on, Jowan, and we'll let Carver have a private moment with his family."

Jowan patted Carver's shoulder. "They'll be safer in the north." He and Leliana walked away, whispering together.

Carver slumped onto the bench at the kitchen table. "But this is our *home!*"

Charade made a face and found some bread and a crock of butter in a crate. She started slicing the loaf, while Bethany put out cheese, sausage and apples.

"Not anymore," Bethany said softly. "Mother sold the cottage to Tobery Salt. His family needs more space than they have at his mother's, with all his sisters and their children living there now. She sold the cows and chickens, too. He takes possession the day after tomorrow, and then we'll take the Imperial Highway to Denerim. Adam gave us a map, and marked where we should stay. He gave us some coin, too. It's all planned out."

Carver shook his head, still stunned by the news. He asked Charade, "What about Uncle Gamlen? Is he well enough to travel?"

Charade's face was hidden by her hair. She kept on slicing bread, but jerked her head at a square box piled with the rest of the luggage. "That's Father. He's dead. Four nights ago. Nice of you to ask, though. After that, your mother decided we should take your brother up on his invitation. Nothing to hold us back, now."

Bethany touched her arm, her pretty face sympathetic. "As long as we're together, we'll be all right."

Leandra, wrapped in a handsome blue cloak, fluttered up the path, her arms out. "Is that Carver? Thank the Maker!" She embraced him for a long time. Then she took his face in her hands, looking him over. "You must have got the letter! I'm so glad! Are you coming with us?"

"I didn't get a letter. I was on my way to Denerim on Warden business."

"But that's all right!" Bethany said eagerly. "We can all go together! That's safer, anyway!"

"Oh..." Leandra was a little disappointed, but then rallied. "Well. You could use a nice strong cup of tea, Carver. Make the tea, Bethany."

Leliana and Jowan made their appearance, food was devoured and sleeping arrangements organized. With Gamlen no longer occupying the largest bedroom, that was not so difficult, though some of the beds had been stripped of their linens.

"Yes," Leliana told Leandra. "We have business in Denerim. We are traveling with the army wagon train in the morning. I am sure the captain would not object if you joined us. We may camp, but if you arrange your belongings carefully, you can sleep in the wagon, since it has a cover. Or under it. Be sure to bring a featherbed and plenty of quilts. We expect to be in Denerim in four days, and with an armed escort so large, no one will trouble you."

"It does seem the Maker's own luck," Charade said slowly.

"There's so much still to do," Leandra fretted. "How will we ever be ready in time?"

"You have extra hands," Jowan said, with a shy smile. "We'll make sure everything is packed and ready, and then in the morning we can load it up really quickly."

"And you don't have to take *everything*, Mother," Carver snarked. "Not if you're going to live in a *castle*."

"Where were you planning to stay in Denerim?" Jowan asked, trying to smooth things over. "I don't think Bronwyn would mind if you stayed at the Wardens' Compound."

"But that's all settled!" Leandra beamed. "Teyrn Cousland has graciously given us leave to stay in his house in town! Such a kind friend to Adam he is."

"But I'd like to see the Compound," Bethany comforted the dashed Carver. "I'm sure it's lovely."

"I'd like to see it, too," Charade chimed in. "It sounds interesting. So let's get packing."

They set to work, stuffing books in crates and wrapping breakable keepsakes. Bethany consulted Jowan about the best way to store her father's magical items so no one would notice them. Meanwhile, Leliana helped Leandra decide how to transport their best clothes so as to prevent wrinkles.

"My dear Adam sent us the loveliest Orlesian silks!" Leandra gushed. "Look at this! I made it for Bethany."

Leliana nodded, evaluating the gown. "Very nice. Such tiny stitching. That shade of blue is very becoming to a dark-haired girl. Your son has excellent taste."

"Adam does everything well. Of course we set to work as

soon as his wonderful present arrived. I don't want Adam to be ashamed of our appearance. There was just enough for a gown for each of us, though I would have liked a contrasting underskirt under Bethany's. I didn't want us to dress identically—I'm afraid we'll look like a troupe of minstrels! We have new traveling cloaks, too, from the money Carver gave us. And we all need new boots, but the cobbler here isn't up to really *fine* work."

"I know a brilliant shoemaker in the Market District," Leliana assured her, deliberately not hearing the reflection on *minstrels*. "During your stop in Denerim, I will take you there. And any lacks in your wardrobe can be easily amended. Of course, in Highever they have many fine shops and craftsmen, too. I have heard much of the town from our Commander."

"Oh, yes! Lady Bronwyn! She has done our family such good!" Leandra was overflowing with gratitude. She pressed Leliana's hand. "We owe her all our good fortune. Recommending Adam to her lord brother was the best thing to happen to us since my darling Malcolm died."

Leliana smiled. "Teyrn Fergus is a most charming and honorable man. Everyone is glad to know how well your son has got on with him."

She left herself open to a great outpouring of Leandra's maternal tenderness for her son Adam: his looks, his keen intelligence, his extraordinary talents. Leliana only smiled, and listened kindly.

And Jowan, up in the loft, expressed his own views to Bethany. They had torn a worn-out sheet to rags, and were in the process of wrapping a multitude of little vials of potions ingredients. "See what you think of the Compound when you're in Denerim. Maybe you'll find that you'd like being a Warden as much as Carver does."

Bethany smiled and shook her head, fingers working busily. "I can't see fighting darkspawn as anything *I'd* like."

Jowan handed her more rags. "You'd be safe as a Warden, though. The Chantry couldn't touch you. And we don't fight darkspawn every day. A lot of my work has been healing or research."

"It's nice of you to think of me, but I couldn't leave my mother. I'm really all she has. Well...and Charade, too, though Mother doesn't appreciate Charade like she should. With Carver in the Wardens and Adam in the midst of his oh-so brilliant career, it's just...the three of us."

Jowan raised his brows, smiling a little, "*Oh-so brilliant career?*' Are you less than impressed with your brother Adam?"

Bethany sat back in a heap, wiping her hair out of her face, smearing her nose with dust from the vials. It made her look oddly childlike.

"No. Everybody's impressed with Adam. I love him. He's a wonderful brother, but he's very much the golden child. It's

only natural, I suppose. Carver resents it, but I've accepted that Adam really is very extraordinary and we all simply exist in his shadow."

Jowan made a face, in complete disagreement. "You're a brilliant mage. Magic is a gift unlike any other. Your brother doesn't have that."

"Much good it does me or anyone. I'm just Bethany. 'Make-the-tea-Bethany.'"

"Well, just come and have a look at the Compound. It's nice. It sounds like your mother will be living with Adam from now on. Maybe you'll want to do something for yourself someday. Just think about it."

And in the kitchen, Charade was talking in a hushed voice to Carver.

"Lady Amell. Lady Leandra Amell. That's what she's going to call herself from now on. Father confessed to her that her parents never disinherited her. The estate is gone, but your mother reckons she has a right to the title. She thinks calling herself that will help Adam up there among the posh Highever folk."

"Maybe," he grunted. So Mother thought herself too good to be a Hawke? "'Lady Amell.' Sounds grand. Too grand for the likes of me."

Charade gave him a cheeky grin. "*You* have a title, *Warden*

Carver! Your mother brags about you, too. Anyway, I can't complain. Bethany and I have become really and truly friends, and your mother's letting me come with them. I may be the poor relation, but at least I'll have a roof over my head. And I got a really fine gown and a new cloak out of it, so that's all to the good."

Carver grunted a scoffing sort of laugh, and looked around at the shelves.

"Remind me why Mother wants to pack all these pots and things? She's going to be Lady Amell, not mess about in a kitchen. You don't need much more than your camping gear and your clothes and Bethany's lute. And maybe some sewing things, since Mother thinks fine ladies spend all their days embroidering flowers."

Charade cuffed him lightly on the jaw. He danced away, and seized up a cheese hoop and twirled it on his arm. "Might as well leave all this for the Salts. *They'll* make use of it."

Charade snatched the hoop away. Carver laughed outright. She had quick hands.

"I have an idea," she whispered. "Let's hide this lot in the pantry. I've already packed all the gear we'll need for traveling. Then we'll keep her distracted so she doesn't look for it. And I'll keep out the churn and show her we haven't room for it. Come on!"

Laughing like bad children, they began filling the pantry with

pots and pans, with milkpans and roasting forks and drying racks and the rest of country life.

Anora burst out laughing at the last bit of advice from her father.

"...I urge you to consider a marriage with Cousland. If Bronwyn and I have no children, he would be king, and you would once more be Queen. If you like, it can be made a condition of our alliance..."

She set down the letter, and murmured, "I'm several steps ahead of you there, Father."

The royal courier had got through quickly, changing horses at every stop. At least now she knew the shape of the future, and was prepared to take her place in it. As satisfactory as it would have been to rule as unchallenged sovereign of Ferelden, it was not to be. However, to be the daughter of the King of Ferelden was no contemptible thing. And perhaps... just perhaps, the throne would be hers again in the future.

But Father proposed to name her Chancellor! Had Bronwyn agreed to this? That was...an interesting prospect. With the war in the south, the chancellor of the realm would wield extensive powers. Anora had ideas of her own—improvements that would bring Ferelden out of its backward condition— and she longed for the chance to realize them.

The Arl of South Reach had arrived today for his daughter's

wedding, which would be held two days hence. He was expected at the Palace later in the afternoon, when he would pay his respects to her and give her some further insight into what was being spoken of in the south. Presumably the courier had caught up with him and given him the latest news about Father and Bronwyn and their plans.

Fergus had written twice to her now. She felt very pleased about her solution to the problem of the Amaranthine troops on Highever soil. If Ser Haglin had any sense at all, he would take her offer of pardon, and head to Ostagar to make his amends. She hoped he would. The sooner that problem was put to rest, the sooner Fergus could join her in Denerim. To build a personal and political alliance, she felt they needed time together.

It was fortunate that mourning became her, for custom demanded that she wear black through the full traditional month of mourning for the King. However, the month would be complete the day before the Bryland-Kendall wedding, giving her the excuse to wear some new gowns. Nothing loud or garish, of course; it would not do to offend people's sensibilities. And winter was coming, so darker colors would be appropriate. Still, the dark blue velvet she planned to wear to the wedding brought out the color of her eyes.

After some time before the mirror, and further time in contemplation, she had decided to change her hair style. She had adopted Eleanor Cousland's look when she was first crowned Queen; feeling that she needed to appear mature, admiring the older woman's elegance, and wanting to show

gratitude for her past kindnesses. Now, of course, it was inappropriate. It would never do to remind Fergus of his mother, and only Erlina had really had a knack with balancing the two coiled plaits, anyway. Instead, her long golden hair was woven in a single braid and twisted into an elaborate bun at the base of her neck, with a few curling tendrils softening her face. It was a far more youthful look.

And 'the item' Father spoke of... Had Bronwyn really found the Sacred Ashes? It seemed incredible...but if she had, would they be the cure they hoped for?

She was not feeling ill, except early in the morning and late at night. Wynne had amazing powers, and was a very pleasant woman. Still, to be truly and completely healed.... She tried not to hope for too much, for that way led to crushing disappointment, but if it *should* work, and she *should* be cured, and well, and fit to marry...

"Oh, Maker! Make it so!"

With Haglin out of the way, and his knights in firm control of the north, Fergus felt he could ride to Denerim and see what exactly the Queen wanted of him. The ruffians had been banished from Highever; Amaranthine was well patrolled; Bann Frandarel's castellan at the fortress of West Hill had finally reported to Fergus and made his submission. The bann himself was in Denerim, safely ensconced on his luxurious townhouse. Much of the bannorn was there, invited by Urien to his wedding. No one wanted to miss a free feast—and the

first feast after the death of the king, at that.

Fergus was almost sorry he would not be there in time. Even if they rode hard, he did not expect to reach Denerim until the ninth. That was two days after the wedding. He would still need to pay a wedding call on the happy couple, of course. Smirking, he tried to picture Urien and Habren as man and wife. Perhaps Habren's pride would be satisfied by the title of Arlessa...at least for a short time. He nearly laughed aloud, imagining her reaction if Bronwyn were to be crowned. The two girls had never got on; not even when they were small.

Hawke rode with him. Fergus thought he would be a good companion on the journey, and as he was fairly new to Fergus' service, he had not been given more serious administrative tasks yet. In time, Fergus would know better what sort of man Ser Adam really was. For the moment it was enough that he was a good swordsman, and could tell a joke without spoiling the punchline.

"We'll stop at the North Road Inn tonight," Fergus called out. "I don't want the horses foundering by the time we reach Denerim."

Anora's letters were something of a puzzle. Was she...*flirting* with him? Surely not. Her husband was dead only a month. On the other hand, how much would she mourn for a man who was planning to cast her aside? Perhaps she was already looking for a way to move on with her life.

He blinked, coming to a realization. His horse, sensing his

confusion, stumbled briefly, making Fergus pay attention to his riding. Was Anora considering *him* to be part of her future? He would be Bronwyn's heir, after all. He could hardly blame her. He was already getting two or three marriage proposals a day. Anora would be far more to his taste than any of the other 'suitors.' And she was a widow, and he a widower...

Yes, death had ended her marriage with Cailan. Would divorce really have been an option? Perhaps the Divine would have made her a special case and dissolved the marriage by Divine Fiat, but it was inconceivable that Anora would have been left alive and free, nursing her grievance. More likely her murder was always part of the plan, and Cailan, who never heard anything that he did not want to hear, simply put his fingers in his ears, and went on merrily with his scheme, leaving the inevitable dirty work for others. Who else had been marked for death?

Loghain, of course. Surely Cailan had understood that setting Anora aside required the murder of her father. Another coup for the Orlesians, and a sweet one: the elimination of the man, who more than any other was responsible for their loss of Ferelden. There had already been the one attempt. Fergus would be very surprised if there were not others. Bronwyn had best watch out for herself if she was going to be in the man's company.

By now the Empress must know that the king was dead and her plan for conquest by marriage in ruins. Long, ago, Father had told him to remember that the Orlesians always had a plan: always, always, always. If one plan was rendered moot,

there was another to take its place. Ferelden was at war and vulnerable. Fergus had made a point of ordering the northern towns to keep a good watch on the Waking Sea.

Fewer and fewer darkspawn were to be found in the Wilds. It was a puzzlement for the Wardens. Though the dearth of enemies had given them a brief breathing space, they feared that what came next might be worse than everything they had previously experienced. Even their Fade visions were ambivalent, peculiar. The Archdemon was being very coy. Was it hiding something from them? The Wardens discussed this among themselves, and a plan was made to explore the Blight Wound, the area of tunnels and caves and pits where the darkspawn had first issued from the earth. So few darkspawn were in evidence on the surface that Bronwyn feared they were massing underground for an attack.

A large force marched out of Ostagar early that morning to explore. Scouts and archers, led by Danith and Tara, moved out in front, while Loghain and Bronwyn rode with the main body. Bronwyn had decided to take most of the Wardens with her. They would have a large area to examine, and very likely would have to split up into small teams.

"I'm going to have to conscript more Wardens," Bronwyn told Loghain. "A lot more. I'm sorry to poach from the army, but I see no way to get good people otherwise."

Loghain was only surprised she had not made the demand before. "How many soldiers do you want?"

"I thought I'd start with twenty from your army, twenty dwarves, and ten Dalish. *They* certainly won't like it, but it's necessary. My people are stretched too thin as it is, and if we're going down below to look for the darkspawn, I need more bodies. And of course, out of that first fifty, I'll be lucky to get half that number as Wardens."

"You can't have Cauthrien."

"I'm not going to steal Cauthrien, though I'm sure she'd survive and be a splendid Warden. I've going to leave it up to you. Have your captains recommend the people, and I'll meet them. I'd like good fighters, but I simply don't know how to judge who's going to survive the Joining. We were fantastically lucky with our first crop of recruits, but I don't expect our luck to hold. I'd prefer volunteers. Perhaps...they shouldn't have families..."

"I'll pass it along and have them sent to you for your approval. If it's known that you're looking for people, you might have more volunteers than you expect."

They made contact with only a few small bands of darkspawn. By the time they reached King's Mountain, Bronwyn was feeling mildly bewildered at the lack of resistance.

The battlefield was ominous enough. Huge scorched patches of earth bore witness to where the piles of darkspawn bodies had been burned. Some of the Taint had soaked into the soil, killing the surrounding vegetation. That, too, was burned to

keep it from spreading. It was an ugly scene, and would remain so for many years.

Not wanting to expose any more people than necessary to the Taint, her underground force was comprised of most of the Wardens plus twenty picked warriors from the Legion of the Dead. Outside, Loghain, Alistair, a company of Maric's Shield, and fifteen mages would keep watch in a fortified position in case of a sudden counterattack. Alistair would keep alert for any darkspawn activity. Dalish elves were entrusted with patrolling the area, listening for any activity coming from the tunnels.

They had come this far and seen almost nothing. Before them loomed cracks in the stone cliffs, a few wide-mouthed tunnels, and some bottomless-appearing pits in the earth. The biggest tunnel looked quite large enough for a High Dragon to squeeze through, but no darkspawn challenged them. Save for a few stray birds, the world was silent. Bronwyn fidgeted with her sword belt, not sure what to do.

Alistair whispered to Bronwyn, "Do you think they've retreated? Maybe we've actually beaten them back!"

Bronwyn had studied enough history to know what that meant. "Darkspawn don't retreat. It's possible, though, that the Archdemon has called them in a different direction. That wouldn't mean the end of the Blight. They'd pop up somewhere else."

"*Where* else?" Loghain asked harshly.

The two Wardens looked at him, not liking to give him the obvious answer, but Bronwyn finally said. "It could be anywhere. Really, anywhere. The Archdemon hasn't been showing us much lately. It could be planning a surprise."

They dismounted, and walked along in front of the tunnel mouths, listening; all their senses open for a hint of darkspawn. Finally, Bronwyn said to Loghain, "I'm really not picking up much of anything. They must have moved fairly far down. I'm getting the most sensation from the big tunnel, so we might as well go that way."

"Don't go far," Loghain ordered. "You don't want to find yourself surrounded and cut off." Alistair shuddered.

"No," Bronwyn agreed. "I don't. A series of probes, then. We'll map out all the branches and try a short distance down each. It will take some time."

He did not move to touch her; not in front of all these people. "Maker watch over you, then."

She gave him a nod and brief smile. Alistair clapped her on the shoulder, with a whispered farewell. Bronwyn turned away, signalling to her people to follow. Her party could deal with pretty much anything other than an attack by the massed horde. A pair of dwarven cartographers was also attached to the party, entrusted with charting out the twists and turns of the raw stone of the tunnels. There was always the possibility that the darkspawn were mining under Ostagar again.

"We'll go about a mile, and then we'll go out and try another tunnel, and then another," Bronwyn said.

"They may connect, Commander," one of the mapmakers told her. "It's almost certain they do. The only question is where."

This was all very disturbing. She had no idea where the Archdemon was. It could, as she had told Loghain, emerge from any number of openings in the earth. There was one very close to the city of Gwaren. There was one southeast of Lake Calenhad, and another one east of the north end of the lake. There was one in the far north, close to the old fortress of West Hill. There were others, too, according to the old dwarven maps. There was one in the middle of the Dragonbone Wastes in the arling of Amaranthine. Those were the ones she knew of. The map they had copied was damaged, and did not show eastern Ferelden very clearly. There might well be more. For all she knew, there was one right under the Royal Palace in Denerim.

Perhaps she should have someone watching those old exits. They were sealed and long unused, for the most part, but someone might have broken into them for a spot of treasure-hunting. During the Rebellion, Loghain had crossed Ferelden traveling along the Deep Roads; going down into them by way of West Hill, and emerging to surprise the Orlesian invaders in Gwaren.

Ideally, the guards on the exits should include Wardens, who could sense darkspawn activity. All the more reason to make a great many more Wardens, and to do it right away. As she

prowled underground, her mind was making lists; how many known entrances, how many more Wardens she ultimately would need. With the first levy of fifty, how many would survive?

As she moved deeper into the foul and tainted tunnel, another idea came to her.

Where were the other Wardens? A small band of experienced Wardens would be a gift from the Maker, even if all they did was watch the Deep Road entrances.

The Orlesian Wardens—all but two—had failed them; the First Warden had done worse. Still, there *were* other Wardens, and surely some of them would like to take part against the first Blight in four hundred years. Where were they?

Surely there was a branch of the order in Nevarra. She knew there was in Antiva, for Oriana had spoken of knowing some of them. There might be some in Rivain, but she simply did not know enough about that country. There were some posts in the Free Marches, but where? They were not in every city, she now understood.

The story of Garahel held some clues... yes...he served at Ansburg. There was a post in Ansburg, and one in Tantervale. There must be Wardens in Tevinter, but her mind revolted against begging them for aid. Tevinters were slavers. Tevinters were heretics. No, she would not ask anything of them. That the Grey Wardens were some sort of brotherhood was clearly a myth. Then she remembered Genetivi's book.

Perhaps there was something in there about Wardens. She would look when she finished here.

Brosca dropped back to talk to Adaia, whose huge eyes were flicking about her in horror and disgust. "So... this is your first time in the Deep Roads... What do you think?"

"I think it stinks," Adaia declared. "This is awful. Somebody needs to scrub this place down with lye soap."

A ripple of laughter. Bronwyn laughed with the rest. "That's a lot of soap!"

"These aren't the real Deep Roads," Kardol, Commander of the Legion of the Dead, corrected them. "These shoddy diggings are darkspawn work. We know the Deep Roads head toward Ostagar, but we're not sure how far."

"Well, they must connect with the Deep Roads," Bronwyn said, "because we saw the Archdemon in the Dead Trenches. The creature has been moving along the Deep Roads, wherever it pleases. Where it is now is anyone's guess."

Abruptly, the vague sensation of darkspawn changed from an ominous tickle to a harsh rasp. Bronwyn raised her hand, and the party slowed. "Something big up ahead."

A pair of scrawny hurlocks materialized from around a corner and rushed them. Danith shot them down, and the rest finished them off.

They met more darkspawn as the tunnel angled down: a few small parties; a larger party led by an emissary; one very powerful Hurlock warrior. Nearly all the darkspawn they came across were hurlocks, in fact. A curious smell reached them... curious and ugly and then, all too recognizable. And that was when they saw the first of the pinkish tendrils. Scout pawed at it and growled.

"A Broodmother," groaned Tara. "We really don't need this."

"Let's scout it out carefully," Bronwyn said, her voice low. "Perhaps it would be smarter to go back for a band of archers or a ballista. A Broodmother is a stationary target, after all."

"For the record," Zevran remarked, "I like that idea."

They entered a broader chamber, when the pulpy matter had spread over the stone floor and twined up along the sides. A few pulsing bags glowed a darker pink. Bronwyn gave a wordless signal and swords were slashing through them. Half-formed hurlocks spilled out wetly, squealing as they were hewn asunder.

Danith's face was white with horror. Bronwyn remembered that she, like Adaia, had not been with them in the dark of the Deep Roads on that first, terrible adventure there. For that matter, few of the Legion had actually seen this.

"This is how a Broodmother reproduces," she explained, raising her voice just a very, very little. "The captured female, whether human, dwarven, or elven, loses her mind, and is

transformed. The body swells enormously and the feet atrophy. These tendrils lead to sacs where the darkspawn form. Broodmothers, though they cannot pursue you, are very powerful and dangerous enemies. They develop strange abilities. Beware their spit. It is a deadly poison and can blind you. Their arms are tiny in proportion with their size, but have very sharp claws. The massive bodies are difficult to wound, since they are heavily padded with fat, but they are vulnerable to magic. They can also summon their brood. When we locate the Broodmother, we'll see if we can withdraw and obtain heavier weapons."

Her heart fluttered like a netted bird; telling her to *get away, get away, get away...* The pain and terror of her encounter with the Broodmother in the Dead Trenches had never quite faded, any more than the scar on her face or her poison-green eyes. Dragons were terrifying creatures, but they did not inspire the skin-crawling dread she felt now. She would be prudent. She would not risk losing another Warden as she had Cullen. They would destroy the Broodmother, but they would do so sensibly and without stupid heroics.

"Archers!" she called out softly, first to Danith, and then to those in the Legion. "If we can't withdraw easily after spotting the Broodmother, aim at the head. It's not an easy target, for it's a tiny object high atop a massive body, but that is the only place where your arrows will do much good. And remember, the thing you see is not a woman anymore."

Down they went: down and down. The pulpy mattered squelched audibly under their boots. Ichor leaked out, and the

stench of it sharpened. They found and destroyed a large number of darkspawn sacs.

"This one's a real breeder," Oghren grunted.

The tunnel opened even more, revealing a big natural cavern. At the far end were a number of fissures, some of them very wide. Bronwyn could sense darkspawn in that general direction, but it was difficult to tell which of the fissures she should enter. The dwarves spread out, inspecting the stone work for clues.

"Commander!" Kardol called to her in a careful rumble. "This way, maybe? Down there..." he squatted down and thrust his torch deeper into the largest opening. "Look at the bottom. Dwarvenwork. This might be where we connect to the Deep Roads!"

"Mark it," Bronwyn briefly instructed the mapmakers. "Mark them all, but we'll follow this one."

The darkspawn sensation was intense now. Sacs hung from thickening tendrils with numbing regularity. Now and then, hurlocks leaped out at them from branching tunnels and alcoves. Bronwyn was tempted to pull back and examine some of the other tunnels. She dreaded the possibility of being ambushed down here. Just a little farther, and then they would head back to the surface—or at least to a side tunnel.

Zevran and Danith moved ahead, cat-footed and silent, peering around corners. The air had changed, growing ever

rank. There was noise up ahead: a low wailing, inharmonious and painful to the ears. As they approached, it grew louder; a cacophony of anguish. Not on a single note, either, but clashing and dissonant, as if a band was playing out of tune. Scout whined and pawed at Bronwyn's knee, unhappy at getting any closer.

"I can feel it, Commander!" Kardol whispered. "There's a *big* chamber around the corner!"

Danith got there first, crouched cautiously behind a protruding rock. She leaned out, sleek muscles tense and still. She did not move, and Bronwyn grew impatient, moving up behind her. Zevran leaned around the corner above her, paused and pulled back. He saw Bronwyn and frowned, with a quick shake of his head. He pulled insistently on Danith's arm, whispering something into her ear. Danith withdrew behind the rocks, her movements stiff and awkward, her eyes glazed. By the time Bronwyn reached them, Zevran had composed himself.

"You must look," he whispered, voice nearly inaudible under the hellish din from the chamber. "You must look, but quickly. Then we must go back and plan."

Zevran helped Danith away. Bronwyn glanced at the Dalish girl in concern. Her mouth was slack; she appeared to be in shock. Well, why shouldn't she be if she had just had her first glimpse of a Broodmother?

Careful not to bang her armor against the stone, Bronwyn

peered cautiously over the rock, and an involuntary gasp escaped her. She clenched her teeth together, willing herself to be silent, to observe, to count, to *think*.

There must be nearly a dozen of them: monstrous, grotesque, bloated; their mindless moaning echoing through the caverns, vibrating up from the floor. Tentacles waved like seagrass in the surf, little clawed arms clutched futilely at thin air. Most horribly, their heads were still the heads of women: recognizable as human, but the eyes dull, unfocused; the faces filthy; the hair matted and foul.

She slowed her breathing, and counted. Three...five...eight... and one more. There were nine Broodmothers here. No wonder the place was filled to bursting with their wretched spawn. The Archdemon may have summoned the horde elsewhere, but these Broodmothers could never move from the place where they had been made.

Considering every movement, she edged back and pulled herself out of sight. Zevran was staring at her, his eyes very wide, offering her a canteen.

She shook her head, and gestured him back.

"We're going," she mouthed at him. "Too many for us."

They returned the next day with three ballistae, with a large party of archers, with fire bombs and shock bombs and with Dworkin's lyrium grenades. With *reinforcements*. Carefully,

they checked out the nearby tunnels, and stationed enough people in them to prevent ambushes.

Loghain insisted on coming. Bronwyn did not argue about it. She felt that he should see and understand the worst of the enemy they were fighting. However, while they were underground, she told him, *she* was in command. He frowned, but agreed. She sensed that he was only humoring her; that it was a pretense, and an infuriating one. She had no doubt that if things went pear-shaped, he would attempt to take over.

Of her own people, everyone insisted on coming. This was an important action, and well supported. Alistair refused to be left behind again. Even Adaia, warned about how bad it was going to be, wanted to help.

"I'll bring bombs," she promised. "Lots and lots of bombs."

Very cautiously, they prepared for this attack by exploring and closing the other fissures in the nearest big cavern, and by destroying all the darkspawn sacs along the way. Bronwyn felt a little mean satisfaction at Loghain's pause and silent absorption of *that* nasty little reality.

And they met some resistance—more than before. Bands of hurlocks—some newborns naked and unarmed—rushed up the tunnels and were shot down, blown apart, incinerated. And then there was the final revelation of the Broodmother chamber. That was even worse than anticipated, for some of the Broodmothers were recognizable... and recognized. A pair of soldiers collapsed at the sight of an old friend's head

surmounted on a hideous hulk. A few vomited. Some wept. Others cursed. There were screams, and misery, and Loghain's stoic, haunted stare. Bronwyn glanced at the creature his gaze was fixed on, but she did not know her. Many women had been lost in the Bloomingtide Battle. Many had been lost since then.

Before she led them here, Bronwyn had made a point of explaining what they were to face: what a Broodmother was, how they were made, and that they had forgotten their lives as women and were now lethal monsters. Clearly, she would have to work on making herself better understood, for the warriors with her were wholly unprepared for the horror of it. Mercifully, no one asked her if the women could not somehow be saved. It was all too terribly plain that they could not be. It was difficult to issue commands...it was difficult to *think* in the clamoring din of the chamber, where the Broodmothers wailed, and groaned, and screamed.

Their spawn swarmed in, but were met with archer volleys and bombs and fireballs. Ballista bolts, impregnated with poison, worked well on the Broodmothers themselves. It still took a great deal of time to finish them off. Bronwyn's people used precautions, but a few of the others were hit by the poisoned spit. Even then, waves of darkspawn attacked them them. Bronwyn had the Legion of the Dead lock shields, stationed the archers behind them, and they pushed their way to a bottleneck, forcing the darkspawn to come at them in twos and threes that could be easily slaughtered.

And slaughter it was. Corpses piled up, and the darkspawn

climbed over them, squawking. The mages set the piles of darkspawn dead afire, burning those behind them. Human, dwarf, and elf alike were almost suffocated by the reeking black smoke.

"Let me try freezing them!" Tara shouted. Bronwyn gave her the nod and waved at Anders to do likewise. This worked well. Combined with shock bombs, the darkspawn shattered into bloody fragments. Bloody slime coated the walls and splashed randomly up to the stalactites hanging from the cavern's ceiling. At length, the attacks slowed, and then stopped, and there was nothing left to be done but clean up the unspeakable mess left behind.

Bronwyn ordered everyone out but Wardens and dwarves, though that order was not universally obeyed at first. Soldiers remained to gape at the dead Broodmothers, unable to believe what they were seeing. Bronwyn was surprised at the drawn, sick expression on Ser Cauthrien's face: she had imagined the woman to be unshakeable. Somehow, she found herself liking Loghain's trusted lieutenant the better for that revealing moment.

Some of her Wardens were no better off. Adaia was crying, her arms around Danith. Tara was drooping, slumped wearily against a thick stalagmite. Brosca and Astrid were talking together, too low to be heard in all the noise, their faces hard and determined. Morrigan alone forced her expression into blank calm, but her shaking hands and unnaturally shrill voice betrayed how much the effort was costing her.

Bronwyn grimaced at Loghain, wishing he would go, knowing that her face must be as black with soot as his. "This is dangerous for anyone other than Wardens!" Bronwyn called to him, over the confusion made by scores of voices echoing in the cavern. "Too much exposed darkspawn blood! We can finish here!"

He gave her a hard, inscrutable look, but before he could answer, a young soldier was shouting in her ear.

"The heads, Commander!"

She stared at him, not understanding.

"The heads," he repeated, looking pained. "We want to give them decent rites. Can we take the women's heads with us?"

Alistair gaped, disgusted by the idea. "Go!" he shouted at the soldier. "You can't do anything for them."

"But—"

"No!" Bronwyn snapped at him. "They're Tainted! Everything down here is Tainted. Stay away from the bodies and the blood and everything else! Go to the surface and wash it all off" The anguish on the man's face reached her. "They will be burned. Pray for them!" She glared at Loghain. "Get them out of here! They're likely to be infected if they stay."

"Some will be, anyway," he told her grimly. "But as you like. At least we've deprived the darkspawn of further

reinforcements."

The Wardens were left with the tasks of killing anything that still moved, and setting fires that reduced most of the corpses to ash. They would let them burn for a day or two, and then come back to clear the way. The mystery of the Archdemon's current location, unfortunately, was still a mystery.

Her friends gathered round, staring solemnly at the hillocks of dead monsters.

"Yup," said Oghren, "I'd call this a good day's work."

"Me, too," Brosca agreed, "though I wish we'd brought a few barrels of ale down here with us."

Bronwyn laughed, a sound that came out more as a cracked groan.

"What seems to you amusing?" Danith asked, nearly numb with the horrors and efforts of the day.

"I just remembered," Bronwyn said, blowing out a deep sigh, "that far away in Denerim, up on the surface, my cousin Habren is being married today, in a grand ceremony probably entirely devoid of darkspawn."

Wynne made her way carefully through the labyrinth of the Royal Palace. The Queen was responding well to her twice-daily treatments. It was personally taxing for Wynne herself,

but she tried not to let the young woman see it. Why should Anora feel guilty, when it was so clearly Wynne's duty to her patient?

And it was all made easier by the fact that Wynne *liked* this particular patient. Queen Anora was so pleasant, so courteous, so appreciative of Wynne's efforts. She had no fear of well-intentioned mages, though Wynne would have preferred that she be a little more wary of Jowan. Still, whatever Jowan had done, he had attempted to make up for it by his scrupulous care for the Queen.

A pity he was not a more talented Healer. Sadly, Jowan was not the best exemplar of what the Circle could offer. Little wonder that he had been intended for the Rite of Tranquility. That would never happen, now, of course, now that Jowan was a Grey Warden. He seemed to be serving well, and in this time of crisis, perhaps— all Wynne's first impressions to the contrary—perhaps he was where he needed to be.

Such a maze! How different from the simplicity of the Circle, with its long spiral staircases and circular corridors: it was far more logical than the Palace. The Palace was more like a living thing; growing organically over time.

She had not seen all of the Palace, of course. Her own duties kept her to the Queen's private quarters, the Little Audience Chamber, the solar at the top of the West Tower, the Royal Library, and, once or twice, the Family Dining Room. There were whole floors she had not seen, and whole towers out of bounds. The King's private quarters, unsurprisingly, were

sealed off. The poor young Queen no doubt could not bear for them to be changed in any way.

Twice a day, Wynne visited the Queen for the regenerative treatments. Aside from that, Wynne's time was very much her own. It was a quiet life. Most of it was spent in the Wardens' Compound, in her own comfortable room. A little confining, of course, but that was the nature and burden of the life of a mage.

She had done a great deal of reading, and she had taken on a share of sewing and knitting from Mistress Rannelly, that good woman. The Wardens needed fresh tunics, sturdy shirts and socks, clean smallclothes and warm cloaks. Grey Wardens were hard on their clothes: it was to be expected. Wynne was happy to help with the work, enjoying the cheerful company of the staff.

The next lot would be sent south in two days, when Arl Bryland returned to Ostagar after his daughter's wedding. Such a nice nobleman. Wynne sighed, wishing she could think of something equally pleasant to say about his daughter. Of course, they had never met—not formally—but Wynne had seen her.

She was...pretty. Yes, she was definitely pretty. Good features, with a slight resemblance to her cousin, Lady Bronwyn. Too bad her expression was so unpleasant—almost sneering. She was young, of course, and there was plenty of time for her to mature. Wynne hoped that Arl Urien was kinder and more accommodating in private than he was when

walking the corridors of power.

She passed the tantalizing door that she understood led to the War Room. That, too, was a place she had not seen. It was supposed to be very handsome in a severe way. Perhaps it was something like the Wardens' Hall. Wynne had grown quite fond of that place. It was so pleasant to see Warden-Commander Duncan's portrait in a place of honor. Wynne had liked the man. Such a beautiful voice, now silent forever...

The Queen was very busy today, dressing for the wedding. It was clear to Wynne that the Queen did not care much for Lady Habren or Arl Urien, either, but she would do her duty, as she always did. Wynne would see the Queen late tonight, when Her Majesty returned to the palace after the wedding feast. In the meantime, Wynne's time would be spent pleasantly and industriously.

Out through the west door, and then only a few steps across a courtyard to the Warden's Gate. A kitchenmaid at the Warden's Compound was fond of feeding the pigeons in the courtyard, and there were always clouds of them. Though..how quiet it was today! Everyone must be busy, preparing for the Queen to leave for the Cathedral. She, of course, would go out through the King's Gate, where the royal coach would await her. Perhaps Wynne could slip out and watch later.

Where was the guard? Shame on him! There was always supposed to be a guard here. He was gone, probably to scrounge something from the kitchens, which were not too far

from here.

Wynne pushed the door open, and the gloom of the stone corridors gave way to a burst of sunshine. Briefly blinded, Wynne, paused, squinting.

The smite struck her without warning. She was falling, she was helpless, her mana squeezed and drained like a fruit ripe for plucking. The stone steps were coming up to meet her face...

From a great distance, she felt the strong hands seizing her; hands encased in leather and steel. The men were silhouettes, dark shadows against the light, faceless in their helmets. The only sounds were the startled pigeons cooing and fluttering in the courtyard, and the scrape of boots on stone steps, and low muttered commands.

"Put that phylactery away! We won't need it anymore."

Wynne knew she must reason with the Templars; she must explain to them that she had duties here...very important duties to the Queen; but her tongue was sluggish, unable to form words. Only an incoherent "Unhh...Unhh...Unhh" issued from her numbed lips.

"Shut her up!"

The Templar's sword pommel rose and fell. A thunderclap of pain slammed into Wynne's skull. White light flashed across her eyes. She slumped, held in remorseless arms, her skull

fractured, vaguely aware of the slow, wet trickle down her temple. She gazed curiously at the tracks in the gravel her heels made as they dragged her away.

No, not like this...not like this...I was supposed to see the Queen again tonight...

Thanks to my reviewers: KnightOfHolyLight, MsBarrows, Enaid Aderyn, demonicnargles, sizuka2, anon, Psyche Sinclair, Zute, Chandagnac, Kira Kyuu, Anime-StarWars-fanzach, Granoc, Blinded in a bolthole, JackOfBladesX, Costin, euromellows, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, Nemrut, Jenna53, Jyggilag, Josie Lange, almostinsane, riverdaleswhiteflash, Halm Vendrella, tgcgoddess, Shakespira, Notnahtanha, Gene Dark, EpitomyofShyness, mille libri, Connie Weasley, Tsu Doh Nimh, Have Socks. Will Travel, and Biff McLaughlin.

59. The 7th Day of Harvestmere, Pt 1

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 59: The Seventh Day of Harvestmere, Part One

Ser Norrel Haglin, once briefly Bann of Highever City, reached Gherlen's Pass on the seventh of Harvestmere. Mountains loomed on either side of the road, and road signs pointed forward to the west, informing travelers of the short distance to Gherlen's Halt and the Orlesian border; informing them also of various distances to the cities of Jader, Halamshiral, Lydes, and Montsimmard. Another stone was marked with the route south, first to Sulcher, and then to Redcliffe. Haglin did not bother to look at the stone's other side, which displayed the way north to Highever, and home to Amaranthine. He was unlikely to travel that road ever again.

He had been a proud soldier of Amaranthine since he was sixteen years old, and he was a proud soldier still. Whatever Teyrn Fergus might think of him, Haglin had done his duty as he saw it. Rendon Howe had been his liege lord, and orders were orders.

Rendon Howe, however, was now dead, along with two of his children. Of Lord Nathaniel there was no word. Without his arl's knowledge, Haglin had sent the boy a letter back at the

end of Justinian when things were clearly going wrong. Not sure where Lord Nathaniel might be, he directed it to the boy's last known place of residence, Markham in the Free Marches. In a way, Haglin was glad Nathaniel had not come home earlier. He might have saved his family, but more likely he would have died with them. He was the last of them now. If the Howes were to have any claim at all to Amaranthine, Nathaniel needed to get back to Ferelden, and as soon as possible.

Whatever Bryce Cousland had done or not done, he was dead and gone, and his son and daughter were mighty powers in the land. The girl, from all reports, was Loghain's lover and right hand; Fergus was high in favor with the Queen, and was now unchallenged in the north.

It was useless to be bitter. The Queen had been fair enough. Haglin and his men were to go south and join Loghain's army. Likely they would be put in the vanguard and marched to their deaths, but in any army, some soldiers had to go first. Knowing Loghain, he would not waste troops out of mere spite. Haglin admitted to himself that it was better than having his head stuck on a spike over the gate of Castle Highever. The old arl had a lot of respect for Loghain, and Haglin trusted his judgment in that, at least.

Their route along the west of Lake Calenhad was slow, but not particularly arduous. They could take the Imperial Highway all the way to Ostagar, resupplying themselves at the villages along the way. Their first important stop was at Gherlen's Halt, where they were to report in, and then have a courier

sent ahead, to inform Loghain they were on the march. They might even be issued new orders, based on the situation in the south.

As the column moved deeper into the pass, they met a courier galloping the other way. The soldier pulled up his horse in a cloud of dust, and shouted at them.

"Who are you? Who's in command?"

"I am," Haglin told him. "Ser Norrel Haglin, en route to Ostagar. I was instructed to report to the commander at Gherlen's Halt."

"Good luck with that, ser," the courier replied. "The Halt is under attack since early this morning. I barely slipped through."

The soldiers nearest to the conversation murmured, looking at each other.

"Darkspawn?" asked Haglin urgently.

The courier spat. "Orlesians! We're told they claim to be 'independent mercenaries' but we know better. Even without the badges and the banners, we can see that they're being led by chevaliers. Not a peep out of the Rock. They must know what's going on. "

Haglin briefly bowed his head in thought, and then began firing rapid questions at the courier: the size of the attacking force,

where they were were strongest, their armament, if they had siege engines... There was no doubt in Haglin's mind where his duty lay.

"I have five hundred men," he told the courier. "I think they may be of some service. Show me the way through the pass, and then ride for Ostagar."

This was the day appointed: the seventh of Harvestmere. The marks were expected back in the late afternoon. Yesterday, all the necessary gear had been meticulously prepared; quarrels sharpened to razors, crossbows and poisons hidden in the chosen concealed vantage points. No one would suspect them. They had already found a place where they could slip unseen through the barricades. They were unarmed, and appeared completely harmless. All they would have on their persons were fresh, dry bowstrings, hidden out of sight in the pockets of their aprons. It would all be easier if their marks shared the same quarters, but their plans took that into account, and followed the marks' declared schedule. The strike must be simultaneous, lest one mark warn the other. If all went well, it should be possible to blend in after the initial hue and cry, unsuspected.

Poison would have been surer, but the marks did not eat privately, in the state due their rank. They ate from the common pots, and it would have been necessary to poison everyone. The risk of a bystander eating first and the situation coming to light was simply unacceptable. Getting close to the individuals had also proved impracticable. They were never

alone, unless in their quarters, and even there they were rarely alone. If they were, only a few trusted servants were admitted. Their quarters had proved inaccessible by the usual means. The only way was to attack at a distance, with very accurate weapons. Even if the marks wore armor, there were always vulnerable points, especially considering the potency of the poisons in which the quarrels would be anointed. It was an interesting challenge, and by no means a sure thing. But then, what was?

The upper camp was not suitable for the venture: too exposed and too crowded. The valley below, however, was another matter. There was tree cover: there were piles of debris. Just outside the gates of the lower camp was a heavily wooded area through which the marks must pass. The marks would be talking on their way back, and they would be tired; not imagining any danger so close to the camp. The rest of the party would be in conversation. Yes, there would be noise. Crossbows made noise, of course, but only briefly. At a distance, it could be confused with the sound of someone chopping wood; and there was always someone chopping wood nearby.

Anora looked about her with carefully concealed distaste. Werberga and Habren had certainly gone all out for this wedding. Huge sprays of autumn flowers sprouted up, ogre-like, from every corner of the Cathedral; the designated seats of Denerim's elite were draped in pink satin. Anora was well aware that pink was Habren's favorite color. So much pink in

the Cathedral, however, seemed to her frivolous and inappropriate. The huge statue of Andraste seemed to think so as well. Usually Anora would describe the unworldly expression on the Prophet's gilded face as one of renunciation: in the present context, Anora felt she could detect a certain disgust. At least the Grand Cleric imposed some sort of restraint on the decorations here in the Cathedral; Anora dreaded the atrocities that had no doubt been perpetrated on the Arl of Denerim's estate, where the feast was to be held. She was almost sorry that she had worn her lovely blue dress and her crown, since she was thus contributing to the overdone grandeur of the day. Everyone of importance in Denerim...everyone of title...everyone who could beg or bribe an invitation was crowded into the Cathedral today.

No amount of blossoms or pink satin could make Arl Urien look anything other than what he was, of course: a dyspeptic, hard-eyed man in late middle age; soft around the belly from indulgence at table and having everything done for him. He had not looked so badly when he had first returned from Ostagar, but since then he had deteriorated.

Perhaps the engine of the change was the loss of his son. Everyone else might have despised Vaughan, but he had been the sun, moon, and stars to his father; the focus of all his hopes and plans. Now Urien was forced to start all over again, and try to have new plans and a new heir. He was obviously not enjoying this day as relentlessly as Habren and her aunt were, nor was he dressed in pink satin, thank the

Maker.

Habren was encased in enough of it, certainly. She looked very happy. and pretty enough, Anora supposed. That combination of dark hair and fair skin that came through the Pengallon line was much admired by a great many people. Bronwyn was very much of that type, though only in the face. She was much taller and not nearly so curvaceous as Habren.

Oh, dear! Father and Bronwyn were planning to marry. What a spectacle that would be... Anora hoped they would do something simple and quiet and not so utterly devoid of dignity as this carnival, but the pressures of politics might demand otherwise.

The Grand Cleric was pronouncing the wedding prayer now. Urien had not smiled once. Anora sighed. Habren was smiling enough for everyone, but Anora suspected that state of affairs would not last more than a few days. Being married to Cailan had been blissful in the early stages—even fun—but Cailan had been a beautiful young man who loved life and had at the time loved Anora, too, quite a bit. The memory made her so sad that tears prickled in her eyes, fracturing the candlelight into dim rainbows. She felt very sorry for Habren, whom she was sure would not enjoy the night that would follow her wedding day. Urien would do his duty to beget an heir, and would not consider pleasing his young wife to be any part of said duty. Everyone knew how unkind he had been to his wife and daughter.

Habren, however, would be an Arlessa. That seemed to be all

the silly girl understood about it. She would be important for a day, dress grandly, and receive a great many expensive presents. Had she even really thought about what followed after? Did she imagine that Urien would open his purse strings as her father had? Did she imagine she would have any power of her own at all?

There was Arl Bryland, stepping back to sit with his fine little boys. Anora had always thought him quite an attractive man. He looked...relieved...Anora supposed. Habren had been too much for him. He obviously loved her, but did not know how to guide or improve her character. This wedding must have cost a fortune, and they had not yet moved on to the feast. Leonas Bryland had contributed coin in plenty for that, though it would be held at the bridegroom's estate. The Arl of South Reach's house in town was large, but nowhere near as large as Arl Urien's Denerim estate, which was of course his principal seat. All sorts of people had been hired for the occasion: minstrels, maskers, jugglers, performing animals, dancers, and experts in Maker-knew-what.

The choir was singing now. It was almost over, and then would come the final blessing, more singing, the procession out of the chantry, the giving of alms to the poor, and the departure to Arl Urien's palatial estate. She, of course, had precedence, even on another woman's wedding day. And, even better, since she was so recently a widow, she was not expected to be cheerful, as if she approved of this folly.

She looked the spectators over carefully as she made her way down the aisle and out the door. A great many people

were here to goggle at a grand wedding, but more were here, like Anora herself, to work: that is, to make connections, to observe, to comprehend the tides of power and politics.

There was quite a bit of cheering in the streets for the parade of carriages, splendid horses, and fine clothes. Anora had felt some concern about this flagrant display of wealth and luxury at a time when many Fereldans were grieving the loss of loved ones in the war against the darkspawn. She was a little surprised that there were no signs of public unrest today. Much of the good feeling was probably due to the alms that the Arls were distributing. As it was his wedding day, and as Bryland was paying for the wedding, Urien must have coughed up a decent sum for the alms. As well he should. Anora eyed the crowd analytically. Everyone in the street was human...no, wait...there was a dwarven couple with a babe in arms. No elves. Of course, there were no longer many elves in Denerim, and they had little reason to cheer Arl Urien in any case.

A slow, tiresome ride across the river to the feast. It was not far from the palace, which would be a good thing at the end of a long, long, day. As they drove down Gate Street, Anora took note of Highever House, lofty and elegant; the city home of the Couslands. Anora had visited Eleanor there often, and particularly loved the rooftop garden. The idea of living there was not at all an unpleasing prospect.

A brief delay on arrival, as Arl Urien and his Arlessa stepped down from their carriage, then formally welcomed their guests.

"I wish you and your lady all happiness, my lord Arl. Such a beautiful wedding," said Anora.

The couple bowed. Urien's simple, "I thank Your Majesty," was counterpointed by Habren's, "Oh, Your Majesty! Wasn't it perfect?"

Anora was ushered into the reception hall and was impressed, though not entirely favorably. This feast would cost a fortune in candles alone, she estimated. The air was heavily perfumed by masked and costumed dancers carrying pomander balls or glass vials of colored, scented powder, which they blew into the air with little pipes. Anora had heard of this being done in Orlais. Thank the Maker Father was not here to see it here! Once down the corridor and into the hall appointed for the feast, the perfumes merged with the smells of roasted meat, and meat was winning.

I suppose we're going to eat all afternoon, she sighed to herself. *Except for those of us who will spend the entire time drinking.*

Her seat was between the two Arls. It could have been worse. At least she did not have to sit next to Habren, who was preening and smirking as if she had never heard of marital incompatibility. The juxtaposition of the newly-widowed with the newly-married was too pointed for Anora's liking as it was. Anora's two bodyguards were posted discreetly behind her chair, nearly out of sight.

Leonas Bryland had the good breeding neither to boast about

nor apologize for the excesses of the day. The two little boys were eventually settled down in between their father and their aunt Lady Werberga, who would, Anora hoped, see that they were not made drunk or sick by the wagonloads of rich food and strong drink on continual offer.

"I had to leave Killer at home," the older boy, Corbus, complained. "Habren hates him. Just because he liked me better. It's not fair."

"Enough of that, Corbus," his father reproved him. "This is Habren's day. You'll see Killer at home tonight."

A large consort of instruments played sweetly up in a specially-built minstrel's gallery. Someone was singing, but Anora could not make out the words due to the shouts, the toasts, the stupid jests of the noblemen, and the shrill, excited squeals of titled ladies.

The tables were set in a wide U shape, to give sufficient room for the performers. Against the far wall, watched over by two imposing guards, was a large table, on which the bridal gifts were displayed.

"Not all of them have arrived yet, of course," Habren declared loudly to the room in general. "Everything is in such a muddle with this awful war. I haven't had a thing from Bronwyn, though Fergus sent me quite a nice silver salver."

A troupe of tumblers, colorful in cheerful motley and animal masks, were going through their routine now. They

leapfrogged, pirouetted, and somersaulted in all sorts of astonishing ways. An assistant set up hoops and the tumblers bounded through them; backwards, upside-down... It was quite diverting.

The first course, composed of soup and foreign delicacies, was carried in on silver platters. Not everyone knew how to eat the artichokes, and Anora felt scores of eyes on her as she composedly dismantled the vegetable.

The Grand Cleric was on Habren's other side, and the older woman was listening with ironic kindness to Habren's frenzied babbling about the glory of the day. Beside Her Grace was the Knight-Commander of Denerim, Ser Tavish, a tall and impressive man, though not noted for his conversational abilities. He drew his belt knife and cut through to the artichoke's heart with rough dispatch, devouring it whole.

After the first course came the dancing, since the ladies wanted to have a chance at it before everyone was too drunk to stand up straight. Anora had been discreetly approached, some days before, and asked if, under the circumstances, she cared to dance.

Of course she did. She had few enough occasions to dance as it was. True, Cailan was only dead a month, but life went on, and Anora loved to dance. She still had precedence over everyone else in Ferelden, at least until the Landsmeet, and so she would lead the opening dance. It might be her last chance to do so. So, yes, she replied, she did, in fact, care to dance.

Thus, according to strict rules of precedence, she, partnered by Arl Bryland, would be first in line for the pavane, followed by the bridal couple. After that, the lesser nobles could fight it out for their places in the line. It would be amusing to see them at it.

Leonas Bryland, whispering a brief, firm admonition to the little boys, rose, and led Anora to the top of the set, which was rapidly forming behind her. Anora smiled quietly, listening to the civil—and not so civil—disputes about precedence taking place further back in the line. After more wine, there might even be a fight or two...and not just among the men.

What wonderful music! Urien had engaged some excellent minstrels. She must ask him about them later. From time to time, it had occurred to her how pleasant it would be to have a minstrel or two about her on a permanent basis. Erlina had played well, but was gone, gone... A human woman, perhaps, would be best, to thwart the inevitable gossip: a woman who played well and had a pleasing voice. Not even Father could object to that—as long as the woman were not Orlesian. Come to that, Anora had no great desire to keep Orlesians about her any longer.

The Arl of South Reach was a man who could manage to remember the steps of the dance while still chatting pleasantly, something one could not always take for granted. His hands were warm and dry, and not clammy like so many others. He could tell her something of the recent adventures in Ostagar; lighter things, not inappropriate to a feast. She wanted to understand more about the people who were so

important to the war; and choosing a favorable moment, asked him specifically about the Grey Wardens, beginning with Senior Warden Alistair.

She was curious about Alistair. Cailan had once confided in her about the existence of a bastard brother. Bronwyn had mentioned him in passing, but no one seemed to think him a threat.

"Alistair?" Bryland smiled. "Very pleasant young man. Splendid warrior, too. Loghain's trying to bring him along as a leader. A bit too self-effacing. He's done well while Bronwyn's been off on her jaunts. He's from Redcliffe, originally. At least I think so. Now that Astrid of his—there's prime leadership material, if you like."

"I have met Warden Astrid," Anora said. "She seems very intelligent. Are she and Warden Alistair...fond of one another?"

"That was my impression."

This...was rather good news. If Alistair was involved with a dwarf, princess or not, he was not positioning himself to grasp at the crown. It seemed strange and unnatural to her, but some people really were not very ambitious. Perhaps he genuinely liked being a Warden, and did not wish to risk his life for his father's throne. It was one less complication, which was very welcome. Still, she would like to meet him. She wondered if she would see Cailan in his face.

One dance ended, and another began. This time her partner was Arl Urien, who hated dancing. It showed. Then Bann Sighard and his pretty young son Oswyn, then Bann Moorcock and Bann Ceorlic, and finally Bann Frandarel. After that, the second course was announced. People settled down for serious gluttony and more entertainment, to be followed more entertainment, more dancing, and by the best entertainment of all: the bedding of the bride and groom.

Anora did not look forward to this event, and thought it all very nasty and tiresome. She well remembered the leers and prurient curiosity at her own wedding. Habren's experience would be much the same.

The tipsy revelers would call out bawdy jests, while the most distinguished guests would follow the procession down the corridor to the bridal chamber. Anora, alas, would have to take part in this, and would have to smile and pretend to like it. The Grand Cleric would bless the marriage bed, and Lady Werberga would strew it with flowers, which Anora remembered could be very awkward if not all the roses had been stripped of their thorns. How she and Cailan had laughed...

Tears prickled in her eyes again, and were swiftly overcome at the sight of the mismatched couple who would soon be in bed together. At least no one followed the ancient custom of displaying bloody sheets any more; though in Orlais, the distinguished guests waited in the bedchamber, sipping wine, until the bridegroom pushed the curtains aside and declared the marriage consummated. And the Orlesians called

Ferelden barbarous!

Anora played with her food, more interested in the performers. The newest entertainment was quite riveting, even for the drunken guests...even for Anora. She had never seen a knife thrower before. The man was wonderfully skilled; and while Anora expected the pretty elf assisting him to be killed, she was not. The man unerringly sank his blades into the painted backboard behind the girl, outlining her shape, slicing off the feather in her headdress with astonishing precision.

After these feats came a woman who could walk on her hands, while her three little dogs walked on their hind legs. The crowd was less certain about this; uncomfortable with the idea of dogs wearing clothes, though the little red and blue satin coats, which matched the woman's costume, were rather adorable. In the end, everyone was won over when the dogs danced to a cheerful tune.

And the food kept coming. Whole roast boars were trundled into the hall, and then a great meat pie in the shape of the Arl of Denerim's estate. There were geese stuffed with apples and chestnuts, and ducks stuffed with prunes and whole cooked duck's eggs. There were huge joints of beef and mutton, which many of the guests, inhibitions relaxed by the excellent wine, were frankly gnawing upon, as if they feared this were their last meal.

So much meat made Anora feel a little queasy, and when the minstrels struck up more dance music, she was pleased that

Lord Oswyn requested the honor of another dance. Better by far to be dancing than eating and drinking until she was sick, like all too many here. Besides, Oswyn was handsome, reasonably sober, and a good dancer. If she were very tired by the time she left, Wynne would attend to it on Anora's return to the palace. She hoped to dance until the next round of entertainments.

Arl Bryland could not partner her at the moment. The little boys were understandably bored and restless, wanting to see the tumblers again, and the younger was innocently gloating about the fact that Habren was to be put to bed earlier than he.

"She was bad, wasn't she? She always is."

The older boy, Corbus, then apparently shared his own understanding of what Arl Urien was going to do to their sister, which from his gestures was gleaned entirely from mabari behavior. Lothar was impressed and horrified, and then both boys began giggling uncontrollably. Lady Werberga loudly pleaded with her brother to stop them. Arl Bryland threatened to have the boys sent home.

"Fine with me," Corbus sulked. "Then I can play with Killer."

"I want to see Habren sent to bed early!" protested Lothar.

The guests were becoming sodden and unruly, and Anora began to hope that the bedding would be soon, since she could leave immediately afterward. Bann Loren begged her

very courteously for the honor of a dance, and Anora decided it was best not to refuse him when she had permitted others the privilege. It was getting dark outside, and the light had changed; more lurid from the great fires. Flickering shadows on the walls mirrored the dancers and the masked mimes who frolicked alongside them. Anora ducked under Bann Loren's arm and came face to face with a startlingly life-like bear. The mime roared at her, and then dropped to all fours, lumbering through the crowd. One of the dancers, dressed in a filmy silk dress, ran up, straddled his back, and rode him up and down the hall, to much applause.

Yes, it was getting entirely out of hand. She fixed a smile on her face, wishing she were anywhere else. Urien was speaking to his seneschal. Surely the couple would depart when the dance had ended.

The musicians struck a final, brilliant flourish, and the guests applauded. The minstrel playing the straight flute bowed, and swept off his half-mask. He had a striking face, swarthy, black-haired and moustachioed, a cheerful smirk on his handsome face.

"And now," he proclaimed, with a most charming Orlesian accent, "you shall dance to a new tune!" As one, the minstrels dropped their instruments and rose up with crossbows. And with that, hell broke loose.

It seemed later to Anora that only her own bodyguards and Leonas Bryland grasped immediately that they were under attack. They saw it coming from the time the musicians

dropped their instruments. Bryland shouted at his sons to "Get down!", and pulled a dagger from his boot, dodging out of the way of a tumbler who bounded at him with alarming speed. A masker with a stiletto charged him from his other side. One of the bodyguards shouted, distracting him, and Bryland hit the attacker with a chair.

Anora, under the shadow of assassination for so long, understood the danger as soon as the crossbows came up. Most of the noble guests stood gaping, as if thinking this must be part of the entertainment. Anora tore her hand from Bann Loren's grasp, running for the cover of a trestle table. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the knife thrower turning in her direction, and a moment later, heard a pair of knives thud into the pillar where she had been a second before. Behind her, Bann Loren was clutching at a crossbow quarrel sprouting from his chest. Anora knew she had been the target, but was fiercely glad it was Loren and not she, as she huddled under the table, drawing her feet up under her.

Orlesians! If they didn't have to make a game of it, they could have shot me dead while I was dancing!

Her little dagger was sewn into her gilded corset, she fumbled for it frantically, nearly slicing off her thumb. One of the performing dogs scampered under Anora's table, and pressed against her, shaking, its little satin coat spotted with blood. Cautiously, Anora peered out from under the tablecloth.

Most of the guests made a dash for the south door, trampling the slower among them underfoot in a frenzied din. This crush

kept the Arl of Denerim's guard, mostly posted in the corridors outside, from being able to get into the hall and deal with the assassins.

"Hold! Stop this violence!" the Grand Cleric cried, trying to make herself heard over the chaos.

"Your Grace! This is none of our affair!" Ser Tavish shouted, bodily dragging the old woman away.

"Release me, ser! You overstep your—" Her objections were smothered as Templars closed in and rushed for the door, swords drawn, the Grand Cleric sheltered in their midst. Shrieks rose up as they cut their way through the crowd. Bann Sighard protested indignantly, and went down, dead or stunned.

Arl Urien's servitors had overturned one of the tables, and the Arl crouched behind it, pulling Habren down beside him, while some of his bodyguard, carrying shields, materialized from behind a tapestry. Anora watched them, intent on what was happening. There was a door hidden there. Urien was wounded and bleeding, and backed toward the doorway, shouting at Habren to follow him. Anora cursed the distance. There was too much open space between her table and the hidden door. She would never make it if she tried to follow them.

"Habren!" Lady Werberga screamed for her niece, and Habren screamed back for her aunt. Without further ceremony, Arl Urien cuffed Habren across the jaw, and the girl

slumped, unconscious. A guard dragged her out, while others sheltered the Arl with their shields. One of them fell, and the rest rushed through, slamming the door, leaving the other revelers to their fate. Werberga screamed again, briefly, when an arrow thudded into her chest.

Bodies sprawled and twitched amongst the overturned tables. Bann Loren sobbed, sitting in a pool of blood, trying to pull the quarrel out of his chest. Bann Reginalda drooped in her seat, her throat cut by one of the tumblers. The knife thrower shouted in triumph as he flung a blade into Bann Grainne's eye. Dancers blew powder in the guests eyes, blinding them; and then they danced away to the safety of the minstrels' gallery.

But the initial shock was over, and the Fereldans were fighting back. Bryland had grabbed up a big silver platter from the floor, scattering sweetmeats. Using it as a shield, he snatched a burning brand from one of the fires, and flung it at the base of the scaffolding under the minstrels' gallery, where the crossbowmen were positioned. Following his lead, others did the same. Quarrels pinged and clattered on Bryland's makeshift shield, and the dog trainer grabbed at him from behind a drapery. Bryland smashed the platter into her face, and she went down. One of the bodyguards—perhaps Bann Sighard's—finished her off. One of her dogs licked at her dead face, whining. The little dog huddled with Anora yelped and ran out into the fight. A stray quarrel struck it in the back, and it squealed horribly, thrashing on the floor. Bryland and Oswyn cornered the knife thrower, and the man fought back

with a wild yell. They struggled, blades rising and falling, and then crashed into the table loaded with gifts. It went over, spilling silver vessels onto the floor like a prodigal's sacrifice. Bolts of sumptuous silks and velvets unrolled, and were trampled and bloodied by the combatants. Blood and wine spread over the stones.

Anora saw her bodyguards looking for her and trying to fight at the same time. "I'm here!" she shouted at them. "Bors! Dalkeith!" They heard her and started running toward her table, shields up.

"No!" she shouted again. "Help Arl Bryland!"

Her table jolted, and Anora was grabbed from behind. It was the man in the bear costume, and his hands were horribly strong. He growled, beast-like, at Anora, and without thinking, she stabbed at the man's eyes, small and human behind the mask. The masker cursed and let go of her: and then was dragged backwards out from under the table by two guardsmen. The bearskin was nearly as tough as armor, and they stabbed and stabbed him until he lay still. Anora shuddered and looked away, knuckles white on her dagger.

A cheer rose up. Oswyn was bleeding, but he had yanked down some of the draperies and threw them into the fire under the minstrel's gallery. Instantly they were aflame, the blaze crackling up the supports.

"*Allons-y!*" shouted the moustache on high. A pair of tumblers somersaulted onto the scaffolding supporting the minstrel's

gallery and climbed up, inches ahead of the flames. Two of the minstrels threw instrument cases through the windows, shattering them. There was a bustle Anora could not quite see, and then the assassins were getting away, climbing down rope ladders, the leader grinning and bowing as if he had done something frightfully dashing and clever. He had time for a parting shot, and then threw his crossbow at Oswyn and leaped out the window after his confederates.

Across the room, a child's scream shrilled out. Another child's voice joined in, shocked and terrified.

"Lothar!" cried Bryland. The little boy had stood up to watch the fight, and the moustachioed assassin had put a quarrel through his shoulder. His face paled as his tunic reddened. Corbus stared at his brother in disbelief.

Lothar whimpered. "Daddy...hurts..."

Bryland swept the boy up in his arms, his face terrible. Anora crawled out from under the table to see what could be done. A few of the attackers were still alive, moaning or unconscious. First of all, though, the Arl's son must be saved, and as many of the other victims as possible. Oswyn rushed to his father, who seemed, against all odds, to be alive.

"Dalkeith, fetch a Healer!" Anora shouted at her guardsmen. "Find Mistress Wynne at the Wardens' Compound! Rouse the city guard after the assassins! Bors! Don't let the men kill all these wretches. I want them questioned!"

Danith and Merrill walked back to camp together in silence. What Danith had seen under the earth was too terrible for speech, but whispers had reached the Dalish scouts of the horrors the Wardens had found and destroyed. There had been stories...legends half understood. Much was now explained.

Merrill touched her friend's hand. "Is it cruel of me to say that I am still glad that one of the People is a Grey Warden?"

"No," Danith said instantly. "These things must be known. How else to guard against them? Our women must know what to do if the creatures take them. If it were only shemlens talking, many would not listen. This fate, though, is not a matter of race: it is the fate of all women in grasp of the darkspawn. Man can become ghouls, but this horror is not for them."

Her voice trailed off. Thanovir came up beside her and offered her some water. She was glad of it. Her canteen was empty after the smoke and stink of the Broodmother caverns.

She said, "Bronwyn has hinted that she wishes to recruit more Wardens, Dalish among them. It will be hard for some to leave their clans, just as it was for me, but I believe it to be necessary. These creatures must be destroyed, for they are utterly evil."

They were nearing the camp, and Danith longed for her little cot in the Tower of Ishal. She never thought sleeping under a roof of stone could be so inviting. The elves passed a stand of larches, and a flock of crows rose up with a great noise.

Thanovir whispered, "Keep walking, but be silent! Someone is watching."

Danith knew instantly that he was right. Not darkspawn, no; but something or someone. Using her peripheral vision, she scanned the trees on either side, and her gaze paused at the trampled undergrowth.

They walked to the gate in careful silence, taking in all the signs left by a hunter hiding in a blind.

Time passed slowly for the watchers in the trees as the weary soldiers filed by: first the savage Dalish; then human footsoldiers, muttering among themselves, shaking their heads; a disciplined band of sturdy dwarves; then some of the Wardens, looking particularly grim. The targets were on horseback, a little behind, talking to each other. It was nearly time. Everything was in readiness.

So focused were the watchers that they were unaware that they themselves were being hunted. There was only a sudden breeze as the twined branches of their shelters seemed to melt away. Then strong hands pulled them down and disarmed them; and fierce, tattooed faces were inches from their own.

"The Dalish were not pleased to discover they were elves, I take it." Loghain settled into his chair and rubbed his forehead, hoping to ward off a headache.

"Not at all," Bronwyn said, "They were disgusted with them. Dalish don't think much of city elves to begin with, but this kind of murder seemed to them particularly squalid and dishonorable."

She could not settle down. An assassination attempt. Again! This had been a clever one, and very likely would have succeeded, but for the superior woodcraft of their Dalish allies. She was angry; bitterly angry that anyone would knowingly try to assassinate a Warden in the midst of a Blight. It was an act of depraved indifference to the welfare of everyone in Thedas. A quartet of elf women had nearly accomplished what great warriors had attempted for years: the removal of Loghain Mac Tir from the political scene. Bronwyn hated to admit it, but she was not only angry; she was frightened, too.

The assassins' gear was piled on Loghain's writing table: fine crossbows, easy to break down and assemble quickly; razor sharp quarrel heads of silverite; a collection of powerful, cruelly lethal poisons guaranteed not to simply cause death, but lingering agony. Also on the table were the women's other weapons, found in their quarters: superb daggers, throwing stars, more poisons, and cunning wire garottes. Their employer had deep pockets.

"So far, we don't even know if you or I or both of us were the targets," she growled.

"Who sent them is the other issue," Loghain pointed out. "Most probably the Empress. She has the most to gain by

getting rid of both of us, though of course each of us has other enemies. You never know. It could be Crows paid for by Rendon Howe, still trying to get at you. All we know so far from what papers we could find is that the attack was to be made on this day and no other: the seventh of Harvestmere."

The elven agents had been extremely clever: not revealing that they knew each other; coming to Ostagar at different times in different ways; above all, playing the parts of humble servant girls so very, very well. They were being held separately now, and Loghain hoped that at least one of them would eventually confess all she knew.

"I want to talk to them," Bronwyn said briefly, not slowing in her pacing. "I want them to know what I'm prepared to do to them if they don't cooperate."

"And what is that?"

"I'll give them to the darkspawn. Not for long, of course. I wouldn't allow them to become mature Broodmothers. However, I will describe the process in detail. What else do people who interfere with a Grey Warden's mission deserve?"

He was surprised; even shocked, and took another look at the stormy young face. She might threaten it, even convince herself the threat was real; but in the end, could she do such a thing? Loghain doubted it. It was quite an impressive threat to use, however. She had grown harder than he realized.

"Yes," Bronwyn said. "I'll talk to them, and then leave them to

your people. Then I've got to move ahead with recruiting. If it's Orlais, it's a clear sign that they will do anything to keep Ferelden from defending itself. We need more Wardens, and we need them now. But I want those elves to talk, and tell us where the next blow is coming from."

"They'll talk," Loghain assured her. "Make your threats. Let them believe that we won't give them a clean death. In the end, they'll talk. I cannot guarantee, of course, that we'll like what they have to say."

Thanks to my reviewers: Aoi24, MsBarrows, Kyren, Chandagnac, sizuka2, mmsbddvr, Psyche Sinclair, Have Travel, Notnahtanha, Mike3207, Jyggilag, Granoc, almostinsane, JackOfBladesX, Judy, Blinded in a bolthole, ShyWriter413, Remenants, KnightOfHolyLight, Jenna53, Nemrut, Hydroplatypus, Zute, anon, ByLanternLight, EpitomyofShyness, mille libri, Tirion, Death Knight's Crowbar, Josie Lange, Enaid Aderyn, Kira Kyuu, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Costin, WhosAmandaPhillips, Biff McLaughlin, Alys, Tsu Doh Nimh, and Blackdex.

60. The 7th Day of Harvestmere, Pt 2

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 60: The Seventh Day of Harvestmere, Part 2, and What Followed After

"It's chaos for the most part out there, Majesty, and that's the truth."

Anora was sure it was, but the truth was a rebuke to her, to the Arl of the Denerim, and to the City Guard. A handful of Orlesian agents had struck terror in the heart of Denerim, killed and wounded a large number of Fereldens, and looked to be getting away with it. She had sent a messenger to the commander of the city gates to let no one out, but for all she knew, the assassins had already fled. She did not know what was worse: that they should escape from her, or that they should remain hidden in the city, planning new devilry.

And it could only get uglier. Rumors of the attack were spreading, and there had been retaliation. A young Orlesian merchant had been beaten and raped in the Market District by a mob looking for an easy target. Houses suspected of harboring Orlesians had been attacked and set afire. That last was intolerable, for fire could easily spread out of control.

They had five prisoners in custody, and two of them were unconscious and not expected to survive. Anora remained at the Arl of Denerim's estate, both for her safety and because there was so much to do here.

There was a grim tally of dead and wounded. Anora knew she must have been the prime target of the assassins. They had failed in that, but the blow was still a damaging one. Five Fereldan banns were dead on the scene: Loren, Reginalda, Grainne, Walden...and Bann Ceorlic, too. Alfstanna, like Arl Urien, might die yet.

There were no wounds found on Ceorlic, nor did he bear the signs of poison. It was possible that the man's heart had given out in the terror of the moment. Without a competent Healer, who could say? He was, one way or another, quite dead. His heir was somewhere in the Free Marches.

Others had died, too: wives and sons and daughters of members of the Landsmeet. Some of those wounded would die, and some would never be the same: lamed or disfigured.. Bryland was griefstricken about his sister, and beside himself with worry about his little boy. Where was Wynne?

The guards she sent to the Palace came back with servants, healing herbs, and linen, but no Healer.

"Majesty," one of the the guardsmen said urgently, "We could not find Mistress Wynne. We have a witness that she was taken away earlier in the day."

"Taken! What do you mean? Where is this witness?"

The witness was a cleaning maid named Meggy, terrified at being taken before the Queen. It was some time before she could manage to speak.

"If it please your Majesty, I was washing the window above the south door, when I saw that lady step out to walk around to the Wardens' Compound where she'd been staying. We were told she was supposed to be here, and that we were not to trouble her. All the same, we did see her. They said—" the girl's voice dropped to a whisper, "that she was a *mage*."

"Go on, Meggy."

"Well, I saw the Templars standing on either side of the door, and they were Templars, after all...."

Anora raised a brow, waiting.

The girl said, "One of them raised his hand up high, and when the lady went through the door, she fell down. Then they grabbed her and started dragging her away. She must have done something wrong, because one of the templars bashed her head with the pommel of his sword and she lay still after that."

Anora's eyes grew larger. Her gaze hardened into a glare. The girl trembled.

"How many of them were there?" asked Anora.

A pause, and the girl looked at the ceiling in thought and counted on her fingers.

"Four," she said, satisfied with her arithmetic. "There were four of them. They were big."

"Could you recognize them?"

"They were Templars, Your Majesty," the girl whimpered. "They had their big helmets on."

Wynne might be injured. She might well be dead. Anora swallowed her fear and rage, and dismissed the girl. She then summoned two knight of the royal guard.

"Go to the Cathedral," she ordered them. "Request, in my name, that Mistress Wynne, the Healer assigned by the Grey Wardens to attend me, be released to your custody immediately. Tell the Grand Cleric I would consider it a very great favor, as there are dozens of people wounded here at the Arl of Denerim's estate: wounded by Orlesians assassins and by her Templars, in their haste to flee the scene. If she says no, tell her there will be consequences. The first of them is that if I cannot see Mistress Wynne, then I insist on seeing *her*—the Grand Cleric. At once."

She had always thought herself so clever. She had scoffed at Father's ranting on the subject of Orlesians, thinking him behind the times, but what had he said that was not true? Father had *told* her—he had warned her again and again that the Chantry was in the pocket of Orlais. The Chantry had

betrayed Ferelden and collaborated during the Occupation. Individual priests might be fine people—like Mother Ailis—but the Chantry leadership's loyalty would always be to Orlais. It would be interesting to hear what the Grand Cleric said.

She sat down abruptly, feeling exhausted. What would become of her, without Wynne's healing spells? Another, terrifying thought flitted through her mind. How much did the Chantry know about Erlina and her poisons? The Grand Cleric, she suspected, knew something about Cailan's plan to put her aside. What else did she know?

Some of the walking wounded, like Bann Sighard, had gone home to their houses here in the city. Others, like Arl Bryland's little boy, were too hurt to move. Arl Urien himself had taken to his bed—and not to consummate his marriage. His wound was either going bad, or it had been poisoned. Habren had been stowed away, like an unwanted pet, in an upstairs chamber, and locked in for her safety. A few servants had crept out, and were now trying to clean the site of the attack. The wedding presents—some of them badly damaged—had been taken to a strongroom.

Anora knew she must get a message to Father. This was the worst time possible—and the Orlesians no doubt knew it—but she needed Father and some of his troops back in the capital as quickly as they could manage it. If she were to have it out with the Grand Cleric, and if things went wrong...well, the Grand Cleric commanded a very large armed force of her own.

The ciphered note was written, and then the courier summoned and entrusted with the message. He was sent off with instructions to get to Ostagar as fast as fresh horses could carry him there. Another courier was sent to find Teyrn Fergus. Wherever he was, he was closer than Father.

The room spun, and Anora put her head in her hands, feeling drained. Wynne's spells had kept her from realizing how badly damaged she was. If she already felt so weak, what would she feel like tomorrow?

It would be a provocation, but if Wynne did not soon make her appearance, Anora might offer blanket amnesty to any secret mages in Denerim, offering them protection from the Chantry in exchange for their services.

The Chantry....

If the Grand Cleric would not come to her, Anora would go to the Cathedral.

Ser Blayne Faraday, the commander of Gherlen's Halt, had just experienced a miracle. He was not dead, as he had expected to be only hours before.

The infiltrators had been clever, and got into the outer keep disguised as merchants. Once there, they had ruthlessly slaughtered the guards on duty and had launched a surprise attack on the inner keep: an attack that had almost succeeded.

Was this a declaration of war? The attackers were clearly Orlesian, and clearly well funded. They were not, however, given support from the Rock—or at least not visible support. De Guesclin had sent no messages, and had not replied to the herald sent by Faraday.

The chief means of Faraday's salvation was now sitting opposite him at his table, wolfing down mutton hash with every sign of relish. Faraday had never met Ser Norrel Haglin before—never really heard of him either—but Haglin had saved his life, and the lives of the survivors of the Halt.

"We'll have to send another courier after the first," he remarked, "or Loghain will think the Orlesians are invading."

"Maybe they are," Haglin grunted. "Maybe they're being cagey about it."

"No papers on any of them, and the leader's dead. I have my men mounting some heads on the walls, facing the Rock."

Haglin grunted again, this time in appreciation. "Sound idea. Show them what to expect, the bastards." He sighed and sat back, thinking it over. "I'm supposed to be on my way to Ostagar, but my men need time to rest, and the wounded—" There was little point in speaking of his dead. He had lost seventy-seven men in the engagement, and over a hundred were unfit to march. The fact that the Rock had not come out in force to support the attack was intriguing. Perhaps the Empress did not want all-out war; but simply wanted to make trouble for her neighbor when it was already racked by

darkspawn and civil unrest.

Faraday shook his head. "I don't mind saying that I'd prefer if you could see your way clear to stay here for the time being. I'll explain in the message to the courier. Loghain's got a big dwarven army supporting him at Ostagar, brought to him by the Wardens. The Cousland girl was here back in the summer after arranging it."

"The Girl Warden," Haglin said. "Never met her, myself. Knew her father, of course."

"Fine girl. Has the greenest eyes you ever saw. My couriers tell me she brought in some of the Dalish clans to scout for the army." Faraday did not divulge other gossip related by the couriers. Something was going on between the Girl Warden and the Hero of River Dane. What with the King's death and the uncertainty about the succession, loose talk was unwise. Who knew who the next king—or queen—would be?

The puppy was very tired, and bruised along the left ribs where a strange-smelling man had kicked him. The man had bad manners, not understanding that the puppy was hungry and had traveled a long way, searching for his Boy. No one had ever begrudged him food before. At Home, the puppy was given the best of everything, and ate from his own plate by the Boy's side. People were always giving him food. The Boy's littermate, whom the puppy liked almost as well as his Boy, slipped him treats under the table. The Boy's sire was generous, too, and his bark was always friendly.

The females of the pack were not so pleasant. The old one only ignored the puppy, or complained that he was dirty, which was a wicked lie, indeed. The young female who covered her natural, ready-to-mate smell with strange flower odors hated him, but was higher-ranking in the pack than the puppy. He could not bite her, and so he gave her a wide berth, and never tasted the treats she tried to offer him: the ones that looked juicy and bloody, but smelled of bad things.

His Boy had gone away and left him with the lowest-ranking members of the pack; the ones he was not allowed to growl at or bite, but who were otherwise beneath his notice, unless he wished to find a snack. Bored, the puppy decided to find his Boy, and had slipped away from Home, with the foolish humans running after him, yelling nonsense. The trail was easy to follow, but many strange people crossed his path. Some saw him and wanted to make friends, barking in a friendly fashion and rubbing his ears pleasantly, but they were not his Boy. Some small people wanted to play, and that would have been amusing, had the puppy not been on an important mission.

He licked his chops. The human had succeeded in kicking him, but the puppy had made off with the plucked chicken. It was quite good, though the puppy preferred his food cooked, just like the Boy's.

He met some other dogs, too; but they were uncouth, and their talk was entirely composed of crude threats. The puppy prudently quickened his pace to evade them.

At last he reached a wide courtyard that reeked of horse. The pack's horses had been here, but the Boy had left them and gone in through the big door. The puppy trotted to the door, and waited until it was opened. All doors opened eventually.

Once it did, it took no time at all to find the Boy, or rather the inside door that kept them apart. He whined and nosed until that door, too, opened.

"Killer!" Corbus jumped down from his chair and ran to meet the barking puppy. "Shh!" he told the mabari, very seriously. "We have to be quiet. Lothar's hurt."

When Bronwyn met with Alistair to tell him what intelligence had been gleaned from the elven assassins, he was fairly horrified at the punishment she suggested.

They walked along the crumbling stonework of Ostagar Bridge. As the weather turned colder, the green moss on the south side of the stones had withered and turned brown. A chill wind, presaging winter, cut through the mountains. The two Wardens talk in quiet voices, not wishing to be overheard. Even so, plenty of soldiers leaned close as they past, hoping to hear more about the upheaval that had shaken the camp.

"What?" Alistair stood staring at Bronwyn for a long moment, and then shook his head. Then he came close and took her by the shoulders.

"Grey Wardens protect people. They don't give them to the

darkspawn, no matter *what* they've done."

Rage soared up to the top of Bronwyn's head again. Did Alistair not understand what these assassins had tried to do?

"They don't care that I'm a Grey Warden! Or you either, for that matter. Those wicked fools don't care about the Blight. All they cared about was murdering Loghain and me."

"But they didn't."

Alistair gave her a hug, and Bronwyn first punched his shoulder, and then resigned herself to the fact that hitting him on his armor was ineffective. She half-heartedly hugged him back.

She growled, "Calling them 'wicked fools' is almost a compliment. They were quite happy to give all of Ferelden to the darkspawn, as long as they accomplished their mission. One of the women won't talk at all, one managed to kill herself, and the two others still don't see that they did anything wrong aside from being caught. It's all part of the Great Game, to them. They know they lost, but they don't see the Game as evil in itself."

"Do we know the Empress sent them?"

"If you mean: did she give them their orders personally?—of course not. That was left for underlings, but I don't doubt the mission originated within the highest circles. The younger one is the most talkative, but of course she was only told what she

needed to know. She did say that she had nosed out that the seventh of Harvestmere was to be a 'great day for Orlais.' It's possible they're up to something else, but all we can do is send a courier to Anora to tell her what happened and that we're all right."

"No more about dumping them in the Deep Roads," Alistair told her sternly. "You know that's wrong. Every Warden knows that's wrong. You might get some of us to do what you said, but we'd always remember it."

"Loghain will insist they be executed. They don't deserve any mercy."

"Who does?" He reached for the little silver Sword of Mercy she wore around her neck. "I'm flattered that you wear this, what with all the fine jewels you've got now. Just remember that it's more than just a trinket."

She hissed with annoyance, but could not meet his mild brown gaze. Had the Guardian of the Gauntlet foreseen this? Were all his admonitions in preparation for her to be just and honorable even—and perhaps *especially*—when her own life was threatened?

"Duncan told me once—" Alistair spoke in the soft voice he used when talking about his mentor. "He told me that there was this thief in Orlais who killed a Grey Warden. Commander Genevieve could have had the man executed, but instead she conscripted him to take the dead man's place!"

"Oh, Alistair!" Bronwyn groaned with laughter. "Tell me you're not seriously proposing putting those women through the Joining!"

He made a face. "I suppose not. Being a Warden is an honor, not a punishment! But Commander Genevieve did it. Duncan told me about it when I gave him a hard time about poor Daveth. You remember him—the one who died at your Joining?"

"I'm hardly likely to forget *that!*" Bronwyn replied tartly.

"I guess the point Duncan was making was that when you become a Grey Warden, it's sort of like being born again. Nothing wrong you did in your past life matters. What matters is being the best Warden you can be."

Bronwyn snorted, and then punched Alistair's shoulder again. She had heard him on the subject of Duncan before, and while she did not share Alistair's admiration for the man, she had no desire to spoil Alistair's fond memories of the only man ever to be a true father to him.

On the other hand, there was a rough justice about the idea of subjecting those assassins to the anguish and peril of the Joining that pleased her. Not that they could be trusted in the least. If she were to undertake such a scheme, the assassins would have to be watched carefully. These were not random street thieves, who might well be glad of a Warden's stipend and a roof over their heads: these were dedicated agents of the Orlesian Empire. It was unlikely they would forego their

primary mission merely because they also felt an overwhelming urge to kill darkspawn.

Alistair was right, of course; most of her Wardens would be scandalized at the idea of execution by darkspawn. Not all: she was almost certain that Astrid would back her. However, there were ways and ways. The women would have to win their vial of darkspawn blood—dangerous enough even in the best of times. If they succeeded in that, the Joining might well still be fatal. If they became Wardens...well, Bronwyn would have to find a mission for them that they could perform without endangering other people. Probably a mission involving fighting a great many darkspawn.

And best of all, Bronwyn herself would gain a reputation for high-minded mercy. A reputation she might not at all deserve, true; but she would gain it nonetheless. The idea really was worth considering. Perhaps Loghain should sentence them to death first, and then...

"Give them a *choice*?" Loghain snarled. "Are you mad?"

"No," Bronwyn said, her mind intent on the prospect. "I don't want to conscript them. When you sentence them to death, I wish to give them the choice: death, or life as a Grey Warden. That way they cannot say, even to themselves, that they were coerced. And Loghain, I assure you, even were they to run away this very night, they will someday end their lives in the Deep Roads."

He hated that reminder of how the Grey Wardens had circumscribed the limits of Bronwyn's life. Surely something could be done about it eventually. But they were talking about the assassins.

"So..." he considered. "A bit of theatre to entertain the troops. Not immediately, though. Conscript your fifty Wardens beforehand. Besides, I want to question these women a little longer." Unexpectedly, he smiled. "Forget them for the moment. I have a present for you."

Bronwyn was quite pleased, and immediately envisioned a glittering betrothal ring. The chest Loghain pointed to, however, was rather too big to contain nothing but a ring.

Inside was a suit of armor. *Loghain*, Bronwyn sighed to herself. *This is a totally Loghain sort of present.*

And it was amazing armor: dark red in color, and chased with gold. Was it enameled? No, it was...

Bronwyn stood up, blinking.

"This is Flemeth, isn't it?"

Loghain considered the question. "Well...yes, mostly. It would have a scandalous waste not to make use of a High Dragon. You think your witch will object to this disposal of her mother's remains?"

Bronwyn burst out laughing, and pressed her hand to her

mouth, trying to stop. To her surprise, Loghain laughed a little, too.

She said, "It's awful, if you think about it. Flemeth's bone and scale and skin... Still, it's absolutely magnificent armor. Is this Master Wade's work?"

Loghain came over to admire it. "Yes. I told him that it had to be completed by the Landsmeet, but apparently he was inspired. It arrived in today's supply train. Wade had your measurements already, but I had that mage girl of yours measure your armor just to be certain. And I even had him make a ridiculously old-fashioned Grey Warden helmet for you."

He lifted it from the chest and set it on her head, rolling his eyes as she drew her sword to see her reflection. The wings fanned back dramatically, and the helmet did not feature a simple nasal, but a half mask that surrounded her eyes and protected her nose. The designs and gilded edgings were superb.

"There now," he murmured. "You are a true warrior queen."

Bronwyn told Morrigan about the armor first, and in private. She was rather nonplussed when the witch broke into a wild cackle of laughter, and then she laughed herself, a little ruefully.

"So you are not offended—"

"If you go about wearing *Mother*? 'Tis all one to me... No, I confess it. I am amused at the idea. A peculiarly just kind of revenge. Perhaps I should demand a share of the dragonhide from the Teyrn! 'Twould be quite the inheritance!"

The chest of armor was brought to the Wardens' quarters, and exclaimed over. And then Bronwyn had to put it on, so she could be exclaimed over again. She did some exclaiming herself, for the armor fit her as no armor had before. The thought of wearing it outside the following day was rather daunting, since she would attract more eyes than if she walked naked through the camp.

So, instead, she wore it down to dinner, so everyone could get their gossiping over with; and in that magnificent armor, she made her official request to the leaders of the armies for Grey Warden levies: twenty from the dwarves and humans, and ten from the Dalish elves. The candidates were to be brought to her the following morning for her approval.

As the afternoon progressed, Anora grew more and more worried about her physical state. Wynne had warned her against overexerting herself, but today's events had made it impossible to do anything else.

Her messengers to the Cathedral were back rather soon, with bad news. The Grand Cleric was unavailable, having need of a nap after the horrors at the Arl of Denerim's estate. Revered Mother Gertrude, her assistant, did not know this "Wynne," the Queen wrote of, and so was quite unable to be

of assistance. Perhaps, in a few days, the matter could be sorted out.

"I *told* them, Your Majesty," her officer insisted. "I told them that was no sort of answer, and that people were dying here. I gave her your message, just as you ordered. The priest said she was very sorry to hear about the wounded, and that they would be prayed for directly." He saw the wrath building behind Anora's eyes, and repeated, "I *told* them..."

"Gather your men," Anora said crisply. "There is no time to lose. And have my carriage brought round. You will escort me to the Cathedral. I am going there myself."

A few days! Anora fought down panic. As weak and ill as she felt now, how would she feel in 'a few days?' The Grand Cleric must be made to see reason, and she must see it before it was too late.

She told Bryland where she was going, and refused his escort.

"No, my lord. You are needed here. Someone must reason with the Grand Cleric, and someone must maintain order in the city."

Bryland looked at her with the grimmest expression she had ever seen on that pleasant man's face.

"If the Grand Cleric," he said slowly, "is denying my son the services of a Healer capable of saving his life, she and every

priest and every brother and sister in Ferelden will answer to me. Yes, and every Templar too, swords and helmets and all. Perhaps it is I who should *reason* with the Grand Cleric."

Anora wondered for a moment if he was right, and then decided to hold to her original plan.

"The Grand Cleric can hardly refuse me to my face, and I wish to deal with her peaceably. I expect to return shortly. However," she lowered her voice. "If the Grand Cleric cannot produce my Healer, I have resolved to offer amnesty to apostates here in Denerim. The Grand Cleric presumed too much when she sent Templars to arrest my personal Healer."

The carriage arrived, and Bryland handed her in, unconvinced and concerned. "I advise you to take a larger guard, Your Majesty. Those Orlesians might still be out there in the streets."

In the end, she took a sizable company with her, and set off to beard the Grand Cleric in her den. The crowded bridge slowed her down, armed guard notwithstanding. There was unrest in the streets, but plenty of townsfolk cheered her as she passed. Even upset as she was, Anora made an effort to wave and smile. It was actually a good move, she thought, to show herself unafraid, and to assure the people that she was safe and unharmed.

When she finally arrived at the Cathedral, it was very late in the afternoon, and when she saw the number of Templars stationed at the doors, she began to wonder if she had not

been a little—impetuous. The doors, in fact, were shut. If the Grand Cleric refused her admittance, it would be an insult...a blow to her prestige...even a humiliation. She was here, though, and could not turn back. She sent a herald ahead to announce her, and stepped down, determined to find out what had become of Wynne.

Revered Mother Gertrude met her, and seemed civil enough. Anora had dealt with her before and had found her cool but efficient. She was escorted into the Cathedral, along with a half-dozen of her guardsmen, and then was ushered into a private study, while her men waited outside.

"Her Grace is not well, Your Majesty," the priest assured Anora. "Not well at all. She's not a young woman, and the violence today was a great shock to her."

"It was a great shock to us all," Anora said smoothly. Her head was throbbing, and it was all she could do to sit up straight. "I have come from the Arl of Denerim's estate, where there are many wounded. A Healer is needed as soon as possible. There appears to have been an unfortunate mistake. Senior Enchanter Wynne, the Healer sent to Denerim by the Grey Wardens to study records of past Blights kept in the royal library, was accosted by a band of Templars and taken away. Her services are required immediately."

"I regret to inform Your Majesty," the Revered Mother replied, equally smoothly, "that you have been the victim of a scandalous crime. The Apostate Wynne was arrested today, and is suspected of causing the death of your husband, His

Majesty King Cailan, by means of the vilest Blood Magic."

Anora's eyes flashed, but she kept her voice level. "I cannot imagine how such an accusation came to be made," she said, "as both my father and the Warden-Commander were at the King's deathbed, and informed me quite positively that he died of Blight disease. So have all the witnesses, in fact. In addition, I was told that *Senior Enchanter Wynne* did her utmost to care for him. As the Warden-Commander must be considered the final authority on matters pertaining to the Blight, it is obvious that *Senior Enchanter Wynne* is quite innocent of any wrongdoing. Furthermore, as she is bound to obey the Warden-Commander by the Grey Warden Treaty of Divine 1:15, I fail to see how she can possibly be accused of apostasy. I would like to see her now, if you please."

"As much as I regret to discommode Your Majesty in the slightest," said the Revered Mother, "I fear that is impossible. The apostate was killed trying to escape."

A pause. Anora had tried to ignore the possibility, but the priest's cold words lay heavy in the silence. Anora knew exactly what "killed trying to escape" meant. Wynne, that gentle-voiced Healer, had been hunted down and put to death by the Templars with no more compunction than they would have felt in swatting a gnat.

Anora stared at the smug priest, and then staggered to her feet, overcome with shock and fear. Spots swam before her eyes; her legs did not seem strong enough to support her. For a moment Anora felt she was already dying.

"Murdered, you mean!" she burst out. "Four Templars were seen beating her savagely in the Palace courtyard! How odd, how very odd that the finest Healer in Denerim should be murdered by Templars just hours before the nobility of Denerim was attacked by the Orlesians!"

The Revered Mother rose too. Anora saw her in a blur, the gaunt figure dancing and swaying like the flame embroidered on her robes. The priest's voice came from a great distance.

"Your Majesty is ill. This is likely the work of the Blood Mage as well. We shall investigate it thoroughly. In the meantime, perhaps your Your Majesty should rest..."

Rest. Anora tried to call out to her guard, but crumpled to the stone floor instead.

Anora's courier met Fergus' party on the North Road in the late afternoon—too late to press on to Denerim immediately. The news he gave them was grave: assassins had attacked the Arl of Denerim's wedding. The Queen was safe, but many others were dead, including allies of the Couslands. Bryland's sister had been killed, and his little boy had been shot, and might be dead by now.

"Arl Urien was wounded, too. The bride's all right, as far as I know," the courier said. He gave Fergus the Queen's note, and then was told to join the Teyrn's party. They would gallop for Denerim at first light.

The Dalish brought their ten to Bronwyn first, early the next morning. Merrill introduced them, and the young elves before her seemed resigned to their fate. Bronwyn was sadly reminded of the Legion of the Dead, and how their families bade them farewell and gave them their funeral rites, and then spoke of them as no longer among the living. One of the elves was a mage, in line to be a Keeper herself someday, and Bronwyn expressed her gratitude to the elves in making such a sacrifice. Velanna might prove very useful. The Dalish, Tara had told her, possessed a great body of magical lore that was unknown to the mages trained at the Circle. Velanna might also be able to learn shape-shifting, for which neither Tara nor Jowan had shown any aptitude. Both of them had come to the Circle so very young that their affinity for the natural world had been sundered, perhaps permanently. A Dalish mage, however...

Some of the twenty dwarves actually were members of the Legion of the Dead. Bronwyn had high hopes of them. One of them, Sigrun, was surprisingly chipper about it all. She had grown up in Dust Town, and was about Broasca's age. In fact, it was soon revealed that the two girls knew each other slightly.

The humans, too, were an interesting group. Seven of them had been in the battle the day before, and five were showing signs of Blight sickness. Becoming a Warden was now their only chance of survival.

Bronwyn felt a certain reluctance to engage any of the recruits closely, since many of them might well be dead in two days'

time. There were some fine fighters here, however; even some individuals who seemed capable of leadership. One of the captains among the regulars had actually volunteered.

Aveline Vallen's husband had been killed in a skirmish while Bronwyn had been on her quest for the Sacred Ashes. To Bronwyn's surprise, the man had been a Templar—one of those rare married Templars. Being unusually scrupulous in his duties supervising mages, he had gone with them into battle, which was something most Templars were not inclined to do. He had died, and his widow was still grieving. She had taken part in the battle against the Broodmothers, and Bronwyn gathered that the horror of it had hardened her resolve against the darkspawn. Good for her. It was better than running away to the north, which some of the women in the army were muttering about. Aveline was a tall, muscular redhead, who fought with sword and shield. Bronwyn viewed her as a potential asset, and hoped she survived the Joining.

Two of the Circle mages had approached Anders, wanting to be Wardens; looking upon it as their best chance of anything approaching freedom.

Niall, Bronwyn was informed, was an Isolationist. That particular mage fraternity held that mages would be better off living completely apart from "mundanes." As that seemed quite impossible in any conceivable version of the real world, he was willing to take a chance on the Wardens, so he never need return to the Circle and its cloistered life.

Petra was a fine Healer, Anders said. She was one of Wynne

protégées, and had got on with her far better than Anders had. That said, she felt she had something to offer the world, and felt she could serve best as a Warden. Bronwyn had always liked her, remembering that she had been the very first mage of the Circle to sign up for duty at Ostagar. Also, Petra hinted that she was not happy about the vicious slanders that the Revered Mother had uttered about Wynne. If she went back to the Circle, she would have to hear more of the same, and she was tired of it all.

Fifty-two recruits. Bronwyn sat down with Alistair and they organized six groups of ten or eleven. Each would be led by a Warden, and each party had a mage assigned to it. Anders and Morrigan would fly out in bird form and scout the Wilds for any bands of darkspawn they could find. If none could be located, everyone would go to the Blight Wound and enter one of the fissures, exploring it until they made contact with darkspawn enough to retrieve enough blood for the Joining.

But no. There were to be fifty-*three* recruits, because as Bronwyn finished her elaborate plans, Oghren came in, ready to volunteer. He was drunk of course, but as he usually was, Bronwyn saw no reason to dismiss what he was saying.

"Well, Commander, this is it. Oghren Kondrat, ready for a new adventure. I think the time has come..." he belched musically, "for me to try my hand at being a genuine Grey Warden. So," he flung his arms wide, "Take me!"

Through the doorway, Zevran grinned at her and gave her a thumbs-up.

They were led out that very afternoon. Bronwyn saw no reason to drag her feet. Three scattered bands of darkspawn had been located in the Wilds, and three of the Warden parties would be sent in pursuit. The other three would descend into the Blight Wound and hunt darkspawn there. The parties were to rendezvous at the old Warden outpost, where the Joining would take place. A few items were left at the spot. If recruits died at the Joining, Bronwyn felt she had a better chance of keeping it quiet at the outpost rather than in the middle of camp.

She was certainly not going to slack off while the recruits were risking their lives. She led one of the parties, choosing the more perilous underground mission. Perhaps she should be worried about more attempts on her life, but she refused to live her life in fear. Ironically, it was likely that she was safer from assassination in the Deep Roads than anywhere else. And now, of course, she had even better armor.

A party of ten was not too small to face the Deep Roads with hope of success. Bronwyn had faced Ortan Thaig with about the same strength, and brought them all back alive. Of course, three of the party had been mages, and that counted for a great deal.

But they had the advantage of Bronwyn's experience, and Anders thought well of Niall's abilities. There was Scout with them, utterly fearless. On the minus side, two of the recruits in the party were Dalish, and had never ventured underground before. For that matter, only one of the humans other than

Bronwyn had been below before, and that was the admirable Captain Aveline.

The three dwarves, of course, were perfectly at ease: alert and capable. It would be interesting to see how the various recruits in the different parties fared. Some would fight in an environment familiar to them, and some, like the dwarves with Danith out in the Wilds, would not.

Bronwyn's party would go through the fissure where they had burned the Broodmothers the day before, and this promised to be depressing and nasty. A secondary aim of the mission was to make certain they had destroyed all the Broodmothers' miserable offspring. At least all the members of the party had at least been told what a Broodmother was and what had happened yesterday. No one would experience the creeping, bewildering horror that Bronwyn had known in the Dead Trenches. Swiftly and surely, she led them to the site of yesterday's battle. The reek in the tunnels was horrific.

Some of the recruits were shaken by the sight of the spawning matter, even though they were prepared for it. Others, especially the humans, whispered to each other about the painful discoveries made here.

"—One of them was Mara Clery! Remember her? She was the second in Captain Mac Gough's company—the one who always won at Wicked Grace. We all thought she was dead, but the darkspawn had taken her, poor girl..."

The Broodmother cavern itself was a nightmare, but a danger

to spirit, rather than bodies. Shapeless mountains of charred, Tainted flesh remained, but they found nothing living there. A few trinkets, a few amulets glinted from the ashes. Aveline Vallen picked up a little gold pendant on a broken chain.

"This was Eliane Pentree's. See her name on the back? I'll give it to her lover. He'll be glad to have some sort of keepsake."

They were not there to grieve over what could not be helped, so Bronwyn pushed them on, feeling a faint scratching on her nerves that heralded darkspawn. It was not very strong, but it was what they had.

They moved through a series of tight passages and found a little cul-de-sac that showed signs of darkspawn habitation. And then they found the darkspawn: a quartet of hurlocks. Three were very ordinary creatures, one was not.

Vexing as it was, Bronwyn had to step back and let the recruits deal with the creatures, for this test was theirs, not hers. Niall had been in the south for several months, and had a good sequence of spells to use against darkspawn. Not at all to Bronwyn's surprise, Captain Vallen took the lead, fearlessly directing the fight with admirable skill and good sense. She was definitely a find.

Once it was over, everyone had a filled vial, and everyone was accounted for. Bronwyn ignored the uncomfortable sensations of darkspawn further along in the tunnels, and took her party back to face the Joining.

The Hawkes and their Grey Warden escort arrived at the Great Gate of Denerim, already alarmed by the news that people running the other way were telling them.

"Orlesians attacked the Arl of Denerim's wedding! Half the nobles in the kingdom are dead!" one excitable fellow gasped out. He took to his heels before they could find out more. Something quite terrible had happened, obviously. Some people said the Queen had been stabbed by a bard, and some said that Arl Bryland had been killed. Others disagreed, maintaining that it was Arl Urien who had been killed...or wounded...or was it his bride?

The women riding in the wagon looked at each other, wondering if they should try to enter the city at all.

"Come on," Carver finally said. "You'll all be safer behind the walls of Highever House than out here in the open. If it's really bad, you can stay at the Wardens' Compound. I'll go talk to the wagon captain."

That individual was going to Denerim, whatever the situation, since he had to deliver the wagons to be reloaded. Among themselves, the Wardens agreed that this was still the safest choice.

"The wagons turn south to cross the river," Jowan said, remembering the streets. "We'll take our leave there. It's only a short way up Gate Street to Highever House. We'll make sure your family's safe first, Carver, and then we can go to

the Palace and find out what's really happened."

"Yes," Leliana agreed. "Let's do that." She had become quite fond of the Hawkes—and Amells—on their journey north. Bethany, she discovered, played the lute very nicely, though she definitely needed more lessons. Charade had a good voice, and was a splendid archer. They were pleasant company, and she was looking forward to their projected shopping spree in the city. Now, of course, that might have to be postponed, if there was rioting in the city.

Once they entered Denerim, things seemed even more ominous.

"We have orders to search everyone coming into the city." The officer in command of the gate told Carver.

"We're Grey Wardens," Jowan said, with the mild confidence that looking down on people from horseback gave him. "And we have orders from the Warden-Commander and Teyrn Loghain to report to the Queen." He leaned out of the saddle to show the guard the letter of transit.

"Good luck with that," the officer grunted, impressed by the Teyrn's seal. "The Queen's been locked up in the Cathedral since last night. Arl Bryland's got the place surrounded. He's in charge of the city, as much as any one is right now."

"What!" Leliana stared at the man. "He would attack the Chantry?"

The officer narrowed his eyes at her accent. "The Templars turned on the Arl's guests. Killed a few of them, too. When the Queen went to the Grand Cleric to complain, they locked up her up. They say she's controlled by a Blood Mage, but Arl Bryland doesn't believe that. He thinks they're in league with the Orlesians. His own son's like to die, and he's not feeling very friendly to the Chantry at the moment."

"This is terrible!" Leliana gasped out.

Jowan already had a crawling suspicion as to what might be going on. 'Controlled by a Blood Mage'. Did they mean...*him*? Or—but this was absolutely insane—*Wynne*? He had better find Wynne right away. If the Queen was being held by the Chantry, she was not getting her treatments, and might be in a bad way... Or maybe...

He said, "Let's get Carver's family safe to Highever House, and then we'd better find Arl Bryland."

The streets were surprisingly deserted, and they were told by the few people they met that nearly everyone had gone to the Market to see what was happening. Carver pulled out the little map Adam had sent, and eventually they were at the gates of the courtyard outside Highever House. To their surprise, it was full of horses. Carver showed the letter, and the guard, reassured by their Grey Warden tunics, let them in.

"The Teyrn said the ladies would be along any day. Welcome, Grey Wardens. The Teyrn arrived a short time ago."

"He's here?" Carver slid from his horse, and hurried to help his mother down from the wagon. They made enough noise to attract the attention of those inside.

Adam came running out, a barking Hunter beside him, and swept Leandra up in a hug. "Mother!"

Teyrn Fergus stepped out into the courtyard, serious but welcoming, and introductions were in order. Leandra murmured in Adam's ear, and he gave a nod and quick grin.

"My lord Teyrn, I present to you my mother, Lady Amell, my sister Bethany Hawke, and my cousin Charade Amell. This lout is my brother, the Grey Warden Carver. I believe you already know Warden Leliana..."

"Yes, of course. Welcome to Highever House, my ladies. Wardens, you are most welcome, too." He looked at Jowan. "And a Warden I don't know..."

"Warden Jowan," Leliana supplied. "A very skilled Healer."

Fergus gave Jowan a nod. "Yes, I know of you from my sister's letters. A Healer! Well, you couldn't have come at a better time. There are wounded people at the Arl's estate who need help desperately, I understand. And the Queen..."

"I'm here to serve the Queen," Jowan said. "I'll help everyone else I can, but I need to see the Queen as soon as possible. We were going to go to the Market and report to Arl Bryland."

"I'm going there myself," Fergus said. "I just received a message from Bryland, apprising me of the situation. Obviously, they've gone mad at the Chantry, and I'll need to sort it out. Since the Queen is..." —he dropped his voice, eyes fixed on Jowan—"...unwell, any assistance you can give will be appreciated."

"But is it true, my lord?" Leandra wanted to know. "Was the Arl's wedding truly attacked by Orlesian bandits?"

"I don't know about '*bandits*,' my lady," Fergus said grimly. "But attacked it was, by assassins disguised as minstrels and tumblers."

Leliana's soft, pained gasp went almost unheard.

Fergus had more to say. "My cousin Bryland's sister was shot dead, and his little son gravely wounded. Bryland is sick with worry about him, and furious that he cannot be at his side because of the Chantry's outrageous conduct. At least five banns are dead. Many more were hurt, including the Arl of Denerim himself. Most of the badly wounded are still at the Arl of Denerim's estate."

Bethany burst out, "How cruel to hurt a little boy!"

Fergus nodded gravely. Adam had said his sister was pretty, and it was certainly not just a brother's partiality. A very pretty girl, indeed. In fact, all of Adam's womenfolk would brighten up Castle Highever considerably. Bethany was clearly a nice girl, too, with her heart in the right place.

"Cruel...yes, of course," he answered. "Even crueler is the Chantry's decision to keep healing from the wounded. The Queen was being attended by a Healer named Wynne, and we discovered that she was arrested the morning before the attack, leading Bryland to believe that there is some collusion there."

"Wynne's a prisoner?" Jowan knew that Wynne despised him, but she was a decent person, and old, and the Templars would...

Fergus said, "The last word Bryland had, the Chantry were denying all knowledge of her, but a witness saw Templars dragging her away from the Palace courtyard, so we know they're lying. Bryland has authorized a proclamation on behalf of the Queen that any apostate mage will receive amnesty if he or she will come forward to assist the wounded."

"Really?" Bethany said, not daring to glance at her brothers. "That's very...sensible of him."

The housekeeper came to see to Adam's family, and the rest of them prepared to set out for the Market. Short as the trip to the Market would be from here, Fergus, Adam, and the Wardens would go on horseback, which would give them visibility and authority. Fergus' soldiers would march with them. And there were others who volunteered.

"We would go with you, my lord. We know how to fight, and wish to help the brother of the Lady of the Wardens."

Fergus puzzled over the tall men with odd yellow eyes. Yes, these were the people Bronwyn had sent north, with orders that they be allowed to stay at Highever House and be put to work. Five men, three women, a young girl, and two young boys, all named Wolf and all with the same curious yellow eyes. It must run in the family. Bronwyn had left a note that the housekeeper had given to him with a long-suffering expression.

Fergus—

These unfortunates were under a curse, and have had a hard time. If you could find something for them, I believe they would serve you loyally.

I can practically see the look on your face, but do it anyway.

Love,

Bronwyn

Bronwyn and her heroics! These must be yet more people rescued by the Girl Warden. The housekeeper had told him that the Wolfs were hard-working enough, but *peculiar*. The men before him were all armed, and all protected with good leather armor. Why not take them along?

"It could be dangerous," Fergus told them, "but as you wish."

They set off for the Market, the soldiers shouldering a path through the crowds. The tower of the Cathedral rose high

above them, guiding them to the mass of soldiery barring access or egress to anyone.

"Fergus!"

Fergus dismounted and clapped his older cousin on the shoulder, concerned at the dark circles under the man's eyes, and the lines of bitter anger on his face.

"I'm here," said Fergus, "and the city guard told me what happened. I am very sorry about Werberga, Leonas. Is Lothar any better?"

"I don't know!" Bryland snarled. "I'm here, trying to sort things out with the Chantry, who have bloody *abducted* the Queen and locked themselves in, thinking there's nothing we dare do about it!" He waved irritably at the massive building. "I've sent to Fort Drakon for a battering ram. I hope it doesn't come to it, but I can't let the Grand Cleric thumb her nose at us. And Maker knows what they've done to the Queen."

"Why did she even put herself in this situation?"

Bryland blew out an exasperated breath. "I advised her against it. I suppose she thought they wouldn't dare defy her. She was coming to fetch her Healer, and the next thing we know, we're told she's under the influence of Blood Magic, and requires prayer and purification! They arrested the Healer just before the wedding. What a coincidence!" He jerked his head over to a knot of men guarding a prisoner.

"That priest was sent out to tell us to go about our business like good boys and girls. Mother Heloise is her name."

"I want to talk to her," Fergus said.

"Come on, then."

Fergus eyed the woman up and down. She seemed perfectly calm, and not at all alarmed by the presence of a mob of armed men. Of course, a priest *would* be accustomed to ordering mobs of armed men about. The Templars, Fergus assumed, would be inside the Chantry, barricading it against attack.

"What have you done with the Queen?" Fergus asked shortly. "Where is she?"

"Where she is safe from malign influence," the priest declared smugly. She pointed to a small window, high above them. "In the tower chapel."

Bryland snarled with baffled rage, but Fergus only laughed. The older man was surprised at the smirk on the Teyrn's face.

"I'll need a rope," Fergus said, "and a grappling hook."

Thanks to my reviewers: Notnahtanha, Aoi24, MsBarrows, BandGeekNinja, Zute, KrystylSky, Oleander's One, JackOfBladesX, Hydroplatypus, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, sizuka2, Judy, Mike3207, riverdaleswhiteflash, Anime-

StarWars-fan-zach, butterflyrrl, Remenants, EpitomyofShyness, Kira Kyuu, MisterSP, Tikigod784, KnightOfHolyLight, Josie Lange, Costin, Halm Vendrella, BlackCherryWhiskey, Jenna53, Jyggilag, almostinsane, Have Travel, Biff McLaughlin, Tirion, mille libri, and WhosAmandaPhillips.

To Butterflyrrl: You were not logged in, so I could not respond to you privately. Your points about the questionable validity of information gained by torture are perfectly valid. I was not expressing my own opinions in the chapter, but the opinions of Loghain and Bronwyn. We know from canon that Loghain has no problems whatever with gaining information by torture.

As for Anora, we know from canon that she can impulsively put herself into danger, presuming that no one would dare harm her.

61. The Golden Bowl

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 61: The Golden Bowl

Corbus Bryland was awakened by Killer walking on his chest. Instantly he was miserably aware that it was not just a bad dream. He was not at home. He could smell blood and herbs and voided urine, and wrinkled his nose, wondering if he could make it go away if he slept some more. Maybe if he wished *hard*, Father would come and fix things. He wondered why his tutor, Master Cletus, hadn't come to look after Lothar. Wasn't that his job?

He asked as much of a servant boy his own age. The boy was eager to share his own gruesome imaginings. "I expect it's too dangerous for him to come, with the Orlesians rampaging through the streets. I hear they're shooting anybody they catch." Corbus ended the conversation there, frightened at the image of Father being killed by those people in bright motley.

He and Lothar had been put in a room with the other wounded people, but at least Lothar had been given a bed. Bann Alfstanna had one, too; up against the far wall. She hadn't made a sound since they carried her in. And they said that Arl

Urien was dying, off in his own great chamber. Habren wouldn't like that. Corbus wondered if Habren would come home and live with them now. Then he thought of Aunt Werberga and sniffled. She had been fussy, and Habren was her favorite, but she had always been a part of his life. When they didn't bring her here, Corbus understood that she was dead. The servants said they were putting the dead people somewhere else. Corbus had seen the quarrel sticking out of her chest, and all the blood. Would they take the quarrel out or leave it in when she was burned?

Many people were lying on the floor, on straw pallets or blankets. A servant had gone around giving the wounded a drink of something to help them sleep, and Corbus had been allowed to help. Then more people had come to wash the wounds and bandage them. Bann Alstanna never woke when they bandaged her. Her face was all grey and twisted. The servants shook their heads, and told Corbus that since her insides were hurt, there was nothing more they could do for her.

Lothar had cried and screamed when they pulled out the quarrel, and then they had given him more of the sleepy drink. Corbus was tired and sick after that, and he had curled up next to his brother and fallen asleep without needing any special medicine.

He could hear Lothar's breathing beside him. He blinked his eyes open, ashamed to fall asleep during the day like a baby. He blinked again at the pretty young face looking down at him.

"I'm Bethany," the girl said. "I'm here to heal your brother."

"My little sister could *die!*" Irminric hissed, glancing around the great nave of the Cathedral for eavesdroppers. His friend and fellow Templar, Ser Otto, put a calming hand on his shoulder, and pulled him into the shadows.

"We have prayed to the Maker for her," Otto soothed him. "That is all we can do for now. That, and watch."

The forces of Chantry were on guard against the outside world, but also against one another. A hum of voices reverberated from floor to ceiling, punctuated by the occasional sharp cry or angry shrilling. Revered Mother Gertrude had declared that they were in no danger. The Queen was here, being rigorously examined for magical influences. Arl Bryland was outside, his mind unhinged by the terrible events of the day; but he would respect the sanctity of the Chantry. Not everyone agreed with her, but no one had challenged her publicly. Yet.

Ser Irminic, elder brother of Bann Alfstanna of Waking Sea, and heretofore a loyal Templar, was one of the foremost doubters. His faith had been sorely shaken by the heartless behavior of Knight-Commander Tavish, who had ordered his men to force their way through the crowd at the Arl of Denerim's wedding, injuring and wounding a number of people. They could have stayed and fought the assassins; they could have protected the weak and helpless. Tavish, however, felt that it was a political, secular matter, and that

his chief responsibility was Her Grace's safety.

It was all hearsay, of course. Irminric had been put out, early that morning, to find that he was not to be included in the Grand Cleric's honor guard at the wedding. He had thought he would be a logical candidate, due to his high birth. He had even looked forward to it, anticipating spending time with his sister. Instead, Irminric had been ordered to remain in the Cathedral for the day.

Alfstanna was a brilliant bann: strong, fair-minded, sensible. Irminic acknowledged this. He had never held their father's decisions against her, even when they entailed Irminic's relegation to the Chantry. He had not wanted to be a Templar, but he had submitted to his father's will and the will of the Chantry. Why was he being shunted aside now?

"Maybe Tavish knew something was going to happen," murmured one of the younger Templars. "Maybe it was all *planned*."

"Stennis," one of the young man's friends whispered back, "you'll get in trouble, talking like that."

A pair of young priest-initiates passed the Templars, fair faces flushed red. They hurried away to find a more private place to exchange confidences.

Irminric had always hated politics. It was one of the main reasons his father had made Alfstanna the heir.

"They'll eat you alive at the Landsmeet, boy,"

Poor Father. He, like so many others, never realized that Landsmeet politics were a game of ninepins compared to what went on within the Chantry.

Within the Chantry, everyone agreed that there was but one Maker, and Andraste was His Prophet. Everyone agreed on the importance of restraining and controlling mages.

Beyond that, it was a snakepit of warring factions and furious accusations of heresy, impiety, sacrilege, doctrinal impurity, and heterodoxy. Debates raged on the nature of Andraste's divinity, on the number of children she had borne to Maferath, on the divisive issue of whether elves, dwarves, or Qunari had souls in the truest sense of the word. Had Andraste's mortal body experienced physical death, or had she been translated before Hessarian's blow was struck? Had Andraste in fact *been* mortal in the usual sense of the word? *That* issue had sparked angry controversy and the assassinations of highly-placed priests.

And it was a fact that priests and Templars, sisters and brothers, were sometimes all too human. Revered Mothers had taken lovers and embezzled Chantry funds; Templars had abused their power over mages in disgraceful ways; initiates of both sexes ran away with peddlers or mercenaries or each other. There was that terrible scandal a few years ago, when it was discovered that an entire monastery in a remote part of northern Orlais had resorted to outright banditry and extortion. All attempts to suppress the facts had failed—at least within

the Chantry itself. The Knight-Commander involved had been executed, and the foundation broken up. The women and young boys held there were paid off to ensure their silence, and then sent abroad for decency's sake.

In Ferelden, the most burning issue was the relationship of the Chantry to the secular government of Orlais, where the Chantry had been founded. Val Royeaux and its Grand Cathedral were the heart of the Chantry. Templars, when their minds and bodies grew debilitated from lyrium, retired to the hospice there. Priests dreamed of the lucrative administrative positions to be had, close to the Divine herself. To achieve such a high position, one had to toe the line of orthodoxy and obedience very strictly.

Of course, no Fereldan priest could dream of being named Divine. That position had been held exclusively by Orlesians since the beginning. Because of that exclusivity, there were sometimes accusations that the Divine favored Orlais in matters not relating to the Chantry. During the Occupation—which any Chantry priest or Templar hoping for promotion must refer to as the Rebellion—the Grand Clerics of Ferelden had thundered denunciations of the Theirins and proclaimed their support for the Orlesian-born subject kings that had supplanted them. Mother Bronach had supported Meghren right up until the moment when Maric and his armies reached Denerim.

People in orders who had grown up as children of the Chantry might be able to swallow the Chantry's official version of recent history, but Irminric had been raised in a noble

household, and had heard tales of Meghren's deranged cruelties; and also of how members of the Chantry had spied and informed for the—call him by the right name—*usurper* and his toadies. It was impossible not to acknowledge, albeit only to himself, that the Chantry had played a shameful role in the conquest and subsequent oppression of his homeland. For obvious reasons, it was imprudent to speak openly of this, unless one wished to be posted to the Aeonar Prison indefinitely. Nevertheless, there were some vocally pro-Ferelden priests, like Mothers Perpetua and Boann. Mother Boann, of course, was dismissed by many as a radical, due to her ministry to the Alienage. Irminric might have dismissed her, too, had he not been made to see the value of her work by his best friend and fellow Templar, Ser Otto.

He could always confide in Otto. Otto loved the Chantry with a deep and abiding passion, but he loved the Chantry Triumphant, rather than the Chantry Mundane. That is to say, he loved the Chantry as it was in the mind of the Maker, rather than the worldly institution that was its pale reflection. It was all very mystical, and Irminric was not sure he always understood what Otto was saying, but he was sure that what Otto said ought to be true, because it was beautiful.

Young Stennis had slipped away, and then returned with a priest, Sister Justine.

"Tell them what you overheard!" the boy urged her.

Irminric liked Sister Justine. She was a nice, well-meaning woman, and Curator of Denerim Cathedral's archive of

manuscripts and religious artifacts. The Grand Cleric was fond of her, too, and because of that, Sister Justine had ready access to Her Grace. But not today.

Looking very uneasy, the priest whispered. "I believe that Her Grace has been drugged. She was not wounded when she returned, but she was given some wine to settle her nerves. I heard Mother Heloise speaking of it to Sister Collette. They wanted her to sleep, while they... 'did what needed to be done.' They thought it was best that Revered Mother Gertrude have control. I know they've always found Her Grace too... moderate." She looked briefly miserable. "Things would not have got to this pass if Her Grace were herself!"

Ser Stennis clearly agreed. "It doesn't help that half the Queen's guard overheard the argument between her and the Revered Mother. She all but accused the Revered Mother of foreknowledge of the attack. Something to do with the mage that Ser Gauthier and his team dealt with that morning. The Queen claimed the mage was sent to Denerim on the orders of the Grey Wardens, and wasn't it convenient that the only Healer in reach was arrested just hours before an attack that left so many badly wounded?"

Irminric licked his dry lips, thinking of his sister, and then of the healing powers of magic. "That's a very serious accusation."

Sister Justine said gravely, "If the mage was under the orders of the Grey Wardens, then dealing with her as an apostate is in clear violation of the ancient treaties. Ordinary laws do not

apply during a Blight."

"Of course," Irminric said, trying to think it through, "only scholars like you you know that. There hasn't been a Blight in four hundred years."

Sister Justine hated to be told—however indirectly—that she was the guardian of little-known and useless facts. "I am quite sure," she said, "that the Grand Cleric, the Revered Mothers, and the Knights-Commander are all cognizant of the treaties. I retrieved the Chantry copies and forwarded the appropriate clauses to all of them!"

"Ah," Ser Otto sighed, "but did they *read* them?"

"Is it possible," Irminric ventured, the words like lead, "that some individuals within the Chantry might actually..." he hesitated, "be—

"—agents of Orlais?" Otto bluntly finished his thought. "Not in so many words, I think. However, Mothers Gertrude and Heloise were born in Orlais, and love their country. That is only natural. They have brought many old colleagues with them from Orlais. Perhaps they genuinely feel that a union between our countries is the best hope for peace."

"That is putting a very generous construction on their acts," Sister Justine bristled.

"Many villains think themselves virtuous, and their enemies wicked," Otto replied mildly. "Does the Maker care about

nations and borders? I think not. No more than do the darkspawn."

A silence. Then Irminric said, "The Maker may not, but the Empress certainly does. We live in the world as it is, and Anora is Queen of this country. I do not think that the Revered Mother is acting in good faith."

"Well, then?" Otto raised his brows, face serene. "Just what are you prepared to do about it?"

The denizens of Denerim Market had not seen such entertainment in years. Arl Bryland had called in the City Guard and his personal militia, and they were lined up in front of the Chantry, demanding that the Grand Cleric release the Queen. Word was that the Arl had sent to Fort Drakon for a battering ram, and was going to storm the Chantry if the Grand Cleric defied him.

"Blessed Andraste!" a red-haired thief declared, in awe of the Chantry's gall. "I never thought I'd see the day when the Chantry would lock up the Queen! You suppose they're going to hold her for ransom?"

"Why did they do it?" a dwarf trader wondered. "Are they crazy?"

His father-in-law told him quietly, "Humans and their religion! Most of them will do anything a priest tells them. The Chantry killed the Viscount of Kirkwall outright and took over the city.

Maybe they think they can pull that off here."

"I'm sure the Grand Cleric has good reasons for anything she does..." an old woman murmured fretfully.

"Maybe those assassins have taken over in there," a man speculated. "They were disguised as minstrels before. Maybe they pretended to be priests and Templars and got in that way."

"Maybe the Chantry's in league with Orlais," a crippled old soldier said grimly. "We've seen it before."

There was a great deal of uneasy muttering.

"Do you suppose she could be a mage? Maybe they found her out..." whispered a nervous man in a hooded cloak. He carried a heavy walking stick with curious carvings. Arl Bryland had proclaimed that anyone with Healing skills would receive amnesty from the Crown, but the nervous man refused to be taken in by such a trick.

"Queen Anora? Teyrn Loghain's daughter?" scoffed a mercenary. "Never!"

"Look! Those are Grey Wardens!" came a shout. A confused clamor followed this, as people strained to admire the fabled heroes.

"Oh, is the Girl Warden there? Is it the redhead? She's pretty! I didn't know she was a redhead!"

"That's not her. Too short."

"Bugger. I wanted to see the Girl Warden..."

"Fine-looking lot, aren't they? That's quite a sword the tall one has."

"Who's the other big fellow?"

"That's the Teyrn of Highever!" declared a lounge. "I saw him at the Gnawed Noble! He gave me three silvers for holding his horse! What's he doing?"

People crowded close against the shields of guardsmen to see. The big man had climbed up on a low retaining wall beside the chantry and was swinging a rope in a slow circle, playing a little more out with every circuit. At the end of the rope was a grappling hook.

A woman with the reddened hands of a laundress and a fair but faded face bloomed with the glow of romance. "I know what he's going to do. He's going to rescue the Queen!"

The grappling hook held on the first try. Fergus grunted with relief, glad that he hadn't made a fool of himself in front of all Denerim. He could climb the rope up to the lower buttress, and then should be in striking distance of the top of the tower. Getting the hook up to the top of the tower would be easier and safer than trying to latch onto the window sill.

Climbing armed was no joke. Hand over hand, he pulled hard, boots pressed against the stone. No windows faced this way, so he should be safe from discovery, even though a cry was rising up from the crowd.

"A rescue! A rescue!"

He hoped so. He really did. If the priest had lied and Anora was somewhere else, Fergus was going to be very, very angry with whoever was in the tower chapel. Interesting that the crowd was not more favorably disposed to the Chantry. On the other hand, not so surprising. However much the Chantry spread their talk of the dangers of the magic, blood would tell, in the end. Nearly every Fereldan knew of a child who had been taken away by Templars, never to be heard of again. A large proportion of those children were someone's son or daughter; someone's niece or nephew or cousin or neighbor. There were places, certainly, where mages might be stoned to death on sight. There were more where apostates operated on the sly, tolerated by local lords and freeholders in exchange for healing or fighting or help tilling soil and breaking stones. Fergus knew his father had turned a blind eye toward hedge mages in Highever on more than one occasion. Was that why the Highever Chantry had been so complacent about the murder of the Couslands?

And old grudges died hard. During the Occupation, the Orlesians had squeezed taxes for themselves and generous tithes for the Chantry. Over the ensuing years, the Chantry had not won many friends with their incessant demand for coin and their interference in secular affairs. Fergus smiled grimly.

They had overreached themselves at last. The chickens had come home to roost, with a vengeance.

The wind was colder, up here above the ground. Fergus briefly wished he were a mage, like that luscious friend of Bronwyn's: the one who could turn into a bird and fly away at will. All of this could be so much easier that way. Except for the getting-down-with-the-Queen part. Fergus had a few ideas about that.

Obviously, it would be much pleasanter for everyone if they could just walk out the front door. The Chantry could save face, say that it was all a huge misunderstanding, and Anora would probably let some of it pass, after privately having the hides of the instigators. The Grand Cleric would probably have to retire to Val Royeaux "for her health," and a number of other prominent heads would roll. Then, alas, it would be back to business as usual in a few years.

But perhaps they would not be leaving by the front door. Fergus had allowed for that eventuality as well. He had some strong linen bandages tied around his waist. If the Queen was too ill to cling to him, he could tie her to him. It would be hellishly hard to manage, but he might have no choice. If she was completely unconscious, he would tie the rope around her and lower her down first. That could be tricky to do without bashing her against the side of the Chantry. One way or another, she had to be delivered to Jowan and his healing skills.

He swung out, close enough to the buttress to get a leg over.

The cheers were more distant now, blending with the wind. He gave the crowd a wave and then carefully stood on the top of the buttress, found a secure footing, and began circling the rope again for another throw. He wanted to place the hook above the window itself. The window was stained glass and did not open, so no one would see the rope though it. He hoped.

Another roar came from below, surging up like waves against the Cliffs of Conobar. A bronze battering ram, its head a snarling mabari, had arrived, drawn by two dozen oxen. The crowd rushed to help the soldiers, and as if on wings, the ram was being moved into position. There was a partial wall sheltering the Cathedral courtyard, but it didn't look likely to stand long.

Fergus released his grip just before the top of the arc, hope flying with hook and rope. The hook slid down the lead-sheathed roof with a brief, metal-to-metal squeal. The hook caught on the edge. Fergus yanked hard, and sent a prayer Andraste's way. He took a deep breath, and swung out again.

Glad that the tower was not smooth marble, but rough hewn stone, he set his boots firmly on the tower wall and walked cautiously to the side, making the quarter circuit he needed before climbing straight up again. He wondered what Cousin Leonas was doing now, but he knew better than to look down. He must make it to the window, and then he would have the element of surprise. Perhaps it would be enough.

There were candles: candles in pairs making a dazzle of gold on the stone wall. There was a pool of red and blue light on the floor. Anora stared at it, too tired to move her head. Her fingers reached toward the light, but could not quite manage the last few inches.

She was lying on a pallet in front of a little altar. Andraste soared above her on the wall, hands upraised, eyes rolled up to the Maker. It was quite impossible to attract her attention. Voices buzzed like horseflies around her, but Anora ignored them. No one would speak to her sensibly, and now it was nothing but buzzing. Her eyes were playing tricks on her: she was not sure if one priest or two was kneeling in front of the altar.

What had become of her clothes? Her fingers tugged, puzzled at the thin white linen shift. Had someone undressed her without her leave?

There had been a circle of eyes around her: some concerned, some sly and smug, some hostile, some fearful, some uneasy. They had withdrawn, and now there was nothing but distant buzzing. Anora did not recall seeing the Grand Cleric, but she was not sure that her memory was perfect at the moment, either. There had been a Templar, she was sure, because he had buzzed at her in much deeper tones, and his face had been hard and angry. He had gone away, and Anora was glad. She was now certain that she disliked Ser Tavish.

"...I detect no magic, but..."

"...It must be magic! There is no other explanation!"

"...Oh? It's not possible that she could simply be sick? And how are we to explain that the Queen died while in our custody? Her father will think we murdered her on orders from the Empress. Those he kills outright will be fortunate..."

*"...Here lies the abyss, the well of all souls.
From these emerald waters doth life begin anew.
Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you.
In my arms lies Eternity..."*

Louder than the buzzing was the beating of her heart; irregular and sluggish. Anora listened to it with detached interest. Things had certainly changed for the worse.

There was a scraping near the window. Idly, Anora pictured a raven, black feathers glossy, head cocked, eyes sharp in the autumn air. It would gather itself, and take wing...

A crash. The blue and red window splintered inwards in shards of rainbow light. Anora thought it very pretty. The buzzing about her shivered into screams.

Had the raven she imagined smashed against the glass? There was a black shape, silhouetted by the sunlight now streaming into the chapel. A man? A man had flown in through the window. That was...unusual, wasn't it?

A big warrior in armor. At first Anora thought it must be Father, come to find her. Hot tears of relief blurred her vision.

"What have you done to her?" the man shouted. "Get back!"

The frightened priests cringed away. One lunged for the door, and the warrior pounced ahead of her, cursing.

"I never hit a priest in my life, so don't make me learn new ways. The two of you—into that cupboard, and I don't want to hear a sound!"

There were whimpers and thumps and the bang of a door closing. Another sliding sound and a grunt of satisfaction. "That'll hold them," the man muttered.

His armor clanked a little as he came close, kneeling down by her. Not Father. A younger face with a soft brown beard and kind dark eyes.

"Your Majesty...Anora..." Fergus Cousland said softly. "I'm going to get you out of here. You're going to be all right. Bronwyn found the Sacred Ashes, just as she promised. Warden Jowan has them and he's here."

Someone pounded on the door, shouting. "*What's going on in there?*"

Fergus laid a comforting hand on Anora's shoulder and then got up and strode over to the locked door.

"What's going on is that you are going to release the Queen! I am Fergus Cousland, Teyrn of Highever, and you will be held to account for kidnapping the Queen of Ferelden, Chantry-folk

or not!"

Whatever the unseen man behind the door was going to say was lost in thunder that shook the Cathedral. The thunder was followed by screams from far below in the sanctuary. Fergus chuckled. "It's sounds like my cousin Leonas has finally had enough! That, You Majesty, was him knocking on the Cathedral doors!"

There were shouts outside and the clash of steel. An argument had gone violent. Fergus listened at the door, waiting. There was a horrible, gurgling ground and the sound of something sliding down the other side of the wall.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," a man said, *"but it's the end of the Chantry in Ferelden if we don't give up the Queen immediately."* A key clanged in the lock, and Fergus stood back, drawing his sword.

With tremendous effort, Anora turned her head. The door was opened, and distant shouts filtered up the tower staircase. A group of Templars stood there, along with a pale, fair-haired priest holding a candelabra in her hand. The man in the lead started at the sight of Fergus.

"My lord of Highever!" he cried. "We did not..." He collected himself. "We have come to see that Queen is returned to the Palace. Perhaps you don't remember me, but I am Irminric, brother to Bann Alfstanna."

"Of course I know you," Fergus growled. "What madness

have you lot been up to?"

"Nothing of our doing, my lord," said another Templar, his voice gentle. "Nor of the Grand Cleric's, whom we believe to be likewise a prisoner."

Irminric said quickly, "Sister Justine here found the key. We knew that keeping the Queen here against her will was wicked folly. Let us assist you and put an end to the violence below."

Fergus paused, hesitating, and then made his decision. Sheathing his sword, he returned to Anora and bending, gathered her up in his arms.

"Lead the way," he ordered.

Anora gasped a little at the boldness of it. She could not recall ever having been carried like this since she was a little girl, running to Father when he returned to Gwaren. Just as long ago in Father's arms, Fergus' armor hurt a little, but she cared nothing for that, happy to be safe, held again in arms of steel. She gazed up dreamily at the ceiling as it turned with the man's movements, as they wound down, down, a long spiral staircase. She passed the painted figures on the wall like crowds at a procession.

"My lord!" cried a voice, accompanied by the sound of feet running upstairs. There must be a mabari there, too, from the all the whuffing. Anora smiled faintly at the idea of a mabari running wild in the Chantry.

"It's all right, Hawke," Fergus said. "They're with us."

Anora caught a glimpse of tall and handsome Ser Adam Hawke, sword drawn, moving protectively in front of Fergus. They continued down the stairs. The space enlarged and vaulting stretched out before her. They were descending into the sanctuary. Fergus shifted his arms so it was easier for her to lift her head and see.

The sanctuary was a battlefield. Bryland's men had poured through the front door, and some had fallen. But they had taken even more Templars with them, judging by the armor. Priests were huddled together here and there: some screaming imprecations at the soldiers, some terrified, some explaining themselves very quickly indeed, some already helping with the wounded. There were pockets of resistance, but they were scattered and desperate.

"Fereldans!" shouted Fergus. "Here is your Queen! Put up your swords, and do her homage!"

"The Queen!" Shouts rose up. A deep, heart-felt pause, and the last of the Templars surrendered, and were disarmed.

Bryland, bleeding from a cut over his ear, rushed to the steps. "Your Majesty!" He looked her over, shocked at her appearance. "What did they do to her?" he asked Fergus.

"She's been ill," Fergus told his cousin in a low voice. "The mage's healing was keeping her going. The Chantry took that away, but the Wardens have brought a cure."

"A cure?" Bryland certainly hoped so. Queen Anora looked half-dead—worse, she looked like she had been tortured. If Fergus hadn't told her she was already ill, he would have put the Chantry to the sword on the spot.

The Wardens were here, too: Carver glaring at the priests, and leaning on his sword: Jowan uncomfortable and grim: and Leliana frantically trying to make peace and calm both sides.

Anora tried to speak, but it was so difficult. She managed a whisper, close enough to Fergus' ear that he heard her.

"Not here. Outside."

He looked down at the frail woman. Her hair had come loose, and her face was a sickly yellow. "You want to go outside?"

"Outside," she murmured. "Out of here."

It was hardly surprising, after all. He shifted her in his arms, and carried her down the last steps.

"We're leaving. Wardens, prepare the Ashes outside."

"Ashes?" Bryland asked, puzzled; but he strode along with his cousin, ordering a detail to lock up the prisoners. No one had seen the Grand Cleric as yet. He sent more men to track her down.

The battering ram had been withdrawn, and they stepped past rubble into the light of day. The sun of noon shone down, defeating all disguise. People climbed up on nearby roofs to

take in the scene in front of the Chantry. As the people coming outside were recognized, another shout rose up, of triumph and relief.

"There's the Queen!" shouted a man. "I see her yellow hair!"

"Look! The Teyrn's got her!"

"I knew he'd save her!" cried the laundress. "Maker bless good Teyrn Cousland!"

"Is she hurt?"

"What did they do with her clothes?" wondered one woman, scandalized. "She's barefoot!"

"The Ashes!" Fergus ordered. "Quickly!"

Jowan had the little envelope, and had thought quite a bit about how to administer them. He had rejected the idea of using his finger to put them on the Queen's tongue as gross and indelicate. A spoon he had also considered, but now there was surely a need for more spectacle.

"Leliana," he said urgently. "Find that present that Bronwyn was giving her cousin and put a bit of water in it."

Leliana had left the Chantry reluctantly, miserable at the situation there. Glad to have something to do, she hurried to her horse and fetched the golden bowl. Her fingers lingered on the cool hammered metal, admiring it.

It was certainly a princely gift. Not very large, but entirely of pure gold, it was a shallow, footed bowl in the form of a flower. Leliana winced as the sunlight reflected off it blindingly. Quickly she poured some water from her canteen into the bowl, and held it while Jowan opened the little packet of Sacred Ashes and sprinkled them into the clear water.

"What is that?" Arl Bryland asked.

Jowan knew that Bronwyn wanted the Ashes kept secret, but he felt that this was no time for secrecy. What the Chantry had done was open and public. The Queen's cure should be the same. Besides, he really could not resist the chance to stick a finger in the eye of the Chantry and their Templars, pointing up their malice, their stupidity, their uselessness. He would never have a chance like this again. He answered the Arl loudly enough that a great many people could hear him.

"A few months ago, the Queen was poisoned by an Orlesian spy. The poison was resistant to magical healing, despite everything I and Senior Enchanter Wynne—arrested by the Chantry yesterday—could do. Lady Bronwyn Cousland, the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, went on a Quest to find the one remedy that could not fail: the Sacred Ashes of Andraste. She succeeded. and you see them here in this golden bowl before you!"

He lifted the bowl to Anora's lips, careful not to spill a drop. She raised weary eyes to him, and drank it down. It tasted...like ashes in water. A little gritty, and rather nasty, in fact; but she was really rather thirsty, and it could have been

worse. She swallowed, swallowed again, swallowed the last of it; and then screamed, more in surprise than distress.

"Ahhhhh!"

Fergus held her fast, his hopes plummeting as she spasmed. Was this going to end in disaster?

It was certainly very intense. Anora was not certain if she was in pain or not. Little shocks pulsed through her body, twinging along her nerves, quickening her blood. Pulses collided at intervals, and she seized up, bewildered at what was happening to her. Her heart jolted...almost as if a hand had *squeezed* it. There was a curious hard pressure on the right side of her head, and then sharp pinches in her back just below her ribs. Lower down, her belly cramped as if she were having her courses. The shocks rippled through her from head to toe and abruptly stopped. And everything was suddenly quite different.

Into the gaping silence, she said quietly, "I'm all right. Put me on a horse, so everyone can see I'm all right."

"You're all right?" Fergus choked out, astonished. Even more astonishing was her appearance. The yellow skin was transforming to rose and ivory; her blue eyes were clear and shining. She did not even look...tired.

Anora wondered if she would burst out laughing. How odd she felt. She had had no idea how sick she really was before. She felt perfectly well now. She could do anything. Bronwyn had

found the Sacred Ashes, and given Anora back her life. It was a miracle.

"I'm fine. I'm perfectly well. Get me on that horse—that nice grey— so everyone can see me and hear me. We have work to do."

In wonder and relief, he smiled down at her, and she reflexively smiled back up at him. Her heart seemed to squeeze again, but this time she did not think it was the Ashes.

"Well..." Hawke raised his brows, and remarked his brother, "that was...impressive. Come now, the Ashes of Andraste?"

"Yes," Carver said. "Really and truly. Bronwyn found them in the Frostbacks. She told us not to talk about them, but I suppose Jowan wanted to make the point that the Chantry isn't the sole conduit to the Maker. Anyway, it looks like the Queen is all right, and that's what matters. It's why Jowan, Leliana, and I were sent to Denerim: to deliver the Ashes to the Queen. We didn't expect it to be so...public, though."

"That was pretty damned public," Hawke snorted, swinging onto his horse. He dug into one of his saddlebags, and pulled out a cloak.

"The Queen looks cold, my lord," he said quietly to Fergus.

A grateful look, and Anora was wrapped in Hawke's best blue

cloak. He wondered if he would ever see it again, but perhaps it was a sound investment in his future.

Bryland left a strong force to secure the Chantry, and mounted with the rest of them. Let the Grand Cleric stew for now; he had to get back to his boys. Jowan was gazing thoughtfully at the amazing golden bowl that had held the Ashes, and the Arl spoke, a little wistfully.

"I don't suppose there are any left?"

Jowan glanced up, and inclined his head in respect. "No, my lord. But I'm a pretty good Healer. I'll have a look at your son first thing."

Leliana murmured, "I'll have to ride with you, Jowan. The Queen took my horse."

Jowan gave her the golden bowl, and swung onto the horse. Leliana clutched the bowl, sighing. After holding the Ashes of Andraste, it seemed a shabby thing for this vessel to be handed off as a ordinary wedding present. It should be preserved, as the sacred relic it was. She took Jowan's hand and vaulted up behind him, letting the sunlight play on the gold, bright as a good deed in a wicked world.

"Your family's more interesting than ours," Corbus declared to Bethany. His new friend had a twin brother who was a Grey Warden! And her older brother had been knighted by King

Cailan. So her family had a knight, a mage, and a Grey Warden. Corbus felt a little envious. He and Lothar were lords, but they were just boys, and had never done anything important. Habren never did much but go to the Market and spend Father's coin.

Bethany was amazing. She could make blue light come out of her fingers, and she had fixed everybody in the room. She would would have fixed Arl Urien, too, but his guards didn't like mages and had threatened her when she tried to see the Arl. She knew about mabaris too, because her brother had one. Killer already liked her a lot, because she had made Lothar all better.

She was exhausted, and stretched out on the stone floor by Lothar's bed. Corbus gallantly gave her a pillow. Everyone in the room was looking much better. Bann Alfstanna was sitting up now, and talking quietly to a group of ladies. Servants had brought in soup, bread, and cheese for everyone. It was like a party for wounded people.

Old Lady Seria Mac Coe walked over to thank Bethany, carefully leaning on the walls.

"You shouldn't be up, my lady," Bethany said wearily.

"My dear, I had to come and talk to you. I cannot thank you enough! I thought I was going to die, here in this terrible place. And you not only healed my wounds, but you have quite taken away the pain in my joints!"

Corbus politely made room for her on the edge of the bed, and the elderly woman sat down gingerly, lowering her voice.

"Life can be so hard for those with the gift of magic. I want you to know that you are welcome to come and stay with me if you ever need a roof over your head."

"That is very kind of you, my lady," Bethany thanked her, "but I cannot leave my mother. Arl Bryland promised mages amnesty in the Queen's name, and I cannot think he would break his word."

Corbus piped up loyally, "Father says a nobleman *always* keeps his word!"

Lady Seria gave the boy a kind, sad look. "Noblemen often mean to do many things, and then complications arise. At least let me know where you are staying, my dear. I wish to reward you for all your help today."

"I didn't do it for coin," Bethany said, growing embarrassed.

"Of course you did not," the old lady replied. "No one would do all this for mere coin. A keepsake, perhaps? A token of my gratitude? I may be old, but life is still sweet to me, and I was not ready to leave my children and grandchildren."

"I am staying at Highever House," Bethany said slowly. "My brother, Ser Adam Hawke, is in the service of the Teyrn of Highever."

"Ah." Lady Seria considered. "You are of gentle birth. I thought as much. Nicely spoken. Well brought up. All the more reason, my dear, for me to welcome you as a companion in my household, were you ever to need shelter."

There was noise in the corridor: the trampling of armored feet and the clamor of excited voices. The door opened, and Arl Bryland burst in. Killer filled the room with ecstatic barks.

"Lothar!"

The Arl stopped, astounded, to see his little boy sitting up, smiling. He was pale, and his shoulder was bandaged, but he no longer looked to be dying.

"Father!"

Corbus ran to him, threw his arms around him— heedless of the blood on his father's armor— and started babbling.

"Lothar's all right! Bethany fixed him! Come meet her! Her brother's a Grey Warden!"

Bethany groaned inwardly, but forced herself to get to her feet to greet the Arl. Carver and his friends said he was nice, but you never knew how "nice" people would react to mages.

Lady Seria smiled at her. "I suspect you will be receiving other tokens of gratitude, as well."

Bryland hugged Corbus back, and let himself be dragged forward. He hugged Lothar, too—carefully—and then had a

look at the pretty, dark-haired girl in traveling clothes.

Others in the room were speaking up, praising Bethany's efforts. Bann Alfstanna herself edged up cautiously from her bed to put in a word. The Bann had been convinced that her stomach wound was a death sentence, but this young girl had saved her. Magic was perilous, true; but it was, by the Prophet's own words, intended to serve man.

"We are all indebted to this young woman, Leonas. Many of us would be dead by now, if not for her."

Corbus caught at Bethany's hand, a little jealously. She was *his* friend, and all these people were trying to take her away. It was time to assert himself.

"Her other brother's a knight, so she's a lady, Father. Her name is Bethany Hawke."

Bryland could place her, now: he had met both of the Hawke brothers, but of course they would have kept the mage sister very, very quiet. A brave and decent girl, to come forward and risk discovery, since she had no pecuniary motive.

He bowed to her, heart full of relief and gratitude. "My lady, you have my thanks. You have done great good here today. Know I am eternally in your debt, and whatever the Arl of South Reach can do for you, will be done."

Blushing, Bethany stammered, "I'm...just so glad I could do something... What happened was so cruel..."

A guard called out, "The Queen!" and Anora entered, still barefoot in a white shift and Adam Hawke's blue cloak. Fergus Cousland was at her side, and just behind them were the Hawke brothers, who caught sight of Bethany talking to Arl Bryland. Simultaneously, they slapped their hands to their heads in despair. Bethany was no longer a secret. Worse, she was being presented to the Queen.

"Yes, everyone's grateful *today*," Carver muttered to Adam. "But what about tomorrow?"

Bethany was already speaking to Anora.

"I was not able to go to Arl Urien," she said, embarrassed. "The guards threatened me and chased me away. Arl Urien wanted nothing to do with a mage. I'm sorry I could not do more."

"Arl Urien made his choice," Anora replied coolly. She turned to Bryland. "I regret to inform you that your daughter is already a widow. The seneschal told us that Arl Urien is dead."

Shocked exclamations followed, which Anora silenced. "Our forces are still in pursuit of the assassins. We hold the Chantry, and we will investigate thoroughly their connivance with the attack."

Jowan said softly, "Your Majesty, since you are well, might I be allowed to go there and search for Wynne?"

Anora sighed, "You may go, but I believe it would be fruitless. I was told there that Healer Wynne had been killed by the Templars shortly before the attack—another reason to suspect collusion between the assassins and elements in the Chantry."

Fergus said, "I was told by a priest loyal to us that the Grand Cleric has been locked away. There needs to be a thorough search of the Chantry, both to determine the degree of guilt of those involved, and to clear those who are innocent."

"All will be revealed, in time," agreed Anora. "Therefore, I call all surviving members of the Landsmeet now present in Denerim to attend me in the Landsmeet Chamber tomorrow. We will cut to the heart of this conspiracy, and the enemies of Ferelden will pay."

Thanks to my reviewers: anon, MsBarrows, BandGeedNinja, Zute, RakeeshJ4, hdp, sizuka2, Cjonwalrus, ellechiM, Have Travel, JackOfBladesX, Death Knight's Crowbar, Judy, Nekura Enzeru, Pirate Ninjas of the Abyss, KnighOfHolyLight, chandagnac, Nemrut, Hydroplatypus, Mike3207, Aoi24, Herebedragons66, Jyggilg, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach-Jenna53, Psyche Sinclair, mille libri, truthrowan, Remenants, Costin, Kira Kyuu, SkaterGirl246, Enaid Aderyn, brrt, EpitomyofShyness, Cor'lii, Biff McLaughlin, undeadyeti, HalmVendrella, Josie Lange, JOdel, vertigomunchkin, Notnahtanha, Syntia13, almostinsane, WhosAmandPhillips, RohanVos,

ByLanternLight, Shakespeira, Tsu Doh Nimh, Tikigod784, BlackCherryWhiskey, stainglasspeppermint, Forestnymph, and amanda weber.

To brrt. You were not signed in, so I could not message you. I enjoyed your review.

("I'll need a rope," Fergus said, "and a grappling hook."

Fergus is Batman.)

Could be true. Thugs murdered his parents, he's really rich, and he often wears a cape.

62. Among the Ruins

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 62: Among the Ruins

Fifty-three recruits marched out of Ostagar into the colorful autumn of the Kocari Wilds, on a mission to find darkspawn and become Grey Wardens. They divided into six war parties, and were ordered to meet afterwards at the old Warden outpost. It was a crumbling ruin now, but it would give them privacy and shelter, of a sort.

Wisely, they had left a supply wagon at the outpost, with a party of guards to protect it and what horses the Wardens had. The wagon was plentifully stocked, and should provision the Wardens sufficiently for the time they would be here.

As it happened, Tara and her party were the first to return. It was late in the afternoon, and the sky had clouded up. Tara prayed that it would not rain on them. Immediately, as planned, she dismissed the guards, and ordered her people to start unloading some of the supplies and gear. They also set to work building up the fire and pitching the tents. These were fairly big ones that would protect them from the wind, if not the cold at night. For that they had blankets and some rather ratty furs.

"Why can't we sleep in the outpost?" asked a tall, bearded human...Walther...yes, Walther. He fought really well, but was always asking her questions. "What if it rains?"

"That's what the tents are for. We can't sleep in the outpost because only bits of it are safe, and we need it for the Joining ceremony. Put up all the tents while you're at it."

Walther protested, "We only need two!"

"Actually, all of us can fit into *one* of them, but our friends will be coming in, and it would be *nice*," she said sharply, "for them to be up and ready. *Especially* if it rains."

"What about opening one of the kegs of ale?"

"Later," Tara said, an edge to her voice.

"Come on, Walther," his friend Griffith said, pulling him away. "We're supposed to mind the Senior Warden." Tara watched them move away, talking urgently. Surprisingly, she was not worried about them doing as they were told. They had been pretty impressed with her during their two skirmishes with the darkspawn. All the same, Walther was one of those people who had to question everything, and just would not shut up.

The dwarves gave her less trouble. Sigrun and her friend Jukka were quite willing to fetch water and put the big pot on the boil. They chopped up the salt beef and vegetables, while the other two, Asa and Roldron, diligently dug the latrine. The two Dalish elves in her party, Darach and Lorrian, were quietly

sticking close to her. They had shot a brace of rabbits on the way back, and she told them to add them to the pot.

"Yes, Keeper," Darach murmured respectfully. Tara rolled her eyes.

Danith and Brosca's party reported in next. They had run into an ogre, and had been cut up pretty badly. Two of the recruits had been killed. The mage Petra was assigned to them, and she had her hands full with wounds and with two of the five recruits who were already suffering from Blight sickness. Those two—both elves—were pale and exhausted, and as soon as they had something to eat, Tara sent them off to rest in the tent she had assigned to Danith.

One of the humans, a big-shouldered, black bearded rogue named Aeron, sat down by the fire, and pulled out battered lute, singing in a surprisingly sweet tenor voice.

Petra, bustling here and there, stopped and said to Tara. "Strange. As big as he is, I'd have guessed he was a bass." Some others joined in, and soon quite a chorus was singing "*The Ballad of Briar Blossom*."

Anders came in with his people. They had also suffered casualties. Adaia was with him, helping with two humans who were in the early stages of Blight sickness. There had been another, who had abruptly died on them during the patrol. The rest were nervous and afraid of contracting the disease themselves. It had been a tense few hours.

"That was worse than herding cats," Anders told Tara, weary and disappointed in himself. "I *swear!*"

By the time Bronwyn and her recruits arrived, it was already well into twilight. Bronwyn accepted a bowl of a-bit-of-everything soup gratefully, and agreed that it was quite all right to breach a keg of the ale.

"There's enough for everyone to have two cups. They're not very big cups, after all," she told her Wardens.

A perimeter was established, and a rota of guards scheduled. Bronwyn was not particularly pleased that this had not been done before she arrived, but decided to discuss it later with her senior people. Danith, she felt, should have known better—or at least better than Tara and Anders, but Tara was her nominal superior officer. Tara had not been brought up to command a camp, however. She was quick enough when someone took the time to teach her something.

So Bronwyn consulted with her, and showed her how such things were organized. With larger groups, they must be more regimented than when they were only four or five. At least Tara had had the sense to have her people dig a latrine and set up the tents.

"Are we going to start the Joinings tonight?" Tara whispered.

Bronwyn had given that a lot of thought.

"No. The other parties might still come in later, and it wouldn't

do to be interrupted. And Alistair, especially, would be hurt if we didn't wait for him."

It was still going to be hard to manage. Maintaining order would be key to their success.

Had she, in old Nan's pithy phrase, 'bit off more than she could chew'? It would be hard to control this large group, especially if many were traumatized by the deaths of friends. And the large number of dead would be difficult to dispose of. Mages would make it all go more smoothly, of course, but it would still be an unpleasant task. However, it must be done all at one time, or recruits who experienced the Joining would panic and want to warn their friends of the danger.

Danith had made her promise that the Dalish dead would be buried after their own customs, and Bronwyn had agreed. That would involve grave-digging and seedling trees planted over the graves. As this was clearly important to Danith, and would make the Dalish as a whole more reconciled to dealing with humans, Bronwyn had decided to allow them their way in this. Astrid and Brosca were not so particular, thank the Maker. She went over her plans with Tara.

"Once Alistair and Astrid come in with their parties, we'll get started. I suspect that by now they're going to camp where they are overnight. If they're late tomorrow, we'll separate into groups for training exercises to keep everyone occupied. For the Joining, we'll take them in the groups they were in today. I want to get the sick ones Joined as soon as possible, so they'll go first."

Even the unwounded recruits were tired enough from fighting and working that they settled down for the night with a welcome degree of docility. Bronwyn sat inside the ruined stone hall of the outpost, working on her roster by candlelight. Those who never tasted the Joining potion were not considered Wardens, and so would not be listed as such. Reluctantly, she consulted the enlistment roster and crossed through the names: *Ulfar Galro, Gron Saelac, Rose Oldfield...*

Once finished with that duty, she crept silently into her team's tent, whispering to Scout to be *quiet*, hoping that her dreams did not distress the recruits.

She was somewhere in the Deep Roads again, but the darkspawn were tantalizingly far away. Time and again, the Archdemon seemed just around the next bend in the tunnel, but Bronwyn ran ahead trying to catch the creature, and each time she found nothing. There was only a tickle in her mind, like the reflection of a smirk. Where had they gone? She was so tired...

Her eyes opened. It was still dark in the tent. Snoring. That had awakened her. There was the muffled sound of a hard shove and then Aveline's furious whisper.

"Toliver! Turn over! Nobody can sleep!"

The warrior snorted and shifted, and the snoring stopped. The dwarves, who had been snoring too, but more softly, awakened and cursed, quietly but feelingly. The two Dalish

murmured to each other. Possibly Dalish elves did not snore at all, and found it another proof of the inferiority of other races. Possibly they were right in this case. More snoring emanated from the other tents. Bronwyn tried to compose herself for sleep again, but some of the chilly damp was soaking through her blanket. She sighed and shifted to a drier place, and then remembered her dream.

What was the Archdemon up to?

The following morning, she let the recruits sleep in, all but those who were up for the changing of the guard. The night had been quiet, but cold. It was not much trouble to build up the fire herself. Some of those recruits unlucky enough to be stirring in the pearly light of dawn were set to cleaning out the stew pot. Others were ordered to fetch water and begin cooking porridge. There was a large kettle for tea as well. Bronwyn longed for it like a child for her mother.

The last of the Wardens and their people arrived before much of the camp was awake. Alistair and Astrid had met each other on their return, and joined forces. Bronwyn glanced over their numbers and found them three men short. Nonetheless, they greeted Bronwyn fairly cheerfully and headed straight for the porridge. Scout liked Alistair, and trotted over to him.

"Who's a good boy?" Alistair grinned, scratching the dog's ears.

Oghren, unsurprisingly, was alive and not more battered than

usual.

"Hey, Boss! You can't get rid of Oghren Kondrat with a measly few dozen darkspawn!"

Also alive, to Bronwyn's relief, was Emrys Stronar, a nephew of Bann Stronar of Redesdale. He had ridden his own warhorse to the outpost yesterday, and a fine beast it was. Bronwyn had not been thrilled to accept him as a recruit, since his death would cause political trouble for her, but the young man was a capable warrior and no fool. He was a distant cousin, too, and Bronwyn did not want to seem to be favoring her family by sheltering him from the hazards of becoming a Warden. Aside from a bandage around his arm, he appeared to be none the worse for wear.

The Dalish mage was with them, and had evidently busied herself tending wounds, though she seemed to find dealing with humans distasteful. She would have to get over that. Bronwyn privately resolved to keep the assignments mixed, and not pair Danith and Velanna together. There was no room for a Dalish clique among the Wardens.

Though that would be tricky. Danith was up, and was already greeting Velanna, wanting her to have a look at the Blight-sick Dalish. Then she was heading in Bronwyn's direction, frowning. Bronwyn made herself greet her comrade with a friendly, helpful look on her face.

"Nuala and Steren are very sick," Danith said, without preamble. "They must be Joined as soon as possible."

Bronwyn nodded calmly. "We will rouse the camp, and set everything in motion. As soon as everyone has had their meal, the Joining will begin. Your team will go first, and then Anders' people, since some of them are sick as well. Find Brosca and Adaia, and send them to me. I need Tara and Anders, too. Tell all the group leaders to keep an eye on the recruits, and not to let anyone wander away. And remember to stay alert for darkspawn!"

The two girls came soon, and were given the task of preparing the ruined stone chamber for the ceremony. Tara and Anders were to mix the Joining potion. After that, they were all to report to Bronwyn immediately. Bronwyn joined Alistair and Astrid at the fire for a bowl of porridge. No matter what happened, porridge should stay put and sustain her.

"We had to go pretty far to find darkspawn," Alistair told her, gesturing with his spoon. "Round and round. We found some treasure, too. Of course, it didn't make up for losing poor Breedwell, but he was *really* careless."

"I lost two dwarves," Astrid added, more soberly. "Not Legion, but good fighters. One lost his head, trying to protect his friend. Fortunately for us, they weren't noble caste, so there shouldn't be any repercussions."

Meanwhile, Brosca climbed into the wagon, and out of the barrel of oats she drew the bag that Bronwyn had hidden there: a bag that contained some of their plunder from Haven. The gold candlesticks and golden goblet would do them proud; Anders had contributed an elegant silk shawl that he

meant to give to Morrigan later; and in a box were enough fine wax candles to illuminate the battered little stone hall in the outpost all day long.

The recruits were too busy to take any note of the two girls hurrying into the ruins, clutching their burdens. Bronwyn drank her tea slowly. It was going to be a trying day.

Each group was ordered to wait inside their tent with their team leader. Adaia was given the duty of summoning the groups, and leading them to the ceremony. The other extra Warden, Brosca, Bronwyn wanted beside her, in case there was some...awkwardness.

Bronwyn told Aveline that she was in charge of their team, and to keep them with her until they were called. They could play cards, they could talk, but they were not to get drunk or leave the tent. Aveline had strong nerves and could wait better than many another.

Tara told her people to go into their tent, and Walther immediately asked her why, and what was going on. Bronwyn stalked over, her nerves on edge.

"Your Senior Warden has given you an order. If you can't obey it, then you can start walking for Ostagar *right now!*"

The man backed away, eyes wide, and hands up in surrender.

"No offense, Dragonslayer. Just asking."

"Your questions will be answered in due time. All we ask of you at the moment is that you prove that you can *wait*."

"What if we need to take a piss?"

"Then do it right now, or bring a bucket into the tent with you!"

She strode away, irritated. The men behind her had plenty to say.

"Walther, you're going to get your arse handed to you if you're not careful. Just give it a rest."

"Did you ever see such green eyes? Scary! But why—"

His words were muffled, as his friend dragged him into the tent. Tara followed them, sighing. Bronwyn went back to the ruins, and had a look around her.

Brosca and Adaia had done a good job fixing up the gloomy stone ruin. It looked like a place where mysteries lurked. The gold candlesticks glittered in the dim light. The golden cup which had once held dragon's blood had been cleaned scrupulously. It was now filled with an even fouler mixture.

The hall was partly open to the sky, and light filtered greenly through layers of ivy and moss. Red and yellow leaves had drifted down, carpeting the dusty stones. Another chamber adjoined, and Brosca had lit candles there too, while Adaia had laid out blankets for the survivors. Another blanket was neatly tacked up on some rotten timbers to screen the

doorway.

"And there," Brosca said, jerking her thumb toward a dark crevice. "is a cubbyhole where we can hide the bodies. Don't worry. There's room for lots of them."

"How nice," Bronwyn muttered, hoping that there *weren't* 'a lot' of them. She told Adaia to let Danith know they were ready.

"Brosca," she said, "if anyone tries to get out of Joining...if anyone pulls a weapon...you know what to do. Only Wardens leave this room."

Brosca thought a bit, remembering bits of her own Joining, and then nodded. "They don't get to disagree about darkspawn blood. Got it, Boss." She faded back against the wall, and drew her sleek shortsword. Casually, she laid it on a a out-thrust fallen stone, then gave Bronwyn a thumbs-up.

"Scout," Bronwyn whispered, crouching down by the mabari. "You have to be very good and very quiet today. Stay there," she pointed to a corner by Brosca. "And don't move or growl or bark! All right?"

If Scout had been human, he would have rolled his eyes. As it was, he went to the corner, flopped down, and dozed through most of the subsequent proceedings.

Petra was in Danith's group. As a Healer, she might soon be useful—if she survived. At any rate, she was a composed

young woman, and Bronwyn decided to call her forward first. The recruits filed in, eyes wide, and the rite began. Bronwyn recited the same speech she had given King Cailan, and then began the ritual words.

"Join us, brothers and sisters: join us as we stand vigilant..."

The recruits looked suitably impressed. They were even more impressed—and not very favorably—when they understood what they were to drink.

Bronwyn's confidence in Petra was not misplaced. As expected, the mage fell back, unconscious but alive. Brosca caught her and lowered her gently to the ground. Then Bronwyn gathered her courage and called the first of the two Blighted Dalish. To her surprise, both Nuala and Steren survived. The singer Aeron survived, but the next recruit did not. When Bronwyn said, "I am sorry, Kerald," there was an uneasy stir.

"He's dead!" whispered a dwarf. Bronwyn fixed him with a stern eye, and called him forward.

"Ketil."

Things might have turned nasty, but he was tough enough to take the cup without argument, and survived. The last of the group, another dwarf, perished horribly.

"Well," Brosca said afterwards. "That was disappointing, but at least I didn't have to stab anybody in the back."

"It was much better than *my* Joining," Bronwyn replied. "This wasn't only one surviving out of three, at least. The first died and Duncan had to kill the second."

Danith gave her a quick, shocked look, and then nodded thoughtfully. She was unsurprisingly pleased that the Dalish had survived. They tended the living first, and then the dead.

"They are lovers," she told Bronwyn, indicating Nuala and Steren. "It is well that they shall have each other."

Bronwyn agreed, but was deeply relieved that one had not died to leave the other grieving. That could get extremely depressing for everyone. In future, she would take more care to break up couples during the Joining. A bereaved recruit might lose all control and lash out.

Adaia, very shaken by the deaths, was given a sip from Brosca's stone bottle, and then went to fetch the next group.

This was Adaia's own group, led by Anders, and once again the results were not very cheering.

A bright-eyed, red-haired boy named Quinn survived, and the Dalish elf, Siofranni, and then they lost a dwarf. There was the same uneasy, frightened stir, but the other dwarf in the group, a woman of the Legion named Idunn, bravely swallowed the potion and lived. And then things got very bad indeed. Three humans in a row perished in the same horrible way: choking, choking, clutching their throats, their eyes rolled white in their last spasms. Bronwyn expected a fight, but the

first of the three was a woman, and perhaps the men thought they were bound to succeed where she failed. The next recruit was a slight and slender archer, and the burly warrior who followed clearly thought himself the better man. He was not.

The pretty blonde girl who was last in line began weeping, hands shaking too badly to hold the cup. She was already grey with Blight-sickness, and Bronwyn held little hope for her now.

"Maeve," Bronwyn said wearily, "from this moment you are a Grey Warden. Anders will hold the cup for you. You *have* to drink. There is no turning back."

Anders gently wiped away the girl's tears, lest they fall in the cup. She drank, collapsed, and lived. There was no accounting for the Joining.

They dragged or carried the survivors to the next room, and laid them down on blankets by their restless fellows. So far, in proportion to their numbers the Dalish were faring best, the humans worst. It was not quite what anyone had expected. On the other hand, none of their earlier elven candidates had failed the Joining. It was something else to think about.

Bronwyn decided to call Tara's group next. Plucky little Sigrun took the cup first and survived, as did her friend Jukka. They lost the next two dwarves, but the annoying Walther lived, as did his friend Griffith.

Joy. I so look forward to all of Walther's questions. Then she rebuked herself for wishing failure on any recruit. Of the two Dalish, the first lived, and the second did not.

Danith didn't like that, Bronwyn noted. Neither, for that matter, do I.

Nor did Tara, whose face had gone white and strained. She must not take this as a personal failure. They were all losing recruits from their teams. Adaia needed another drink, but Brosca was holding up quite well. She was pleased that her old acquaintance Sigrun had made it, and philosophical about those who did not.

"The ones in the Legion were counted as dead already. This just makes it...permanent."

Bronwyn let Anders and Tara take charge of the living. She and Brosca handled the uglier task of depositing the dead into the dank little hole. She decided that her own group had waited long enough without a Warden, and sent Adaia for them.

Niall's brown eyes were very big when the secret of the Joining was revealed. For that reason, Bronwyn called first on Aveline, and her trust was rewarded.

Without a word, the tall redhead took the cup and swallowed her dose. Her hands steady, she handed the cup back, and when she fell back, she did not seem to be fighting the potion. Anders caught her carefully.

"She's all right," he said.

Bronwyn liked that. Saying "She lives," instantly gave a very broad hint that there was some doubt as to the outcome. Perhaps that helped Niall take the cup with better spirits, though he wagged his brows and mouthed "*Blood Magic?*" at Bronwyn, who frowned at him until he shrugged apologetically and drank.

Danith uttered a muffled cry when they lost another Dalish, a strong and handsome young man that Bronwyn would have laid odds on surviving.

One of the dwarves stepped back and asked, "Does that happen a lot?" and then looked away from Bronwyn's cold green stare. Two dwarves perished, but the last two lived, which ended the group's festivities on a pleasanter note.

The sleeping and the dead were variously set aside, and Adaia went out to fetch Alistair and his people. Bronwyn had personal concerns about this group. Maker, she was tired. This was just too much at once. She was growing hard and indifferent, and that would not make her a better leader.

Emrys was smiling as he came in, talking quietly with another recruit. All conversation stopped abruptly when they entered the gloomy stone chamber. Bronwyn wished briefly she had lubricated her tired throat with the contents of Brosca's stone bottle, but she gave the speech yet again. This time, however, she asked Alistair to recite the ritual words.

And then Bronwyn offered the cup. "Emrys Stronar, from this moment you are a Grey Warden."

She was deeply relieved when Emrys survived his dose of the Taint. He reminded her a bit of Carver Hawke: a younger son trying to make his own way in the world. He had no chance of inheriting his uncle's bannorn, nor even his father's small manor. His only real patrimony was his horse, his armor and his sword. He was not as handsome as either of the Hawke brothers, but he was tall and well-made, with clear hazel eyes and a strong-boned face. He was Warden Emrys now, at any rate. She would see what he made of it.

Nice young Liam made it. She had discovered that he could handle a team, and had rather been counting on him to drive their wagon back to Ostagar. Bronwyn could drive—after a fashion—and Alistair knew plenty about hitching oxen, but an expert teamster would be helpful. He was a fair-faced boy, too: with sun-bleached hair and a winning smile. There was something to be said for the power of good looks to raise the spirits.

Oghren stepped forward and sneered at the contents of the cup. "Is that all? Is that the regular dose? Or are you commenting on my size?"

"Standard dose," Bronwyn said, trying not to smile. "All you need is a swallow."

He snorted, and then took a hearty draught. Bronwyn took the cup back quickly, a little alarmed.

He belched, his eyes rolling back.

"Hey! Not bad..."

He crumpled heavily to the floor, already snoring.

Others were not so resistant to the potion. A human archer died, and a little later, a dwarf axeman. Still, the rest survived, and there was only one more group to go.

One last time, they began the ceremony of life and death. Astrid brought her people into the chamber. There was the same brief, awed hesitation, and then Bronwyn began speaking.

Dalish Velanna took the cup fearlessly and drank. Bronwyn caught Danith's eye. A look of unutterable relief was there, as the elven mage fell back, alive. No one else faltered. Perhaps humans and elves had too much pride not to dare what an elf and a woman ventured. Even when one of the humans coughed out his life, the next recruit took the cup. Trembling, yes: but he took it all the same. They lost a Dalish recruit, too. The very last of the recruits, Catriona, a human archer with hair prematurely streaked with grey, survived.

It was over. Everyone took a deep, exhausted breath, and they moved the survivors into the adjoining room. Adaia hurried to spread more blankets for them. The whole process had taken perhaps half the morning.

They had sixteen dead to deal with. The three Dalish would be

buried, and the rest burned. Amongst them, the Wardens managed to hitch up the wagon and load the bodies into it. Anders and Brosca stayed behind to keep watch over the sleeping recruits.

"Thanks, Boss," Brosca muttered fervently. "Not that I mind digging, but burning bodies are...gross."

The clouds broke, and the welcome sun peeped out, warming the breeze a bit. Bronwyn drove the wagon over some fairly flat ground to a clearing half a mile away. Danith and Adaia took shovels and began digging a grave for the Dalish. The thirteen human and dwarven bodies were...stacked...neatly, and Tara incinerated them with terrifying, magical dispatch.

Bronwyn watched the holocaust, eyes dry, but sick at heart. The grand Wardens' pyre after the Bloomingtide Battle seemed very long ago. Those Wardens had been recognized by name, and had speeches made and wine poured in their honor. These unfortunates were being disposed of like rubbish. Bronwyn did not even have commemorative amulets for the survivors. She had forgotten about them, and there was no way to obtain them anyway. They would preserve the remains of this Joining potion, and then procure some hollowed-out crystals at a later date. Probably not by Satinalia. With luck, they could be First Day presents.

Tara was equally miserable. Could they have made a mistake with the Joining potion? Surely not. They had followed Fiona's instructions faithfully. It was impossible to guess who would survive the Taint, and who would not.

"I should go help Danith and Adaia now," she said, turning away.

"Have a drink, first," Alistair said. He smiled weakly at Bronwyn. "I brought a bottle of wine."

They passed it around, and Alistair recited a bit of the Chant of Light. The remaining clouds blew off, leaving the sky a fierce and uniform blue behind the rising black smoke. Astrid took a swig of wine and raised the bottle in salute.

"Atrast tunsha. Totarnia amgetol tavash aeduc."

"At least we've got Petra and Niall. Oghren, too," Tara sighed.

Astrid shrugged. "We have thirty-one new Wardens, which is thirty-one more than we had yesterday. I never doubted Oghren for an instant. It is possible that long exposure to the Deep Roads and to darkspawn might lend a kind of immunity. The Legion did well, too."

"It did," Bronwyn sighed. "We might as well learn what we can from this. Tara and Anders woke first, out of their Joining," Bronwyn reminded them. "Perhaps it has something to do with being mages and thus more at home in the Fade. We'll see how the newest mages fare."

Back at camp, Bronwyn sat down with ink and quill, and carefully noted all the recruits down into the roll of Fereldan Wardens: both the living and the dead. Some of the Wardens

were striking the tents and loading them; others—led by Alistair—were preparing something like the *potée de chasse* Fiona had cooked in the cabin in the Frostbacks. Alistair was otherwise a terrible cook, but Fiona had taught him how to make proper porridge and decent *potée de chasse*, and the lessons had stuck. They were his only inheritance from his mother, after all.

The sausages were plump and rather salty Ferelden ones, rather than the spicy Jader venison sausages Fiona had used, but as long as there were plenty of onions, parsnips, and turnips, Fereldans would be happy. There were even a few cloves of garlic to render it something like the original. There was bread and sharp white cheese; there was a basket of red apples. There were two more kegs of ale. They was even a large pot of *hallensal*, and a smaller pot of wild honey; a gift of the Dalish. The Wardens would march back to Ostagar with full bellies.

Bronwyn strolled over to the apples, selected one, and began munching. It had been a hard day's work already, and it was only a little after noon.

Anders stepped out of the ruins and called to Tara, "Petra is waking up."

Tara smiled and went to welcome her, taking a bucket of water and a dipper. Anders was more Petra's friend than Tara was, but it would be good for the young woman to awaken with familiar faces around her.

Tara knelt beside Anders, and gave Petra a drink of water; while Anders calmed her down from the distress of those first, dreadful Fade visions.

"I think I saw the Archdemon!"

"You probably did," Anders told her. "In time we learn to control those dreams a bit better. Bronwyn will have a meeting and explain it all when everyone's awake. Why don't you go outside and get something to eat?"

"Maker! I'm starving!"

Tara helped her to her feet, and said quietly. "Not everybody made it through the Joining. Bronwyn will explain about that, too."

Petra glanced quickly around the crumbling stone chamber at the thrashing, slumbering men and women, and then whispered, "Is that normal?"

"Afraid so. The Joining is dangerous. Mages seem to do better than anybody else, though. Niall's all right."

"Is anyone injured? I could—"

"No," said Anders. "It's the potion itself. It's either a lethal poison or it isn't."

Niall awakened next, and then Velanna. They staggered outside into the sunlight and to their first meal as Wardens. Bronwyn had opened the ale, and that seemed to help. The

first two surviving Dalish, Steren and Nuala, were relieved to be cured of the Blight-sickness. They kept apart, talking softly to one another, and then went to speak to Danith, trying to make sense of what they had seen. A few more awakened, shocked by their ventures into the Fade.

A freckled, red-haired boy approached the stewpot, grinning enormously. Bronwyn had nearly stopped the Joining when she guessed how young he must be. He was tall and strong enough, and had killed darkspawn in battle, but that smooth chin had never known a razor.

"So, Quinn...how old *are* you?" she asked, watching him fill his bowl to the trembling brim. He grabbed a hunk of bread, tore it into pieces, and scattered it on top of his stew, like a child.

"F-f-f-f...Eighteen, Warden-Commander!" he lied brazenly. He held his spoon like a child, too.

"Feighteen. I don't know that number," Bronwyn mused. "Could it be closer to thirteen or sixteen? Or in the middle? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

He shrugged, smirking. "Don't know, really. I *could* be sixteen. Anyway, I'm a Warden now! I hear you get paid regular! Is that true?"

"Absolutely true. You'll all be due twenty silvers when we get back to camp."

The boy nearly dropped his bowl. "Twenty silvers! I'm rich!"

So there was joy, but there was sorrow, too, as the recruits awakened and found that friends and acquaintances were dead. Some were brooding and silent; a few were shocked and rather frightened of the Wardens. Some, deplorably, gloated a bit, feeling that this test had been a judgment on their rivals. Some were deeply horrified by the visions they had seen. For the dwarves, who had never experienced anything similar before, it was particularly disorienting. Grieving or not, everybody ate, and that brought them into contact with their new comrades. Escaping death was quite the bonding experience.

Oghren eventually awakened. He lumbered from the ruins, squinting and cursing. "Sodding nughumpers! I was *seeing* things! And I wasn't even drunk!"

Astrid shoved him toward the food, with a tolerant smile. Bronwyn stopped by to congratulate him, and was given an earful about how the Joining was "worse than the worst hangover. Ever. And I've had a few."

"You'll do," she laughed lightly, rapping him on the pauldron.

Riordan had told them that one never forcibly awakened freshly-Joined Wardens from their first Fade-dreams. Bronwyn let her new people sleep themselves out, and it was mid-afternoon when the last of the recruits —three dwarves from the Legion of the Dead—were up and scraping the stewpot to appease their raging hunger. Scout, the beggar,

was cadging treats from the new-Joined Wardens: sausage ends and cheese rinds.

Sigrun was among that last group, eating happily. She grinned at Bronwyn.

"I guess I'm still alive! Funny how that keeps happening!"

Everyone was rounded up, and Bronwyn thought the time was right to give them their official welcome and lay down the law. Scout came to sit beside her, very straight and dignified. Bronwyn pitched her voice to carry in the open air.

"You're all Grey Wardens, the latest in an ancient line of champions against the Blight. Some of you smile, but champions you are, who have just passed your first, great test by mastering the Taint. There will be more tests to come. I inscribed all your names—the names of those who survived the Joining and those who did not—in the Warden roster. When we get back to camp, you will be paid. Regular payday is quarterly, but you're due a bit prior to Satinalia—"

"Twenty silvers each!" Quinn shouted gleefully. Brosca slapped him on the back of his head, and the boy subsided.

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed kindly. "Twenty silvers each. You've already earned them."

"Commander—" Walther interrupted. "What was that—"

"Silence there!" Alistair ordered, scowling. Bronwyn was

pleased. Alistair was doing much better at sounding authoritative. Walther grimaced, obviously bursting with curiosity.

"You all have questions," Bronwyn said. "and the Grey Wardens have many secrets. You have a right to know them, but first you must swear the Warden's Oath never to reveal them to any outside the order. Don't look so eager," she said to some willing faces. "This is serious. The penalty for oathbreaking is death, not just for the careless, loose-lipped Warden, but for those in whom he confides. You don't tell your lovers, your friends, your brothers, your mothers, your clan leaders, your heads of Houses, or your banns. If you do, they will be killed or made to undertake the Joining. As you have noticed, not all who Join survive to serve."

There was a leaden silence. One of the women wiped her eyes.

"So I call on you now to stand, and to swear before Andraste, or by your ancestors, or by the gods you revere, to keep the secrets of the Wardens; to hold all other Wardens as your sisters and brothers, with no regard to their race or creed or rank at birth; and to pursue our mission to protect Thedas from the threat of the darkspawn by whatever means are necessary! Do you so swear?"

A pretty good shout of "I do!" with some scattered agreement around the edges. Bronwyn looked at them all, and saw no refusals, though many new Wardens were puzzled or grim.

Bronwyn took a deep breath, continued. "So be it. You have sworn. Now I can tell you that we bear a heavy burden. The survival of all Thedas rests on our shoulders. Only Grey Wardens can truly defeat the darkspawn. The blood you drank gives us great power. We can sense the darkspawn, and follow them into their secret places. We see them in the Fade, and gather intelligence about their movements. The Joining gives us greater strength and stamina to perform our duties. We are immune to Blight-sickness, and need not fear close action with our ancient enemies. In fact, Grey Wardens, as I understand it, never get sick at all. You may suffer wounds aplenty, but you'll never catch cold!"

There were a few laughs, and a decided lightening of the general mood. Bronwyn was sorry that she must now give them the bad news.

"However," she admitted, head high, "these powers come at a price. After many years—perhaps thirty or so—a Warden's link to the darkspawn becomes overwhelming, and the Warden hears them all the time. Traditionally, the Warden then goes to the Deep Roads to fight a last battle. One way or another, the darkspawn are our destiny. But we are all soldiers, and we know that Fate exacts a payment: the greater the glory, the greater the sacrifice. This too is a secret of the Wardens, another one that you must never reveal.

"And there are other aspects to life as a Grey Warden that you should be aware of," she added. "You have already experienced the Grey Warden appetite for food! That will not

change. It takes a great deal to fuel our powers. You have experienced the terrible dreams we see. In time, you will be able to control them. I have been told," she said slowly, "that Grey Wardens have few children. Whether this is because of the hazardous lives we lead or for some other reason, I am uncertain."

Somewhat to her surprise, there was not a lot of distress at the news. Bronwyn wondered a little at that. On the other hand, perhaps none of these recruits had had it drummed into their heads from earliest childhood that it would be their duty to continue a noble lineage.

She had wrestled with the last, greatest secret, and then had decided to save that. Let these new Wardens settle in for at least a few days.

"There is more to know, but that is enough for one day. We'll break camp and return to Ostagar. Arrangements have been made to give us more space in the Tower of Ishal, and I can tell you the officers you have been ousted are displeased!"

More laughter.

"For now, you Junior Wardens will continue to report to the Warden who led you today, with the exception of the mages, who are under the command of Senior Mage Warden Tara. The group Tara commanded today will now be led by Warden Brosca."

Brosca waved a hand.

Bronwyn went on. "In time, as we know your abilities better, there will be reassignments based on who fights best with whom, and who has special abilities—like those of Warden Adaia in the bomb workshop. If you're interested in that kind of work, talk to her about it. Three of our Wardens are in Denerim right now, and will eventually lead fighting teams. We have also some comrades supporting us who are not Wardens: Morrigan, Sten, and Zevran. Grey Wardens do not refuse powerful allies. Ours have proven themselves scores of times, and are to be treated with respect.

"Learn these regulations now: You must obey my orders and those of Senior Wardens Alistair and Tara, and those of Wardens senior to you. Refusal to obey a direct order will be considered insubordination. Such an infraction will be punished first by loss of pay, the amount depending upon the seriousness of the offense. Further offenses will be punished by confinement to quarters, flogging, or execution, in that order. A combination of punishments may also be imposed. I find it hard to believe that any of you would even face accusations of cowardice. All of you have proved your courage. However, desertion in the face of the enemy will also be punished, depending upon the seriousness of the situation, and whatever mitigating circumstances may apply. Above all," she said, repeating it so no one would forget. "*Keep our secrets*. If you must gossip or confide in someone, confide in a fellow Grey Warden. We are more than comrades-in-arms. We are your family, from this day forward."

She gave a sharp nod to Alistair, who shouted, "Grey

Wardens! Break camp!"

They set to work quickly: saddling horses; scrubbing out the cooking gear and crockery; wiping the cleaned bowls and cups; folding blankets and tents; stowing everything away in the wagon. Liam and Quinn hitched the oxen, and before long they were on the move. Reflexively, the archers moved out to the perimeter, eyes sharp for enemies or a bit of game.

Brosca climbed up on the wagon seat beside Liam and began teaching him a filthy ditty. Aeron accompanied them on his lute, singing an elaborate descant to the melody. Danith shook her head, and talked softly to Velanna, hands sketching out her conversation. Astrid herded the rest of the Wardens into a creditable column before and behind the wagon. Bright leaves fell around them, muffling the tramp of booted feet. The talk was cheerful or at least composed.

Emrys, on his fine warhorse, rode next to Alistair, who was in charge of the rear guard.

"So, there are more secrets left to learn?"

Alistair granted him a wary smile. "A few. Some of them are big, but there's plenty of time. The rule used to be that you were a Warden a full year before you were told everything. Obviously, we have to do things differently during a Blight. Bronwyn will make sure you know what you need to know."

"What are the Commander's strictures on fraternization within the order?"

"She doesn't have a problem with it, as long you do your job. She lets avowed couples arrange a bit of privacy in the barracks."

"Impressive armor she's wearing. I wish I'd seen her kill that dragon. She's a real hero, isn't she? Perhaps the hero of our time."

"You don't know the half of it."

Thanks to my reviewers: Nemrut, Zute, Aoi24, reality deviant, MsBarrows, Jyggilag, Psyche Sinclair, KnightOfHolyLight, Mike3207, BandGeekNinja, BAMS, butterflygrrl, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, EpitomyofShyness, BlueRiverSaint, Hydroplatypus, KiraKyu, Amanda weber, hdp, sizuka2, Death Knight's Crowbar, JackOfBladesX, almostinsane, Jenna53, Nonahatanha, Josie Lange, undeadyeti, euromellows, Mike, mille libri, Have Travel, Remenants, WhosAmandaPhillips, Ellyanah, SilverAegis, brrt, Tirion, Biff McLaughlin, Girl-chama, stainglasspeppermint, Enaid Aderyn, Oleander's One, ByLanternLight, Costin, Shakespeira, Tsu Doh Nimh, Blinded in a bolthole, Herebedragons66, and timunderwood9.

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63. III Tidings from Denerim

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 63: III Tidings From Denerim

The Grey Wardens returned to Ostagar rather subdued, their party considerably smaller than it had been two days before. Bronwyn reported to Loghain immediately.

"You look exhausted," Loghain said, rather concerned. Actually, Bronwyn looked worse than that: drawn and sallow and grim. She looked five years older than when he had last seen her two days before.

"Considering that I just poisoned nineteen people and disposed of their bodies," Bronwyn said, her lip curling slightly, "I think I look fairly *perky*." She added, "Three of my recruits were killed in battle, so I'm not directly responsible for *their* deaths."

"You knew that many would die."

"Yes, I did. They didn't. At least nobody tried to run, thus forcing me to cut them down. That was fairly ugly at my own Joining. But the sobbing and shaking was distressing. I understand that there are murderers who find such things

stimulating. It only made me sick and ashamed."

He pushed a cup of wine her way. "I have had a request from the Dalish to deal with the assassins themselves. Do you still wish to offer them them mercy?"

"I suppose I do," she said, "and for that reason, I will not be offering them the chance to be Wardens. Besides, after all my new people went through, it would be wrong to spit on their sacrifice by introducing people who cannot be trusted. Undergoing the Joining doesn't magically make one good, after all. We have no guarantees that they'd suddenly see the importance of fighting darkspawn. More likely they would take the first opportunity to knife Quinn or Maeve or Sigrun in the back, and then flee to Orlais." She finished her wine in a single long swallow. "What do the Dalish want to do to them?"

"Use them for target practice," he grunted. "I got the impression from Thanovir that their Keepers had had something magical in mind, but decided that it would be too shocking for their human allies. I wouldn't have objected to stranding them in the Fade myself, but the Revered Mother would have squawked. At that, I wonder if the offer would have been made, had the assassins been Dalish, rather than city elves."

"Have they had anything further to say—the assassins, I mean?"

"No. Quite professional, in their way. For that matter, I would have had them questioned more harshly, but I had to consider

the Dalish themselves squawking. All this concern for the customs and opinions of others is very tiresome. If it were left to me, I'd keep them in cages and hang them from the battlements until they starved, and then send their heads to Empress Celene."

Bronwyn found that a rather horrible idea, though it was admittedly less horrible than her own first impulse to give the women to the darkspawn. "I suppose we'll have to get used to considering the customs and opinions of others."

"Perhaps." He nodded. "I will pass along your consent to young Merrill. I would like to be rid of those women as soon as possible—preferably today, if they can arrange it. Enough of them. What of your expedition? Did you find many darkspawn?"

"We found enough for our purposes, but only scattered bands in the Wilds. The darkspawn are nearly gone from the surface here, though we'll continue to run patrols. In the tunnels there were more, but they too seemed to be remnants. I'm almost sure that the horde has withdrawn elsewhere; possibly quite far away. We'll obviously have to continue to keep watch at Ostagar, but I'm considering sending out parties to check out some of the known Deep Roads entrances."

"That will divide your forces."

"A good thing I recruited so many, then. I see no way around it. Were I the Archdemon, I would be preparing an assault on somewhere undefended. They could pop up outside West Hill,

for all I know, and no one would even know they were on the march until they were at the gates of Highever!"

The execution of the would-be assassins was held at sunset, and was over fairly quickly. Sensitive to the views and customs of his allies, Loghain had allowed the Dalish custody of the prisoners they had captured. The four women were marched out before the army and tied to posts, and the ranks of Dalish archers were drawn up before them. The assassins' leader, unrepentant to the end, spat her defiance on the ground, hoping the Blight took them all. No one who did not wish to be part of the execution was forced to participate, but the ranks were nonetheless quite impressive. Maynriel gave them the order to loose, and the feathered bodies slumped. As the women were Andrasteans—more or less— they were then given to the priests to be cremated.

The Ferelden army admired the marksmanship, but was not perfectly pleased with the disposal of the remains, believing that the women's heads should have been put on display, either here or in Denerim. The dwarves rather agreed with this point of view, feeling that an example was necessary in such circumstances.

Everyone attended the execution, of course, including the Wardens. Bronwyn stood by Loghain in the front, the two of them witnessing the end of the women who had sought to end them. Loghain glanced at the girl, who clearly had seen about all the death she cared for that day. Her face was carefully impassive throughout, and she turned away afterwards, with

only brief thanks to Merrill, and a word to Loghain that she must see to her Wardens. Most of the onlookers lingered, watching the corpses carried away, and discussing the iniquities of those who sent them.

"The Dalish were too soft on them, in my opinion. I suppose it comes from living in small bands," Piotin Aeducan said shrewdly to Loghain, after the event. "Elves are used to dealing with each other on a family basis, more or less. If they ever got their homeland and had to live in a proper city, they'd see why you can't be squeamish about treachery. Though I wonder if things aren't changing a bit. This is the largest gathering of elves in some time, I've been told, and there's been a bit of friction. Elves always go on about how it was all peace and love and harmony in the days when they ruled the surface, but I find that hard to credit."

Loghain agreed. The Dalish homeland was going to be a sticking point at the next Landsmeet. Cailan had promised it, and the Dalish must be given *something* for their service. Bronwyn had told him of some elven ruins she had explored in a remote area in the Brecilian Forest, east of the White River. She held that it would be a more rational place for the Dalish than the chilly south. Poring over the map, Loghain thought such a grant might be feasible. There were no human settlements there, and no regular trade routes, other than occasional hunters or some stray lumbermen. There were those who would decry giving the elves anything at all, of course, and the Chantry would cause trouble, too.

No doubt everything would fall apart for elves eventually, when

the missionaries were ejected and the Templars invaded. However, Loghain felt he could not be responsible for what might happen in a hundred years or even fifty. He had to do the best with the situation as it stood now, and the Dalish were performing well, and keeping their agreements in good faith.

Carefully, he drew a circle around the marked site of the ruins. Four hundred square leagues might be no more than a good sized bannorn, but it would infinitely more than the elves had possessed since the fall of the Dales.

The new Wardens were recognized and saluted at dinner. They sat together, and said little to those who were full of questions about the mysterious challenges they had faced, and also about the fates of those who had not returned. The Grey Wardens' reputation for secrecy was upheld, to the frustration of many.

The leaders of the armies met afterwards and discussed Bronwyn's findings.

"So the horde has been beaten back!" cried Bann Carlin. "That's a real victory, but does it mean the end of the Blight?"

Piotin Aeducan harrumphed in disgust. "Perhaps for you surfacers, if that's all you care about!"

Not wanting a quarrel, Bronwyn hastily interposed.

"No," she confessed. "Not at all; not as long as the Archdemon lives. It only means they've mostly gone somewhere else. We will continue to explore the Deep Roads, but one of the reasons I recently recruited so many Wardens is to make us able to scout a number of different Deep Road entrances around the country."

"That's a frightening idea," Merrill said softly. "I don't like to think they might be lurking anywhere, ready to pop out of the ground."

"There are only a few places where they could 'pop out,'" Loghain said, his voice dry. He waved at the map of Ferelden on the wall. "The entrances are marked."

"The *known* entrances," Thanovir added.

Loghain allowed that. Who knew what digging the darkspawn had undertaken?

"Take some of the Legion of the Dead with you," Kardol advised. "We need action."

Wulffe rubbed his beard. "Will the darkspawn make another major assault this season? Do darkspawn make war in winter, for that matter, unlike humans?"

"Winter means nothing underground," Ronus Dace pointed out. "The darkspawn do not need provisions, like the speaking peoples. They might wander out at anytime, though..." he considered, beetling brows contracted. "...Though perhaps

they would not venture out into the cold in force unless led by the Archdemon. It could be that they will remain underground until warm weather comes again. I believe I have read something in the Shaperate to that effect."

Merrill was concerned. "The Dalish always go north for the winter," she said nervously. "It will be hard for us to bear the cold here, and hard for the halla."

Loghain was prepared for that.

"While we would need a portion of your people to remain here with the army and Wardens, perhaps it would be a good idea for some of you to go north and winter there. There is empty land in the Neck at the mouth of the River Dane." It would be handy to have scouts like the Dalish there, if the Orlesians attempted a sortie into Ferelden itself.

"Or in the Brecilian Forest," Bronwyn suggested. She decided she would speak to Merrill later about the elven temple. That would accommodate hundreds, even in its dilapidated state.

Loghain caught her eye, and shrugged. It might not be bad, at that, for some of the Dalish to scout out the area and see if they thought it would do.

Wulffe was surprisingly sympathetic to the elves' concerns. "Winter in the south is nothing to joke about. I'll tell you a lot of my militiamen are anxious to get home to their farms and families. It was a hard harvest without them."

"But once gone," Bann Stronar said grimly, "will we ever get them back?" He was anxious about his own men, but very proud of his nephew at the moment. Emrys was a good lad, and having a Grey Warden in the family at the moment, he felt, gave him a certain prestige.

Loghain mulled it over. "We have the royal army, and I must hold you to keeping a least a core of your militias in the field. However, we may be sending them closer to home in some cases. Quite frankly, it would be nearly ruinous to try to feed the entire army through the winter, especially if it appears that the darkspawn have largely moved on."

Bronwyn suggested, "You could grant furloughs to some of the men, and send them home until the turn of the year. Some of them might run, true, but the freeholders have land, and we know where they live. And others feel lucky to get a soldier's pay."

They wrestled with the matter for some time, and within two hours had outlined a strategy to take them through the winter. Bronwyn returned to the Wardens' quarters, wanting to see if all the new people were settled in.

Screens and bookshelves had been arranged to give the Wardens a little more privacy. One of the original chambers had been cleared of cots and set up as a meeting room. In the newly-assigned room, the Junior Wardens had double bunks, and it was interesting to see how determined the dwarves were to claim the lower ones at all times.

Bronwyn found her own cot by the possessions heaped at the foot, and quickly stripped down to her shirt and smallclothes, longing for rest. Her Wardens walked past, clearly wanting to talk to her, but she put a forearm over her eyes and growled, "Tomorrow."

And tomorrow came, to her great disgust. At least they did not have to cook their own breakfast. The first order of business was dealing with the aftermath of their new Wardens' nightmares. They had been warned, but it was one thing to hear of it, and another to experience it for themselves.

Afterward, Bronwyn called some of her people to a private meeting: Alistair, Tara, Astrid, and then, thinking it best, Danith. She had hit on a plan as she was just falling asleep, and wanted to offer it up for consideration.

"It looks like the darkspawn have largely withdrawn from Ostagar. We can't keep the whole army here over the winter, especially since there's reason to believe that the Archdemon has moved on. Loghain's going to have to release some of the noble's militia for winter furlough. We Wardens need to do some scouting for the horde before the weather turns hopeless."

Astrid looked at her with keen interest. "You think we should send out patrols beyond the far south."

"Exactly. While we must maintain a presence in Ostagar, our increased numbers now give us the chance to hunt the

darkspawn elsewhere. When we were in Orzammar we copied some maps of the Deep Roads, and identified all the known entrances. I think we must search them out and descend into them to estimate the darkspawn strength remaining in Ferelden. Each of you will lead a contingent. You will also have detachments of the Legion of the Dead under your command, volunteered by Kardol."

Danith, very reluctantly, said, "I do not have great experience in the Deep Roads."

Bronwyn nodded. "And for that reason, your party will be largely on the surface. Nonetheless, it will be a challenging mission." She unrolled her maps of Ferelden and the Deep Roads, and the rest crowded around to see them and compare the two. "I want you to lead your party to the east, scouting for darkspawn. Move across the Wilds and through the southern end of the Brecilian Forest, in the direction of Gwaren. There is an entrance to the Deep Roads just outside the city. Descend into it and explore it for some miles—just enough to get an idea of how infested it is. I obviously do not expect you to travel all the way back to Ostagar along the connecting Gwaren Road, but have a look and determine how recently the darkspawn have been near Gwaren. You will be provided with travel documents and permission from the Teyrn to be quartered in his own Keep. Once you are done there, you will have to determine what the weather permits you to do. If it is still fair enough, I would like you to go north through the Brecilian Forest along the White River. You may come across your clan, Danith, and if so, see what news they have

of darkspawn incursions."

Danith nodded, so far quite pleased with her assigned mission.

Bronwyn continued, "You may be snowed in. Whether in Gwaren or South Reach, you will have maps of places you can stay."

"Or we can stay with my clan," Danith pointed out.

"Yes, there is that option. I'm sure the humans and dwarves under your command can learn much from the experience."

Danith grimaced at that, but nodded. It was only to be expected.

"If you *can*," Bronwyn said, "I want you to proceed north to Denerim, to the Warden Compound. I may be there by then. At any rate, you can resupply and equip your people, and Mistress Ranelly will be happy to spoil you."

"You're not staying Ostagar?" Alistair asked.

"Not for much longer. You'll be in command here," Bronwyn said. "and I'm thinking you should have either Brosca or Oghren as your Second. Think about it. I haven't settled on the individual assignments quite yet. You'll have a mage, of course. Perhaps Petra or Niall. I want Velanna, with her tracking experience, to be in one of the scouting parties."

"Not mine, I take it," Danith said sourly.

"Probably not," Bronwyn said, thinking it best to be frank. "We need to spread out Dalish expertise. I'm thinking Astrid will have Velanna in her party. Astrid and Tara will lead parties in parallel, one on the surface, and one through the Deep Roads. They'll go together to the entrance south of Lake Belennas, and then divide. They will meet at the entrance near Kinloch Hold." Her finger traced the path north, to the east of Lake Calenhad. "At that point, if weather permits further travel, I would like them to switch, and then proceed on the Amgarrack Road north, turning up to West Hill."

Astrid pursed her lips, thinking. "On the journey south, that stretch of the Atredum Road—the Deep Road between Orzammar and the entrance near Ostagar—" she explained to Tara and Danith—"was hotly contested. The dwarven army killed a *lot* of darkspawn, I'm told." She shrugged. "It could be that it's fairly clear, at that."

Bronwyn hoped so. "Obviously, we don't know much about the Deep Road between Ostagar and Lake Belennas, but it would answer a lot of questions if the section north of that is not yet repopulated."

Tara thought about it, too. "If we don't see a lot of darkspawn, it could mean that they were decimated, or it could just mean that the Archdemon has led the horde somewhere else."

Astrid pointed to a name on the map. "If we go north toward West Hill, we will come upon Zygmunt Thaig. That could be interesting. It has been in the power of the darkspawn for a

long time, and I know of no expeditions that have explored it."

"Destroy what darkspawn you can," Bronwyn said, "but don't be destroyed yourself. This is a scouting mission, not a duel to the death."

"Where are you going?" Tara asked Bronwyn.

Bronwyn had considered telling her people about her plans to take the throne, but perhaps this was not yet the time. Instead, she only shared her share of their general mission.

"I'm going north. I have to go to Denerim for all sorts of reasons anyway, but as you see there is yet another Deep Roads entrance—the one in Amaranthine at Drake's Fall."

Astrid leaned closer. "That is very close to Kal'Hiol," she said, "once a very important site for dwarven invention and smithing. Orzammar would be grateful if there were a way to once again reclaim that thaig."

"Really?" Bronwyn said. "I didn't know that. We'll hope we can achieve something useful for our dwarven allies. There's something else in the north I want to pursue. Near Drake's Fall is the site of an ancient fortress belonging to the Grey Wardens. It was our headquarters for hundreds of years, up until the time the order was banished from Ferelden."

"Yes," Astrid said, "I remember that trader fellow talking to you when we were in Denerim."

"I do too," Tara said, excited. "I forgot about it. Now that the civil war is over up north, you could see if it's in better shape than the outpost down here at Ostagar."

"That's the plan," Bronwyn agreed. "Before we spend any coin on the outpost here, I want to have a look at Soldier's Peak. It's not so remote as Ostagar, nor as cold, and from what Dryden said, it's considerably bigger."

"What if Tara and Astrid get snowed in?" Alistair brought up, sorry that he would not be seeing Soldier's Peak for himself.

"Well, I certainly don't want them to try to survive the winter at the Spoiled Princess tavern!" Bronwyn said tartly. "Good point, and it's not as easily arranged as Danith's accommodations. The northwest is trickier. However, most of the banns there are Cousland vassals, however lightly they wore their loyalty in the last few months. Bann Loren's manor, here—" she pointed, "would do. Even better would be West Hill, if you can actually get that far. It's a huge and mostly empty old fortress. Quarters there would be no problem, though provisions might be expensive. I'll see you're all well supplied with coin. If you can possibly manage it, make for Highever. My brother's people will see you right. Then you'll simply have to make the best call. If the weather holds, take the North Road for Denerim and report. Otherwise, hold fast where you are and patrol as best you can."

Astrid got up and walked around the table, considering it. "I think," she said slowly, "if the weather is at all questionable, we should stay in West Hill. We can access the Deep Roads

from there, and strike out further on the Amgarrack Road. Who is the lord there?"

"Bann Frandarel," Bronwyn shrugged. "He's something of a recluse. He sent a small party to Ostagar. The bannorn was a rich one, long ago, hence the size of his fortress, but the land was laid waste during the Occupation and Rebellion. There was a very significant battle there."

She said no more about that, as the battle had been a *very* significant defeat for King Maric and his army, and the Rebellion had nearly ended then and there.

"It's true that Bann Frandarel is my brother's vassal, and I shall give you a letter of introduction. Of course, your status as Grey Wardens *ought* to give you hospitality anyway."

Danith looked confused. "I thought that the old arl with the loud voice was the lord of West Hill."

Bronwyn looked blank, and then laughed a little. "It used to confuse me, too. In Ferelden we have both an arling of West *Hills*, and a bannorn of West *Hill*. Bann Frandarel's lands are here—" she pointed to the dot on the northwest coast. "The arling is in the southwest," she said, indicating the legend. "It's too bad they couldn't come up with something more distinctive!"

It was a plan, or at least the beginnings of one. The surface party in the west would have a supply wagon, which would slow them down, but be vital to their success. Alistair tended

to think that they would need two wagons, in fact. They also discussed taking detachments of their allies with them.

"I do not want a wagon," Danith said, thinking it over. "We will not be traveling by road, and it will be very hard going..." she paused. "Unless we had an aravel, drawn by halla. They are lighter, but could carry a great deal. Merrill might let us have an aravel. Would that be unseemly for Grey Wardens?"

Alistair grinned. "Not at all! I think it's a great idea. Of course, you might want to fly a Grey Warden banner to make it official!"

"One more thing," Bronwyn said, "Tara, I'm taking Anders with me, and thus Morrigan. I was inclined to take Zevran as well, but you may prefer to have him with you."

Tara looked sad. "I'll miss him," she said steadily, "but if you're going to Denerim, he should be there. Zevran's at his best in a city. He knows all the gangs. It'll give me an incentive to get done and join you. Besides..." she thought a little more. "I think for my first command...people will respect me more if they don't see me with my boyfriend all the time. Take Zevran to Denerim."

"Let's talk to him," said Bronwyn. "We also need to see how he feels about it."

They agreed to let the recruits enjoy a day of rest and leisure, but set up a training and exercise rota for the five or six days until the patrols would depart. Everyone wanted a closer look

at the recruits' capabilities before the final assignments were made.

In fact, as they walked out of the Tower of Ishal toward the training grounds, they saw that the recruits had already undertaken some informal practice of their own. A group of archers were in fierce competition to uphold the honor of their race, class, or town. They were putting on quite a show, and many more than Grey Wardens were crowding close to watch and place bets. Bronwyn was considering making it official and finding a piece of booty to offer as a prize, when one of Loghain's personal guards hailed her.

"My lady!" the man said, "the Teyrn is in the War Room, and requires your presence at once."

The contest forgotten, Bronwyn followed the man across the bridge to the big log building constructed under the ancient pillars of the fortress.

"Shut the door," Loghain said. On first glance, he seemed calm. On the second, she saw that he was blazing with repressed violence. "Ill tidings from Denerim," he told her.

"What has happened?" Bronwyn asked, a thousand possibilities flitting through her mind, all bad.

"Sit." He pointed at a chair. In his hand was a folded piece of parchment that bore the Queen's seal, broken. "We were not the only targets on the seventh. The Arl of Denerim's bridal

feast was attacked. It was...brutal."

Bronwyn waited, in wretched suspense.

Loghain referred back to the note. "Anora was not wounded, but there were heavy losses. She wrote this immediately after the attack was repulsed—and she gives a great deal of credit for that to Leonas' courage and quick wits. Banns Ceorlic, Loren, Reginalda, and Grainne were killed outright."

Bronwyn caught her breath, eyes wide.

Loghain glanced at her, grim, and continued, "Arl Urien was wounded to some degree, though Anora does not know how badly. Dead are Ladies Werberga Bryland—"

"Werberga!" Bronwyn gasped, horrified at the idea of the murder of that silly, harmless woman.

"—Adela Claycombe, Miriah Poole, and Thalma Youngbloode. Bann Frandarel's eldest son, too. Also wounded were Leonas' younger son, Bann Alfstanna, Bann Sighard, and Lady Seria Mac Coe. Anora says there were more losses, but she was writing this in haste. The assassins were disguised as minstrels and entertainers at the feast. Some of them were killed, a few captured, and many more escaped and are at large. They were Orlesian, yes, and their hirelings," he added, in reply to her unspoken question.

"The Empress has been a busy girl, it would seem," Bronwyn said, her smile bitter.

"There is more. Some guests were injured when the Knight-Commander had his Templars shove through the crowd, as they hustled the Grand Cleric to safety. And also—" he frowned, making some of the same connections that Anora had.

"Also," he said, "Wynne was arrested by the Templars a few hours before the event, which could point to collusion by the Chantry."

"Maker!"

Anora had not been hurt, but there was no denying that this was a blow—a serious blow—to the safety of the realm. In the space of a few minutes, four bannorns had lost their leaders. There were three vacant bannorns in Amaranthine alone, and four in Highever, and now—Andraste's nightgown!—How were they to find rulers for all these now, too?

Loren's son was dead, of course, killed in the Highever massacre. Bronwyn had no idea who could claim that title. Loren had no siblings, except for a sister who had taken orders and was now gone, too. It was possible that the bannorn would legally revert to Highever's direct rule. It was another plum for Fergus to offer some loyal man of his.

"What a tragedy!" she said, winded. "And what a tangle. How, terribly, terribly cruel!"

"It's clear to a child that the Orlesians want to destabilize the country, hoping to make their move when we are at our

weakest. We cannot wait for a Landsmeet in Haring. I must go to Denerim, now— today. And you must come with me."

Trying to keep up with events, Bronwyn thought hard. "I had planned major missions for my people. I briefed them this morning. We should still go ahead with them."

Loghain nodded. "Yes, so you said. You'll keep Alistair here, I trust?"

"Yes. He'll command the Wardens in Ostagar."

"Keep the Qunari here with him," Loghain said. "I don't want him going about the country, nosing out all our secrets."

"Very well. Sten will stay with Alistair and his Wardens. Danith will go east to Gwaren and then up through the Brecilian Forest. Tara and Astrid will go up the eastern shore of Lake Calendhad: Tara on the surface, and Astrid in the Deep Roads. Ultimately I want them to go all the way to West Hill, or as far as they can get before snow flies."

He glanced at the map, seeing it all, and approved.

More slowly, Bronwyn said, "Yes, I must go with you. I can see that. We'll have to announce our betrothal as soon as we reach Denerim. And I was planning to go north anyway. I wanted to scout the Deep Road entrance in Amaranthine. I can call my people together and arrange for my own party to go with us today: six Wardens and one or two allies. The other missions should move out in three or four days. Yes, I

can do this."

"Talk to your people," he said, eyes fierce and intent. "I'll call the commanders together. I had not planned to do this immediately, but events have forced my hand. I intend to leave Cauthrien here with a company of Maric's shield. The nobles will want to come to Denerim with us, or at least very soon. Many have family who were killed or injured. I'll talk to the dwarves and the Dalish, and let them know what's going on. Talk to your people and get back here as quickly as possible."

A horrible thought struck Bronwyn.

"What if this is exactly what the Orlesians planned? The breakup of the army? The rush to Denerim?"

He shook his head. "What they do not know is that the darkspawn have withdrawn. They undoubtedly believe us still to be under heavy attack. They think us pinned down. We are not."

Unexpectedly, he seized Bronwyn in his arms and kissed her hungrily. She warmed at the embrace; reassured, flushed with life. When he broke the kiss, he held her at arms' length, with a grim little half smile. Then he gently kissed her forehead.

"Surprise is on our side, my girl. We'll make them regret this."

Darach won the archery competition, to the delight of the

Dalish. Cathair, who would be traveling with Bronwyn, and the human archer Catriona had also performed brilliantly.

Bronwyn found Alistair, and whispered her news in his incredulous ear; and then the Wardens were ordered to report to the Tower at once. Next she sought out Zevran.

"Walk with me, if you please. I have to return to the Tower."

There was no time to be bashful.

"Zevran, I've got to go to Denerim today. In a few days Tara will be leading a patrol north by way of Lake Calenhad. We'd like you to go with one of us, but the choice is yours. Darkspawn and bandits with Tara, or darkspawn and politics with me."

To Zevran, there was no choice. "I am your sworn man, and the Blight is not yet over. I must, by what honor an assassin can command, serve you. Something is in the wind, I take it?"

"On the same day that those elves attempted to kill Loghain and me, there were other attacks in Denerim. The Queen is safe, but some nobles were killed, and everything's in an uproar. Please keep this to yourself, until I have the chance to tell everyone. So you're with me?"

"I have said it."

"Good. I suspect that things will be sticky in the north."

By the time the Junior Wardens had made it back to the

tower, Bronwyn had torn through her belongings and found a handsome gold ring.

"Congratulations to Darach, today's champion archer of the Grey Wardens!" She presented the prize to him, amidst cheers. "I'm glad to see all you new Wardens honing your skills. You'll need them in the coming days."

Quickly, Bronwyn informed them of events. Orlesians assassins had attacked in Denerim. Many had been slain or wounded, and it was unclear how bad the situation was. Apparently, it was part of the same attack that had targeted Loghain and Bronwyn on the very same day. It appeared that foreign powers were attempting to hamper the efforts against the Blight. She had already made plans to send some the Wardens on scouting missions around Ferelden, and now the plans must be accelerated a little. She and her own patrol must leave today, along with Teyrn Loghain and a portion of the royal army.

"Some of you will remain here under Senior Warden Alistair's command. Senior Warden Tara will command one of the missions. Let me take this opportunity to announce some promotions. Astrid and Danith are also now Senior Wardens, and will command the other missions. After them, the chain of command goes to the Wardens above the rank of Junior Warden in this order: Wardens Leliana, Anders, Broasca, Jowan, Carver, Adaia, and Oghren, due to his long service as our ally."

Even more briefly, Bronwyn outlined the extent and purpose of

the missions. The Senior Wardens remaining would have to make the final assignments of personnel.

"I shall be going north, first to Denerim to deal with the political situation there, and then further north to Amaranthine, to scout out the Deep Roads entrance in that arling. With me will travel Warden Anders and the following Junior Wardens: Aveline, Toliver, Cathair, Hakan, and Soren. Our allies Morrigan and Zevran will also travel with us. Get your gear together: we will be leaving after the midday meal! We'll have a wagon, so at least you'll not be burdened with a pack on the march. Junior Wardens are dismissed. Everyone else, stay."

The door was shut, and Bronwyn looked at her comrades. Only Alistair knew the whole story of what was going to happen in Denerim, and now that it came to it, she felt some sorrow and unease at what she had to say. There was nothing else to be done, so she came out with it.

"As I told the Junior Wardens, I am going north to Denerim, to help sort out the situation. There was a great loss of life in the attack, and there is also the possibility that it took place with the collusion of elements in the Chantry. For those of you who don't know much about human religion, that is a very serious matter. The Divine, the arbiter of our Prophet, rules from Val Royeaux, and certainly has never hesitated in furthering the interests of her own country. If the Chantry is involved in hampering our efforts against the Blight, we might find ourselves fighting Templars as well as Tainted creatures."

"The Templars won't march against Ferelden, if it means they

have to face darkspawn," Tara said, scowling.

"They might not come as far south as Ostagar," Bronwyn allowed, "but they might attack our supply trains and make trouble for the mages who are serving in the army. To be frank, Loghain thinks that the Orlesians don't know how effective we've been so far, and they probably believe we're pinned down here. Our problem is quite different, actually. The darkspawn seemed to have largely withdrawn from the south, and we don't know where they are right now. Thus the scouting expeditions. Since I'm leaving in a few hours, you'll have to hash out the personnel assignments yourselves, though I've left some notes with Alistair. You don't need to move out for a few days. It's important that you're thoroughly prepared. I wish all the mages could transform into birds, so we'd have better communication, but we'll do the best we can. Loghain is leaving official letters with the Wardens that will enable you to demand the cooperation of royal couriers."

Alistair was looking at her, kind and serious; it was time to tell them everything.

"There's more, but I ask that you keep it to yourselves until the public announcement is made. As you know, King Cailan left no heir. With the current unrest, it's more important than ever that the Landsmeet choose a ruler for Ferelden that all can unite behind. Many people would like Teyrn Loghain to assume the throne, but he has no royal blood, and the nobles might balk. My family—the Couslands—are next in line of succession by blood. My brother has said that he does not want the Crown, choosing instead to restore the north to

peace and security. Therefore..."

"Oh!" cried Tara, smiling like a sunrise.

"Oh!" Adaia croaked, a second later, beautiful eyes wide.

They were the first to catch on, but Astrid looked up quickly, only a beat behind them.

Brosca gaped, and then said outright, "Boss, are you going to marry the big guy so he can be King? That sounds like Orzammar, sort of."

Astrid laughed. "It does! You will raise him to the royal caste by marriage!"

Anders was grinning. "Bronwyn's getting married! Can I be a bridesmaid?"

"Bronwyn's going to be *Queen!*" Tara squealed. "All hail Queen Bronwyn!"

Danith was more sober. "You will be Queen of the shemlens. Will you resign from the Wardens?"

"No!" Bronwyn assured them all instantly. "I will continue to serve. Defeating the Blight is of paramount importance. I will be Queen, because that way those who put store by blood will be satisfied, and the country will continue to have the best leadership during this crisis. There will be a wedding and a Landsmeet and a coronation, but in between those events and after them, I will continue to focus on my duties as a Warden.

If the darkspawn triumph, a trumpety crown will be of little worth indeed."

"But you *like* Loghain," Tara declared. "It's not like you're having to marry somebody you don't like."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "I like Loghain. I think we can work together well."

Tara only looked annoyed. "That's not what I meant."

"Wait!" Adaia's voice cracked, and she waved her hands in agitation. "Your red gown! Leliana and I finished the alterations and the little cape. I was going to give them to you for Satinalia!"

Bronwyn had not thought about Queen Rowan's gown in days, but was relieved to hear that she would have something to wear.

"Thank you so much! I'll be sure to take that with me."

Brosca said, "We won't all be together again for a long time, will we?"

A pause. Bronwyn experienced a curious pang of grief. No, she would not see many of these faces for months. If some were unlucky, perhaps... No, she would not allow herself to think like that.

"We'll meet in Denerim!" she said. "And perhaps by next spring, the south will be so clear that Alistair can join us there,

too."

"Let's make a pact!" Tara proposed. "Next spring in Denerim! Maybe the first of Drakonis! If the darkspawn permit," she added, in a smaller voice.

The future lay before them, ineffable and uncertain. Each thought about what another five months might bring, and paused, baffled.

Alistair hoped that no one would force him to attend the Landsmeet. Surely Bronwyn would sweep all before her, and the next time they met, he would be bending the knee before his Queen. The thought of Bronwyn married to Loghain did not make as him unhappy as it once might have. Loghain had been more than decent to him, and had taught him so much. Alistair had once had thought about Bronwyn for himself, but over time they had evolved into brother and sister—if he had had a loving but very *bossy* older sister. For himself, he would much rather spend the winter here, with the Wardens, with the army and its allies, fighting darkspawn, clearing the tunnels they had dug; making the world safe, though no one else might know it. He would miss his friends, but he would not be totally alone. He had his fine new batch of Wardens, and he already had a feeling that he and Emrys were going to be good friends. Adaia would be here, too, working diligently, so lively and pretty, now that she was able to eat properly. Oghren...yes, he'd keep Oghren here. The dwarf knew how to train recruits, and he and Sten were fairly companionable. Sten...well, he knew that Bronwyn wanted Sten to stay in

Ostagar. The qunari was a fortress in himself, and if the darkspawn doubled back, he would be worth even his considerable weight in gold. Yes...friends, and Warden-work, a settled routine here in Ostagar. And, Andraste be merciful, no Landsmeet. Life could be far worse.

Tara was excited and more than a little nervous at the prospect of command. Bronwyn made it look effortless, and Tara knew that her own style would be very different. She was not the imposing daughter of an ancient noble house, but an elf and a mage, and thus among the lowly of Thedas. But she was a Warden, and that made all the difference. She would wear her Warden tunic everywhere. If she had to beat everyone over the head with her status, so be it. She would, she decided, take Brosca to back her up. Oghren and she were not so compatible. Yes, Brosca and she would work really well together. They had the prospect of meeting up with Astrid and her people, too, which was immensely reassuring. Tara had a great deal of faith in Astrid. Zevran...would be missed, but Tara realized she was far more excited about her new command. They wouldn't be separated all that long, after all. Magic was never supposed to rule over people, but Tara would be ruling over her own detachment of Wardens. She had come a long way from the abused and oppressed prisoner of the Circle.

Denerim! Anders was quite enchanted at the prospect. Morrigan had never been to Denerim—never seen a real city, or at least a real *human* city. Orzammar was grand in a creepy, sunless, and monumental way, but *Denerim!* And he

was completely safe from the Chantry! He could shop at The Wonders of Thedas with no fear of repercussions, and of course if everyone would presume that Morrigan was a Warden, too. The others had told him what a great place the Warden Compound was. With luck, he and Morrigan could have a private room with an actual bed, which could only improve what was, in his opinion, a beautiful friendship.

I hope I go with one of the scouting teams, Broasca decided. *I need to get out of here for awhile*. Which gang she went with did not matter that much to her, though she was sorry the Boss was not taking her along. No big surprise. These kids would need all the help they could get in the Deep Roads. She got on all right with Danith, and pretty well now with the Princess of Orzammar. And Tara. She liked Tara, in spite of herself, but the memory of Cullen still *hurt*. She shouldn't hold Cullen against Tara. In the end, he had chosen her—Freydis Broasca—and was coming back to her, if a dragon hadn't got in the way. Sodding Stone, but she *hated* dragons. So she'd go out there and hunt for the Stone-cursed Archdemon, the biggest dragon of them all, and she'd kill it, and wear its hide the way the Boss was wearing Flemeth. She smiled. The Boss had *style*. Broasca hoped they could get the scouting done soon enough that she could be at the wedding, or at least see the Boss in her crown. She wondered if it would be as fancy as that one Caridin made for Bhelen. Thinking of Bhelen made her think of Rica and her nuglet. Broasca wished they could make a detour all the way to Orzammar. She had some nice bits of treasure put by now, and it would be something to give the kid a present. Her train of thought was

briefly derailed. Presents? Didn't people give wedding presents? She remembered the Boss finding something to give her cousin—the one whose wedding got broken up by the Orlesian gang. The Wardens should give the Boss a wedding present! Something really special. She'd need to talk to everybody about it later...

Brooding a bit over which Wardens would fall to her lot, Danith focused on the mission ahead, where she would be in independent command. She would lead her Wardens as she saw fit. Overbearing and arrogant as Bronwyn could be, she at least recognized the value of Dalish expertise. The mission was not an unworthy one, and well suited to Danith's abilities. However exasperating she found them, she must be fair to her shemlen Wardens. Or as fair as they deserved. That fellow Aeron, the singer... he had behaved well, and done as he was told. Perhaps he would prove a pleasant companion. For so many Dalish, durgen'len, and shemlen to work together against the Blight must teach them much about cooperation in the future. And she could not complain about the respect that her status as a Grey Warden commanded. She must get to Merrill and discuss this news. If Bronwyn were to be the shemlen Queen, then there would never be a better time than now for Merrill to get a firm commitment from her about a Dalish homeland.

So Bronwyn would be a Queen. Astrid pondered the matter, wondering if it could serve as a precedent. She reproved herself for such daydreams. Still, it probably had not occurred to Bronwyn that Bhelen might be made very, very nervous by

the news that a Grey Warden was ascending a throne. The thought of Bhelen's unease brought a smile to her lips. As it was, she should not complain. She was an officer now, raised to the rank of Senior Warden. She would have a command once more. However small it was, it was still a command, and Astrid was going to do all she could with it. A brief regret made her pause. Yes, she would miss Alistair, but he was such a boy, after all... And his claim to the throne was clearly about to come to nothing. He, however, seemed to be glad of it. Astrid would never, if she lived to be a thousand, understand that. As for her, she liked the idea of her mission very much. Some time in the Deep Roads. Some time on the surface. A mixed command, too, with dwarves, elves and humans. That would be a very interesting challenge. The elves did not seem to resent dwarven command as much as they did that of humans. She herself was extremely curious about the state of the Deep Roads in Ferelden. They very possibly might stumble on the horde itself, withdrawn into one of the big, deserted Thaigs. The mission would require care and shrewd scouting. Astrid turned her mind to that, rejoicing in even the shred of power that had come under her hand once more.

A little disappointed that she would not be going to Denerim any time soon, Adaia settled back on the bench. She was promoted, anyway. Maybe she would be due more coin. If any other Wardens came to work on bombs and poisons, she would be in charge, she supposed. Some of the dwarves were interested in that, and that Dalish girl Siofranni. It was not like she minded her work: it was the most interesting and

best-paying job she'd ever had. An exciting thought came to her: she could send money home to Father and Shianni! She glanced around, and saw that Alistair was looking a bit sad and wistful too. He must be sorry not to get away and have a new adventure. He caught her eye and gave her a rueful smile. She smiled back, and he brightened up a bit. She had never imagined she would think it of a shem, but Alistair was a very nice boy, and very nice-looking, too. When she had first joined the Wardens, she had the idea that he and Bronwyn were something, but Bronwyn was involved with Teyrn Loghain. What she thought about *that* Adaia was never going to reveal to anyone. At least Bronwyn would get to be Queen, and maybe she would be kind to elves. In fact... More pleasant thoughts came to her, as she thought of repairs that could be made, and wrongs righted, if an elf of the Denerim Alienage had the ear of the Queen of Ferelden.

Branka had once told him that there were no second chances in life. *Wrong again, sweet hips*, Oghren snorted. Here he was on the surface, in an outfit that even the deshyrs had to respect, and he'd been promoted to full Warden after a day. *A day*. Whatever the Boss cooked up for him to do, he'd do it and not whine like some sort of pansy elf. As long as he didn't drink so much that he couldn't stand on his feet and swing an axe—as long as he didn't totally screw it up—the world was his. He could march into Orzammar, armed to the teeth, and the bastards would have to nod and smile, and say, "*Atrast Vala, Grey Warden!*" just as nice as you please. Next... he needed to find himself a woman. Astrid was too high and mighty: sort of a Branka with better common sense, which

was a scary prospect in itself; Brosca was still moping about that Chantry Boy. But there were some sodding fine women in camp, and surely Oghren Kondrat could find one to call his own.

News spread of the attack on Denerim. A great many oaths of vengeance were sworn, some even without the aid of strong liquor. As Loghain had predicted, quite a few of the nobles felt they must go to Denerim to see to family and to set things in order. Their Seconds were left with reduced forces, and with instructions to obey Ser Cauthrien and to heed the advice of Senior Warden Alistair.

There was a flurry of packing, of arranging the wagons, of dividing some of Master Wade's weapons amongst the Wardens. Bronwyn promised to order more when she was in Denerim. Tara and Zevran disappeared into their little cubby, no doubt making their fond farewells. They had been so happy that Bronwyn regretted separating them. With luck, it would only be for a few months.

Adaia pressed the refurbished red gown on Bronwyn, and it was deposited, carefully packed, into a trunk. She also pressed on Bronwyn a coin purse and a little bag of gifts for her family, which Bronwyn solemnly promised to deliver.

"And when you're there..." Adaia said anxiously, "if you see something that needs to be fixed, you go right ahead and make sure it gets done. Please?" she added.

She looked so small and defenseless that Bronwyn felt ashamed to do anything else but comply.

"I shall."

There was little time to do anything but get ready to leave: there was almost no time to think. Nonetheless, Merrill slipped through the mob to confront Bronwyn as she scribbled a few more notes for Alistair.

"I hear you're going to be Queen. Congratulations. That's nice for you." said the fey little elf.

Bronwyn glanced at her friends, who discreetly moved away. Merrill wanted something, and Bronwyn was quite sure she knew what it was.

"Loghain and I are going to be put forward for the throne. I think our chances our good," she answered. "Thank you for your kind words."

"Well, if you are to be King and Queen, everyone thinks it would be a good idea if you'd proclaim that we Dalish are to have land. Oh...I shouldn't have said it right out like that, should I? I was supposed to be diplomatic, but you're so busy, and being diplomatic takes such a lot of time. Cailan wanted us to have land. How do you feel about it?"

Trying not to laugh, Bronwyn thought it best to be straightforward. "Loghain and I both believe that the Dalish ought to have real, concrete rewards for their alliance. Cailan

originally proposed some territory here in the south, but since you think it's not suitable for the winter, I had thought that the area around the elven temple we found in the Brecilian Forest might be much better: it's not Blighted, for one thing, and its full of game. Besides, the temple itself is so significant and impressive that surely the Dalish would like to reclaim it as part of their rightful heritage."

Expecting more of a debate, Merrill stared at her a moment. "Oh. Then it's all right, then. We have to leave some of our people here, but perhaps I'll have a look at this temple myself. I've never been there, but it does sound very nice."

"The biggest question is whether you want any land on the seacoast."

"Why would we want that?" Merrill wondered. "We don't want to sail away. We wouldn't know how. Of course we do want all the land we can get."

"Well, then, why don't you or some scouts have a look at the place and think about what would work best for you? Do it soon, and then come to Denerim to meet with us. I'll be doing some scouting in the north myself, but I'll be in the city from time to time."

Merrill looked at her a moment, blinking. "This is so nice!" she finally exclaimed. "I do like talking with people who will say what they really think. I've always liked you, Bronwyn. I hope you enjoy being Queen. It's quite a bit like being a Keeper, isn't it?"

"Very like," Bronwyn agreed.

Dax stood ready: saddled and waiting. Scout ran about, barking and excited, wanting to smell everyone and everything. Zevran and Tara were making a romantic spectacle of themselves, which made Bronwyn smile a bit. Commands were shouted in the organized chaos of the departure. Bronwyn caught a glimpse of Morrigan, already mounted, her face closed and tight with displeasure, evidently having some sharp words with Anders. She would have to find out what Morrigan was unhappy about, but it would have to wait while they got underway.

Her Junior Wardens were in order: Aveline had seen to it. That woman was going to be a gift of the Maker.

And her Wardens—her first Wardens—her loyal and faithful comrades— were gathered around wanting to bid her goodbye. Bronwyn glanced at Loghain, who was having a quick, businesslike conversation with Cauthrien. She had a moment, then.

They seemed a little repressed, a little in awe. All except Brosca, of course, who hugged her.

"I'll miss you, Boss. Put those deshyrs of yours in their place!"

That broke the ice, and there were more hugs, and hearty hand-shakes, as Bronwyn made her hasty farewells.

"Administration is an appropriate role for a capable female," said Sten, studying her with a considering look. "A worthy use of ability. Hereditary monarchy, of course, is a primitive form of government; but your people have as yet not been enlightened by the Qun."

Bronwyn supposed this was a form of congratulations, so she smiled and gave him a slight bow of acknowledgement. Oghren slapped her on the back, and even Danith wished her well. Merrill must have already told her friend the upshot of their conversation. Well, if Danith was actually pleased with her, that was all to the good. The mission to Gwaren was *important*.

She was hugged by a tearful Tara, by a more collected but smiling Astrid, and then, more shyly, by Adaia.

"I won't forget my promise," Bronwyn said softly. Adaia nodded and backed away, biting her lip, eyes alight with hope.

Alistair was red-eyed and mournful, and seeing him made Bronwyn rather emotional herself.

"You take care of yourself," he managed. "Watch out for people in disguise with daggers, because—"

She threw her arms around him, the tears breaking free. "I wish you were coming! I wish you were! Who knows when we'll meet again?"

At that, there were throat-clearings and sniffles all around.

Even the coolest heads and hearts among them were grave and thoughtful.

Another fierce hug, metal to dragonbone; a rasp of her cheek against his stubble, and she stepped back, wiping her face. "Alistair, you are and always will be my brother."

He wiped his eyes too, with a crooked grin. "I always wanted a big family."

"You've got one," she laughed a little wildly. "You've got me and the Wardens...over fifty sisters and brothers! You've got Fergus as a sort of half-brother, and when I marry Loghain, you'll have a brother-in-law!"

"Does that make Queen Anora my niece?" His voice cracking, he asked anxiously, "Are you sure you've got everything?"

"Yes!"

"And don't forget to write."

"I won't."

"And write the First Warden, too, and give him what for! Duncan would have been ashamed of him, leaving the Blight to us!"

She punched him on the arm, laughing a little. Her Sword of Mercy swung free, and at the sight of it Alistair grinned again.

"Don't take it off," he told her. "It sounds like you'll have lots of

opportunity to find out just how merciful you can be, once you get to Denerim!"

"I'll never take it off."

Loghain was looking her way now, ready to be gone, and Alistair gave her a leg up into tall Dax's saddle. The sun was still fairly high. If they moved quickly, they could be halfway to Lothering by sunset. The Imperial Highway stretched before them, lined with trees ablaze with autumn, the pavement gloriously carpeted with leaves yellow as fire and red as blood. A little gust of wind blew past, catching the ensigns, making them snap and flutter.

The trumpets blared, and they rode out together. Bronwyn turned her head, seeing her friends—even Sten—growing small with distance.

"Goodbye!" she called. "Goodbye! Stay safe and hold fast! I'll see you in Denerim sooner than you think!"

Thanks to my reviewers: Zute, JackOfBladesX, Girl-chama, sizuka2, anon, Hydroplatypus, Nemrut, Enaid Aderyn, Mike3207, Kira Kyuu, almostinsane, Blinded in a bolthole, Judy, KnightOfHolyLight, Chandagnac, Have Travel, Raxiselic, Verpine, Psyche Sinclair, amanda weber, Death Knight's Crowbar, Tsu Doh Nimh, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, BAms, Jenna53, mille libri, EpitomyofShyness, Shakespeira, Jose Lange, MsBarrows, FearIsMyTwin, stainglasspeppermint, Cobar713, and timunderwood9.

64. Toward a Reckoning

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 64: Toward a Reckoning

"I want the Cathedral searched from top to bottom," commanded Anora. "I want to know the names of the traitors in our midst. Priestly robes will not protect them. I want to know their secret plans. I want to know to whom they reported, and how, and when."

The Grand Cleric was in no position to object. Too shocked and frightened by the events of the tragic wedding feast, and physically undermined by the drug that had subdued her, she kept to her own quarters, and largely to her bed. Anora considered the possibility that she might be malingering to conceal her own involvement, but decided to bide her time, while building her case against other Chantry officials.

The clergy had been rounded up and were being held in the nave of the Cathedral. Their guards had strict orders not to tell them what had transpired elsewhere in the city. Not everyone was there, of course. Some had been elsewhere in the city, and after witnessing events from the outside of the Cathedral, had decided to lay low for a time.

For the most part, priests and Templars were being treated with respect until they could be sorted out. However, the quarters of certain individuals were being targeted for special attention.

Anora had a list, and Bryland had a list, and at the top of the list were the names of Mothers Gertrude and Heloise and Knight-Command Tavish. Revered Mother Gertrude had held the Queen of Ferelden prisoner, and it was impossible to describe that action as anything but treason. Mother Heloise had colluded with her. Tavish had injured noblemen and noblewomen of Ferelden during his flight from the Arl of Denerim's wedding feast.

Also on the list was Clarine, the Revered Mother at Ostagar, who interfered incessantly and noisily in military matters. While bigotry and a shrewish tongue were not necessarily evidence of treason. Anora was taking no chances. Her quarters were searched as well.

Anora knew her legal standing here was shaky. Theoretically, members of the clergy were exempt from the secular authorities, and were subject only to Chantry law. It was questionable that a member of the clergy could even be deemed a "traitor" in the normal sense. Anora considered the matter for some time, and then decided that she was not going to permit her hands to be tied by those who had tried to compass her death, and who had murdered Wynne in all due legal form. She would not go whining to the Divine, whom she suspected would put her off with soft words and then quietly reward those in the plot.

Therefore, those against whom there was evidence were taken under guard to Fort Drakon. Cupboards were broken into, and secret hiding places found out. Everything was taken back to the Palace to be pored over at length. Anora, Fergus and Leonas Bryland worked in the Privy Chamber, along with a few trusted knights and clerks, and with the assistance of Warden Jowan, who was only too happy at the opportunity. A steady stream of priests, Templars, and lay sisters and brothers appeared before them to be questioned.

Irminric, Otto, and Stennis were questioned along with the rest, as was Sister Justine, to obtain their views on which of the clergy was most loyal to their native land, and which had the strongest ties to Orlais. On the basis of this, a number of clergy were determined to be no threat: among them Mothers Boann and Perpetua and Chanter Rosamond. Their rooms had been checked like everyone's else's, since no one felt they could be too careful, but it was ascertained fairly quickly that these women had nothing to hide.

"I would like to see my sister, if I may," Irminric asked. "Bann Alfstanna. I heard she was badly wounded."

"Of course you may see her," Anora said. "She is at the late Arl of Denerim's estate, where she is recovering.. She would no doubt be glad to see you."

"She is much recovered," added Leonas Bryland, "thanks to the efforts of Ser Adam Hawke's sister Bethany. The young lady also saved my son's life."

It was not long afterward that Irminric learned that young Mistress Bethany was a mage: a mage declared free of Chantry authority by the Arl of Bryland's proclamation, which was now confirmed by the Queen. Uneasily, it occurred to him that there had been an earthquake of sorts in Ferelden, and nothing would now be the same.

A friendly group of soldiers let Bethany tag along with them after she left the Arl of Denerim's estate. They were en route from Fort Drakon to the Gate, where they would take their turn at guard duty,. Bethany was not the only civilian in their wake, but she was a pretty young girl, and therefore particularly welcome. From the Gate, it was not difficult to find her way back to Highever House. She was recognized and admitted by the men working in the courtyard. Inside the door, a yellow-eyed servantwoman named Lita reproached her.

"Your lady mother has been so worried about you!"

"Is that Bethany?" cried Leandra Hawke from the stairs. The older woman ran down them and seized her daughter in her arms. "Where have you been?"

"Everything's fine, Mother," Bethany replied. "I took advantage of Arl Bryland's amnesty for mages and healed his little boy. Lots of other people too. They were very grateful."

Leandra burst into tears, wondering if they should grab a bundle and a purse of money and flee the city. It would be just like the early days with Malcolm. People were grateful—oh,

so very grateful—but then they thought again, and realized that the Chantry could destroy them and their families, and that the Chantry said there was no need to be grateful to mages anyway, and then she and Malcolm had to run for their lives. Again and again.

Charade had run down after her aunt, and hung back, feeling awkward, while Bethany tried to be reassuring.

"Don't cry, Mother. It's really all right. The Teyrn was there, and the Queen was there, and they thanked me themselves and the Queen said I was to be free of Chantry supervision! Is there any supper?" she asked the watching Lita.

"Directly, my lady," said the yellow-eyed woman, quickening her pace toward the kitchens.

Charade could no longer restrain her curiosity.

"You saw the Queen? Was she all right? How did they get her away from the Chantry?"

"She was all right, but she had nothing on but a shift and Adam's blue cloak. The priests stole her clothing! Isn't that horrid? Teyrn Fergus climbed up to the tower chapel and carried her down. Carver and Jowan and Leliana had to go to the Warden Compound, but later they're going to help search the Chantry, since the plotting was against the Wardens, too. Everybody wants to know if the Chantry was involved in that assassination attempt on Teyrn Loghain."

Bethany gave them all the news of her own adventures: about her new friends the little Lords Corbus and Lothar, Lady Seria Mac Coe, and Bann Alfstanna; and all about the Queen's anger at the Chantry.

"I think she's really going to curb their power," Bethany said. "And she promised that I wouldn't have to go to the Circle, ever."

Supper was announced, and a nice meal was laid out on a table in a small panelled parlor.

"I thought," said Lita, "that you ladies would prefer to eat apart from all the soldiers. It will be quiet and private here."

"This is nice!" Charade declared, admiring the pretty room.

Despite her fears for Bethany, Leandra Hawke was otherwise in the heights of bliss, ensconced in the luxurious townhouse of Teyrn of Highever. Not since she was twenty years old had she lived like this, with servants to lay out her supper in a pleasantly warm room, to fetch her bathwater, to take away her clothes to be laundered. After supper was the happily anticipated bath, and after that, she changed into her silk gown, reveling in the sleekness against her skin, determined that she would dress like this every day for the rest of her life...unless she really did have to take to the heather with Bethany.

The girls had baths, too; and Leandra saw to the washing of Charade's mop of bushy brown hair herself.

"You should let your hair grow out, dear, now that we're going to be living this sort of life. More length will weigh the curl down, and then you'll have nice waves. Or we could braid it up into something very elegant. You don't mind if I experiment a little, do you?"

Charade turned her head, so Leandra would not see her rolling her eyes. It really was nice to be fussed over a little. Nobody had fussed over her since her mother died. Bethany looked over from the dressing table and gave her a sympathetic smile.

Highever House was big, but right now its lord was in residence with a large complement of knights and men-at-arms. Therefore, nearly everyone had to share rooms, and Ser Adam's three ladies were quartered together. At least there were two beds: a grand, curtained one big enough for Leandra and Bethany, and for Charade a small, single bed, brought in and set perpendicular to the foot of the larger. None of them felt the least like complaining. The room was big and well-furnished, with a pleasant, cushioned alcove at the window where one could sit and read, and a writing table, all fitted up with inkstand and quills. Screens in a corner concealed the washstand and the close-stool. There was a small bookcase with a few books, and a good fire in the fireplace. Their clothing was put away in a fine clothes press of polished wood. Colorful silk carpets softened the floor. Neither Bethany nor Charade had ever been in such a room in their lives.

After they were clean and dressed, the servants came to take

the bathtub away and empty it. That left them to enjoy a peaceful evening within while all was activity and confrontation without. Bethany brought out her lute, tuned it, and played for her own amusement and that of her mother and cousin, hoping that she found a place in the world for herself, in spite of everything.

In his search of the Cathedral, Jowan found the courtyard where they burned the mages: a squalid, scorched expanse of rough stone and grey dust. Wynne was long gone. The Tranquil who cleaned the courtyard told him that the remains were placed in barrels, pounded into a fine grit, and then carted out of the city to one of the Chantry's farms, where they were used to improve heavy soil in the fields and gardens.

A little storeroom was nearby, filled with staffs and amulets and used robes, with trinkets and books and keepsakes and a locked box for the coin taken from the bodies. The Tranquil worked there, placidly refurbishing the items for return to the Circle or for sale at the Wonders of Thedas and other shops.

One of the Tranquil was meticulously repairing a nice blue-grey gown, newly cleaned. Jowan yanked it from the man's hands.

"That is the property of the Chantry," the Tranquil told him in an even monotone.

"No," Jowan said, forcing himself not to blast the innocent

victim. "It's not."

He crumpled it under his arm and stormed out, sick at heart. Tears burned in his eyes, remembering how disappointed Wynne had been in him.

What would he do with the gown? Return it to Leliana? Would she want it, knowing that it had been taken from Wynne's dead body by the thrifty Chantry, looking for coin however they could find it?

As he made his way through the halls, one of the Highever knights, Ser Tyrrel, saw his tunic, and called out, "Warden! Maybe you should see this!"

Deep beneath the cathedral, in a maze of cellars and tunnels, the searchers had found the lyrium storage room, and the soldiers puzzled over it. Jowan knew exactly what it was, of course, and had never sworn any oaths to keep the Templars' secrets. The soldiers could hardly believe it, though some knew friends and comrades who had become dependent on liquor or elfroot leaves, which some chewed to manage chronic pain. His anger burning in him like dragonfire, Jowan gave them the ugliest, most highly-colored version possible, dwelling on the Templars' inevitable decline into drooling idiocy, and their retirement to the nursing hospice in Val Royeaux.

It made quite an impression. Jowan doubted that any of the men would want their sons to enter the Chantry.

Beyond was the phylactery chamber: and this really was a shocker for the healthy-minded liegemen of Teyrn Cousland.

"I'm not sure I'm following you," said Ser Tyrrel. "You're saying this isn't evidence against blood mages? That the *Templars* collected this blood?"

"Yes," Jowan answered, with bitter pleasure. "That's exactly what I'm saying. When a child is sent to the Circle, the Templars cut the boy or girl and keep the blood. Then they do a spell—" Jowan smirked inwardly at how bad that sounded, but it was really no more than the truth—"to track the mages down if they ever escape."

"Isn't that Blood Magic?" the man persisted. "If a mage did that, it would be Blood Magic, right? So how is it not blood magic if a Templar does it?"

Jowan controlled his face, inwardly dancing with glee, and made himself look sad and concerned. "I can't answer for the Chantry, but you're exactly right about mages. It's a capital offense if a mage did it, but I suppose the Chantry is above the law. "

"That's not right," Ser Tyrrel said, his innate sense of justice aroused. "That's just not right. Ought to smash these things."

Jowan grimaced. "If we did that, the Chantry would make trouble for everybody, and they'd just cut the children in the Circle again."

The soldiers left, grumbling. Jowan smiled, a wonderful idea quickening his pulse. The search of the Chantry was not yet complete. He would be back tomorrow. Perhaps one of the soldiers knew of a slaughterhouse in Denerim. If he replaced the blood with something that looked exactly the same, who would be the wiser?

He would need a funnel, too, or perhaps a syringe...

Early the next morning, Leonas Bryland sat his daughter down for a private talk, determined to give her the truth of her situation.

"But *why*, Father?" Habren whined, for at least the twentieth time. "Why can't I remain here? This is *my* estate, is it not? I am Arlessa of Denerim!"

Bryland sighed and rubbed his eyes, slinking lower in his uncomfortable chair. He had rather face a score of Orlesians assassins again than deal with this. This evening they would give poor Werberga to the flames, and both of them were depressed about it. Habren had screamed at the serving maids until they produced a mourning gown up to her standards. It had been finished only just before the midday meal, and now Habren sat stiffly in it. It was not unbecoming.

"Habren, my dear girl, Urien is dead. I'm sorry, but there's no help for it. Since he's dead, you're the *Dowager* Arlessa of Denerim. The terms of your marriage contract are perfectly clear. As Dowager, you are entitled to the manor of Rose Hill.

You were granted ownership of those houses off the Market and some property in the Alienage. Altogether, you'll have a good income. On the other hand, you are not the ruler of Denerim, and you won't have a vote in the Landsmeet."

"Anora is still Queen!" Habren objected. "It's not *fair!*"

Bryland sat up in alarm, praying that no servants were listening at the door.

"Do not speak of Her Majesty in that insolent way!" Seeing her cowed for the moment, he lowered his voice. "Her Majesty is Queen *Dowager*, and by the will of the King will rule only until the Landsmeet in Haring...if that long. I will remind you that that leaves quite enough time for you to be ruined if you cannot make yourself speak of her respectfully. She has been a hard-working Queen for the past five years; you were Arlessa less than a day. In fact, my girl, think very carefully before you complain of your situation. The marriage was not consummated, and, if encouraged to consider the matter more closely, some might think it invalid, which would leave you with exactly *nothing!*"

He snorted bitterly. "Good luck with trying to get your dowry back. That disappeared into Urien's coffers as soon as it was paid out, and no one appears to have any idea where he kept his gold."

He did not mention that the estate was being searched minutely, both for the Arl's gold and for his papers. There were hints that Urien had had dealings with the Orlesians. If

so, it was important that the Brylands distance themselves from him as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

"It's not *fair*," Habren repeated, sniveling a little.

"That's true," her father told her, not unkindly. "However, life is often unfair. You've been lucky up to this point. Now, no one's going to make you leave until the Arl's funeral, but that's tomorrow. I've handled all the arrangements. Then you have some choices to make, and I hope you'll be guided by me. You can either go live at Rose Hill Manor, or at that empty house in the Market District, or—which is what I advise—you can come home, either to stay or to sort things out for awhile. And," he added, with the craft born of years of experience. "of course you'll bring your wedding presents with you wherever you go."

That was a shrewd touch at her feelings, and he congratulated himself on deflecting her misery.

"My presents!" she cried, brightening a little. "I'm haven't seen the half of them! I hope they've been washed," she said, picking peevishly at the embroidery on her skirt, "I heard they were all bloody."

"Nonsense!" Bryland retorted. "They've been tidied and locked up for you. We can go downstairs right now and have a look at them. We'll have the servants start packing them up. If you decide to spend a bit of time at your manor next summer, you might want to make sure it's properly furnished. Some of the presents might be just the thing."

"I haven't had a present from Bronwyn," she complained. "She is so haughty."

Bryland was tolerating no criticism of Bronwyn. He had chosen his side and was sticking to it. "Speak respectfully of your cousin Lady Bronwyn the Dragonslayer. She's been carrying a heavy burden for months. and has had better things to do than buy presents for spoiled girls. It certainly wouldn't do to demand gifts at the moment. Let it go, Habren. Bronwyn has always sent you lovely things for your naming day."

"Things Cousin Eleanor picked out," muttered Habren, resenting her father's partiality to Bronwyn. He *always* took her side. For that matter, he always took the boys' side, too. She was glad that Lothar hadn't died—yes, she really was. She didn't mind him suffering a bit, however, since it keep him quiet and out of her way.

Besides, she ought not to be annoyed at poor Bronwyn. Bronwyn was a Grey Warden, and forced to wear dull, tacky clothes and heavy armor now. She hadn't sent a present because she was probably jealous of Habren. Nobody would marry a Grey Warden, especially a scarred old maid who had lost her looks. And Habren was an Arlessa now...even if a Dowager Arlessa, and would take precedence of Bronwyn for the rest of their lives. *Yes!* As girls, Bronwyn had walked in front of Habren into the Chantry and into the homes of the nobles, but the tables had turned with a vengeance.

These were all very comforting thoughts. She felt even better when they sorted through the gifts and saw all the lovely

heavy silver and colored glass. And she began to like the idea of going home tomorrow. She could leave after Urien's funeral and sleep in her own bed. The townhouse would be a little sad and empty without Aunt Werberga, who had been the one person who could be trusted to stand up for Habren. Nevertheless, home was still home, and the maids there knew what she liked for breakfast.

Leliana came with Carver the next day to take his family on a tour of the Warden Compound. She was not known to the Queen, and therefore, unlike Jowan, was not asked to participate in the search of the Cathedral and the examination of the documents found there. Perhaps it was for the best, for she certainly would have been torn in two. It was hard to credit that priests would stoop to assassination...but...well, perhaps it was not so hard, after all.

She sighed. Not every priest in Orlais was a model of disinterested virtue. Plenty had meddled on their own behalf and on that of their families. Some Templars had been known to behave badly—like those who had abused their trust when Tara was a prisoner of the Circle. It was very sad and depressing, and it was not hard to understand why the Maker had lost patience with his creation.

Shut out from the great events for now, she could console herself by helping Carver show his family about the Compound, so they would understand more of what his life was like. Afterwards, the plan was for Leliana to take the ladies shopping. Leliana had a great many commissions from

Bronwyn to undertake, and it could all be handled together, for the most part. With the city so unsettled, it was sensible for the ladies not to go out without protection. Then, too, they might find some trinkets to add to their current apparel, for later today they were to be presented to the Queen.

"We must go to the shoemaker," she declared, consulting the list she had painstakingly composed the night before. "It is sensible to do this now. In a month or so, orders will pour in for the Landsmeet. Then we will visit the dressmaker near the Chantry. She does very good work."

She must also visit Pandelin, the jeweler near the Palace District. His work was always superb, and being distant from the Market, he might not have been attacked by people angry at something done not by him, but by the Empress of Orlais. Leliana would go there alone, of course, and probably tomorrow. What she had to order for Bronwyn was practically a matter of state, and demanded discretion.

The day started with a visit to the Compound, and it went very well. The ladies admired the Warden's Hall, and Leandra insisted on going up into the tower to see the room that Carver was currently occupying. To his relief, the maid had already tidied up in there. There was little criticism his mother could make, as it was infinitely superior to the loft he had slept in since he was old enough to climb a ladder alone.

The housekeeper was in the process of cleaning and readying the dormitory rooms above the hall for the eventual influx of new junior Wardens. Mistress Rannelly was proud of her

handiwork there.

"Thirty-one new Wardens!" she exclaimed. "Just fancy! The dear Warden-Commander is such a industrious girl."

Leandra could meet her in praise of that individual. "Lady Bronwyn has been so very good to our family: so kind to Carver, and so generous with her recommendation of my son Ser Adam to the Teyrn of Highever."

The dormitories were three large rooms furnished with bunkbeds and footlockers. They were very plain, but clean and well-lit. Stocks of linens and blankets were being brought out of storage to air. Mistress Rannelly assured Lady Amell that if Carver had a special quilt or blanket, she would see that his bed in the tower was made up with it.

"It will make the place a bit more home-like," she said kindly. "It makes it nicer for the Wardens, often so far from family."

"Oh, how nice!" Leandra cried. "Carver, I saved your quilt with the bears. It was always your favorite."

"It was my favorite when I was *six*," Carver pointed out, but the females of the species did not seem to hear him. The fluffy bear quilt was his destiny, sure as fate.

They talked so long, and dawdled so over the details, that it seemed reasonable to accept when Mistress Rannelly pressed them all to take an early midday meal in the Wardens' Hall. Jowan alone was not present, since he was

busy at the Cathedral. The small and merry group enjoyed it all very much, and the ladies took care to keep their silk dresses unstained.

By now, the sun was high, and the Harvestmere air was not too sharp. It was a fine day for a walk, admiring the tall houses of the rich. Leliana hoped her charges would not be too exhausted at the end of it. At least Highever House, on the north side of the river, was not so very far from the Market District.

"We won't be able to visit the Cathedral, of course," Leliana said in a subdued tone. "There is so much going and coming for the investigation. But you can see the outside, which is handsome. Nearby is the Arl of Redcliffe's estate, which is a large and noteworthy structure."

Bethany was thrilled by it all, as she began to take in that she was really in a city. She had known nothing but Lothering all her life, and stories had not prepared her for the scale of Denerim. They walked and walked, and kept on passing more houses, more little shops, more people. She was used to walking, and was not tired, but she was astonished at how the city just kept on *going*.

Charade and Leandra, who had known Kirkwall, were not so impressed. Some of the noble houses were fine, but there was nothing in Denerim like Kirkwall's Hightown: that exclusive enclave of the wealthy. Even Highever House was more a fortress than a mansion, and the sanitary facilities were comparatively crude. Denerim desperately needed a proper

sewer system.

Aside from that, Charade and Leandra's views diverged. Charade's experience of Hightown had been that of an outsider looking in. She had seen the great houses, but knew they were not for such as she. The contrast in Ferelden between rich and poor was not so painful, not so extreme. No, there was no Hightown in Denerim: on the other hand, there was no Darktown.

Leandra, for her part, was grateful to the Teyrn for his generosity, but thought that bechambers and sitting rooms of his house would be more attractive if more of the rough stone walls were to be plastered over or paneled. Ferelden was a poor country, of course, and one must not expect too much.

Gate Street led them to the wide and bustling Market, and everyone was entranced. Carver's jaw dropped at the splendor of it—the life—and Bethany uttered a little cry of joy. Shops surrounded the rough square, and in the center, under a great tent of gaudily-painted canvas, was a multitude of fascinating little stalls.

"How delightful!" Leandra exclaimed.

"Yes," Charade agreed, since she now had a few coins in her purse. It had not been so delightful when she had arrived here with almost nothing.

"We can buy...*anything*...here!" Bethany smiled at the thought.

Leliana carefully herded everyone with her, wanting to get their orders made at the shoemaker's. To Carver's great disgust, he was forced to join them, for Leandra wanted him to have something "nice" for the times when he would not be clomping around in a pair of iron-shod warboots. He let her have her way as long as his footwear was plain black. Once his big young feet were carefully measured, he waited glumly, glancing longingly out the open door at the wonders of the Market.

"I'll just stay by the stalls," he promised, inching away. "On my honor."

"Don't get lost!" Leandra called after him anxiously, and then returned to the orgy of color and texture. While Charade was being measured, Leandra applied to Leliana for a recommendation of a tailor to make Carver a doublet.

"We must go there next," Leandra decided. "After that we'll let the poor boy go free, as long as he meets us somewhere later."

"The Gnawed Noble Tavern," Leliana suggested. "It is a very nice place to sit and chat."

It was a busy day: dragged to the tailor, Carver was told he liked blue, and he denied it categorically.

"*Adam* likes blue. I don't."

"But you always wore blue," Leandra objected, puzzled.

"That's because I was wearing his hand-me-downs. I *hate* blue."

Dark grey with black embroidery was an acceptable compromise. Black breeches, too, that would not be too fussy to care for. A black cloak. Bethany told him he would look like the Black Fox of legend, but that idea pleased Carver. He thought he looked dangerous in black. He was sent on his way and told when to meet them at the Gnawed Noble. Being ordered to go to the finest tavern in Denerim mollified him quite a bit.

New gowns were ordered, and new bodices and belts. Fine linen was selected for undergarments and nightgowns. Silks and velvets were chosen for dressing gowns. A stall sold silver hair pins and clips, and Charade was persuaded to choose something that would help tame her cloud of brown hair.

Leliana looked for a favorite vendor, and in her place saw a grave young man instead. She looked through his stock of fragrant oils, and asked, "Where is Liselle?"

Responding with pleased surprise to her accent, the young man said, "She was attacked during the riots here. She is recovering at home. We were lucky not to be arrested."

He too sounded like a transplanted Orlesian.

"I am very sorry your sister was hurt," said Leliana. "Please give her Leliana's regards. Lady Amell, sample this attar of

roses. It is so refreshing!"

Generous purchases of bath oils and perfumes were made, and the young man appeared considerably happier. Bethany bought a clove-decorated pomander, and enjoyed smelling that rather than the general odor of wet dog and garbage.

Since winter was coming, they also stopped at a glover's establishment, and once again were astonished at all the colors that leather could be.

"This is a wonderful place," Charade said, looking about the Market. "I think it would be such fun to live here!"

Leliana's gaze slipped towards the locked and silent door that guarded Marjolaine's little house. "I suppose so."

Other might be enjoying the day, The Grand Cleric was not. She had been allowed a day of rest, but now had to endure a most unpleasant conversation.

"Your dear lady mother," the Grand Cleric told Fergus Cousland, "was my good friend."

Her voice was hoarse with ill health and fear. She had been summoned to the Palace; and alone in the Privy Chamber, without Templar escort, she was being subjected to rigorous questioning by Queen Anora and her closest advisers present in Denerim.

Anora looked at her hands, allowing Fergus to answer this appeal to sentiment. The Teyrn gazed at the elderly cleric with hooded eyes.

"For four months, my mother's corpse lay rotting in a mass grave—no, that's too dignified a description. My parents, my wife...my son... were thrown in a midden with all the other victims of the Highever massacre perpetrated by Rendon Howe. In that time, until I retook Highever and *demand*ed their just dues, no priest came forward to offer them rites or give them to the fire. Your *friendship*, Your Grace," he snarled, "seems to have been of little value. And don't tell me that Howe had put the priests in fear. If anything, his relationship with the Highever Chantry seems to be have been remarkably amiable. According to his accounts, he gave the Revered Mother in Highever —also a dear, dear friend of my mother—the generous donation of two hundred sovereigns. A similar donation was made to the Chantry of Our Lady Redeemer in Amaranthine. Astonishing that no priest in the city of Amaranthine noticed shackled elves being loaded into the ships of Tevinter blood mages."

A silence. The Grand Cleric collected herself, and said quietly. "That is all vile and atrocious, but I had no part in any of it."

"It is true," Anora admitted, "that no proofs tie you directly to the crimes. Otherwise, this conversation would be taking place not here in the Palace, but in Fort Drakon."

Indignant, the Grand Cleric protested. "You would threaten me?"

Anora's blue eyes were hard as flint. "I will not permit *you* or any member of the Chantry to threaten this country. My father has written to me repeatedly, complaining of how the interference of Revered Mother Clarine has hampered his efforts to pursue the war against the Blight. Evil deeds have been wrought: there have been attempts on my own life, on that of the Teyrn, on my father and the Warden-Commander. Ferelden nobles have been murdered or wounded. All the evidence, to be perfectly frank, can be ultimately be traced to Orlesian intrigue—most especially an Orlesian agent. We know she had many contacts. We now know, based on our search of the quarters of Mothers Gertrude and Heloise, that this agent—and others— had such contacts in the Chantry." She smiled coldly. "We have strong evidence...circumstantial, but *strong*, that these Mothers and possibly Ser Tavish knew that the attack on Arl Urien's wedding was imminent. And that is why, contrary to your own treaties with the Grey Wardens, a harmless woman, Senior Enchanter Wynne, was heartlessly murdered in hopes of causing even more loss of life."

Anora sat back. Bryland had much to add.

"My sister is dead, my son only saved by the intervention of a brave young mage. Tomorrow, my daughter, already a widow, will give her husband to the flames. Your Templars did not lift a finger to aid or protect anyone in that room other than themselves and you. In fact, I have compiled a list of those injured by your Templars as they fled the Arl of Denerim's estate. No deaths can be directly attributed to them, but these injuries require compensation. I have icalculated a figure which

the Queen deems reasonable."

The Grand Cleric saw it, and forced herself not to gasp or make a face. It was a substantial amount, and was no doubt not simply meant to indemnify the injured, but intended as a punitive measure against the Chantry. She noticed that in the total were two entries of two hundred sovereigns each. Fergus Cousland was evidently very displeased about the conduct of the Chantry in the north. The Grand Cleric pursed her lips, determined to have it out with Mothers Petronille and Ita. If she, the Grand Cleric, had to suffer this humiliation, they would suffer likewise.

To his eternal amusement, Jowan discovered that he did not have to completely replace the blood in the phylacteries to achieve his ends. Even a small syringe full of sheep's blood rendered them outwardly unchanged, but utterly useless.

The soldiers liked him. He had healed the poor beautiful Queen after all, and he cheerfully dealt with their own cuts and bruises. When Jowan told them he needed some "equipment" for his part in the search, they carried his kegs for him without question. It did not take long to contaminate every phylactery in the storage area, since the syringe's sharp point easily penetrated the wax stopper. Afterward, Jowan could warm the spot and smooth it over, rendering the contamination undetectable.

Some phylacteries he did not touch: those of mages whom he knew to be dead. He read some names with silent anguish,

remembering friends who had disappeared after their Harrowing, or who had been killed for some infraction.

His influence was great at the moment. He knew it would never be greater. The Queen was furious with the Chantry, and now was the time for reform in the treatment of mages. If he could persuade her that the collection of the blood for phylacteries was a sinister form of Blood Magic, he might be able to keep from the Templars their best tool for tracking apostates. Some mages would always prefer the settled, ordered life of the Circle. Some longed to be free. Jowan felt they should have that option. After all, no one else in Thedas was imprisoned for crimes that they *might* commit some time in the indefinite future.

He would like to do away with the Rite of Tranquility altogether, but perhaps that was not realistic. However, if it were only voluntary, and could *never* be imposed on a mage against his or her will, Jowan felt he would have struck a blow for the mages of Ferelden. Some mages might choose Tranquility, fearing the terrors of the Harrowing. For himself, he would rather be killed by a Templar in a failed Harrowing than be made a walking, talking puppet.

He paused. Wynne's phylactery was in his hand. He set the vial down gently, and wiped his nose.

"So where do we stand?" Bryland asked, glancing through his notes. "We're still not sure about Urien's degree of complicity. I think we should question his guards more closely—especially

his seneschal. It's very odd that we can't find either his accounts or his treasury. The account books might answer a lot of questions."

"I tend to think," Anora pondered, "that he was indeed accepting coin from the Empress in exchange for intelligence. That was treasonable in itself. I do not think, however, that he had any foreknowledge of the attack on the seventh. In fact, it's possible that part of the intent was to eliminate him and thus keep him from ever telling us what he did know. And likewise with Bann Ceorlic. His name is mentioned in some of the correspondence. I am sending to Lothing for his accounts."

Fergus agreed. "And there's no evidence that either knew about the prior attempt on you, Your Majesty. They were tools, and they were used and discarded."

Anora tapped her fingers, thinking. "I tend to agree. I don't believe the poisoning was known to anyone other than the treacherous maid, the Orlesian agent Marjolaine, and her principal. That was a very subtle plot, and very nearly succeeded." Her blue eyes looked across the breadth of Ferelden and beyond. "I believe that the attack on the seventh was a response to the news of the death of the King. The Empress hoped to gain all by a marriage with him...and was disappointed."

Bryland forbore to spit, but there was a foul taste on his tongue. He had now been told about the secret marriage contract, and regretted more than ever that Bryce Cousland

had not been elected king. He would not say it aloud and offend the lady sitting opposite him, but Bryce would have had things better in hand. And Eleanor would have been every bit as capable a Queen as Loghain's daughter.

Loghain and Bronwyn were not a perfect solution, and they certainly were no substitute for Bryce, whom Bryland had considered his best friend from boyhood. However, Loghain's experience and military leadership were essential, and combined with Bronwyn's royal strain and her estimable qualities, Ferelden would have a king and queen who stood a good chance of leading Ferelden through this terrible time.

He glanced at Fergus. He was fond of Fergus, too; though Bronwyn seemed the more remarkable of his friend's two children. If by some mischance Loghain and Bronwyn had no children, Fergus would grow to be a fine king. He was willing to be heir presumptive, and no more; but even that would satisfy many of those to whom blood was all.

A pity that Fergus had never shown any interest in Habren, and now clearly never would. He studied the looks exchanged between Fergus and the Queen, and was sure he understood the situation. There was something there between them. It was far too early for them to act upon it, but it seemed likely that the Queen Dowager might well someday become the Teyrna of Highever. He hoped Anora was not barren, as rumor had it. They would need two children after all: an heir for Highever, and one for Gwaren as well. Unless Loghain kept Gwaren for a second child of his own...

Loghain and Bronwyn; or Fergus and Anora? For Bryland the choice was clear. While the common folk might love their pretty stories of the knight rescuing the fair lady in distress, Bryland felt that Loghain and Bronwyn were the leadership the country needed now. They were each of them true heroes; beings who appeared rarely on the world's stage. By all accounts, and by the evidence of his own eyes, Bronwyn had found the Ashes of Andraste! That was so extraordinary that Bryland felt he needed some time to take it in. So, politics first. After the meeting here, he would go to the Arl of Denerim's estate to visit with the convalescents there and canvas for more votes. The Landsmeet needed no surprises.

Arl of Denerim...Arl of Denerim... Someone had to be Arl of Denerim. Vaughan was dead. Who was Urien's heir? Wasn't there some sort of cousin...?

The Queen was speaking again, and he must attend.

"Mother Gertrude has told us more than she realized. Her complicity is clear, and she has implicated a number of others. Ordinarily, we would protest to the Grand Cleric, and perhaps the malefactors would simply be sent to Val Royeaux, but that is unacceptable, as the plots originated there. Executing senior officials of the Chantry, however, would be an irrevocable step."

"They're more useful as prisoners, anyway," Fergus said. "We'll likely get more information and more names from them. We can drag out the investigation for a long, long time."

"And if the Grand Cleric pulls herself together and demands their release?"

"I don't think she will," Fergus said, with a faint smile. "I really don't think she will. She, too, is angry and afraid of those around her. If in the course of our investigations we find that she was drugged on orders from Val Royeaux, I think she will be even more angry and afraid. That could be very useful."

"My father is coming," Anora said, taking comfort in the words. "My father is coming. I have received a message. He is only a day away. Once he is here, I believe our next step is to make some decisions about who will fill all these vacant lordships. We will gather our old friends together and make some new ones, too, I think."

A knock at the door. The messenger was admitted, and had the air of repressed excitement that heralded remarkable news.

"Your Majesty," he said, "Lord Nathaniel Howe has arrived, and he begs the favor of an audience."

Thanks to my reviewers: EpitomyofShyness, almostinsane, Kira Kyuu, Mike3207, Jyggilag, Tikigod784, sizuka2, JackOfBladesX, Judy, KnightOfHolyLight, Tirion, Nemrut, Blinded in a bolthole, anon, Jenna53, Enaid Aderyn, BandGeekNinja, MsBarrows, amanda weber, Zute, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Shakespeira, queen-of-dirt, Josie Lange, Oleander's One, mille libri, Have Socks. Will Travel, Girl-

chama, LynnTerald, emptysummer, Psyche Sinclair, Tyanilth, Rake1810, and Phygmalion.

Syringes have been used medically since Roman times. I don't think it's impossible that they would exist in Thedas.

As for the disposition of the mages: they have to go somewhere. Cremation, no matter what some people would like to think, does not reduce bodies to fine ash. Some bones remain, and today machinery is used to crush them. I think if your soil had a lot of clay in it, the bone meal would help quite a bit. I presume that the remains of dead mages at the Circle are dumped in Lake Calenhad. However, I'm quite sure that the Chantry retrieves possessions and anything of value before disposal. If my depiction resembles the warehouses of Dachau or Auschwitz, stuffed with clothing and suitcases and pitiful rag dolls, that's inevitable. Yes, mages are dangerous, but the Templars do not, in many cases, treat them in a humane manner, and the Chantry clearly exploits them. I've been trying to determine just what their legal status is: are they criminals? Are they slaves? I suppose they're just...mages.

65. The Boy Who Found Fear at Last

Victory at Ostagar

Sorry for any mistakes. I'm am writing this on a netbook in Bryce Canyon, Utah, and it's very hard to proofread. (Yes, I know. My life is replete with irony.)

Chapter 65: The Boy Who Found Fear at Last

On the road to Lothering, a courier reached them, this time from Gherlen's Halt, notifying Loghain of the attack by Orlesian "mercenaries," and its repulse. This was serious news, and Loghain knew he must share it. He ordered the march stopped and summoned Bronwyn and the nobles. They took council under a huge old oak tree, its leaves beginning to brown, while a chilly wind whistled through the forest, whispering of snows to come.

"Looks like Haglin gave them a surprise," grunted Wulffe.
"Well done, that."

Bronwyn agreed. "The Empress is playing the Grand Game, making believe that she knows nothing of these attacks, and pretending likewise that we don't know that she's behind them. It's all very tiresome."

"Tiresome or not," Loghain replied grimly, "The Empress knows that we are in no position to take offense openly and declare war on Orlais. In a way, this "Game" is somewhat to our advantage, in that it enables us to save face."

There was little they could do, and no help they could send to the fortress. Loghain acknowledged the message and told them to hold fast. They mounted up again, and rode to Lothering.

Morrigan had her own horse, even though she hardly needed one; but she was always insistent on her perquisites, however unnecessary. She gave Bronwyn a look that clearly indicated a wish to speak to her privately. Bronwyn allowed her horse to drop back from the leaders, and Morrigan kicked her mount up close to Bronwyn's.

For a while the witch was silent. She had been in an unpleasant and uncommunicative mood since Bronwyn had announced her trip to Denerim. Was Morrigan nervous about seeing the great city for the first time? Was she having some sort of trouble with Anders? Knowing better than to pry, Bronwyn rode beside her, equally silent, curious about what her friend had to say.

When Morrigan spoke, it took Bronwyn by surprise, for it was the last thing she expected to hear.

"Do you truly intend to marry Teyrn Loghain?"

Of course Anders had told her everything. It was only a

wonder that he had not stood on Ostagar Bridge and declared it to all Thedas.

"Yes," she answered quietly but without hesitation. "That's the plan. We will marry and claim the throne."

"Indeed?" Morrigan said, rather coolly. "At least you will be Queen. 'Twill be something that makes the sacrifice worthwhile. I see little advantage to you otherwise."

Surprised, Bronwyn looked at the witch's beautiful, stormy face. Did Morrigan *dislike* Loghain? Bronwyn had never suspected it.

"After the death of the King," Bronwyn said, "Loghain and I came to believe that this was the best way to ensure Ferelden security and a victory over the Blight, unhampered by anyone else."

"Did he approach you first?"

Bronwyn smiled wryly. "Actually, the first to openly broach the matter to me was my cousin Arl Bryland. He and great many other people want Loghain to be King, but Loghain has no legitimate claim on the throne of Ferelden at all. My cousin gave me a long and serious lecture about the value of legitimacy in these matters. It would not do for it simply to be a matter of the strongest general using the army to seize power. That would set an evil precedent indeed. My brother Fergus and I have the strongest blood claim to the throne. Fergus is not interested. That leaves me, and my own claim is

somewhat clouded by the fact that I am a Grey Warden. Nonetheless, if Loghain and I present ourselves to the Landsmeet as a married couple, I do not see anyone able to challenge us."

Morrigan listened carefully, and then asked, "So Loghain has not pressured you into this...marriage?"

Bronwyn laughed, surprising herself. "No more than any of the other nobles! The idea has gained a great deal of momentum among those who are here with the army. They largely feel that it is my duty to marry Loghain; and all Ferelden knows the old saw that '*Couslands always do their duty!*'"

No amusement was reflected in Morrigan's yellow eyes.

She asked, "Could you not take the throne alone? Without Loghain as your...consort?"

Bronwyn had not seriously considered the idea. "It *might* be possible, but there would be a lot of controversy and I would not have the kind of support that Loghain commands. If I were not a Warden...yes. I suppose so. But the fact is that this is all being proposed in order to put *Loghain* on the throne."

"So you are a means to an end?"

A burst of masculine laughter rang out in front of them. Wulffe had said something his fellow nobles found hilarious. Even Loghain was grinning. For some reason it irritated Bronwyn beyond words. She scowled, hating the way Morrigan put the

situation, but acknowledging its essential truth.

"I always knew..." she began. How to explain this? "I always knew that as a Cousland, my life could not be completely and only my own. I could not be selfish, and marry only to please myself. My parents were, for that matter, far more indulgent than most nobles. I at least had the power of refusal. Otherwise, I would have been the wife of Thomas Howe two years ago, when he was old enough to marry, and my life would have been very, very different. Obviously."

Morrigan sneered. "You are not the only young woman whose parents wished to control her. Even Flemeth...well...'tis common enough."

That was only too true, and Bronwyn acknowledged it.

"Exactly. It is not uncommon. I am, however, uncommonly fortunate in that the man everyone wishes me to marry is the man of my choice."

"So why now?" Morrigan narrowed her eyes, and brushed a fallen leaf from her hair. The wind had picked up again. "Why are you not *already* married to Loghain if everyone thought it such a wonderful idea? Why has the man not already asked for your *'hand,*' in that silly figure of speech?"

The conversation was making Bronwyn extremely uncomfortable. She glanced behind her, wishing that Zevran or Anders would interrupt, but they were deep in their own discussion. While she did not want to answer Morrigan, essential honesty required some sort of response.

"I don't think Loghain ever thought of me in that way, at least before I came to Ostagar as a Warden. My father thought that Loghain would never remarry unless he was given a very, very good reason—and that meant a better reason than a pretty face. And to be perfectly truthful, my parents did *not* want me to marry Loghain." She grimaced. and then lowered her voice further. "They did not think him good enough for me."

"Then they had better sense than you or all these other 'nobles,'" Morrigan said bluntly. "for I agree with them."

Bronwyn looked at her companion in astonishment, and felt her face grow hot. Before she could summon a reply, Morrigan cut her off.

"I will say this but once, since the Wheel of Destiny is already turning. You *are* too good for him. When I see you together, I see a strong young woman with all her life before her, ill-coupled with a ruthless, hard-bitten, self-made man old enough to be her father: a man who is not too scrupulous to take advantage of her birth and fortune and her fresh young body as well. You have made a bad bargain in Loghain, my friend, and you will live to regret it. Flemeth told me a great deal about Loghain."

Dangerously close to losing her temper, Bronwyn could hardly trust herself to speak. "That would be the same Flemeth who lied to you throughout your childhood and was planning to eject your soul from your body like an unwanted tenant. I do not consider Flemeth a reliable source of information, and neither

should you!"

"She prophesied," Morrigan hissed, "that Loghain would betray Maric three times: *'each time worst than the last.'* I presume that his stealing the throne of Ferelden from the Theirin line must be considered the last and greatest of his treacheries, so I cannot speak of the others. Flemeth knew much that others thought hidden. She told me that Loghain's cold heart had warmed but once, and never again. That rather lets you out. No. Do not rail at me. I have done, and I merely foretell."

Wisely, she pulled on the reins, forcing her horse to drop back. Bronwyn refused to look at her, already struggling with unwelcome, half-acknowledged doubts of her own.

Bronwyn felt a little uncomfortable staying at Bann Ceorlic's luxurious manor, knowing how much she had displeased the man. Loghain, however, preoccupied and laconic, gave her no chance to disagree with his choice of quarters. There was a limit to how far men and horses could go in a day, and everyone needed to rest, if they were to deal with the crisis in Denerim.

She was familiar with the manor, of course, from her last visit. She knew the seneschal Rurik and remembered the maid whose name was Kara. This time, with such a large party, they were packed into the luxurious chambers with little chance for privacy. She would have to share her room with Morrigan and Aveline. At least she would have a proper bath.

It was worse for the men. All six of the Wardens' party were camping out in another of the rooms, some on straw pallets laid on the floor, and with Zevran lying crossways at the foot of the great bed.

"We'll have far more room at Castle Bryland," she consoled her people. "if the weather holds, and we push ourselves, we might make it there by late tomorrow."

Truth to tell, most of them were not very put out at their living conditions. Anders and Morrigan did not care for the arrangements, but Bronwyn thought they could survive not sleeping together for a night or two. Cathair, their Dalish elf, was bewildered by the manor and its excess, but he seemed a rather easy-going fellow, which was a welcome change from the prickliness of Danith.

It was very pleasant to have clean hair and nails again—however briefly—but it was impossible to dry her hair thoroughly before going to bed. Bronwyn braided up her long brown locks and hoped for the best. If she had been of a delicate constitution—or simply not a Warden—she might fully have expected to awaken the next morning with a cold. She paused by the door to her room, not wanting another scene with Morrigan. The witch's words had disturbed her deeply, and she resolved to forget them. Morrigan meant well, perhaps, but she was meddling in affairs about which she knew nothing.

Then Bronwyn smiled, and decided to seek out Loghain. That would be the best balm for her doubts.

He was in the room she had slept in the last time she was here. And there was a guard at the door. How annoying. And here she was, in her shirt and breeches, pretending to be at her ease. At least the guard recognized her, and did stupidly shout out "Halt!" just as everyone was trying to get to sleep.

The fellow stood to attention, though. "Good evening, Warden-Commander."

Speaking more boldly than she really felt, Bronwyn said, "I have business with the Teyrn."

Was that a *smile* on that man's face? It disappeared quickly enough, and the man opened the door and stepped inside to speak to Loghain. There was a muffled exchange, and the man stood aside respectfully.

"Enter, Warden-Commander."

Loghain had not yet gone to bed, but frowned—not very welcomingly—at the sight of her. Bronwyn slipped in and shut the door behind her. Urgent need had brought her here, and at the sight of the man she wanted, she smiled, and moved forward to wrap her arms around him, enjoying the heat from the hard and seasoned body.

"Bronwyn, this isn't the—"

She caught his lips with hers and kissed him fervently, pressing close. He let her have her way for only a few moments, before his strong hands unfastened her arms and

he pushed her away.

"You need to go. The last thing we need is unpleasant gossip."

She stared at him, dumbstruck and reddening. "Are you throwing me out?"

He was. Elaborately, insultingly patient, he was ushering her to the door, like an importunate peddler—like an unwanted camp follower. He said, "I trust the guard, but one never knows who is watching. You need your rest, and so do I."

"As if I'm likely to get any, between Morrigan's bad temper and Aveline's nightmares!"

This was awful: awful and humiliating. The desire warming her belly cooled and sickened.

"Don't be a child," Loghain said, scowling. "We have to maintain a degree of propriety, at least until our betrothal is announced. People might be casual about their own romantic arrangements. They might even be amused to hear that I found myself a pretty girl—"

Bronwyn hissed in disgust and looked away. Loghain caught her by the wrist, and went on. "—However, all sorts of people can be oddly conventional about ladies, especially ladies who might wear a crown. Old women—of both sexes— with Landsmeet votes are the worst. The Girl Warden must be above reproach."

"But it's absurd!" Bronwyn protested, her body wanting relief. She thought with repulsion of that dark little room, already bursting with the occupation of Aveline and Morrigan. "What do I care for gossip?"

"You *will* care," Loghain insisted. "You'll care if the banns probe the matter in detail at the Landsmeet. Nothing is sacred to them. It's impossible to be private in the midst of an army. When we get back to Denerim, we can arrange things more to our liking."

Bronwyn doubted it. In Denerim, she would be quartered in the Wardens' Compound and he in the Palace, and their every movement would be known to the servants.

But somehow he had got her to the door, and had at least the decency not to push her out through it.

"Now off you go."

He looked as if he might be about to give her a brisk goodnight kiss, but Bronwyn glared at him and shook off his hand. She took a quick breath, pulled herself together, and opened the door on the surprised guard. She was gone, shutting the door in Loghain's face. He heard her outside, her voice admirably calm as she spoke to the guard.

"Good night." Her footsteps died away down the hall.

Loghain was relieved to have her gone. He did not want to be seduced or persuaded, but it would have been difficult to

resist her much longer. He knew he was right in this, and Bronwyn would understand some day. Touchy creatures, young women. No doubt she would nurse her grievance for a day or two.

If she could not see the danger, she was fortunate that he could. Luckily, he had the experience to know when to be discreet. Because he could be discreet, Bronwyn—and the rest of Ferelden—did not know that he and Queen Rowan had once been lovers, long ago, when she was not a Queen, but a fellow rebel. Few had ever known it, for Loghain had never been one to kiss and tell.

Rowan must be Bronwyn's model. Rowan had always been very careful of her reputation, even before her reconciliation with Maric. It was one thing to openly declare her feelings in the Deep Roads, with only Loghain, Maric, and the odious Katriel present; it would have been quite another to make herself the talk of the rebel army.

As the daughter of the Arl of Redcliffe, Rowan was watched and judged by everyone they met. Aside from the issue of her suitability to be Queen, any blot on her name might adversely affect her younger brothers or the memory of her father. Bronwyn's situation was analogous: Loghain must protect her and her good name, even if she was too young to understand the possible consequences of malicious gossip.

Bronwyn, meanwhile, was hot with shame and anger. Never had she imagined that a man she had given herself to—a man

who had taken her maidenhood and had won her hand in marriage—a man who was about to claim a kingdom on the basis of that relationship—would reject her affections with such scorn...such contempt.

This was horrifying. She had defended him to Morrigan, but what if he truly cared nothing for her? Perhaps she was only a convenient stepping-stone up to the glory of a throne. Perhaps she had been an idle amusement, and then a useful tool. Perhaps... her mind reeled...she had been a very great fool.

He was a famous man, and a frequent topic of discussion; but once, when she was a little girl, she had eavesdropped on Father and Mother talking about his marriage. He had refused all the noble ladies who had flung themselves at him and had chosen the daughter of a cabinet maker instead. Speculation was rife about that. Father thought it might simply be that Teyrna Celia was a golden-haired beauty, but Mother had interpreted it differently.

"Oh, she's pretty enough, no doubt; but more important, my dearest, she owes him everything. She has no family to defend her when he abandons her for months at a time in Gwaren, while he pulls Maric's strings in Denerim. A noblewoman would never stand for the way he treats her. She would never have to. Celia has no recourse, and has to smile and pretend to like it. Or I suppose she still smiles. We haven't seen her in years, since apparently he doesn't want her about at the Landsmeets."

"He'll have to let her come eventually. I hear their daughter is becoming quite the beauty. He'll want to dangle her before Maric—or Gailan."

Mother had said, very coldly, "No doubt."

And then she had been discovered and shooed away, alas, and heard no more of their very interesting conversation.

Mother had never wanted her to marry Loghain. Nor had Father. Maker's Breath, what if her parents were *right*?

No. She would not let herself dwell on that possibility. She was committed to the marriage and could hardly get out of it now. Bitterly, she set her jaw, swearing to herself that Loghain wanted her in future he could bloody well seek *her* out...and crawl a little.

Morrigan and Aveline had already gone to bed and blown out the candle by the bedside. The light of the fire lit the room redly. Bronwyn angrily shrugged out of her breeches and flung them disdainfully over a bench. She crept into bed in her smalls and shirt and tried to be still, her body complaining bitterly. She stared up at the canopy above her for what seemed like hours, while Aveline grew restless in her sleep, no doubt tormented by vivid nightmares of the darkspawn.

A deep sigh from Morrigan. She was awake, and angry about it. Bronwyn was too tired to talk and so pretended to be asleep when Morrigan muttered furiously about the noise. Finally the witch snatched up her pillow and a quilt and stalked

to a corner. Scout roused and was curious, but Morrigan warned him away with a cat-like hiss.

Unable to sleep, Bronwyn watched the shadows of the dying fire play on the ceiling and the draperies. Most of the time now, she could suppress her own dreams somewhat. She did not always sleep well, but was rarely shocked awake. She was sorry for Aveline, but wished she did not have to listen to the groans and whimpers. With sour envy, she thought of Loghain, smug in the solitary grandeur of a room to himself. She would not soon forget how he had scorned her.

On the road the following day, another message from Denerim arrived. Bryland's note informed them that the Queen was being held against her will at the Cathedral. This bit of news caused Loghain's face to redden alarmingly. His first impulse was to ride with a small picked band to Denerim ahead of the rest of the forces, but he was old and experienced enough to know that such a course would be madness. It might well, in fact, be exactly what his enemies were anticipating.

"That's enough from those bastards!" he snarled to Bronwyn, twitching his reins restlessly. "I've put up with all I'm going to take from that cow in Ostagar and that doddering fool in Denerim. Things are going to change."

He behaved as if nothing had happened last night—or failed to happen—and Bronwyn was determined to behave in exactly the same way. He must not know how much he had hurt her,

for it would be a weapon in any man's hands. As things stood now, Bronwyn did not wish to give Loghain such a weapon. He might actually use it.

Castle Bryland opened to them, pale cold stone and black iron. In the ancient hall, the evening's conference was even grimmer than the last.

"We want to be careful," advised Bann Carlin. "We don't want the Divine declaring an Exalted March on us."

Bronwyn shrugged. "If the Chantry dares to lock up the Queen of Ferelden, I don't see that we have much to lose. It sounds like they're already moving against us."

Loghain stared into the fire. "At the end of the Rebellion," he said slowly, "Maric considered a break with Val Royeaux. The Divine had openly declared herself the enemy of Ferelden. Maric decided in the end that we were too weak to deal with another war hard on the heels of the last." He got up and leaned on the stone mantel, surveying their expressions. "Perhaps it is time to assess the degree of threat an Exalted March actually poses."

"How many Templars does the Knight-Divine command?" Bronwyn asked. "Do you know?"

"No," Loghain admitted. "and I don't have to. The Chantry can't pull all its Templars out of every nation in Thedas to attack Ferelden. Since this is clearly an Orlesian offensive, Nevarra will not cooperate. If the Divine pushes too hard,

she'll find more nations arrayed against her than Ferelden. Nevarra knows why Orlais wants Ferelden: for the Bannorn breadbasket that would support the continuing war against Nevarra."

"The Free Marches hate Orlais," Bann Stronar agreed. "And the individual Chantries would be reluctant to strip their ability to control their own local mages."

"So an Exalted March at this point," said Wulffe, "would essentially be an Orlesian invasion. And because of the war with Nevarra, they won't be able to throw their full force our way."

"But there is another factor," Bronwyn considered. "And that is that we are in the midst of a Blight. The Grey Wardens have kept their distance, but if Orlais attacks us now, they will be forced to make a stand for the sake of their own credibility and honor. The Grey Wardens will not march with Orlais, I'm certain of it. No matter how close they are to the Empress, they still have to answer to Weisshaupt and the rest of Thedas. The Divine will not want a war between the Chantry and the Grey Wardens, " she paused, rage rising up from her deepest core, "because we will whip their cowardly, sanctimonious, purple-skirted *arses!*"

A burst of laughter. Even Loghain smiled grimly.

"Well put!" rumbled Wulffe, still chuckling.

"You may well be right," said Loghain. "The Grey Wardens of

Orlais might not move against us. It might well be that the Empress will pretend neutrality and use the Templars to conduct a proxy war. I do have fairly good intelligence as to the numbers of Templars within the borders of Ferelden. We'll start there, and take a closer look at their activities."

The conference broke up, and they all took themselves off to their quarters. Bronwyn felt took a certain childish pleasure in bidding Loghain a dismissive good night. Castle Bryland was indeed much larger than Ceorlic's manor, but there were still a great many soldiers to lodge. Once again, Aveline and Morrigan were assigned to Bronwyn's room, though thankfully in separate beds. Morrigan dragged her bed as far away as possible. She and Bronwyn were carefully polite to each other, but said nothing beyond the most necessary words.

Heavy rains slowed their progress toward Denerim. The West Road north of South Reach was not an engineering marvel like the ancient Imperial Highway. Quite long stretches were paved with stone, but there were deplorably muddy gaps, and in a number of places swollen stream beds had swept away small bridges, forcing their party to ford across.

And at each halt a new message arrived: Bryland was laying seize to the Cathedral; Fergus Cousland had arrived; Arl Urien was dead; the Queen was rescued and saved by the Ashes of Andraste; the Queen was well and in control of the city.

That last, very reassuring message reached them at the royal manor of Skraeling, a very old and inconvenient hunting lodge with a thatched roof. Only a handful of arrivals could find

shelter in the house or barns: the rest had to set up an encampment.

Loghain was sending messages himself, wanting to know the situation in Denerim before he arrived. The last reply reached them when they were half a day from the city, and included a lengthy note to Bronwyn from Warden Jowan.

She read it on horseback, letting Dax have his head. She read it though, read it again, and then told Loghain the gist of it.

"Jowan has confirmed that the Templars murdered Wynne. The Revered Mother in Ostagar was obsessed with punishing her for the death of the King. She wrote to the Grand Cleric, whose diligent assistant, Mother Gertrude, saw to the matter. The correspondence indicates that Mother Gertrude knew Wynne's location for over a week before she sent the Templars after her. There's no doubt in Jowan's mind that she chose the day very carefully."

Loghain nodded. The Chantry had overreached itself at last.

"Also..." Bronwyn hesitated. "Jowan apologizes here for making the Ashes known to everyone. Apparently he told people what they were when Anora emerged from the Cathedral, and her healing was very public."

"Good," said Loghain. "Just as well to make clear that the Chantry had no part in saving her life. Quite the contrary."

Bronwyn was not satisfied by that. "I told him to keep it quiet!

I didn't want people talking about the Ashes or going looking for the Ashes. Someday we'll have to do something about Haven, but I don't want there to be some sort of huge rush to grab at miracles. Adventurers are likely to be killed, or the Chantry will try to make coin from it."

Loghain did not care about the fate of the dragon-worshippers of Haven, and even less about the fate of people stupid enough to wander there alone.

"The Chantry will not be in a position to finance expeditions or make new foundations for some time after I finish with them." He opened another message, and laughed harshly. "A patrol has captured some of our fine Orlesian minstrels. I wonder what tune they'll sing for us?"

The rain stopped before they reached Denerim. In the hazy distance they could just make out Fort Drakon. Loghain ordered a final halt to eat and rest, and perhaps to smarten themselves up a bit before entering the city. He looked over at Bronwyn, talking quietly to her Wardens, with some pride and pleasure. She had taken his admonition to heart with surprising maturity. She really was quite a remarkable girl.

"Bronwyn!" he called, stalking over to her. She regarded him with admirable composure.

"My lord?"

Loghain paused, a little softened by the sight of her young face turned up to his. Yes, a remarkable girl, and already a

queen in bearing. Too good for the likes of him; but he would endeavor to learn to be happier than he deserved.

"Don't wear your helmet," he advised Bronwyn, a bit gruffly, fingers light on her cheek. "Let the people see your face."

The troops reformed in good order, the horses by twos, the soldiers in their ranks, the wagons full of baggage and loot trundling along on well-oiled wheels.

People were gathering along the roads to see them pass, chattering and pointing. Bronwyn heard the words "*That's the Girl Warden!*" all too often, even though she had resigned herself to the nickname. Loghain might be at his best looking stern and forbidding, but she could not help smiling at the friendly folk as they held up the children to see. People talked about her looks, her red armor, how she had found the remedy to save the Queen...talked about her loudly, and as if Bronwyn were too deaf to hear them.

Ahead loomed the walls of Denerim, and before them the Great Gate. The last time Bronwyn had come to Denerim, she had slipped in almost unnoticed. Now, the crowds swirled and thickened, calling her name. Guards below and guards above shouted to each other, onlookers were pushed back, out of the way of the advancing troops.

Quite a few people wanted to see them: see her, Bronwyn, in particular. Fathers held up their children; mothers ran alongside Bronwyn's stirrup, wanting her to touch their babies.

Well...."bless" their babies, in at least two cases. Really, what sort of stories had people spread about her?

She began to have some idea, after they reached the Palace and Bronwyn found a priest with a message from the Grand Cleric waiting for her in the courtyard.

"Her Grace wishes to speak to you as soon as possible..."

Loghain had not noticed. He had received a message himself, and was reading it, face inscrutable.

The arrival disappointed her a little. She had looked forward to showing her new Wardens about their Compound. Instead, Jowan, Leliana, Carver met her at the Palace steps with the rest of the officers and functionaries, and Bronwyn had hardly a moment to greet them and whisper to Jowan, "I need to talk to you—" when she was swept away with Loghain, off to see the Queen.

Her Wardens were left behind, bemused and rather cheerful, to be taken in hand by Leliana. Bronwyn cast a longing look at them over her shoulder as she mounted the steps to the Landsmeet Chamber.

Inside, quite a few nobles lined the long aisle, and the cheers were loud. Nonetheless, as long as it had been since Bronwyn had trod these stones, she could tell that there were faces missing. In the air was a fever of fear and hope; a wish that someone would put things right.

Oh, there was Fergus, standing by the Queen! Bronwyn smiled with her whole heart, just for him, and was rewarded with his white and boyish grin. Beside her, Loghain might evince only a certain sardonic amusement, but Bronwyn found it wonderful to be so respected and validated by the foremost in the kingdom.

Fergus stepped forward to embrace her in a formal but nonetheless heart-felt salute. He whispered a word to Loghain, his voice low, disguised by the noise around them.

"Shall I announce the betrothal now?"

"Yes," Loghain agreed. "Better now than later."

Bronwyn felt a silly flutter of nerves, and rebuked herself for it. So it must be. There was no other path. Best to seize the day and make it her own.

Anora arose from her throne to welcome them.

"Welcome to you, my father, Loghain Mac Tir, Teryn of Gwaren, Hero of River Dane, and General of the Armies of Ferelden. Be welcome also, Bronwyn Cousland, Dragonslayer, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden. Word of your deeds has reached us, and we rejoice to hear that the darkspawn in the south have been fought to a standstill. All honor to you both, and it is our wish that you remain in the city some time, putting paid to the miscreants who have threatened the peace of the kingdom!"

A great deal of cheering at that. Ferelden's nobles had received a very bad fright. Darkspawn in the south were one thing: assassins at a wedding feast was something appallingly close to home.

Anora said: "Some of Ferelden's noblest have fallen and their desmesnes lie vacant. We shall require your good counsel in settling the ensuing claims."

Loud murmuring. Bryland's face was a curious study. Bronwyn wondered which lordship had caught his interest. South Reach was safe, of course. There was no time for pondering the matter, for Anora was speaking about her.

"Lady Bronwyn has done a deed worthy of great reknown. Months ago, I was poisoned by an Orlesian intriguer, and no healing could cure me. Only one remedy remained: to find the Sacred Ashes of Andraste. Lady Bronwyn succeeded in this quest, and the Ashes, administered to me after my captivity in the Cathedral, restored me to perfect health."

Amidst the rising noise and clamoring, excited gossip, the Queen made a most beautiful curtsy. "I thank you, humbly and sincerely, Bronwyn Cousland, for my life."

Bronwyn felt brevity was best. She bowed, and then replied, "It was my honor to serve the Crown of Ferelden, Your Majesty."

More cheering followed, but Bronwyn's sharp eyes saw there was debate admixed in it.

Fergus stepped forward. "Your Majesty, if I may speak..."

Anora smiled at him. She all but batted her lashes.

"You may, Teyrn Fergus."

Bronwyn nearly smirked. Anora was really laying it on rather thick. Not that Fergus didn't deserve it.

"It is my great pleasure," Fergus declared, "to announce the betrothal of my sister, Lady Bronwyn, to Teyrn Loghain! The wedding is to be held a month hence, and I swear on my sword that no Orlesian villains will mar their rites!"

If there had been excitement before, the response to this announcement eclipsed everything. Cheers, gossip, speculation, envy, some sage nods from people already in on the plans. Bronwyn barely heard Anora's words of approval and congratulation, as her destiny became public property.

Loghain held her hand in his, and looked: if not happy, at least content. He whispered in her ear. "Once we're done here, Anora wants us to join her in the Little Audience Chamber. I think you'll find it interesting."

"This place is fantastic!" Carver assured his new brothers and sister. His new *younger* brothers and sister—at least in a manner of speaking. That made all the difference. He smiled, at peace with the world.

Anders had not seen the Compound before, and his grin lit up the Wardens' Hall. As a full Warden, he was informed he would have a private room in the tower. Morrigan, touchy and out of sorts during their journey, was pleased by that.

They were shown the portraits of Duncan and Genevieve, and told something of their history. Aveline and Toliver had met Duncan, and found it all very interesting. Servants took everyone's trunks and impedimenta to their various quarters, while Jowan made the introductions to Mistress Rannelly, and the Wardens sat down to a hearty meal.

Afterwards, they were told where the bathing facilities were, and the jakes. Leliana, suspecting that Bronwyn would not be pleased if the Wardens instantly scattered all over Denerim, improvised a schedule. They were to stay in the Compound this evening, and amuse themselves. Tomorrow there would be exercises in the training room above the Hall. As soon as it could be arranged, they would be allowed liberty to explore Denerim as long as they returned at the appointed hour.

Aveline found herself alone in the women's dormitory, and was assigned a single bed there that was far more comfortable than the bunks lining two of the walls. Her trunk was set primly at the foot of the bed. By the wall were armor and weapon stands. She set her poor lost Wesley's shield on one, and sighed. It was a little like having a bit of him left to her, but not nearly good enough. Still, as barracks went, it was very nice indeed. She listened absently to the noise of the men settling in next door. It would be good to have a little

quiet time. Morrigan had not been the friendliest of companions, and Bronwyn, while a considerate leader, had seemed preoccupied—understandably so, from the reports coming out of Denerim.

A knock at the door.

"Come in."

Toliver peered around the room: big, friendly Toliver. He was the only other human in their group of junior Wardens, and had naturally gravitated to Aveline, even though she was a former officer and considered "stuck-up."

"Found the training room," he told her. "It's something like! Want to spar?"

Aveline hoped he was not one of those men who looked upon sparring as a form of courtship. She was hoping to get a better look at the Wardens' study, but perhaps that was intended only for the higher ranks... "I wouldn't mind having a look at the place. I don't know about sparring—"

"Do you good. Set you right up. But if you want a spot of entertainment first, the elf's already at the butts."

Aveline smiled slightly. "Let's see if he really can shoot backwards."

Morrigan approved of their room once her wishes were

acceded to, and they were settled on the third level of the tower, away from everyone else.

"I do not wish to hear wails, groans, snores, or Zevran attending to his own needs," she said to Anders. "This privacy is very welcome."

"It is, isn't it?" agreed Anders, bouncing experimentally on the wide bed. "Nice place. Everyone told me, but you never know until you see a place for yourself. I hope they let us out tomorrow. There's a shop I want to show you. The Wonders of Thedas. A lot of magical items and funny old books and maps. You'll like it."

"'Tis possible, I suppose," she shrugged. "For the moment, I shall revel in the freedom from Aveline's jejune militarism and Bronwyn's approaching doom."

"She's going to be Queen!" Anders almost cheered. "Think what she can do for mages!"

"Anders, you are such a child, sometimes. She can do only what those imbecilic nobles will allow her to persuade them to do."

He refused to be daunted, and bounced up again, to take her in his arms and nuzzle her superb white throat. "Mnnnnnh. And she's pretty persuasive. Anything she gets for us will be more we've got."

Nathaniel Howeknew better than to complain. He had been shown to quite nice quarters in the Palace. He also knew better than to complain about the guard at the door, or the fact that he had been requested not to wander away. He was a prisoner, at least in a sense. He could no doubt break out of here and run away, but that would mean the end of the Howe family in Ferelden. For now he must behave himself.

His meals were brought to him, his chamber tidied by a pleasant but uncommunicative servant. No one had said anything about summary execution, so things could be far worse.

Adria had given him fair warning—both she and Varel together. After receiving Ser Norrel's urgent messages, he knew he must choose: either to make his life henceforth in the Free Marches as he could; or boldly return to Ferelden, accepting that his father had roused great anger and brought a bloody vengeance on himself.

He sat in the hard wooden chair, looking into the fire, trying to uncover the riddle of the past few months in the wayward flames.

He was alone. He was an orphan: fatherless, motherless. His silly brother and wise, sweet sister had been thrust from the world by violent hands. Delilah had kept the bond of family alive, writing to him faithfully, her letters thoughtful, cheerful, optimistic; and only on closer reading betraying a deep vein of melancholy. Her short life had never been happy; never...not even particularly happy when they were children. He did not

think that Father had meant for her to be unhappy, but perhaps that was because Father did not understand what happiness was, never having known it himself.

Save for those fragile bonds, save for the casual friends he made here and there, he had been alone for years in the Free Marches. He had not sought more, always feeling that his life lay in the future, at home in Ferelden. He would return someday and then there would be time and opportunity for friendship, for the kind of lifelong regard he thought bound together his father and Bryce Cousland. He had hoped to make just such a friend.

Meanwhile, he had squired for Lord Balimon and Lord Harriman; he had made his bow alive and eager in his hands; he had sharpened his skills with a blade until he could stake his life on it and win.

He had learned other crafts as well: how to hear the words underneath the ones spoken aloud; how to become the man that those around him wished him to be; how to slip unseen through a crowd, along an alley, among the great; and how, when necessary, to make himself both heard and seen...and attended to.

And all these skills might be for naught if Ferelden cast him out as the scion of treachery.

It was impossible to determine just what Father thought he was doing, or why he thought he could get away with it. It was all very unclear—much like trying to find a lost treasure at

the bottom of a murky pool. Father had led a surprise raid on Castle Highever and had murdered Bryce and Eleanor Cousland; and not satisfied with that, he had killed Fergus' Antivan wife and his little son. He had tried to kill Bronwyn.

What was he *thinking*? Father had been a mystery to him: a man who never explained himself, who never made excuses or apologies. The book of his life was closed, and Nathaniel had no access to the key that would unlock it.

Ser Norrel's messages—yes, they had urged him to come home at once. The darkspawn were stirring in the south...folk believed it was the beginnings of a Blight...Teyrn Loghain had led the army against them...the King himself had marched with his soldiers. Father was deep in some sort of political intrigue, and Ser Norrel was concerned about him. Whether his father admitted it or not, Nathaniel was needed at home.

Thus, he bade farewell to his friends and made his way from Markham to Ostwick, where he heard shocking news. The Couslands were dead, murdered by his father. No one seemed to know why. It seemed a brazen, outrageous power grab. How Father imagined he could get away with it was hard to understand. At first he thought that the whole family was dead, and then he heard that the son and daughter had survived. Fergus, in fact, had already left for the army before the attack. It all became even more incomprehensible.

Then he learned that Bann Esmerelle had passed through Kirkwall, heading north to Starkhaven. Gossip was aflame about her, and word from Ferelden was that she had not been

truthful about her precipitous exile. Accompanying her movements was the news that Father was dead, murdered by the Crows. Exmerelle had fled Amaranthine a step ahead of a vengeful Fergus Cousland.

She had come to the Free Marches a very wealthy woman, and the source of her fortune was shocking. She and Father had become entangled with Tevinter slavers. After Father's seizure of Highever, he had sold off the entire Alienage. Then he continued his dealing, luring in elves from Amaranthine, from Denerim, from anywhere with false promises of work. The unfortunates had commanded a high price. Esmerelle was possibly the richest woman in the Free Marches, and those officers who had escaped with her had purses heavy with gold.

Had Fergus hired the Crows? He had ties to Antiva, of course. That had been his first thought, though when he arrived in Ferelden he found no one seemed to believe that, and it was definitely dismissed by Varel, and then Adria.

Adria, his dear second mother, was heartbroken at the fate of Delilah and Thomas. It was she who had taken charge of the bodies and prepared them decently for the pyre. She was certain that Fergus had meant to spare Delilah. The young Teyrn of Highever clearly did not think her guilty of anything. The assassins had escaped in the confusion, and had left behind a spiteful message from Oriana's Antivan mother, written in her own tongue and in the flesh of Rendon Howe's chest.

All the news was alarming, for that matter. On his arrival, the town of Amaranthine was chaotic and fractured, held together by Fergus' garrison: men and women who luckily had not recognized him. Varel had greeted him kindly, but was concerned for his safety. The soldiers Fergus had left at Vigil's Keep eyed Nathaniel like a poisonous snake.

And now he learned that the King was dead, killed in battle against the darkspawn. Nathaniel had not seen Cailan in years, and now would never know what kind of man he had become. A Landsmeet had been called, to be held in Haring, of all preposterous times, though Varel thought the vultures were already gathering. Fergus Cousland was there, at the side of the widowed Queen Anora, who would rule for the next two months until a new monarch was chosen.

"It's a risk, either way," Varel counseled him. "The Couslands are high in favor at the moment. If you show your face, it might be the end of you. On the other hand, the cruelty of that Antivan woman's revenge sickened Teyrn Fergus. I don't think they'll have you executed—or even tried for treason. They might exile you, but that's no reason to exile yourself. The bold thing might be best: make your obeisance to the Queen and your liege lord. Denounce your father's crimes—for crimes they were—but stand firm on for your rights. There's a chance the arling may come to you. If they decide on exile, it's likely they'd be fair enough to see you had a share of the family treasures."

Adria had wanted to come with him and take care of him, but Nathaniel thought that unsafe for her. He kissed her goodbye,

and bowed his head for her blessing. On the road, he heard that Orlesian assassins had attacked the wedding feast of the Arl of Denerim, and killed him. Many other nobles had been killed or wounded. The Queen, too had been injured in some way, and rumors and accusations were flying back and forth. Some of the rumors attributed some of the guilt to the Chantry. Surely, that could not be possible?

In the city, the talk was all of Fergus' storming of the Chantry to rescue the Queen. A more fantastic tale gave out that the Girl Warden—whoever *she* was—had found the Ashes of Andraste and miraculously healed the Queen. Was this the Dragon Age, or some misty, long-forgotten time of myths and legends?

The door opened abruptly. To Nathaniel's relief, the royal seneschal was there, rather than an execution detail. Guards there were, but only four of them. Perhaps they were simply underestimating him.

"My lord," said the man. "The Queen requires your attendance."

Nathaniel did not recognize the corridors. They were not taking him to the Landsmeet Chamber, which was good, as that would be the likely venue of a treason trial. Instead they climbed some handsome stairs, and he was admitted to what was evidently the Little Audience Chamber.

Queen Anora, elegantly dressed in blue, was enthroned on a low dais. Nathaniel had not seen her in years, but she was still

a very beautiful woman. Beside her stood the imposing figure of Teyrn Loghain. Nathaniel had not known he was in the city. Perhaps he had only recently arrived. More ominous was the presence of a somber Fergus Cousland on the other side of the throne, and with him Leonas Bryland, a close ally of the Couslands, equally somber.

His attention was riveted by someone he did not know. Next to Teyrn Loghain was a tall young woman in splendid dragon bone armor of an unusual dark red. A gold double-headed griffon was flourished over her breast. He had heard that Duncan, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden, had died months ago. Was this then the famed Girl Warden? She seemed far too young to command any force of Wardens Nathaniel had ever encountered.

Far too young and too beautiful as well. Her long dark hair fell in loose waves over her pauldrons, brushed back from her white and unlined brow. A thin, pale scar traced its way from cheekbone to jaw. Most arresting were her eyes: a brilliant, glittering green that could not be the natural color of any human's. Did she perhaps have some elven blood? She seemed far too tall and broad-shouldered. He looked at her again. There was something vaguely familiar about her...

A terrible thought struck him.

Do they mean to make me a Warden?

It would make a horrible kind of sense. But Queen Anora was speaking, telling him what had been decided for him. If he

would swear homage to Fergus as his rightful teyrn, if he would forswear pursuing revenge for his family—of whose deaths Fergus was blameless, and if he would vote at the upcoming Landsmeet as the Queen, Loghain, the Couslands, and their allies wished; then they in turn would support his claim to the arling of Amaranthine. There was some crosstalk, to which he listened in a kind of daze. Adria would be thrilled. If only Delilah had lived to see this day.

When Fergus called the beautiful stranger by her name, Nathaniel was shocked. *Bronwyn*? He would never have associated this woman with the lovely, grey-eyed child who had plagued and teased him. What had happened to her? How had she come to be a Warden?

Bronwyn left the Little Audience Chamber after the ritual torture of Nathaniel Howe, exhausted by all the formality and subtextual meanings. She made her excuses to everyone, not wanting to hear anything more about titles and lordships.

Seeing Nathaniel again after so long and in such circumstances had wounded her in some subtle way. He had grown into manhood—a fine manhood—in foreign lands, and must be grieved at such a homecoming. With what quiet dignity he had faced them all...people he must regard as his worst enemies...and stood fast before them. He was clearly Rendon's son—the long, slightly hooked nose and keen grey eyes under dark brows proclaimed that—but Rendon had always been lanky and rawboned...almost scrawny. This broad-shouldered, slim-hipped man had the strength and

grace of a young dragon.

As a child, she had admired him, and expressed her affections in the only way she knew: by making herself obnoxious. She had complacently heard the talk about a marriage, and then he was abruptly sent away. It occurred to her that her passion for Loghain had flowered the spring after Nathaniel's departure. That was..disturbing.

No. She was committed to Loghain, and while angry with him, had not ceased to feel for him. Nonetheless, the remembrance of things past caused an upswell of good will toward Nathaniel. If only he would keep his word! She wanted no more harm to come to him.

In her room in the Wardens' Compound was a pile of correspondence: letters from the First Warden, the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra, Antiva, and Ansburg; vassals of Highever, and citizens of Denerim. And there a personal note from the Grand Cleric, not satisfied apparently with sending a priest with a verbal message.

"Her Grace wishes to meet with the Warden-Commander at her earliest convenience."

Bronwyn sighed. That might be disagreeable. Would she complain about Fergus? Or...she groaned aloud.

She wants to talk about the Ashes. Who wouldn't?

This was no better than the Little Audience Chamber. She

heard voices in the study and hurried there, hoping for harmless gossip and a glass of wine.

"Bronwyn!" Carver beamed at the sight of her. "The new lot are settling in. And I have the best room in the world!"

She smiled back, enjoying his frank enjoyment. "I like it here, too. Everyone else satisfied?"

They were: it was a pleasant group. Jowan had recently arrived and seemed unusually cheerful, even elated. She would have to talk to him privately about the Ashes, but what was done was done.

Jowan, Leliana, Carver, Anders, Morrigan, Zevran. And Scout was here, too, of course, sprawled luxuriously in front of the fire. It was almost like the old days before people took it into their heads to make her Queen. She was not the only one who thought so.

"I wish all the rest could be with us just like this," Leliana said wistfully, pouring a cup of wine for Bronwyn. "This is so nice."

"Someday," Bronwyn said, though she thought it unlikely.

Carver, big overgrown boy that he was, had slid out of his chair and lounged on a cushioned stool by the fire, scratching Scout's ears.

"I miss our stories," said Anders. "That was great. Of course we don't have Sten here to make his unique observations on

our barbaric customs."

"Why don't we have a story anyway? It's Carver's turn," said Jowan. He was happy: perhaps the happiest he had ever been. Even if Bronwyn reamed him out for revealing this existence of the Ashes, a moment like this was worth it. He had found a whole archive of secret correspondence. Some of it was in cipher, but there was reason to believe it pertained to the Aeonar Prison. If they could do something about that...

"Yes!" Zevran sensed the mood turning a little melancholy, and seized on the idea. "It is the turn of our young wielder of the mighty greatsword. Who knows when we shall all be together? Why not hear a story now?"

Carver nearly fell off his stool. "I have the perfect story!" he told them. "I've been saving it up ever since I thought of it. My father used to tell it to me. It's called 'The Boy Who Found Fear at Last.'"

"All right," Bronwyn said, in the mood to be diverted. "Let's hear it."

Carver's story of The Boy Who Found Fear At Last

There was once a woman who lived in a little cottage in the forest with her three children. The two eldest had gone to seek their fortunes, and the youngest was kept at home to bear his mother company. The cottage was isolated and far from any neighbors, and so sometimes the mother was very

lonely.

They were sitting together on a winter's evening, when a storm suddenly sprang up, and the wind blew the door open. The woman started and shivered, and glanced over her shoulder as if she half expected to see some horrible thing behind her. 'Go and shut the door,' she said hastily to her son, 'I feel frightened.'

'Frightened?' repeated the boy. 'What does it feel like to be frightened?'

'Well—just frightened,' answered the mother. 'A fear of something—you hardly know what—takes hold of you.'

'It must be very odd to feel like that,' replied the boy. He thought about it all night, and decided, 'I shall go through the world and seek fear till I find it.' And the next morning, before his mother was out of bed, he had left the cottage in the forest behind him.

After walking for some hours he reached a mountain, which he began to climb. Near the top, in a wild and rocky spot, he came upon a band of fierce bandits, sitting round a fire. The boy, who was cold and tired, was delighted to see the bright flames, so he went up to them and said, "Greetings to you, sers," and wriggled himself in between the men, till his feet almost touched the burning logs.

The bandits stopped drinking and eyed him curiously, and at last their leader spoke.

'No caravan of armed men would dare to come here. Even the very birds shun our camp, and who are you to venture in so boldly?'

'Oh, I have left my mother's house in search of fear. Perhaps you can show it to me?'

'Fear is wherever we are,' answered the leader, smirking.

'But *where?*' asked the boy, looking round. 'I see nothing.'

Insulted and disappointed the bandits looked at each other, finding that they were not so menacing as they liked to believe. The leader scratched his head, and then had an idea to put this young lad in his place.

'Take this pot and some flour and butter and sugar over to the ruined castle which lies down there, and bake us a cake for supper,' replied the bandit. And the boy, who was by this time quite warm, jumped up cheerfully, and slinging the pot over his arm, ran down the hill.

When he got to the ruins he collected some sticks and made a fire; then he filled the pot with water from a little stream close by, and mixing the flour and butter and sugar together, he set the cake on to cook. It was not long before it grew crisp and brown, and then the boy lifted it from the pot and placed it on a stone, while he put out the fire. At that moment a ghostly hand stretched out, and a voice said:

'Is that cake for me?'

'Do you think I am going to give to the dead the food of the living?' replied the boy, with a laugh. And giving the hand a rap with his spoon, and picking up the cake, he went up the mountain side, whistling merrily.

'Well, have you found fear?' asked the bandits when he held out the cake to them.

'No: was it there?' answered the boy. 'I saw nothing but a white hand that came from the air, and belonged to someone who wanted my cake, but I just rapped the fingers with my spoon, and said it was not for him, and then the hand vanished. Oh, how nice the fire is!' And he flung himself on his knees before it, and so did not notice the glances of surprise cast by the bandits at each other.

'There is another chance for you,' said one at length. 'On the other side of the mountain lies a deep pool; go to that, and perhaps you may meet fear on the way.'

'I hope so, indeed,' answered the boy. And he set out at once.

He soon beheld the waters of the pool gleaming in the moonlight, and as he drew near he saw a tall swing standing just over it, and in the swing a child was seated, weeping bitterly.

'That is a strange place for a swing,' thought the boy; 'but I wonder what he is crying about.' And he was hurrying on towards the child, when a maiden ran up and spoke to him.

'I want to lift my little brother from the swing,' cried she, 'but it is so high above me, that I cannot reach him. If you will get closer to the edge of the pool, and let me mount on your shoulder, I think I can reach him.'

'Willingly,' replied the boy, and in an instant the girl had climbed to his shoulders. But instead of lifting the child from the swing, as she could easily have done, she pressed her feet so firmly on either side of the youth's neck, that he felt that in another minute he would be choked, or else fall into the water beneath him. So gathering up all his strength, he gave a mighty heave, and threw the girl backwards. As she touched the ground, a golden bracelet fell from her arm, and she and the child vanished. The boy picked up the bracelet, and put it in his purse.

'I may as well keep it as a remembrance of all the queer things that have happened to me since I left home,' he said to himself.

On and on walked the youth, but fear never crossed his path, and one day he entered a large town, where all the streets and squares were so full of people, he could hardly pass between them.

'Why are all these crowds gathered together?' he asked of a man who stood next him.

'The ruler of this country is dead,' was the reply, 'and as he had no children, it is needful to choose a successor. Therefore, each morning one of the sacred pigeons is let

loose from the tower yonder, and on whomsoever the bird shall perch, that man will be our king. In a few minutes the pigeon will fly. Wait and see what happens.'

Every eye was fixed on the tall tower which stood in the centre of the chief square, and the moment that the sun was seen to stand straight over it, a door was opened and a beautiful pigeon, gleaming with pink and grey, blue and green, came rushing through the air. Onward it flew, onward, onward, till at length it rested on the head of the boy. Then a great shout arose:

'The king! the king!'

But as the boy listened to the cries, a vision, swifter than lightning, flashed across his brain. He saw himself seated on a throne, spending his life trying, and never succeeding, to make poor people rich; miserable people happy; bad people good; never doing anything he wished to do, not able even to marry the girl that he loved.

'No! no!' he shouted, hiding his face in his hands; but the crowds who heard him thought he was overcome by the grandeur that awaited him, and paid no heed. All around him were cries of joy.

'The king! The king!'

And as the young man heard, a cold shiver, that he knew not the meaning of, ran through him.

'This is fear whom you have so long sought,' whispered a voice, which seemed to reach his ears alone. And the youth bowed his head as the vision once more flashed before his eyes, and he accepted his doom, and made ready to pass his life with fear beside him.

Anders responded to the story with shocked silence, and Zevran with veiled and sympathetic amusement. Jowan was about to praise Carver, when he saw the looks on the other faces. Leliana, who had seen it all coming for some time, only sighed, and gave Carver an encouraging smile.

Bronwyn hardly knew what to say. Just when she thought herself safe, her future had slapped her in the face, vividly described by this innocent young man.

She swallowed. "What a...remarkable story," she managed. "Your father was a very wise man. Thank you for sharing it. Now," she said, rising carefully from her chair and setting her wine aside, "I must really return to my correspondence."

Too upset and confused to make a dignified exit, she nearly walked into the closed door. Furiously, she flung it open, and fled to the silence of her room.

Carver stared. "Did I say something wrong?"

"'Twas an excellent story!" Morrigan said forcefully. "A remarkably apt and pointed cautionary tale. I believe it was exactly the story that Bronwyn needed to hear at this

particular moment."

"Carver," Anders said kindly, "you do know why Bronwyn is in Denerim, don't you?"

Carver looked at him blankly. Anders pursed his lips.

"You know that someone will have to take the throne, don't you? You know about the Landsmeet?"

Carver suddenly gaped, and then blushed to the roots of his hair. *"Maker's Breath!* She's going to kill me!"

"Perhaps not personally," Zevran pointed out, "but soon it will very likely be within her power to order you hanged, drawn, and quartered."

Thanks to my reviewers: Zute, Nemrut, Phygmalion, reality deviant, Blinded in a bolthole, Jyggilag, Hydroplatypus, Mike3207, MsBarrows, KnightOfHolyLight, sizuka2, anon, Kira Kyuu, Biff mcLaughlin, BandGeekNinja, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Judy, riverdaleswhiteflash, Josie Lange, JackOfBladesX, Shakespeira, Enaid Aderyn, amanda weber, Jenna53, mille libri, euromellows, KimiRen, Have Socks. Will Travel, Psyche Sinclair, Verpine, Herebedragons66, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

The story is from Andrew Lang's Yellow Fairy Book, from a Turkish original.

66. Tasks at Hand

Victory at Ostagar

(I was on vacation in the canyons of Utah last week, and my internet connectivity was very poor. If my reply to your review did not reach you, I apologize. Also, this chapter is shorter than I planned, as I spent quite a bit of time hiking under waterfalls and communing with a recalcitrant horse.)

Chapter 66: Tasks At Hand

She was rushing through the Deep Roads with extraordinary speed, her tail whipping behind her. Her shoulders smashed at the rocks on either side, shattering them to fragments. Her slaves quailed before her and obeyed without question. Other beings, shadowy grey creatures, thrummed at the edges of her consciousness. She reached out, seeing through their eyes, learning what their pitiful minds understood of this strange world into which she had been reborn. Hers, all hers. Victory lay ahead.

Bronwyn slept late. Scout woke her at last, impatient to go outside. She was not exactly tired, but felt as if she had been running a race all night. She remembered flashes of her

dreams: an endless slithering through darkness. It was all nonsense, of course.

She let Scout out, and her eyes fell on the correspondence on her writing table. She must sit down and answer it all in detail.

A servant entered, with a small box on a salver.

"From Teyrn Loghain, my lady."

Bronwyn blinked, still not quite awake. She dismissed the servant, and opened the box.

Ah. The ring she had been expecting when she was given armor instead. Loghain had not given her a ring last night, when their betrothal was announced. Perhaps he wanted to give her a chance to say whether or not she liked it. Did she?

She supposed she did. It even fit, thought that was typical of Loghain's careful strategic planning. The ring was of fine gold set with three diamonds, the one in the center quite large and brilliant. Bronwyn wondered cynically whose ring it once was, and hoped it had not been Teyrna Celia's. That would be tacky, and distressing to Anora besides. But no: Loghain was not *that* insensitive. Besides, his dead wife's jewelry would have gone to Anora.

She put on the ring, admiring the sparkle. She really was betrothed now, she supposed. Blowing out a breath, she turned to her letters, ever conscious of the subtle weight on her hand.

The First Warden was really, really not pleased with her. She might be called 'Warden-Commander' here in Ferelden, but her foreign correspondents made clear that she was nothing of the sort in anyone else's eyes.

The Warden-Commander of Nevarra was friendly enough. He, like the Commanders of Ansborg and Antiva, wanted to know what was going on. They knew this was a Blight, but what exactly had the Archdemon done?

Hector Pentaghost of Nevarra, himself the scion of a proud and ancient house, seemed very cognizant of the dilemma that Orlais had presented Ferelden: any help from their Wardens was tied to an occupation by Orlais in all but name, and demanded ultimate submission to the Empress. He knew that Bronwyn had obtained the help of Orzammar and of the Ferelden Dalish. He also knew that King Cailan had been killed, and that the throne was undecided. His questions were clear enough: had the Archdemon diversified its attack? In past Blights, the darkspawn had issued to the surface in multiple locations. Had they been seen anywhere but at Ostagar?

And there was more: he explained why no one had offered experienced Wardens to assist her. The First Warden had forbidden it. It was believed that the main attack would be coming soon. The First Warden held that the attack at Ostagar was simply an early feint—a mere foretaste of the real horror to come. Since no one knew where the darkspawn might strike next, no Commander felt it wise to weaken his own forces, lest the darkspawn appear at his own gates.

Unwritten but very clear was the opinion that Ferelden was too small, too remote, too unimportant to be the main thrust of a Blight. The great battles would be fought elsewhere. Bronwyn hoped he was right.

A similar story was told by Ansburg and also by Antiva. In addition, Gian-Antonio del Condottiere sympathized with Bronwyn's indignation at being targeted by the Crows. He assured her that he had spoken to the Masters of the Houses. One would think that when faced with a Blight, the Crows would forbear to attack Grey Wardens. Alas, some Crows were greedier and more short-sighted than others, even though no Crow would dare attack an Antivan Grey Warden, lest a vendetta be called on them. He had been told that the Crows were pulling out of Ferelden altogether, partly in fear of the darkspawn, and also because their recent failures against the Wardens of Ferelden had decimated their ranks. Gian-Antonio congratulated his sister Warden Bronwyn on this success. It was important to keep the Crows in their place.

There was no word from Tevinter, Tantervale, or Orlais. The last did not surprise her at all. Tantervale was close enough to Weisshaupt to adhere to the commands of the First Warden. As to Tevinter—well—it was so far away that Bronwyn doubted that the fate of Ferelden mattered a particle to them. The only Fereldans the Tevinter Wardens were likely to meet were the elven slaves abducted from their homes.

The First Warden was very displeased with her. She had been insubordinate. She was not Warden-Commander of Ferelden according to the First Warden's reckoning. She was

a wayward junior Warden who had exceeded her authority. She had not given due regard to the chain of command. Duncan was the last Warden-Commander of Ferelden. Whether a new Warden-Commander would be appointed in future was only the First Warden's to decide. Bronwyn could expect no assistance from Weisshaupt, since Ferelden had refused the assistance generously offered by the Wardens of Montsimmard.

His letter made her so angry that she was unsure she could compose a rational reply. What did she care for the Grey Warden "chain of command?" They seemed willing to give Ferelden to Orlais, and she scorned the "generous assistance" offered by the enemies of her blood. Hector Pentaghast's frank letter answered many questions, and made clear that no help was imminent anyway.

The letters were not a total loss, of course. She had hopes of developing some sort of link with the Nevarran Wardens. Their country was at war with Orlais, and they clearly sympathized with Ferelden's refusal to admit the chevaliers. While Pentaghast would not send her Wardens, he might well continue to give her useful information.

So the Antivans thought the Crows had withdrawn from Ferelden? That was fine with her. She must pass on the news to Zevran later. She saw no good in a pack of foreign assassins running wild during the current disturbance in Ferelden, or in fact...ever. If she truly became Queen, she would consider coming down hard on the Crows, should they try to reestablish themselves.

She set the Grand Cleric's note aside. She must go see the woman. The chantry was being turned upside down by the Royal Guard. Jowan was deeply involved, too, which was awkward, considering that he was a Grey Warden; but it was also very good, as he was a mage who had a unique perspective on the Chantry, and specialized knowledge of their secrets.

But she should go and smooth the waters, as best she could. The Grand Cleric herself had been the victim of betrayal, and might be inclined to make common cause with them...as long as someone stepped forward *soon*.

There were more letters: various people asking for coin, asking for assistance, asking for recommendations or positions for friends and family.

Among these miscellaneous letters was a missive from the mother of a Templar named Ser Friden. Friden had disappeared, and his officers believed him to have deserted. The mother, on the other hand, wrote that her son had been investigating a possible coven of blood mages active in the South Docks area. The mother included his investigative notes. If the Girl Warden could find the Ashes of Andraste, could she not find a lost son?

A coven of blood mages? Perhaps it was only a band of wretched, frightened apostates. Perhaps the son really had deserted. It was interesting, nonetheless, and might be worth looking into. She would take Jowan with her, and they would see what was going on. If they were well-disposed apostates,

she might consider conscripting them.

There were other things to do here in Denerim. In her trunk was the tattered book she had retrieved in the elven temple, full of notes about a mysterious Gaxxkang, also called "The Unbound." She dug the fragile book out and looked it over. The latest of the entries mentioned an address in Stealcopper Court, and a man named Vihm Madon. He might be able to tell her more. If she could get away for an hour or two, it might be interesting to know the end of the story.

And she must go to the Alienage, and deliver Adaia's presents. She could delegate that to someone else, but that seemed shabby to her. Adaia had personally refurbished the gown that Bronwyn would be wearing to the Queen's table tonight, and thus it seemed only right that Bronwyn would personally deliver the gifts. She would ask after that child that had caught Danith's fancy, too: Iona's daughter...Amethyne. A pretty name.

Breakfast seemed to be the first, best plan, and she splashed herself clean, and then slipped on a fresh shirt, Warden tunic, leather breeches, and decent boots.

Leliana poked her head in, smiling.

"Are you ever coming to breakfast?"

"As soon as I can do something with my hair."

"Oh, come now, and I shall help you afterwards. Carver is so

afraid you are angry with him!"

Bronwyn smiled wryly. "I'm not angry. He told a very good story, and it made me think. What else are stories for?"

"That is exactly what I say!"

She noticed the ring and squealed. Bronwyn held out her hand to be gushed over. It really was a very nice ring.

Nobody else at breakfast noticed it, thank the Maker, or perhaps they simply thought it a bit of plunder. Bronwyn did her best to put Carver at ease, while they stuffed themselves with porridge, with sausages, and with bread and honey. Bronwyn directed a maid to unpack her red gown and set it to air...and to iron it, if it were badly creased.

"A major dinner tonight," she told everyone. "everyone's to be in their best by sunset. Junior Wardens, that means you, too. Go to Mistress Rannelly and she'll issue you a Warden tunic. If you need other garments, I'm sure she can find you something."

"What's new in the letters?" Jowan asked.

Bronwyn saw no reason to keep their situation a secret.

"Oh...I've been a very bad girl by not deserting Ferelden. No one's coming to help us, because the First Warden has forbidden it. Also, all the other Wardens think the primary attack will be elsewhere...or they're pretending they think that

in order to keep their Wardens close to home."

There was some grumbling at the wickedness of foreigners. Bronwyn's mind was already on her tasks for the day.

"I have heaps to do today, and I'll want some of you along with me. The rest of you are no doubt dying to see the town, and that's fine. However, if you go out this morning, be back for the midday meal at noon. Also, I don't want you out alone. Stay in twos or more at least. The city is still unsettled and I can't afford to lose any of you. After the midday meal, you can go out again, but you must be back an hour before sunset to wash and dress for dinner."

There was quite a bit of excitement at being allowed to see the city. Bronwyn smiled tolerantly.

"I'd like to visit Highever House first thing. I have some personal things stored there, and I'd like to go through them. Carver would no doubt like to visit his family. Then, I must really call on the Grand Cleric and tell her the story of the Ashes. Leliana, you were there, and you should help tell the story. Zevran—"

The Antivan winced and put up his hands. "Not I, Noble One. The Grand Cleric would be very uncomfortable with an elf in her private chambers, and I would prefer to keep my existence and continued survival as quiet as possible."

Leliana would have eagerly assured him of the Grand Cleric's indifference to his race, but even she was not that optimistic.

"Nonetheless," said Bronwyn, "I'd like you to come with me today. After my visit to the Grand Cleric, I'll visit the Alienage and deliver Adaia's presents to her family. You've been there before, and I'm sure they'd prefer to see a familiar face."

The note was sent to the Cathedral, and Bronwyn prepared herself for a difficult conversation. Secrecy was impossible. It was probably best to tell the Grand Cleric the truth, and why she had not intended for it to be publicly known. Leliana, of course, was thrilled to meet the Grand Cleric and tell her all about their amazing spiritual experience. Bronwyn, looking back on it, still felt very uncomfortable about much of what had happened.

For her trip to the Alienage and to the Cathedral, she did not change, deciding to let her Grey Warden tunic speak for itself. Leliana insisted on elaborately braiding the sides and back of her long hair into three plaits, which she then braided together. The effect was very good.

Jowan, it appeared, wished to call on the ladies at Highever House. Leliana whispered to Bronwyn, "I think he finds Bethany Hawke very charming. She is a sweet girl."

So Bronwyn, Leliana, Carver, Jowan, and Zevran set off for Highever House. Anders, Morrigan, and the other Wardens accompanied them part of the way, wanting to visit the Market District as soon as possible. Very likely they would cross paths in the course of the day.

Jowan, of course, had already spoken privately to Anders and

Morrigan about the phylacteries. Anders was still laughing about it, quietly, secretly; enjoying the sabotage in his deepest heart. Every phylactery in the Cathedral had been contaminated—at least those belonging to live mages. If Jowan would forswear Blood Magic for good and all, Anders felt they might even be friends someday.

"A clever ruse," Morrigan had agreed, eyeing Jowan with more respect. "But what is to be done about the phylacteries that the Templars continue to collect from their new captives?"

"I've laid some ground work for that," Jowan said, voice low. "When I discovered the storage area, I made sure that all the soldiers understood what it was. They were sickened, and will no doubt spread the word. To them, despite the sophistries of the Chantry, it's all Blood Magic. With the Chantry is such bad odor at the moment, it may be possible to reign in such doings." He added, very quietly, "And if Bronwyn becomes Queen, we can hope for real reform."

Anders agreed entirely with that, so they walked together very companionably. All of them had considerable coin in their purses, and plenty of ideas about how to spend it.

Bronwyn had not visited Highever House since she was sixteen, and it seemed very unfamiliar to her at first. At the moment, it was overflowing with knights and men-at-arms. Most startling of all was the presence of some yellow-eyed people whose existence she had nearly forgotten.

But they had not forgotten her.

"Lady of the Wardens," said their leader. "We are glad to see you once more. We have served your brother faithfully."

"I am glad you see you, too. Has life among humans treated you well?"

"It has not been easy, and many among us died, but we preserved the children, and found a place in the world. Our swords are yours, always."

A cheerful voice called down. "Bronwyn? You're here!"

Fergus had not yet gone to the Palace so early in the morning, and was there to greet her and make the introductions. Most of the knights she knew—some of them quite well. Ser Adam Hawke was there of course, and quite at home. He was far better dressed than he had been when last she saw him.

And here were the hitherto unknown Hawke womenfolk: Lady Amell, the mother; the pretty sister, Bethany, a mage of whom Cousin Leonas had spoken in the most glowing terms. It was quite understandable why Jowan would be charmed. Perhaps he hoped to make her a Warden, though Bethany seemed too devoted to her mother to leave voluntarily. Bronwyn decided she must speak to Jowan about not conscripting a young girl simply because he fancied her. For all she knew, Grey Wardens might do such things all the time, but she had no desire to so offend one of her brother's knights, and cause

such unhappiness to a decent family.

So the mother was calling herself 'Lady Amell' now. Bronwyn had at first understood that her style was 'Mistress Hawke.' The uncle had held the title, she supposed, and was now dead. The title had no land to back it up, but if it pleased the woman, Bronwyn would indulge her. Lady Amell had certainly produced some very fine Fereldan children.

There was another girl with them: the cousin, the daughter of the uncle. Should *she* not be 'Lady Amell?' Apparently this Charade had helped her late father escape assassins back in Kirkwall, and had seen him safe to Lothring. Those deeds suggested considerable strength and courage. She was dressed rather blandly in lady-like silks, but her eyes were bright and noticing. Bronwyn rather liked her, she decided.

The women had visited the Compound, and were pleased to have Carver so well settled in life—if only, said the mother—were it not for the darkspawn. Carver rolled his eyes in Bronwyn's direction. She could not help grinning back.

"Yes," she agreed solemnly, "the darkspawn are very inconvenient."

She excused herself for a private word with Fergus. Up in the study, Fergus had opened a hiding place that concealed a great deal of gold. It was a cache that Grandfather had prepared in case of crisis. There was another such hiding place up in Mother and Father's room. Mother had told Bronwyn about it a few years before, swearing her to utter

secrecy.

Fergus was using the room himself, and was aware that there was a hiding place in the room, but had waited for Bronwyn to open it properly. This was done, and a great deal of treasure was revealed. Among the items was a magnificent suit of silverite armor, that might be just the thing for Fergus to wear to the Landsmeet. Mother had left some lovely jewelry and gowns: things she wore only to a Landsmeet and the attendant grand ceremonies.

"You should have this," Fergus said. "Mother would have wanted it."

"Mother would have wanted this to belong to the Teyrna of Highever," Bronwyn replied, shaking her head. "Don't think me cruel to say it. I hope with all my heart that you will someday love again, and find a woman worthy of you."

Fergus smiled ruefully, not ready to tell his sister that he had found just such a woman. She might be shocked for Oriana's sake, or if not for her, for the sake of the king, dead only little over a month. Cailan had not been a good husband to Anora, but he had been her husband nonetheless, and it was far too soon to speak.

"I'll see to it that the next Teyrna of Highever has bridegifts in plenty. You left Highever with nothing, and then Highever was sacked. Mother's good pieces—and Oriana's—and yours were stolen and shared out as loot. I don't expect to recover even a handful. A good lot of them are probably on the far

side of the Waking Sea, decorating that bitch Esmerelle. I want you to pick out some things as keepsakes, and you'll need clothes for the Landsmeet."

Scruples aside, what he said was perfectly true. She did not want to go to Loghain like a beggarmaid. Loot she had, of course, and some fine jewels. Leliana had made some heavy orders, but Bronwyn had so little clothing that anything was a help. Among other things, she ended up taking a splendid sable cloak, a belt studded with pearls, her mother's gold and amber brush, comb, and mirror, and an elaborate red velvet dressing gown. She thought again, and took a lacy white silk nightdress too, ignoring Fergus' smirk.

"I'll have it sent to the Warden's Compound," he said agreeably. "Maybe by those Wolf-people of yours. I get the impression that they can't do enough for you."

She took a quick look at her own old room. None of the grand clothes would fit, of course, and it was mostly devoid of personal items, save for a book or two and some dusty toys. She turned from it with a sigh.

Jowan talked Bethany and Charade into going to the Market with their party. Adam decided to go as well, and it was a cheerful mob that left Highever House...aside from Bronwyn. She and Leliana veered off, heading for the Cathedral, while the rest indulged themselves in shopping.

Inside the Cathedral was controlled chaos, and a large presence of soldiers and some areas out-of-bounds to the

clergy. Bronwyn and Leliana were shown to the Grand Cleric's private quarters.

"Her Grace gave command that you be admitted immediately, Warden-Commander," said a very, very civil priest. On being asked her own name, they learned that the polite priest was Mother Perpetua. Bronwyn knew that she was considered a Fereldan loyalist. It was very gratifying to see her so close to the Grand Cleric.

Deciding that the old lady had seen enough Cousland anger, Bronwyn decided to present herself as the good, if justly-aggrieved daughter of the Chantry. With Leliana at her side, it should not be difficult.

The Grand Cleric Muirin had spent most of her time in her quarters since the attack on the seventh. The Wardens were shown in, and found the old lady sitting up, wrapped in a shawl, and looking very unwell.

"My dear, dear Bronwyn!" cried the Grand Cleric, putting out her hands in welcome. "And will you not introduce your Warden to me?"

"Your Grace, this is Warden Leliana, who until recently was Sister Leliana of the Lothering Chantry."

The atmosphere warmed notably. The two Wardens knelt for the Grand Cleric's blessing, which was given very willingly.

"I was sorry," Bronwyn began, "to hear of the treacherous actions against you. To drug the Grand Cleric herself! I hope you are tolerably recovered?"

"Thank you, my dear. I am very much better. Such a bewildering series of events. Mother Gertrude had my every confidence. I still can hardly believe she would do such a thing as drug both me and the Queen herself!"

"When the stakes are so high," Bronwyn said sympathetically. "Even previously strong characters can fall prey to temptation. My brother told me that Mother Gertrude had been promised a great deal for her treachery. But now you are safe, as is the Queen. Everything could have been so much worse."

"Arl Leonas is so bitterly angry," said the Grand Cleric. "Though one must be understanding, since he has lost so much."

"He's a very good man, and loves his family dearly." Bronwyn said blandly. "And it's shocking for poor Habren to have been widowed practically on the day of her wedding. We've been complacent too long, I'm afraid, about the threat posed by Orlais. One would think that in a time of Blight, the nations of Thedas would unite, but it seems not."

"The evidence—" the Grand Cleric began delicately, "—it does indeed indicate that the attacks were of Orlesian origin?"

"Absolutely," Bronwyn said. "The very day of the attack at the wedding, there was an assassination attempt directed at

Teyrn Loghain, and at me—"

"My dear!" cried the Grand Cleric.

"—perpetrated by Orlesians. And the fortress of Gherlen's Halt was also attacked that day, led by Orlesians who called themselves 'mercenaries,' but who were clearly based at Roc des Chevaliers. The Orlesians are making use of our distraction to attack us, and they seem to care nothing for whom they may harm. They are our *enemies*, Your Grace, and while I understand that even priests may feel attachment to the country of their birth, we cannot allow them to hide behind their robes."

"Terrible times," murmured the Grand Cleric. She paused. "And strange, too. Are you aware, Bronwyn, that there is a rumor circulating that the Queen was 'healed' by the Ashes of our Holy Prophet Andraste?" She peered at Bronwyn's calm face. "And that those Ashes were said to have been sent...by *you*?"

"Your Grace," Bronwyn replied, her voice steady. "That is not a rumor, but the absolute truth, and I have come here today to tell you the story. What you decide to make of it will be a matter for your own good judgment." She tilted her head toward her companion. "Warden Leliana was present as well, and she can supplement the tale, which began shortly after the Bloomingtide Battle, when I traveled to the Circle, to obtain the aid of the mages. At the Spoiled Princess Inn, by the shores of Lake Calenhad, we met a traveling scholar: Brother Ferdinand Genetivi, and he was, he told us, looking

for the Ashes himself. He believed that he would hear more of them in a remote village in the Frostbacks: a place called Haven."

Leliana shuddered at the name. The Grand Cleric noticed it, and asked, "And Brother Genetivi is not with you. Do you believe him to have suffered a misadventure?"

"He is dead," Bronwyn said bluntly. "When we spoke of his quest, I counseled him against traveling alone when the country was in such turmoil. I am sorry to have been proved right, though I had no way of knowing what peril he would be walking into."

The Grand Cleric listened intently. Bronwyn glanced at her and went on.

"When visiting Denerim some two months ago, I called on Her Majesty the Queen. I was present when she discovered that her elven, *Orlesian* maid had been drugging her tea for some weeks with a slow-acting poison that would mimic a gradual, natural death. The maid had been in league with a highly trained Orlesian bard who was stationed here in Denerim. The agent's correspondence showed that she was obtaining state secrets from some highly placed sources. Though the poisoning was stopped, we discovered that not even magical healing could entirely cure the Queen: it could only sustain her temporarily, delaying the deterioration. The Ashes—and Brother Genetivi's wild story—seemed to be the Queen's only hope."

"Tell me everything," said the elderly priest.

They did—nearly all: the nervous secrecy at Sulcher; the denial that Brother Genetivi had been seen there; the attack on the road; their arrival at the hostile village of Haven.

"The denials continued at the village store, but in a bin of oddments, we found this." Bronwyn offered a volume to the priest.

"In Pursuit of Knowledge: The Travels of a Chantry Scholar..." The Grand Cleric saw the inscription and the marginalia. "His own copy..." her voice trailed off, and she sighed. "Did those people kill him?"

"Yes. Haven is a very insular community, and over time had developed odd beliefs," Bronwyn said.

"Horrible, perverted heresies," Leliana added. "They claimed to worship Andraste, and referred us to their priest, 'Father Eirik.'"

That was shocking enough for the Grand Cleric, but Bronwyn, not liking to drag it out at length, gave the truth baldly.

"From what we were able to gather, the villagers were true Andrasteans at one point, descendants of faithful followers who carried the Prophet's ashes into the mountains, away from the Tevinters. However, a few hundred years ago, a madman seized control of the people, and killed those who refused to submit to his lunatic ideas. His rise to power

coincided with the appearance of a High Dragon. He claimed that this dragon was Andraste reborn, and even since that time, the people have worshiped this dragon as a god, drinking dragon blood to give them unnatural strength, and sacrificing strangers to her. That indeed was the fate of Brother Genetivi."

The Grand Cleric sighed again, and put a hand over her face. "Maker turn his gaze upon him. That poor gentle soul."

Bronwyn let Leliana tell the next part of the story: the immense temple filled with fanatical heretics, with demons and monsters, and the caverns where the dragons were raised for the blood rites. Their meeting with the ranting Father Kolgrim, and the trick Bronwyn played to get past him, his followers, and the High dragon, in order to gain access to the Shrine.

"All that is wild and terrible," Bronwyn said, "but there is nothing supernatural about it. Once we stepped into the Shrine, however, it was another matter."

"The dragon cultists wanted Bronwyn to despoil the Ashes," Leliana told the Grand Cleric. "They had the mad idea that it would transfigure their dragon into a being that the whole world would worship. However, none of them could gain access to the Shrine, for it was guarded...by a spirit."

"A demon?"

"No," Bronwyn said, very decidedly. "We have fought many demons. This was not one of them. It was a man who claimed

to have been a companion of Andraste, and who had protected the Shrine from the unworthy for ages."

Leliana's voice lowered into a mysterious music. "There are tests. Anyone who wished to approach the Ashes has to endure them."

"And you did?" asked the priest, growing skeptical again.

Bronwyn silently cursed Jowan, wishing he had obeyed orders and kept the Ashes secret. Why should anybody believe this fantastic story? Why should the Grand Cleric, who had known Bronwyn as a scabby-kneed little girl, believe that she had any remarkable spiritual gifts?

She let Leliana tell the unbelievable story of the tests: how the Guardian had known things about them that no one should have been able to know: how the Guardian had distressed Bronwyn, asking her details about the deaths of her parents. How they had fought phantom doubles of themselves: ugly and distorted versions of the worst in each of them. How they had been confronted by spirits who asked them riddles, and then how they had spanned a chasm and walked through fire to approach the Sacred Urn.

Leliana's eyes glowed with the memory. "Bronwyn was permitted to take a pinch of the Ashes. You cannot imagine what it was like!" Her face fell. "We thought nothing could harm us, but outside were the heretics...and the dragon."

Bronwyn hated speaking of what happened next. "One of my

Wardens—a former Templar, Ser Cullen—was killed by the dragon."

The Grand Cleric raised her brows. "The Ashes did not save him?"

"Not after being bitten nearly in two by a dragon," Bronwyn said bitterly. "By the time it cast him aside, he was already dead."

"Unfortunate," said Her Grace.

Leliana, sensing Bronwyn's rising temper, interposed. "Bronwyn made us swear not to tell anyone about the Ashes. She felt that we needed to speak to you first. Jowan was entrusted with the Ashes to help the Queen, but he was not supposed to reveal their existence."

"But he made a very great scene, I am told," said the Grand Cleric, "and made claims that cannot be substantiated: first because no one knew of the Queen's poisoning, and because no else saw these Ashes." As Bronwyn's eyes flashed, she put up a hand. "I do not deny that you obviously had an extraordinary experience. However, for such an event to be recognized as a 'miracle' would require a thorough investigation." Seeing Bronwyn's anger, she sighed. "Surely you see, Bronwyn, that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof?"

Bronwyn shot to her feet and began pacing. "I made no public claims! I don't want an investigation! I didn't want this known

at all!" She whirled on the Grand Cleric, and tried to lower her voice.

"Haven is a dangerous place! Either foolish people will hunt the Ashes and be killed, or they will slaughter the foolish, misguided villagers. A pointless slaughter, too, since the Guardian will never let mere mercenaries pass."

Leliana bit her lip, and ventured, "We can prove that the Ashes have the power of healing! We all had a pinch, after all!"

"Leliana!" cried Bronwyn, furious that this last secret was out. Worse and worse! No one could stop talking!

The Grand Cleric's heart thumped oddly. "You have more of these...Ashes?"

Bronwyn clutched her head, utterly confounded.

"Yes!" Leliana cried eagerly. "All us were rewarded with a pinch! We used poor Cullen's pinch to heal the Queen."

Urgently, Bronwyn gestured at Leliana to be still. "Surely you understand, Your Grace, the peril each of us would be in, if that became known. Every one of us would be targeted for death by every treasure hunter in the world! A pinch of the Prophet's Ashes is nearly beyond price...but not entirely. Perhaps an king's ransom?"

"I see," the Grand Cleric said slowly. "However, only one

pinch would be required for a test. Bronwyn," she pleaded, "this must be proven, and publicly."

"You could use mine—" Leliana offered.

"No." Bronwyn was furious. "I forbid it! I will not have my people, who suffered unspeakable hardship and braved unimaginable dangers, to be deprived of their just reward. If such a test must be made, you will use my pinch. I will not *give* them to you," she said, with a furious glare, "but you may find someone to test them on and I will administer them." She jerked her head at Leliana, indicating that it was time to go. "Choose wisely, Your Grace. It would be absurd and shameful to use this miracle on some priest's cut finger!"

"Bronwyn...wait!" cried the old woman, as the two young women bowed and strode away. Leliana looked back with a wistful expression, but Bronwyn's jaw was set hard, and she was down the stairs and out of sight in a moment.

"She is not your enemy," Leliana said softly. "And it is not unreasonable to ask questions and demand proof."

Bronwyn finally came to a stop outside the Cathedral, and took a deep breath. Leliana was right, of course, but Bronwyn would have much preferred not to be in this position at all. Zevran was waiting for them, leaning on a wall, smirking at them.

Surprisingly, the smirk somewhat eased Bronwyn's irritation. Luckily, Jowan was out of sight, no doubt dancing attendance

on Bethany Hawke. She would have to have it out with him, sooner or later. Yes, the mages were treated badly, but first Ferelden must defeat the Blight...and Jowan must learn to obey orders. She worked hard at mastering her anger and indignation, and eventually was able to talk rationally.

"Leliana, do you know if any of the gowns you ordered for me are ready for fittings?"

"I can go to the dressmaker and find out."

"Please do. Zevran and I are going to the Alienage. I'll see you back at the Compound for the midday meal." She paused, and then patted her friend on the shoulder. "Thank you for being there with me, and keeping me from making a complete fool of myself by killing the Grand Cleric."

Leliana dimpled. "You would never do that."

Zevran smirked the more, and Bronwyn laughed reluctantly as she watched Leliana's retreating back.

"That's all *she* knows. It was touch and go there for a moment."

The Alienage was infinitely worse than she had imagined it would be.

A trickle of sour liquid waste ran down the gutter in the middle of the "street," if one could call it that. It was not even paved,

unlike most of Denerim. The buildings were woefully dilapidated, and propped up in places with timbers. The place seemed almost deserted. Now and then a scrawny elf scuttled away at the sight of her, peering at her from the shadows. A rat dashed across her path. Scout growled, but stayed where he belonged, at Bronwyn's heels.

She was ashamed that this was a district of Denerim, capital of Ferelden. Not only that: she was ashamed that she might be the Queen of a country that permitted this—no, *expected* it, as the rightful order of things. She had once heard that the Alienage in Val Royeaux was far worse: ten thousand elves crowded into an area much the same size as the Alienage here. The thought did not make her proud to be Ferelden: it made her ashamed to be human.

All was not well in Ferelden, where Bronwyn had always had food, clothing, and shelter of the best that coin could buy. Yes, the past six months had been hard, but war and the Blight were special cases. Up until then, she had lived a life of blissfully ignorant luxury. Even when her family was attacked, she had presumed that she was so much more important than anyone else, that it seemed perfectly reasonable for Duncan to rescue her, rather than an elf like Iona, or a knight like Roderick Gilmore. What extraordinary conceit!

If she were an elf, she would go to the world's end to escape from humans.

Or would she? It was easy for her to make such a claim: she, who had been brought up a Teyrn's daughter, accustomed to

having her way, accustomed to her feelings being considered. She was not a city elf, made to think from her childhood that she was weak and inferior, deserving to be the lowest of the low. Adaia showed unexampled courage in escaping the chains of such conditioning. Adaia... or Melian Tabris, who had always heard that elves must not use or possess weapons, had taken her little ironwood dagger in hand and fought for her friends. She had made a place for herself at Ostagar, working with deadly poisons and dangerous explosives. She had dared to be a Warden, and never shirked a duty. Seeing where she had come from put into perspective just what an indomitable spirit she possessed. Bronwyn felt rebuked by the girl's unassuming resilience.

How easy to blame the elves for their squalor, when they were permitted nothing better. Adaia had told her that elves could not legally keep a shop here—though one enterprising soul did, regularly paying off the Arl's patrols. How easy to blame them for the condition of this place: though their human slumlords felt no need to make repairs.

Adaia had asked her to look about and see what might be done. First on the list would be to excavate and put in a sewer pipe under the Alienage, connected to the main drainage tunnel that emptied a little way out to sea. Denerim did not have an extensive sewer system, but that one main sewer could support some more tributaries, and thereby make the city cleaner. Bronwyn was sick of the veiled criticism from her more 'civilized' friends. The Alienage could have something better than a filthy gutter. Once that was accomplished, the

main street here could be paved with cobbles, and not be a sea of mud and feces in wet weather.

The only beautiful thing in the entire Alienage was the great vhenadahl tree, now dropping its autumn leaves in a glory of red and gold. The wind blew them everywhere, mockingly festive. It was almost Satinalia, after all.

Zevran did not speak and interrupt her thoughts, but he seemed to read them, and gave her an odd, ironic, rather sad little smile. He pointed out the door of the hahren's dwelling. Bronwyn marched up to it. Eyes peeked from the window. There was the sound of a frantic bustle inside, and the door opened.

"Another Warden!" smiled a mild old elf. "We are always glad to welcome those of your order! Come in, please."

This, then, was Valendrian, hahren of the Denerim Alienage. His speech was courteous, even cultivated; his bearing respectful without servility.

"Master Aranai," said the hahren, "how pleasant to see you once more."

"I thank you. Hahren," said Zevran, with a bow. "This is Warden-Commander Bronwyn Cousland, newly come to Denerim."

The womenfolk hiding around a splintered corner uttered muffled squeals. The old elf's eyes opened very wide.

"The Warden-Commander! This *is* an honor!" Even Valendrian's good manners were briefly lost in gawking, but he showed her to a chair—the best chair in the house—and begged her to take refreshments.

"That is very kind of you," Bronwyn replied solemnly. Not for the world would she have shamed or flouted this decent old man. And the biscuits were quite nice.

Valendrian was too polite to ask her her business, but Bronwyn could sense his questions.

"Warden Adaia—Melian Tabris—sends her love to her family and friends. She was quite well when I left Ostagar. She asked me to bring gifts and a letter." Gently, Bronwyn laid her little burdens on the plain, but lovingly polished table. "Adaia wished to send part of her wages home to her family. In addition, she has sent this for her cousin Shianni—" she indicated the little wrapping of silk that covered a silver necklace.

A fiery-headed girl dashed out, bobbing a little curtsy. Bronwyn guessed that this was Shianni herself, and turned to smile at her.

"Thank you, my lady!" the girl nearly shouted, grabbing at the necklace. "And please, my lady, tell Melian thank you, too! And that we love her and miss her!"

"I shall." She pointed to a silver spoon. "This is for her father... and this, Hahren Valendrian, it for you. It is a Dalish carving of

a halla, the creature so important to your elven cousins. She thought you would find it interesting."

"I do," said the old elf, handling the little sylvanwood statuette with curiosity and admiration. "You are generous with your time to deliver these yourself."

"It is no trouble," Bronwyn assured him, "I promised my friend that I would see to it."

They talked for some time. Bronwyn assured them that Tara was also well, and in command of a mission of her own to the west. Then she asked how things had been in the Alienage, after losing so many of their people to the cruelty of Arl Howe.

The hahren sighed. "Things have been...quiet. Quiet, and very sad. Since the dreadful news broke of the Wicked Arl's trading in elves and the implication of Arl Urien's son, the patrols have ceased, and our gardens are no longer destroyed out of spite. Of course, winter is nearly upon us... Yes, there has been some good out of all the evil. We even have a useful animal in the Alienage—the very milk goat generously given to Deranni by your noble brother. That was a great day for the Alienage indeed."

Bronwyn blinked. Fergus had given an elf a goat? He had said nothing of this. It would be a minor matter to him, but seemed to have made a tremendous impression on the elves. Of course, she had noticed the lack of animals, other than curs and rats...

"Is it forbidden to keep chickens here?" she wondered. "It seems such a simple, sensible way to earn money and supplement the diet."

Valendrian granted her a faded, sad smile. "Not forbidden by law, no; but forbidden in fact. If the Arl's men saw an animal, they would confiscate it. Benammi's goat was spared because the Arl did not wish to offend your brother. Of course, Arl Urien is now departed...Maker turn his gaze on him, of course," the elf added automatically. "Perhaps his successor will prove less...exacting."

"Goats are good," Zevran considered. "Goats will eat anything. A few goats, and there could milk for the children, and cheese. Every bit of a goat can be used. With goats and chickens, life could be better here."

Valendrian did not seem too hopeful. "That is certainly true. We shall see what comes. Right now the loss of so many people has rather taken the heart out of the Alienage."

"I heard from Adaia—I mean to say Melian—" said Bronwyn, "that the rents here have been reduced with the loss of population. Who owns the property here in the Alienage?"

Valendrian could answer that in detail. "Most of the buildings belong either to the Arling of Denerim or the Bannorn of South Docks. Arl Urien's son was the Bann of South Docks, which includes the Alienage, and thus he was our liege lord. However, the building used for the orphanage and a small block of apartments are both royal properties. Various houses

belong to others—mostly nobles. I have a comprehensive list, if you are interested."

"I am. When you are at leisure, hahren, I would like for you to make me a copy."

Bronwyn then spoke to the hahren of the Highever Massacre, and of the child Amethyne. The hahren thanked her for the coin she had sent.

"Another good from evil. Not only have we been able to dress and feed her well, as you shall see," said Valendrian, "but with the money it may be possible for her to learn a trade, and thus become self-supporting some day. We would commit her to nothing," he hastened to add, "without consulting you."

Bronwyn knew that elves were forbidden to engage in most trades, especially those involving guild membership. And, of course, the regulations forbidding keeping a shop within the Alienage—and the impossibility of an elf keeping a shop outside it—drastically reduced the options.

"What kind of trade might be possible?" she asked.

"Something she can do safely within four walls," Valendrian said wisely. "She might learn to spin. A drop spindle and a distaff are not costly, and she could attach herself to the workshop of a human weaver, spinning an allotted amount of wool or flax for the weaver's use. Weaving itself is mostly out of the question, save for ribbon weaving. For some reason, the inkle loom was not mentioned in the charter of the

Weaver's Guild. An inkle loom is an investment, but can be had for a sovereign."

Bronwyn began to grasp why Valendrian looked upon her as the child's patron. Three sovereigns had meant nothing to her, but was a mighty, life-changing sum here. She decided to say nothing about Danith's interest in Amethyne. Packing her off to the Dalish might sound nearly as bad to this man as selling her to Tevinter.

Zevran had some ideas of his own.

"Amethyne is a pretty child with a sweet voice, and might learn to play and sing."

"It is possible," Valendrian cautiously agreed, "though a musical instrument is very expensive. A human minstrel *might* accept her as a pupil. Then, too, for a fee, an elf can apprentice at human workshop to become an assistant: not a journeyman or master, of course; but even an assistant makes decent coin, as the Alienage reckons it. Amethyne might apprentice at a dressmaker's, for example."

"It sounds like you have some very good ideas," said Bronwyn. "I shall send you coin quarterly for her, as we must assume her mother either dead or lost to the slavers. May I see her?"

The child was pushed forward from behind the women's skirts. Bronwyn was somewhat taken aback to realize that the little girl had heard every word of their conversation. Of

course, in such a small house there was little expectation of privacy.

"Make your curtsy to the Warden-Commander," Valendrian instructed her gently. "She has been very generous to you."

"I thank you, Warden-Commander," said Amethyne in a small, fluting voice. She curtsied nicely, eyes on the floor.

She was perhaps eight years old: old enough in the Alienage to begin to work and earn her keep. Even common human folk expected their children to be productive from an early age. Bronwyn hoped that her coin would prevent the girl having to work like an adult for a few years at least.

She could hardly remember Iona, whom she had met only briefly. This child did not have her mother's pale blonde hair, the only feature Bronwyn recalled. However, the child's long braid was chestnut-brown and silky, her eyes a very beautiful turquoise-green color. Yes. She could see why Danith was so taken with her: the child was delicate and pretty as a rose leaf, and seemed bright and sweet-natured. Amethyne glanced fearfully at Scout, lounging massively by Bronwyn.

"Come here, child," Bronwyn said. "And don't be afraid of Scout. He would never hurt a little girl."

Timidly, the girl came forward. Bronwyn saw that her clothes were plain but neat: a simple white smock covered with a sleeveless brown pinafore. Considering the growing chill in the air, Bronwyn was glad to see that she had warm woolen

stockings and ankle boots—a little too large for her, but meant to give room for growing feet.

"Has she a cloak for the winter?" Bronwyn asked Valendrian, and smiled as the girl's face blossomed with excitement.

"She does, Warden-Commander," Valendrian assured her.

"It's *green!*" Amethyne burst out, "It's a beautiful green and it has a *hood!*" She blushed, and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"I like green, too," Bronwyn said. "Tell me, Amethyne, what do you like to do? Do you like to play outside, or play with dolls?" Seeing a somewhat blank expression, she tried something else. "Do you like to sew, or are you fond of music?"

"I like music, my lady," the child said shyly. "My mother and I used to sing together. She was teaching me to read, too, when she had time, but she was always very busy."

"I know she was, but I know she always thought of you. When I met her in Highever, she spoke of you, and told me that you were her life. She loved you very, very dearly."

Since everyone now considered her the child's protector, she must take the responsibility seriously. She ought to give the child a present, and cursed herself for her lack of forethought. What did she have about her that would do?

"Here is a piece of silver for you, Amethyne, all your own,"

Bronwyn said, laying the shining coin in the child's hand. "Spend it however you like. And Satinalia is coming. Now I have a little better idea what you would like."

She rose to her feet, and nodded to Valendrian. "I hope to be in the city for some time. We will speak again, both about Amethyne and other things."

Thanks to my reviewers: Phygmalion, timunderwood9, Zute, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, JUdy, JackOfBladesX, amanda weber, Knight of Holy Light, Blinded in a bolthole, Redhand, Nemrut, Shakespira, RaZorMandiblez, Have Travel, MsBarrows, Psyche Sinclair, almostinsane, Mike3207, Hydroplatypus, Prototype, Darkmeadow90, Jenna53, SkaterGirl246, Oleander's One, Josie Lange, Enaid Aderyn, and mille libri.

67. Unbound

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 67: Unbound

She was absolutely starving, and focused on the midday meal at first, glaring a little at her universally happy Wardens. Everyone had bought something, even Cathair, the Dalish archer. He held up a crystal prism to the light, dangling it by a bit of copper wire, enjoying the colored light refracting through it.

"I shall hang it in the window that catches the morning sun, and see a rainbow every day," he solemnly informed Toliver.

"Rainbows are good," agreed his brother Warden. "There's nothing like a rainbow over the meadow after a thundershower."

Then the dwarves, Hakan and Soren, began demanding to know how it was possible to see a 'spectral display' by any means other than a crystallized mineral. A long description of sunshowers and ensuing rainbows ensued. The dwarves did not appear convinced that this was anything other than fantasy.

Even Morrigan was a bit flushed, admiring some bizarre magical gadget that Anders had found for her. The mages were whispering together, entirely too pleased with themselves.

"Jowan," Bronwyn said, "after you're done eating, I want to see you in the study. Alone."

He looked up at her, and gulped; and then choked on an unchewed bit of mutton. Anders thumped him on the back, smirking. Bronwyn gave Jowan a cool stare and strode off to the study, shutting the door behind her. Once there, she began pacing, hoping Jowan had the sense to come soon and not let her grow any more annoyed.

In fact, he knocked at the door directly, and at her "Enter," poked his head in cautiously. She beckoned him before her with a peremptory gesture.

"Jowan, tell me why you disobeyed my orders. The Ashes were to be *secret*. You've caused me quite a bit of trouble, and there's likely more to come."

"I'm sorry..." Jowan looked at the floor, fidgeting. "I was wrong, but I was just so *angry*... When the Teyrn carried the Queen out of the Chantry she was in such a bad way. I had to do something right away. I had to use my own initiative. And now I know it was even worse than I thought." He burst out, "They *killed* Wynne, Bronwyn! They killed her for being a mage. They killed her for being in their way. And they would have killed the Queen, too, with their plots and their schemes."

There's no end to their arrogance, and they're nothing! Nothing! They think they should run everything, and right now the only people who are really out there trying to save the world are Wardens and mages!"

"Jowan!" Bronwyn brought him up sharply. "Wardens and mages are not the only people fighting against the darkspawn. There are plenty of good soldiers and honest dwarves and brave Dalish who are doing their part. We must not dismiss them. I grant you that the Chantry has been more than a hindrance than a help, but don't paint everyone with such broad strokes. You'll make enemies of friends. Now... all right, the Queen needed healing right away, you say. I can believe that. I'm really not happy that you had to mention the Ashes. Why did you?"

He looked away, his jaw working with tension. "First of all, everybody saw them. Your brother the Teyrn and Arl Bryland and *everyone* were looking over my shoulder, and they saw everything I was doing. And then, too, I wanted everybody to see how empty the Chantry's claims were. They talk as if only they have importance to the Maker, but it was *you* who got the Ashes! I didn't want them saying it was some priest's stupid prayers. It was you who should get the credit! That's why I took that gold bowl and put them in water. It was such a dramatic moment. I suppose I got swept up in it. Besides, I didn't think I should stick my finger in the Queen's mouth."

"Wait..." Bronwyn cocked her head. "Are you saying you used my wedding gift to *my cousin Habren* to administer the

Ashes? That *would* have attracted attention! I hope you washed it thoroughly before you gave it to her!"

"Actually..." Jowan cowered, and looked about to flee. "We didn't. I mean, we didn't give it to her. By the time the Queen was healed and we showed up at the Arl's estate, he was dead, you see, and I thought maybe it would be...tactless...to give the Arlessa a wedding present... And it's like a holy vessel now, so I didn't think it was something that you'd want given away. I still have it!" he told her quickly, beseechingly, seeing Bronwyn's stunned expression. "I was going to give it back to you as soon as I could do it quietly."

Bronwyn rubbed her face, hardly knowing how to feel. "Where is it?"

"I took it back from Leliana and put it in my saddlebag. It's in my room."

"Fetch it *now*, and give it to me. It certainly is *entirely* too late to give it to Habren now. I'm glad I know that I should not be expecting her thanks!"

Jowan cringed away. He was sorry she was angry, but she would not kill her or make him Tranquil. Her sharp voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Don't *ever* disobey me again, Jowan, or I'll stop your pay for a year and thrash you besides!"

An incoherent apology, and he was out the door, running.

"I hope you did not scold Jowan too harshly, Bronwyn," said Leliana, as they made their way to the dressmaker's in Silk Alley. "It was a terrible time, and he only wanted to save the Queen. If you had seen how she looked—yellow with sickness—I thought she was dying—and there was your brother holding her in his arms—well, if you had been there, you would understand. And he wished to show proper respect for the Prophet by using the finest vessel we had. I think it was meant to be. Yes. I think it was destined by Andraste herself!"

Bronwyn was not going to shout in the street. "And then today you told the Grand Cleric that we had more! I really wish you had said nothing about that, Leliana," she said. "I told you I wanted them to be *secret*."

"So they shall be," Leliana insisted with sweet and provoking reasonableness. "Only the Grand Cleric and her closest advisors will know. What could be more secret?"

"Leliana..." Bronwyn caught hold of her temper. "The Grand Cleric was drugged by her closest advisors only days ago. We can only hope that her *new* closest advisors are more reliable. Personally, I wish she had never known about it. It's all becoming too complicated." She caught Leliana by the arm, and said slowly, "Do *not* mention the Ashes to anybody else. That's an *order!*"

"Oh, of course I won't," Leliana assured her earnestly.

At the dressmaker's they could not continue their

conversation, which relieved Bronwyn in a way, since it was impossible to make Leliana understand her. She had made a mistake in taking her along with her to see Her Grace, and now she must live with it.

No one was perfect, certainly. The gowns that Leliana had ordered for her were quite satisfactory in every way, with an emphasis on bold, warm colors. Her friend had ordered linen of the very finest, and even some very nice boots and slippers. It was the sort of thing she did well. And Bronwyn had another task in mind for her.

"There is something I would like you to do, sometime in the next few days," she said. Leliana looked up at her from her perusal of a pile of silks, so sweet and willing that Bronwyn sighed to herself for trying to make her friend be other than she was.

"Yes?"

"That child in the Alienage...the child Amethyne... I was discussing her future with the headman who is looking after her. I would like you to visit the child and evaluate her aptitude for music. If she has any potential, I'd like you to recommend a teacher for her. I'll also get her something musical for Satinalia, but I'll need your advice."

"What a lovely idea!" cried Leliana. "I should love to do that! Zevran says the little girl is adorable. Oh, I hope she has a good ear! And if she is graceful, she should also learn dancing. I shall go as soon as I can."

Dress fittings and dressings-down of disobedient Wardens were only irritating: lengthy meetings doling out the vacant lordships of Ferelden were excruciating.

Interesting, too, of course. Nothing would be official until the Landsmeet voted on the appointments, but with the number of votes they already controlled, it seemed likely that they would largely have their way—if they could decide amongst themselves what that way was.

Some of the titles were fairly straightforward. Bann Ceorlic's sons were in the Free Marches. The eldest had been designated the heir, though he would have to appear at the Landsmeet if he expected to be confirmed. Bann Reginalda's eldest married daughter was her heir, and everyone knew her and thought well of her. As for Bann Grainne, her husband was dead some years, and her son and heir a minor. His father's brother could serve as guardian and steward. No one wanted to do the child out of his inheritance.

Most of vacant lordships were in the North, of course. They were the result of Rendon Howe's power grab and its unpleasant consequences. As Teyrn of Highever and overlord of Amaranthine, Fergus was the default possessor of all the Landsmeet votes of the unoccupied titles, giving him immense power. He intended to use it.

They met together: Loghain, Bronwyn, Fergus, Anora, with the Arls of South Reach and West Hills. When Teagan Guerrin deigned to come to Denerim, they would have to admit him

into their councils, but they had not heard from him yet. Wulffe had written to him, advising him to come and be heard. Nathaniel Howe, still on probation of sorts, had not been included. At some point they would have to discuss their plans with him, since they would involve him. Five of the lordships were in the Arling of Amaranthine. Fergus would fill them with his own men. That was not negotiable.

There were three vacant lordships within the boundaries of Highever, and no one questioned Fergus' right to assign those as he pleased. The first and greatest was the bannorn of Highever City. That Fergus intended to keep for himself and ultimately for his heir.

Bann Loren's desmesne, Darkencombe, had no heir. The only son was dead in the Highever Massacre, and due to the Orlesians, there was no kin within five degrees.

"I want Ser Naois Gilmore to hold the bannorn," Fergus said. "He's a loyal and sensible man, and distantly related. It's the least I can do to reward his service. As to Greenleaf Forest, where Howe's men killed the bann, my knight Paley Renwick is the nephew. I don't think anyone can reasonably object to him."

Loghain nodded. This was all well and good. Fergus had a right to do as he liked with Highever, and the men proposed were sound. With Amaranthine, however, there was the possibility of a generation of dispute. It was important not to create a pig's breakfast of hostility there.

Bronwyn agreed with him. "I think it's important to appoint men who can get on with Nathaniel," she said. "Men loyal to you, yes, of course: but also tactful men who won't always be at daggers drawn with their Arl."

"I've been thinking about that, too," said Fergus. "That's why I'm giving Naois Loren's desmesne. Better to keep him in Highever, and as far from Amaranthine as possible. He'd never forgive Nathaniel for his father's crimes...for Rory's death. Dan Seyton, though...I think he'll do for Knotwood Hills. The Packtons are dead or fled, and good riddance. Time for new blood there. He's no fool, but he's a bit of a diplomat, and he was with me when we found Tom and poor Delilah. He saw how ugly blind vengeance can be."

That left Hafterhold, Black Marsh, Drake's Fall, and the prime plum amongst them, Amaranthine City. Various names were considered. There was a shortage of noble blood, given the losses of the last year. There was a shortage anyway, never quite made up in the thirty years since the Orlesians were driven out.

"Who will have the city of Amaranthine?" Anora asked. "Such a rich and important place. I take it you do not mean to let it revert to the arling, Fergus?"

"No," Fergus instantly replied. "I want my own man in Amaranthine. Someone I can trust. Furthermore, I think it would be best for the kingdom to have some new blood there, too: someone beholden to no one but us—with no family ties to complicate things. I've been thinking about Adam Hawke."

A silence. Loghain scowled. That opportunistic pretty-boy! A fine warrior, unquestionably, but Loghain was not sure what loyalty Hawke had, save to himself and his family.

"I hardly know him," said Anora. "He is very...charming, of course. He has noble Marcher blood on his mother's side. Lady Amell is a very pleasant woman, and very devoted to her children. The sister, Bethany, is a mage..."

"Splendid girl!" Bryland exclaimed at once. "Saved my Lothar's life, and Alfstanna's, too! A lot of people owe her a great deal."

"That's as may be," said Loghain, "but we were considering her brother's suitability, not hers."

"Adam is very capable," Bronwyn said, partly agreeing with Fergus. She liked the Hawke family, and had no trouble with the idea of doing something for them. Giving them the port city of Amaranthine, however, was a mighty undertaking. "I don't know how much he understands about administration, of course, but perhaps with an experienced seneschal..."

Fergus nodded vigorously. "Adam's a quick study. He's always handled any task given him with dispatch and resourcefulness. And his family links to Kirkwall might help him deal with the Viscount."

"Possibly," Anora said, thinking it over. "He does seem to have a gift for getting on with people."

"Well I think it's a wonderful idea," Bryland declared. "I'll never forget how the late king knighted him on his deathbed. And he stood by Fergus, when we stormed the Cathedral. He's all right. He'll fit in."

Wulffe shrugged. "Can't say I know him well. Seems a decent sort."

Loghain drummed his fingers on the table of the War Room. "Perhaps..." He went on, more decisively. "We don't have to decide the matter today. Why don't we give the fellow a chance to prove himself? Send him up to Amaranthine town and see how he does as a castellan. If he does well settling the place, then he can be rewarded with the title and all."

Fergus liked the idea. "But I'll let him know that the ladies can remain at Highever House. There's no reason to expose them to the troubles up north until things are calmer."

"Better for young Mistress Bethany's patients," Bryland agreed. "Now... what about Denerim?"

Everyone was too mature to simply groan. "Who's the next in blood?' Wulffe asked.

"I've found out," Bryland said, with a certain veiled eagerness. He had a scheme in mind. "Urien had no surviving brothers or sisters, as you know, and his son and daughter predeceased him without issue. Most of the family were killed in the Occupation. The closest relation is hardly that: only a third cousin once removed, with a small freehold out White River

way. Urien held himself too high to have anything to do with the family, but they're Kendalls, right enough. The freeholder's a fairly young fellow: Aron Kendalls. Considered a good farmer. There's a younger brother and two little sisters. The parents are both dead, so the oldest brother looks after them all."

"Can he," Anora asked delicately, "*read?*"

Loghain glowered, and looked up at the ceiling, summoning all his patience. It was unbecoming in a freeholder's granddaughter to be a such a snob.

Bryland blinked. "I really don't know."

Wulffe shrugged. "No law says that's a requirement to hold a title!"

Another silence. Bronwyn's conscience troubled her.

"For the record," she said, "and between these walls, I have reason to believe that Bann Vaughan did indeed have 'issue,' though illegitimate and unacknowledged. He was relentless in his abuse of the elven women in the Alienage, and a number of women bore children that could well be attributed to him, though he scorned to support them in any way."

Wulffe grasped the situation. "That little Warden of yours that Vaughan was so exercised about. Was she one of them?"

"Not Adaia," Bronwyn said hastily, protecting the girl's

deepest secret. "Though Vaughan did abduct her from her own wedding, along with all her bridesmaids. Her young husband was killed trying to protect her. Adaia escaped, but the other girls were not so lucky, and some of them died after horrid cruelties. However, Adaia did tell me of Vaughan's frequent depredations, which started when he was quite young. The children, human in appearance as they were, were given to the Chantry."

"You know," Bryland said after a moment, "also between these walls, I thank the Maker every day that Habren's marriage with Vaughan never came off. Ferelden is better off without him. He never would have stopped that kind of indecent goings-on, and he would have ended up with his throat slit by some elf woman's father or brother."

Wulffe snorted. "Or by the little elf girl herself! And serve him right!"

Anora grimaced daintily, refraining from mentioning how repulsive she had always found the man.

"I would hope," Bronwyn said, indignation stirring again, "that whoever takes hold in Denerim will have the decency to do something about the Alienage. It's a disgrace and an embarrassment. We don't have to treat our elves as the Orlesians do. I've met the headman there, and he's a very good sort. Considering what they suffered from a high noble of Ferelden, and considering what we're arranging for the Dalish, I think a few improvements and some kinder treatment of the remaining city elves would not go amiss."

Fergus thought of his ill-gotten gold, and winced. "I can hardly talk, as all my elves are gone."

Bronwyn gave him an odd look. "Actually, you *can* talk, as you are something of a hero in the Alienage here. They cannot stop talking about the goat you gave them."

"A...goat?" Anora ventured.

"A goat?" Fergus asked, puzzled. Then his brow cleared. "Oh, yes, I remember. That miserable handful of elves not taken by the Tevinters included an infant. I told someone to buy a goat to keep the poor little creature alive on the way back to Denerim."

Anora smiled slightly, thinking what a fine person he was.

"Well," continued Bronwyn, in a slightly teasing way. "It was one of the greatest events in Alienage history. Apparently, Urien's men always confiscated any animals in the Alienage, but the guards were afraid of offending you, and so left the goat alone. Likewise, they've made a habit of destroying any gardens they find. It seems petty to us, but it's a very great misery to the elves."

"Wouldn't want anybody interfering with *my* gardens," Wulffe muttered.

Loghain frowned thoughtfully. "The Alienage in Gwaren has no such restrictions. Of course the elves need gardens and chickens like everyone else. I can't believe there's anything so

ridiculous in the Denerim Alienage edicts."

"I'll have my secretary read them," said Anora lightly. "It is possible that it was simply one of Urien's crochets. Now, let us hear more about this Aron Kendalls..."

There was not much more to tell. Bryland said that he had sent a messenger to the man, telling him to come to Denerim and present himself if he wished to claim his birthright. He had a personal reason in this, which he did not mention to the others. Aron Kendalls was unmarried, and would need an Arlessa. If he was at all presentable, Bryland would take him under his wing and back his claim to the Arling, on the condition that Habren achieve her dearest wish.

She was so miserable, poor girl. She was disappointed and bewildered and lonely without Werberga. He had had to put his foot down and *make* her understand that she could not come to tonight's feast. It was simply too soon. In a week or two, dressed in mourning, it might be possible for her to attend public gatherings, but not tonight. She had screamed and stormed and thrown things, but the time had come—almost too late, Bryland admitted to himself—to set some limits, for Habren's own good. And if the Kendalls fellow was hopeless... Bryland shrank from the idea of Nathaniel Howe, but he would do as a back-up plan.

They adjourned to change for the feast to follow. They stood, and moved toward the door, still chatting, the conversation changing from matters of state to mere social gossip. It had occurred to Bronwyn that the people here might be interested

in what was going on in Redcliffe, and that Teagan might be married by the time he made an appearance. She mentioned that the people of Redcliffe thought it likely that Teagan would soon marry young Kaitlyn Merton, and gave them some of the particulars.

"Merton...Merton..." muttered Arl Wulffe. "You say the girl's related to Babcock of Whitewood Hills? Not much coin there."

"A poor relation, at that. It was my understanding that the girl has nothing of her own. As a distant cousin of the Guerrins, Arl Teagan granted her a small pension and the use of a house for herself and her little brother. She's very young, and very pretty and good-natured."

"Teagan couldn't put it off anymore," Bryland remarked. "High time he did his duty to his family." He had once had hopes of Teagan for Habren, but the man had made his lack of interest all too clear. "It sounds like he chose someone as unlike Arlessa Isolde as possible!"

Loghain nodded, seeing Leonas' point. A sweet and biddable young girl would not test Teagan's temper or flout his decisions. At least she was not a foreigner. And even if Teagan gained an alliance with the elderly Bann of Whitewood Hills by this marriage, it was not of great political value. It appeared to him that Teagan would be coming to the Landsmeet with no power to challenge his own...or that of the Couslands.

With the teyrns and two of the arls united, with another arl

under their control, and the added prestige of the Dowager Queen, it seemed unlikely that there would be any significant challenge to the decisions they made behind closed doors in advance of the Landsmeet.

He glanced over and saw Anora and Fergus talking together quietly, standing in front of the big window. He looked again. Anora was looking up at the Teyrn of Highever with softly sparkling eyes. Well... That was good, he supposed. Fergus Cousland was a decent man. Loghain had suggested such a match to Anora, and she, true politician that she was, had taken his advice to heart. She was playing her part extremely well. Had the man been anyone but Fergus Cousland, the most eligible noble in Ferelden, Loghain would have thought her interest in him sincere. A faint smile came to his lips. Then he looked at her again, his certainty shaken a little. Anora *did* seem sincere...

Bronwyn was looking at the pair in the front of the window, her brows contracted in puzzlement. Abruptly her face cleared, and she glanced at Loghain, a bit surprised.

"I see," she said softly. "Well... I shall join you at dinner later. It's going to be a great affair, it seems."

"Yes, unfortunately. You'll want to wear something other than Grey Warden garb."

"I shall." She gave him an almost mischievous look. "You'll see how much I can *not* look like a Grey Warden tonight!" She lowered her voice, "And thank you for my ring. It's beautiful."

He looked at her oddly, not quite smiling. "Then it suits you. I thought it would."

Leliana, already lovely in her blue and lavender gown, came in to Bronwyn's room to arrange her hair and help her dress. She had an entire box of hairpins with her. She then began to fuss over Bronwyn like a bride's mother.

"We'll do your hair up tonight," Leliana decreed. "Very elegant; very dignified. It will be necessary with the high collar of the capelet."

Bronwyn sat still while Leliana worked her own sort of magic. Morrigan came in and watched for awhile, smirking, but saying nothing. The braiding and the coiling and pinning and the curling seemed to take forever, but at last the bard was satisfied, and stepped back.

"And now for your gown."

Bronwyn dressed as if she were arming for battle, every piece just so. The silk stockings, the lacy garters, a slim and elegant dagger strapped in its sheath to her right calf, the shining new ankle boots of black Antiva leather, the silken gown, the gold belt studded with pearls. Leliana looked at her critically, smoothing the gown, and then the black velvet capelet was settled on her shoulders and pinned with the dragon brooch. The upstanding collar brushed the sides of her jaw, framing her face.

"And now for the best part. Look what the jeweler Pandelin made for you!"

A gleaming, fragile object was pushed into her hair, the front resting gently on her forehead. Leliana teased out some curling tendrils of hair very carefully, and then held up a mirror for her to see.

"Oh, that *is* nice!"

Bronwyn liked the elaborate headpiece very much. It was not a crown or a coronet, nor was it a tiara. It was, however, a very beautiful, very delicate ornament of gold and silver swirls, set with a glowing ruby that rested on her brow like a dragon's eye. It did not make a closed circle in the back, but nestled into her hair at the sides. She could braid her hair, or simply wear it down. Wearing this, she would always look quite grand. It was not improper or vainglorious to wear such a piece of jewelry, and Bronwyn thought it gave her a touch of gravity or...what? Mystery?

She turned her head, studying the effect in the mirror. It was not so heavy that it would give her a headache, but it looked very rich. She had given Leliana a brief description of her idea, Leliana had talked to the jeweler, and this had come out of it. It would go well with her ruby dragon brooch and her crimson gown. The effect would be striking.

She had never seen Anora wear red. Bright red was a very expensive Antivan dye, made from a shellfish that lived in Rialto Bay, and was difficult to obtain in Ferelden. Blue and

greens—even yellows and purples were easier to come by. In fact, women rarely wore red at all. She might well be the only woman at the feast in a red gown. The thought made her feel...powerful.

She swept out, meeting her Wardens and her friends, who waited in the Hall. A rustle of astonishment greeted her, and impressed stares. The Junior Wardens whispered among themselves.

Zevran bowed gallantly.

"Noble one, you are in every way a queen tonight!"

Anders grinned at Morrigan, who rolled her eyes.

"Come on," he teased in a murmur, "She looks beautiful!"

"'Tis too good for the man in question, indeed!"

"Spoilsport! And you're looking seriously beautiful yourself!"

Morrigan preened, knowing it was true, and took Anders' arm with a scornful smile, following Bronwyn to the Palace.

A herald and attendant guards were stationed at the door, inspecting the guests carefully. There would be no repeat of the disaster at the Arl of Denerim's wedding. Bronwyn glanced into the Hall, impressed at the effort that had gone into making this a night to remember. Colorful banners, each painted with the arms of the Crown or one of the noble houses of Ferelden, hung silken from the vaulted ceiling. The

tables were laid with white napery, silver goblets and plates, and wreaths of autumn flowers. Candles shone their golden light everywhere. Handsome bronze salt cellars, wrought in the form of fantastic beasts, had been taken from the royal treasury, and each table was adorned with one of them. It appeared that the one at the Queen's table was a dragon.

After her brief glimpse, the herald shunted the rest of the Wardens off to an usher, who would see them to their proper seats. Bronwyn was led to an antechamber, where Fergus, Bryland, and Wulffe were already gathered, chuckling over their wine. They too, seemed impressed and pleased at her appearance.

"My dear Bronwyn!" Bryland exclaimed. "You look exactly as you should."

"Better than that," Wulffe said amiably.

"Out to make more conquests tonight?" Fergus teased. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Loghain told me he sent you a ring."

She raised her hand for his inspection. "He sent it to me this morning. You didn't notice it at the our council, and I didn't want to be like horrible Hab—a silly person, waving my hand about, shrieking, *"Look what I got!"*

"What did you get?" Bryland asked eagerly, overhearing her last words.

Fergus bit back his laughter. "Her betrothal ring."

Bronwyn felt herself grow red as her gown, and indeed lifted up her hand for their general approval, feeling ridiculous.

In a few moments, The Queen entered with Loghain. There was a pause as the two women took each other's measure.

Anora was rather taken aback. Having seen Bronwyn only in armor, Warden's tunic, or a rather dowdy grey gown, she had not quite grasped how splendid she could look when properly groomed and dressed. *Red*. Anora did not much like red, and had never thought of wearing it. A mistake, clearly. The color was absolutely riveting. The contrasting black velvet capelet made Bronwyn look very authoritative, and the ruby-set headdress, while not a crown, made her seem already a queen. She had not realized that Bronwyn was so striking a young woman. Of course, she was very tall, and that always drew the eye. With a flicker of vexation, she suspected that all eyes *would* be on her successor tonight. Very astute of her, of course. It was a good move, politically speaking. Most of the nobles collecting for the feast tonight had never seen Bronwyn at all, or last seen her when she was hardly more than a child. This first impression was vital. Anora glanced at her father, and was further vexed at the look on his face.

Men.

In her turn, Bronwyn considered the beautiful blonde woman with fresh eyes. Anora looked quite lovely tonight. Since that dose of Sacred Ashes, Anora seemed years younger: her

complexion fresh as a young girl's, her sapphire eyes bright and unshadowed, her hair pure, fine gold. She was in a magnificent blue gown that became her wonderfully well. And Bronwyn had not missed the way that the Queen and her brother looked at each other. Everyone had described Fergus' rescue of the Queen as a most romantic exploit. Was Anora to be the next Teyrna of Highever?

Bronwyn had no right to stand in their way. Fergus had suffered so much, lost so much, that anything that would make good his heartache must be welcomed. And he would be a far better husband to Anora than King Cailan had been. That, of course, begged the question: would Anora be a good wife to Fergus? Of that, Bronwyn could not be certain. She would certainly not be the *same* kind of wife that Oriana had been.

After a curious, brief pang of memory, Loghain took a deep pleasure in looking at Bronwyn. He felt proud, approving, really and truly delighted that once again she had risen to a challenge and surpassed all expectations. Everyone in attendance tonight would look at her and see a Queen. And not just any Queen, but a strong and beautiful woman who worked tirelessly for the good of her country. How like Rowan she was!

Still, he had felt it; that moment of painful remembrance. He remembered the night after the victory in Gwaren when he had met Rowan listlessly wandering the streets, garbed in a fine gown of just that blood-red color, heartbroken at Maric's faithlessness. He had said all he could, given her all the

validations that love and respect could offer, hoping to comfort her. She had resisted him then, but had come to him at last on that dark journey through the Deep Roads. That gown of crimson silk Bronwyn wore he took as a sign: this was the right woman at the right time; this was the woman he would *not* let get away; this was the woman who ought to be Ferelden's Queen.

The door opened again, and Nathaniel Howe stepped in, clothed in black. Of course he would sit with the queen and the high nobles. It would not do to isolate or foolishly antagonize him. Rather, it was best to start assimilating him into their ranks; making him one of them, making their decisions his decisions. Howe bowed to the Queen, silent and grave, his eyes briefly widening as he looked at Bronwyn.

Bronwyn felt the brief, unspoken compliment, and smiled mischievously at the clouds gathering in Loghain's face. He had not missed Howe's expression either. He gave her his arm with a certain possessiveness, and they followed Fergus and Anora into the Hall, excited voices rising at their entrance like a vast flock of ravens taking wing.

Scout was snoring again. Bronwyn slowly opened her eyes to the dim grey light seeping through the shutters. A thin shaft of light illuminated the golden bowl, set high on her half-empty bookshelf. The gleam must have awakened her. She tried to settle back to sleep again, but the vague memory of unpleasant dreams made that distasteful. Soon her mind was racing, thinking over the events of the night before. It had

been a great success— of a sort—she supposed. They had been paraded out, they had dined, she had been recognized and honored, but it was all a blur. Too much had happened at once. She had been hungry, but had eaten moderately and carefully, hungry and half-empty, painfully aware that all eyes were on her, and loath to gain a reputation as a glutton. People did not understand about Grey Warden appetites, and the truth of it was a secret of the Order.

She sat between Loghain and Wulffe, which was fine. She could always find something to talk about to Wulffe, who in fact wanted to know all about the Hawke family. Hardly unreasonable, if they were destined for the Landsmeet. So she told him about the noble mother, the knightly son, the mage sister, the Warden brother—whom she knew best—and the girl she knew least, the cousin.

"Not a mage, is she?" Wulffe asked. "That's the one down there, with the curls? Pretty lass. Now let me see if I understand you: the mother's brother had the title, but he's exiled and dead, and now the mother has it? What about the daughter?"

"I don't claim to understand that myself. There were hints that the uncle was not the proper heir and that the mother should have had it all along. It hardly matters, I suppose, since they've lost their land and fortune in the Free Marches. The girl has no dowry, but she's quite brave and venturesome, to have spirited her ailing father away from the assassins and all the way to Lothering. She seems very nice."

"No dowry now, to be sure," Wulffe said thoughtfully, "but if her cousin becomes Bann, he'd no doubt do something for her."

Nobles and their eternal matchmaking. Bronwyn could giggle over it now, in the privacy of her bed. She wondered if Wulffe was considering Charade for one of his sons. Just as there was a shortage of noble heirs, there was *always* a shortage of attractive potential spouses for them.

Loghain had spoken to her softly, now and then, careful not to say anything that enemies could seize on. Bronwyn understood why. Some agents were trained to read lips. One had to be careful. Once or twice, his hand had slipped into hers, or he had gently laid his hand on her thigh. Once he had murmured into her ear that she should always wear red. His attentions, like the dinner, were enough to whet her appetite, but not enough to satisfy. The difference was that she could beg some bread and cheese from Mistress Rannelly later.

Loghain had promised that they would be together in Denerim, but that so far had not come to pass. They had parted after the feast last night with disappointing propriety.

But Loghain had kissed her hand, and shot her a glance from under his black brows that had given her a pleasurable thrill. She had hoped he would do more, but practically every noble in Denerim was looking at them at the moment, and Loghain had made clear that he would have no scandal cloud her name. It was frustrating, but after some consideration, she did see his point. Most people were reasonable about such

things, but some were not; and those people often had the power to be troublesome.

The Grand Cleric was of course such a person. No member of the Chantry had been present last night, but Bronwyn had no doubt that someone there would report every detail to her. Bann Alfstanna was a decent person and a fine ruler of her bannorn, but she was very, very devout and had a brother among the Templars. For that matter, Alfstanna herself had made her own views on the importance of chastity very well known. She was not alone in such expressed views, though Bronwyn tended to think the others were hypocrites. Alfstanna actually lived her principles.

All the same, Loghain seemed to be able to set her aside without visible signs of reluctance. That was worrying.

She turned her head toward her writing table, and saw the unanswered letters from her brother Wardens rebuking her for her sloth. She really must answer them in the next few days, and attempt to do so tactfully. That might not be entirely possible in the case of the First Warden.

Their general message was clear: no Wardens would be coming to help them. Bronwyn lay in bed, giving that a little more thought. There was good and bad in the situation, looked at objectively.

Loghain distrusted foreigners, and would not welcome foreign members of an independent military order. He would regard them as spies, or at best as meddlers. He would not be the

only one. Father had often commented on how much Fereldans hated outsiders. Some parts of the country were worse than the others. Denerim and the Coastlands might have the flexibility to cope with foreign accents, but the Bannorn was notoriously insular, and as for West Hills or Gwaren! So there was that. If no foreigners came, Bronwyn would not have to constantly smooth the feathers of her countrymen.

On the other hand, their supply of Archdemon blood, provided by Riordan and Fiona, was nearly gone. She could prepare Joinings for ten more recruits at most, and that was stretching the supply. Eight was more realistic, and of those, how many would survive? Four? Five?

The Warden's Compound was decently supplied, but not for fifty Wardens. Her funds were not unlimited, either. She must sit down with the account books and see if the tithes were paid up. If not, that would be a depressing and vexing task to add to her duties at the upcoming Landsmeet. It also would do nothing to inspire support for her claim. Where else could she find help for her Wardens? Where might there be more supplies? She had seen all the little cache in the Market District had to offer. She had inventoried the supplies here at the Compound. The Warden Post at Ostagar was a ruin. What else was there?

Quite out of nowhere, she remembered a conversation some months ago with that annoying trader...Dryden...Dryden. What was the first name?

Levi. Levi Dryden. He wanted her to go to Soldier's Peak, the ancient Warden fortress on the Coast. It had been abandoned for two hundred years, and thus was not likely to be full of foodstuffs, but there might be something there. How long did those preservation spells the mages used last? At the very least, some books or records might have survived to help her. She had put the Dryden fellow off, what with Howe's rebellion, but if the rebellion raged no longer...

She must have a look at her maps. How long would it take to get there? It was not nearly so far as Highever. Dryden had implied that he could guide her there. She could not remember his address in Denerim, but she had written it down somewhere. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to speak again with this scion of the formerly noble Drydens.

She sat up, stretching, rather excited to have a new plan. If she was not very careful, she would be trapped in an endless treadmill of insipid and meaningless court functions. She would write the man a note, and tell him to present himself as soon as possible—*today* if he could!

What else? She slid off the bed, opened the shutters, and dug through her papers, looking for the notes on the "Unbound." She would take a walk to Stealcopper Court, just as soon as she and some of her friends had breakfasted, and speak to this Vilhm Madon. A bit of exercise was just what she needed.

"...And when his kingdom fell, so disappeared the stolen riches of an age. The beast, the Unbound, lies dormant until

one of true spirit claims his throne. So must hunt the hero of his people, the principled one who would search for ancient evil. This is how they can make a real difference..."

The Wardens at the breakfast table listened, entranced.

Bronwyn looked up from the crumbling journal, pleased at their interest. "There's more. Whoever last owned this had collected clues from all sorts of places. Here's a later parchment he slipped inside:

'...The riders follow after every town, ever since my lucky break deciphering the story. I see it now, how they take the locals closest to me, preventing rest or kinship. I thought this a road to glory, but I am dogged at every step by his talons. Gaxkang: curse his name and the day I heard it..."

"Gaxxkang!" Carver repeated. "What a name!"

A ripple of amusement. The dwarf Soren looked up from his fascinating surface bread and honey, and muttered, "I swear I've heard it somewhere."

Bronwyn smiled, and said, "This was scribbled at the bottom of the page a little way on:

'Three pages, three ages. Same story, updated. Same as the tavern song, but older! Signature torn on purpose, but compare and get "Vilhm Madon". All from him! How?"

"Vilhm Madon?" snorted Anders. "It sounds like an anagram!"

"Of what?" queried Morrigan, very scornful. "*Man Hold Vim?* Is that any better?"

Leliana burst out laughing.

"What is an anagram?" Cathair whispered to Toliver.

"No idea," the human mumbled around his porridge.

Zevran considered, and his face brightened, "How about '*Lad Hmm Vino?*'"

"Or '*Divan Hmm Lo,*'" suggested Jowan, wanting to join in the fun.

"This is silly," muttered Aveline, disapproving of the nonsense.

"All right, all right," Bronwyn raised her voice, calling them to order. "Anything can be a name. I have no idea where this Vilhm Madon Divan Vino is from. At some point he lived in Stealcopper Court here in Denerim, according to this person's notes. He might be dead or long gone, so I thought I would go there and find out. If he no longer lives in the house, the current tenant may know something. Oh...by the way, another piece of parchment is inserted in the journal. Listen to this:

'... You asked, so I'm telling you. Don't go. The stories talk of the riches, but never the names, never where they supposedly spent their wealth. I heard the same tales as a

lad in Denerim, felt the same pull, but it's a lie, son. They may paint a trail, but once you're on it, does it lead to the beast or back to you?"

A pause.

"I'm in," said Anders, thumping down his cup. "Let's go call on Anagram Man. Ask him about..." he sniggered, "*Gaxxkang*."

Morrigan raised her brows, looking skeptical, but Anders patted her arm. "It's be fun! Stealcopper Court is on this side of the river, so it's not a long walk. Then we can take the Dock Bridge across and go to the Market."

"Very well," Morrigan generously consented. "I wish to visit The Wonders of Thedas again. I have not yet finished browsing through their selection of books."

Zevran got up to find his armor. "I shall go, naturally."

"We can't all go," Bronwyn declared. "Leliana, I'm leaving you in command of the Compound. I sent a message to a fellow named Levi Dryden to pay us a visit. He approached me a few months ago about the old Warden fortress up on the coast. Wanted me to go there and see what's left. Now that Rendon Howe is gone and my brother controls the Coastlands, I'm inclined to take him up on his idea. Most traders are settling in for the winter now, so there's a good chance he's at home. If he shows up, keep him here until I return. I shouldn't be gone long."

"Wear your armor," Zevran urged, his voice low. "Just in case the trail has led 'back to you.'"

"Yes," Leliana agreed for different reasons. "You should wear your armor and be seen by the people."

Stealcopper Court was nearly as disgusting as the Alienage. It was a back alley of ramshackle buildings, stinking of dead cats and rotten vegetables, of piss and fermented shit. It had rained during the night, and puddles of water— or some sort of water-like substance— reflected the tentative sunshine.

"Ugh!" Morrigan groaned. "I have stepped in something!"

"When you lived in the Wilds," Anders pointed out mildly, "you stepped in 'something' all the time."

Her face grew stony. "'Tis hardly the same thing. Who would live in such a place as this? Bronwyn, have you mistaken the house?"

"No..." Bronwyn replied, amused. "This is the one. Look! It's even conveniently marked with the initials 'VM.' I hope Master Vino Divan is at home."

"'Tis a *hovel!*" Morrigan sneered. Bronwyn kept her smile unseen. Morrigan's standards had certainly gone up since leaving the *very* hovelish hovel she had shared with Flemeth.

It was early, but heads poked out of neighboring windows and

doors, curious and fearful about the presence of a band of well-dressed and well-armed people with a mabari.

Bronwyn put her hand to the rusted knocker and rapped smartly.

"Hello? I would speak with Vilhm Madon."

No response. The sound echoed in the courtyard, Bronwyn glanced about her, a little self-conscious about the interest she had aroused. If no one answered here, she would bear down on some of the gawkers and ask if they had ever heard of Vilhm Madon. Surely someone...

She slammed the knocker down again, annoyed.

"I am Warden-Commander Bronwyn Cousland! I've come to ask about Gaxxkang the Unbound! Be good enough to open!"

The lock clicked. Anders gingerly extended his staff, and pushed the door open. Bronwyn wrinkled her nose at the musty odor filtering out. Scout put down his head, and growled.

"I believe the dog," said Zevran instantly.

"As do I," Morrigan said, hefting her staff.

"Well, come on." Warily, Bronwyn stepped over the threshold.

Inside was a hovel indeed. The filthy room, its one window covered with thick oiled parchment, was nearly unfurnished

save for the ruins of a priceless Antivan carpet. The light was dim, and provided mostly by the fire in the hearth. Needing a moment to let her eyes adjust to the gloom, Bronwyn had just enough time to catch her breath and consider the man standing before her.

Neither old nor young, but somehow ageless, he was waiting, hands behind his back, quite at his ease. He was not dressed poorly, but his garments were...unusual. He wore the cowl of a mage, but also a heavy bronze gorget protecting his throat, bronze bracers at his wrists, and a jerkin reinforced with metal strips. The style was an old-fashioned one, dating from long before the Orlesian invasion.

His face was perfectly ordinary. No one seeing him would remember him a moment later. Clean-shaven...almost too clean-shaven. His skin was sickly pale, and his eyebrows nearly invisible. His voice, however, was clear and resonant.

"Grey Warden, isn't it? Strange that you would force such a visit in a time of Blight. I suppose I'm used to inspiring a different kind of seeker."

"Bronwyn," Anders warned her, on a thread of breath. "That's not human."

Zevran smirked, his daggers already in his hands. "Not that it matters to me."

Scout crouched, ready to spring. With a curious, uneasy jolt, it occurred to Bronwyn that perhaps she had made something

of an error. Vilhm Madon was not simply a storyteller. He was

She licked her lips, and said quietly, "Your stories attract them. And then they disappear."

The...man?...chuckled, ominously smug. "I encourage fools to waste their lives in fantasy. The adequate ones find the gems I left as beacons, and then I find them. But you," he said, eyeing her with a certain admiration. "*You* are already brighter than the signal at Ishal. Eyes are on you from a very high vantage, Grey Warden. I cannot hide in your wake, but I will not be a footnote! Witness Gaxxkang!"

Could light be black? There was a shock, as if the air had somehow turned inside out, and Bronwyn experienced an instant of total blindness. She blinked, drawing her blades, and found her herself facing a demon.

Scout leaped, going for the attenuated legs. Morrigan screamed out a curse, staff sparking. Anders' arms were lifted, his head tilted back as he shouted his own incantation. A burst of frost from the demon, and Bronwyn choked, unable to breathe.

What kind of demon was this? The horrid skeletal teeth occupied half its face. Its grotesque, emaciated arms ended in ragged claws. It glowed redly from within, and cast powerful spells, draining her strength and will. Perhaps it was something like that dreadful emanation in the Elven Temple: hideous, ancient, and strong.

Scout leaped again, trying to come to grips with the monster. Bronwyn managed to suck in some frigid air, and shouted wordless defiance, waving her sword to fix the creature's attention. Somehow, Zevran had slipped behind it, and with a cry of delight, buried his daggers in its bony back.

The demon reared, flung out its arms, and they were all knocked back by a blast of raw power. Bronwyn slammed into the crumbling wattle-and-daub wall, and brushed away dust and debris, scrambling to her feet, wanting to find out who was hurt, and saw—

—that the demon had changed form. It was now a Revenant: an entity she had also seen in the Elven Temple. This was the mighty apparition of a warrior clad in ancient winged helmet and heavy plate. It wielded a frosty blue longsword that shrilled out a song of death as the blade swung down on Anders.

Bronwyn flung herself forward, and caught the blade on her own. The revenant's blade bit into hers deeply, locking the two swords together. Its weapon was clearly better than hers.

"Maker's Breath!" she shouted, and stabbed with her off-hand dagger, piercing into the unnatural flesh at the joining of the neck and the head.

Another violent shock, and she was once again knocked back. Scout squealed in agony, maddening her. The demon had changed back to its first form, that of a monstrous mage. Morrigan was hurt, her left arm hanging oddly, but her yellow

eyes were aflame. She matched the demon, ice for ice, and the creature slowed, glittering with frost.

Zevran threw his arms around the thing, and his daggers crunched through the ribs. He twisted them, his handsome face distorted into a rictus of effort, and was hoisted off his feet. Another blast of magical power knocked him back and slammed him down. Bones snapped, and Bronwyn heard a muffled cry of pain.

The demon was a warrior again, its dreadful sword lifted like a scythe, ready to mow them all down. It could not be stopped; could not be parried. The blow fell, the sword keening triumphantly. Bronwyn rolled aside, her armor protecting her from the splintered floor. Spells flashed behind her head, and she saw the too-white light in her peripheral vision.

"A-a-a-gh!" she screamed, stabbing upwards, her notched blade biting into the massive demonic sinews. The revenant stumbled, its knee giving way. Anders avoided the slash—almost. Flecks of scarlet from his torn upper arm painted the wall behind him. He shouted out another curse, paralyzing the weakened demon. Morrigan, hoarse with fury, drained the creature's mana, while a crippled, whining Scout seized the creature's sword arm in his jaws. Bronwyn scuttled out of the way of the demon's fall, and grabbed it by its bony jaw. Gritting her teeth, she drew her dagger across its throat, slicing deep through undead cartilage. The creature whistled and squealed, and then fell forward, dragging Bronwyn along with it. She slid over the armored back, head first, her

helmet's wings taking the brunt of the impact.

For a moment she lay stunned, draped over the revenant's back. Already as cold as a corpse, the creature's stink redoubled as it rapidly deliquesced. Centuries of decay, too long deferred, were made up in minutes. Even its armor crumbled away, no longer sustained by magic. Bronwyn slid away, gagging, and to her dazed confusion, she heard a smattering of applause.

Looking up, she saw a ring of shabby locals peering through the doorway. Evidently, they had enjoyed the spectacle. Some of them. Others were puking into the straggling weeds by the doorway. It did not much improve the smell.

"That's my neighbor!" shrieked a woman. "He's...all runny."

"Reckon he was a demon," mused her sister. "Can't say I'm surprised. That mean he was—wouldn't lend me so much as a needle or a cup of meal. Well done, Grey Wardens!"

"Those are *magas*," a man muttered. "You'd best mind yourselves."

The first woman shoved him aside, eager to see better. "If they're killing demons as was hiding themselves amongst decent folk, they're all right with me."

Staggering to her feet, Bronwyn managed a grimace at the spectators.

"Anders, are you all right? Can you do some healing? Everybody's hurt."

"I *noticed*. Me, too." Anders sat up and began casting. At the blue flash of light, there was a general withdrawal and some awed cries of "Oooooooo!"

Cuts and bruises, mostly, though Zevran had a broken collarbone and Morrigan a broken left arm. Scout whimpered until Anders healed his bleeding wounds, and now there were cries of "Awwwwww!" as the dog licked the Healer's hand.

Bronwyn shook her head, then stopped, since it hurt. On the floor lay the longsword wielded by the revenant. It was quite the weapon. A little way off lay the discarded shield. She picked it up and hefted it. It must be magical, for it seemed the perfect weight and balance for her. Apparently, they had been the only real things about Gaxxkang the Unbound.

"That's the Girl Warden," another neighbor whispered. "I seen her red armor when she rode into the city." There was more applause, conscientiously loyal. Bronwyn wondered if she was expected to bow and make a speech.

The first woman edged into the room. "I wonder if I could get this house, now that Master Madon's gone. It looks bigger than mine." She asked Bronwyn, "You mind if I take a look?"

Such infernal impudence could not be tolerated, even when suffering a headache like the one raging in Bronwyn's skull.

"Please step out for now," she managed. "Yes, out there. We need to check the house for more demons. Don't touch the remains until they're done decomposing. " With another false smile, she eased the woman over the threshold and shut the door.

"What in the Maker's name," wondered Anders, "was that creature? *Two* forms? Even if it was a possessed mage, how did manage two different forms? That was just...wrong!"

Morrigan frowned, intrigued by the puzzle. "Perhaps the mage was a shape-shifter in the beginning. Surely it could not be that he was possessed by two demons at once. It is likely we shall never know."

Zevran was sitting up, and now looked much better. He tilted his head at the sword on the floor. It still glowed blue. "Have a look at it, my Warden," he suggested. "It's a fine weapon. Dragonbone, I think."

"Be *careful*," rasped Morrigan, glaring at Zevran, still clutching at her rapidly healing arm.

Bronwyn laid her gloved fingers on the hilt, and even through the thick leather, she sensed a thrill of magic. Gripping it, she felt something trickle up her warm, like a spider web of connection. The blade seemed content with her, hoping for great deeds to come.

"There's writing on the blade," she murmured, catching the firelight along the length of it. Yes, it was dragonbone, and

very, very old. "I can't make it out."

Anders craned his neck to look up at it. "It's Arcanum. The Keening Blade. That's the name. Let me check it out before you use it in a fight, all right?"

"All right."

Zevran rose, testing his limbs to make sure everything worked. Satisfied, he began exploring the tiny house.

Behind the front room was a little alcove, containing a bed and an elaborate chest. Zevran played with the lock, while the rest of them looked over his shoulder.

"Ha!"

The lid was pushed back, revealing the contents. Scout nosed under their arms for a sniff, and seem to find the loot neither menacing nor particularly interesting. The other companions were more impressed.

"He tempted them with jewels, he said," smirked Zevran, "And what jewels, indeed! There is gold, too!" He raised his hands in wonder. "Why do all these powerful beings live in such squalor? Had I such power and wealth I would prefer a palace. With beautiful women!"

"No doubt," Morrigan dismissed him, intent on the treasure.

"Those gloves..." said Anders, examining them. "I think they may be enchanted."

It was best to divide the loot on the spot. The gloves fit Anders, and thus fell to his share. Not wishing to be selfish, Bronwyn urged Zevran to see if The Keening Blade suited him. He touched it briefly, and withdrew his hand with a hiss.

"I think...not. The sword has chosen its owner, and has no use for me."

The fine shield, Anders told Bronwyn, was named "Fade Wall," and also appeared to have magical qualities. They agreed to take both sword and shield back to the Compound for evaluation. Bronwyn had not used a shield regularly, but this one was so excellent, so perfect for her, so suitable, in a word, that she began to consider changing her fighting style, or at least keeping the shield with her in case the situation merited it.

"If I keep these weapons," Bronwyn pointed out, "then it is only fair that the gold and jewels be yours."

Morrigan selected the most remarkable piece for her own: an emerald brooch of antique make, the grass-green stone carved with the face of a woman. After some good-natured chaffering, the loot was divided and hidden on their persons. Gaxxkang and his armor were now nothing but a roughly man-shaped pile of dust on the floor. It was time to face the community of Stealcopper Court.

They opened the door to more applause, more cries of "Maker bless you, Girl Warden!"

They nodded and smiled their way through the crowd. The local women had already fetched their cleaning gear. Bronwyn's last glimpse of Gaxxkang's little hovel was of one woman flicking dust out the doorway with her broom, while another washed it into the gutter with a pail of dirty water.

Thanks to my reviewers: Zute, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, JackOfBladesX, Phygmalion, Raxiselic, Judy, KnightOfHolyLight, Nemrut, Blinded in a bolthole, Jenna53, Chandagnac, Mike 3207, almostinsane, Josie Lange, Hydroplatypus, Oleander's One, Girl-chama, darksky01, Shakespira, SageofAges729, Herebedragons66, lemonjay Psyche Sinclair, Raxiselic, Ms Barrows, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

Aron Kendalls and his family do not figure in my other story, The Keening Blade, as heirs of the arling of Denerim, because they were all killed when the horde marched up from the south.

68. Wardens on the March

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 68: Wardens on the March

Ostagar seethed with activity as the Warden parties prepared to move out. Alistair was torn in three different directions, worrying about them all. He was not thrilled to be left in Ostagar, but made himself think it over, and came up with some plans of his own. For now, he, like most the Wardens, was pressed into duty in the bomb workshop, putting together supplies for everyone. Adaia was in her glory, showing them all how to measure and mix and pack. Alistair only hoped that they would not blow themselves to the Black City in all the bustle.

Siofranni, a petite Dalish elf with coppery pigtails. had more or less apprenticed herself to Adaia, wanting to learn the crafts of poison-and-bomb making. The girl's enthusiasm was not dampened when Adaia explained that she was more or less an apprentice herself to Master Dworkin. The dwarves under Alistair's command, Asa and Ulfa, showed some aptitude as well, though Asa's skill with an axe also made him a valuable companion in the Wilds. Ulfa came from the miner caste originally, and knew her rock and stone, which would be very handy when Alistair led them down into the Deep Roads

again. While everyone else was away, exploring the other entrances, Alistair had decided that they could do their part here, and clean out the tunnels beneath Ostagar. For all he knew, they were yet more Broodmothers, spawning replacements for the horde.

Work broke off for a meal, and amidst the laughter and talk, Tara took Astrid aside, wanting to discuss their plans privately.

"I'd like to travel due west, first, rather than go directly to Lake Belannas."

"But why?" Astrid asked. "To sweep for more darkspawn?"

"Well, that of course; but I have a secret agenda. Let's go somewhere quiet, and I'll tell you about it."

They found a corner of the mess hall and fortified themselves with ale and bowls of stew. Tara gave a quick glance about her, and then pulled two things from the inside of her leather cuirass: one was a folded piece of parchment, and the other

"That is a golem's control rod," Astrid said, tense with excitement. "Where did you find it?"

A lofty, virtuous smirk. "I *bought* it. From a shifty trader fellow in Sulcher Pass. I just thought of it as a knickknack of sorts, but then I slept on it and talked to the fellow again the next day. *He* said that he got it further south. He was told there

was a golem in a village called Honnleath, and that this was supposed to activate it if you said the words '*dulef gar.*'"

"*Dulef gar?*" Astrid frowned. "That's not dwarvish. Sounds like gibberish to me. Still..."

A golem! A golem of their own. Astrid considered what that could mean. Golems had been the first line of defense against the darkspawn for ages, until the secret of their making was lost. Bronwyn, Astrid knew, had met the Paragon Caridin, himself transformed into a golem; and she had destroyed the Anvil of the Void at his request. For better or worse (and Astrid had her own views about that) there would be no more golems. Those that remained were kept under tight security at the Shaperate, preserved for a final, desperate defense of Orzammar.

A golem of their own. There was no question in Astrid's mind. If there was the least chance of obtaining such a powerful weapon, it was clearly their duty to pursue it. She only wondered that Bronwyn had not, and said as much to Tara.

"I didn't really bring it up," Tara said sheepishly. "Bronwyn had a lot on her mind, and I know she doesn't really approve of golems...because of how they were made. Still, we need all the help we can get, and Bronwyn's off to Denerim. This would be something *we* could do."

"Where is this Honnleath place?"

Tara eagerly unfolded the parchment. "Look! I copied

Bronwyn's map with those extra places that Brother Genetivi marked. That's Honnleath, at that maze of rivers and little lakes. It's south of Redcliffe, and very remote. We might as well see if the darkspawn have got that far west, anyway. We can ask around about the golem, and then we can go north and take the road at Redcliffe. That will get us back to Lake Belennas, where the Deep Roads entrance is." She sat back, excited and pleased with herself.

Astrid was rather excited herself. "You have given this a great deal of thought. Very well. Honnleath first. We should tell Brosca the plan too, but no one else, lest they be disappointed."

After final farewells and some tears shed, the Wardens separated, some marching to the east, some to the west, and others remaining with the garrison at Ostagar. It was a gloomy, windswept day, a harbinger of the winter to come, and the Wardens wrapped themselves in their cloaks and cast doubtful looks at the skies. Uncertain as the weather was, it was unlikely that waiting would improve it.

The great obstacle in Danith's journey to Gwaren was the White River. It was broad this far south, as it hurried to its final destination, emptying into the frigid southern ocean. There was an old but sturdy bridge further north in the Brecilian Passage, but the terrain was such that traveling there through the forests and hills would add three days to their journey. Danith decided to trust to Dalish ways.

Due east from Ostagar, the Southron Hills diminished to mere ridges, though the forest was particularly dense. However, Danith knew the land well. Her clan had spent the summer before last in these parts.

They came upon darkspawn from time to time: stragglers from the horde, wandering aimlessly over the landscape, spreading their filth. Her new Wardens were coming into their powers, and these random encounters were good practice for them. It grieved her to burn good meadows and noble trees polluted by Taint, but restoring the natural world to health was also part of a Grey Warden's duty, and the part that Danith found the most compatible to her Dalish upbringing. Let the durgen'len have their Deep Roads, and the shemlen their cities. Danith took her pleasure in being a Forest Warden.

Because of the darkspawn, there were also smoking, ruined villages and occasional bands of shy, terrified Chasind. Danith had come across Chasind before, and knew how to talk to them—more or less. The Grey Warden tunic and the little griffon banner fluttering bravely from the mast of the aravel had proved a passport of sorts.

Every day, she blessed the Creators and Merrill's generosity in allowing them halla and an aravel. They did not have to carry heavy packs, since they could store their gear in the aravel. The halla traveled swiftly and tirelessly through the trees, ears alert for danger.

Danith looked forward to reaching the great river. It was a significant natural barrier. Once past it, it was unlikely that

they would find darkspawn on the other side—unless they had had emerged from the Deep Roads access point near the shemlen city of Gwaren.

Her party was a strange mix, but not unpleasant. Steren and Nuala were fine elves: excellent archers and trackers, and agreeable people besides. The two durgen'len in the party, Idunn and Ketil, were cheerful and sturdy. Ketil was a powerful axeman, and Idunn was quick with her daggers.

Their facial tattoos interested Danith. Unlike the blood writing of the Dalish, which proclaimed adulthood and membership within the clan, their markings were symbols of exclusion and oppression. "Dusters," they were called, and were outcasts among their own kind. Both seemed to regard their adventures on the surface and their admission to the Grey Wardens as the best things that had ever happened to them. Danith thought that in itself a grave indictment of dwarven society.

She had not been present with the other Wardens during their journey to Orzammar and their extensive exploration of the Deep Roads. There was a certain bond between those who had experienced those hardships. It had been very horrible, Danith understood, and Bronwyn had nearly died. Those who were not dwarves had learned unpleasant things about dwarven society; and one of them was the dire situation of those dwarves who had no caste, and thus no place in dwarven life. Tara had seen both the foul city Alienage and the refuge of the casteless, called "Dust Town." She had assured Danith that Dust Town was worse, by far. It was

difficult to credit, but Tara was not a liar. Danith did not much care for the Qunari Sten, but she agreed with him that to waste one's own people was a foolish and wicked thing.

The three shemlen under her command were of a better sort than the usual lot. Human mages, she had discovered, were far more sympathetic and understanding of the Dalish plight than most of their race, since they themselves suffered from ignorant prejudice. Niall was an excellent mage: skilled and willing. He had no more idea how to cook than a baby, and his woodcraft was of the most rudimentary sort, but he was not unwilling to learn. After a day or two, he began talking, and Danith learned many interesting things.

He did not know how to do anything for himself, because in the Circle, such tasks as cooking, cleaning, and the making of clothes were all performed by those he called "the Tranquil." They were in Ostagar, too, but Danith, having no dealings with them, had never chosen to speak to them. These Tranquil were mages, both elves and human, whom the Chantry had mutilated by cutting them off from the Beyond, which the shemlen called the Fade. It left the victims emotionless and submissive, but very hard-working, since there was no longer anything to distract them. Danith heard Niall out, grasped at last what was being done, and felt like vomiting.

Considering the matter further, she also began to understand why Bronwyn seemed not to trust the priest-folk, and wished to keep certain things from them. What she did not understand was why people did not rise up and drive out those who would commit such hideous acts. Danith made a

private vow to the Creators that she would never surrender a mage of the elvhen to the Templars, no matter how much blood need be shed.

Niall told her other things, as well. The mage prisoners of the Chantry amused themselves by dividing into factions, called Fraternities. These factions proposed different ways of life for the mages—ways that were mostly impossible fantasy, given that the Chantry controlled their lives. Niall had belonged to such a Fraternity, called the Isolationists, and they held that mages should live apart and have no dealing with the rest of the world.

"That is more or less what we Dalish have attempted to do," Danith pointed out. "And you can see how well it has worked out. However much we try to avoid the rest of the world, it keeps on finding us."

"Then you haven't gone far *enough!*" Niall shot back, kicking at leaves underfoot. "Beyond the mountains, maybe... There must be islands... There must be somewhere to go where the word 'mage' is not an insult! Or 'elf,'" he added, with a wry grin. "Really. It's a big world. Who knows what lies beyond the mountains to the west or the ocean to the east? Or maybe north, if you can get past the Qunari."

"To the north?" Danith snorted at his naiveté. "Everyone knows that in the far north it is so hot that the very rocks have melted. No plant or animal can exist there without instantly bursting into flames. The Qunari live in the hottest lands that living beings can tolerate. There is no hope in the north. I

know nothing of the ocean, though I saw it once, when I was in Denerim. It is very dirty. The mountains? Perhaps... There is a story which I shall tell you some time."

Quinn, though he towered over the elves and dwarves and knew his swordsmanship, was only a boy in years. He had come from a farmhold, and had done his share of hunting. He had also learned to care for the farm beasts. He was fascinated by the halla, and begged Nuala and Steren to allow him to help them. They were understandably reluctant to entrust the precious creatures to a clumsy shemlen, but allowed the boy to perform some of the menial tasks. His sheer brute strength was immensely useful and rather intimidating to the elves, though the boy was nothing if not cheerful and friendly. Perhaps, Danith thought sourly, he was too young to have been fully indoctrinated into shemlen views of the inferiority of the elvhen.

Maeve puzzled Danith a little. The woman did as she was told, and fought bravely and well, but was silent and withdrawn. Danith understood that the woman's Joining had been very frightening and traumatic, which might explain her somewhat. Indeed, she wondered why the woman had volunteered at all. She was no hunter, but a good camp cook who did not oversalt roast meat as many shemlens did. Though she said little, she wrote every day in a little book she carried. Among all of them, only Niall could also read and write. He had asked Maeve one night what she was writing, and she had looked away and said, "It's only my diary," and he had not plagued her with more questions. When asked, he informed Danith that

a diary was a book into which one wrote the day's events and one's thoughts about them. Personally, Danith did not see the point. Why else have a memory?

On the sixteenth of Harvestmere, they reached the White River. More importantly, they reached a place that Danith knew well and where she had previously crossed.

Only the Dalish in the company had ever seen the White River. Neither the River Dane, nor the River Hafter, nor even the River Drakon was as mighty a stream as the White River south of the Southron Hills. Even after the dry months of summer, it stretched out before them, wide and brownish-green between its banks.

"We can't possible ford that," Quinn said, his blue eyes very big. "It looks *deep*. Isn't there a ferry somewhere?"

Steren smiled to himself, readying what they would need. Nuala, more open with the boy, said, "Dalish make their own ferries. We shall teach you our ways."

The shemlen and durgen'len learned much that day. A long day, for it took a great deal of effort. Hallas could swim very well, and aravels were watertight. Once Danith had shot an arrow attached to a thin cord of spider silk across to a tree on the other bank, they began to see how it would be done. She would cross the river, with the aid of the thin cord, bearing a heavy rope attached to the aravel. Once fixed securely on the other bank, the heavy line would allow the landship to swing out into the current and eventually float to a low bank she had

spotted. Then they would haul it up to dry land once more.

One major kink in the plan was the reluctance of the dwarves.

"Er..." said Ketil, "You're talking about swimming. I can't swim."

"Neither can I!" Idunn declared.

"You can't swim?" Danith asked, astonished. "Not at all?"

It was so, however extraordinary.

Niall confessed, "I haven't swum since I was a little boy. We don't get out much, there in the Circle Tower."

There was a solution, fortunately.

"Then you shall go in the aravel. Children, the elderly, and the infirm always travel thus."

The dwarves and the mage did not look happy at the classification.

Niall, terribly embarrassed, changed his mind, and decided that he could manage by holding on to the cord and going hand-over-hand. He slipped and splashed and went under several times, but staggered onto the bank inordinately pleased with himself, to the cheers of his comrades.

"This is like adventuring!"

"No," Danith said, not as harshly as she might have a few months before. "This is living life."

It took a long time and a great deal of effort, but by the end of the day they were all safe and across, and the aravel was not much the worse for its wetting. Even the dwarves had somehow been soaked, and thought themselves fairly intrepid. Best of all, as they dried out around the campfire, Danith sensed no darkspawn. None. Unless some of the creatures had found the bridge at the Passage, and then turned south, the Wardens should have an easy journey to the shemlen city of Gwaren.

The Wardens in the west reached Honnleath on the eighteenth of Harvestmere. They thought it must be Honnleath, anyway. Three windmills rose above the stubbly, harvested fields, proclaiming the existence of a village about two miles distant. Even more impressive was a tall, slender stone tower. Tara had not imagined a remote village would have such an impressive piece of architecture. She hoped it was intact. It was too late to push on, however, since the sun had already set in red and gold splendor. Instead, they camped in a meadow near a spring. They had had a strenuous journey so far, and a profitable one.

Fifteen Wardens proved more than equal to anything the wilderness of the southern Hinterlands could send their way. Wolves, bears, a lone Hunger Demon...and darkspawn, of course.

It went without saying that there would be darkspawn. Scattered bands, for the most part, and a powerful, nasty mob, hemmed in at the first cataract of the Rock River. That group boasted two ogres and a genlock mage.

The Wardens however, had Tara, Velanna, and five superb archers. The darkspawn were decimated before they ever got within striking distance. The blade wielders finished off the rest with gleeful ease. The ogres were frozen and hacked to pieces, and there was plunder for all.

"Why do darkspawn carry coin?" Walther wanted to know. "Why? It's not like they go shopping! "

"Reckon they like shiny," his friend Griffith rumbled, lying back on his blanket and holding a old Orlesian gold piece up to the firelight. "/ like shiny."

"It's true," Brosca agreed sagely. She bore with Walther's endless questions to Tara's admiration. "The 'spawn have an eye for value. They pick up coin, gems...all sorts of treasure."

Sigrun giggled. "Sometimes they *swallow* the gems. Gold, too. No! I swear it's true. Remember, Jukka? There was that nutcase Fike. He used to cut darkspawn open to see what they had in their guts. He found an opal the size of—"

"Please!" groaned Catriona. "*I'm eating!*"

"Not opals, nor even diamonds and sapphires," laughed Tara. "Just plain old porridge."

They had sensed fewer darkspawn as they went west. Now the signs were infrequent. Taint seemed somehow to move ahead of the darkspawn, so they saw Blighted plants even when they no longer sensed actual darkspawn. They had been forced to burn some fields near Ostagar, but out here, Taint could be found only in traces, and Tara taught Velanna how to burn it out carefully, without setting whole forests on fire.

Just before dawn, the sentries awakened the camp. They might not have sensed darkspawn before, but they were sensing them now: a large party sweeping up from the southeast, bearing down on the village of Honnleath.

"Move! Move!" Astrid shouted. "Everybody *go!* Leave the gear!"

Advancing quickly, they found a bottleneck on the little dirt road leading to the village, and moved into position. Up on the hills along the road, a handful of Wardens waited: some archers, and some others well-supplied with Dworkin's lyrium bombs.

Thirty-odd darkspawn charged them, without fear and without art. There was never any question as to the outcome.

"No ogres!" Tara shouted cheerfully to Velanna, who was sneering at the darkspawn in disgust. "That's always a good thing!" She flung out her her arms and called down a whirlwind of ice and lightning on the darkspawn. The tainted creatures stumbled and spasmed, weapons dropping from nerveless,

clawlike hands. A few staggered doggedly ahead, drawn by the Wardens' Taint, and when they were close enough, it was time for other tactics.

"Archers and mages, fall back!" Astrid ordered. She banged her sword against her shield. "Blades! Follow me!" She caught Brosca's eye. The Duster laughed, and charged with her.

Tara glimpsed a farmer in front of his little cottage, staring at the battle in terror and disbelief, and gave him a jaunty wave. He ducked back inside. A little later, as the Wardens were mopping up the last of the enemy, a boy dashed out of the cottage, running pell-mell for the village.

"That's right!" Brosca shouted after him. "Roll out the welcome for the Wardens!"

Tara was crushed. The golem was *broken*. The activation code had not worked.

"It's for the best," a man named Matthias consoled her. "The golem killed my father. That's why we got rid of the control rod."

Their welcome otherwise was very satisfactory. Honnleath was a remarkably pretty village: far more attractive than Lothering; and, though not as big as South Reach, more pleasant. Not only did it boast the tall tower they had seen at a distance, but a handsome arched gateway and a respectable stone wall. The lack of a gate in the gateway,

however, seemed a serious oversight. This isolated place undoubtedly would have been destroyed by the darkspawn if not for the Wardens. They were feasted and praised to even their standards. The junior Wardens were finding their career choice very much validated by the esteem in which they were held.

"We didn't even know there was a Blight!" cried Olaf, the head of the village council. "Why didn't anybody tell us?"

Matthias looked determined. "We'll be better prepared in future. There are things we can do."

It did not take long to figure out what they were. Quite a bit of them involved magic.

"I wish Niall were here!" Tara shouted gleefully. "This is what the Isolationists have been talking about! Mage Town! It's not bad, actually."

A very large number of the villagers were, in fact, mages. Every family had a father, or a mother, or a child who had magical ability. Matthias was the village schoolmaster, who mixed magical lessons with reading and writing. Most of the mages here did not seem very powerful to Tara, but they had put their talents to strange and inventive uses.

Olaf's wife Maggie used magic to *cook*. Even Velanna and the other Dalish were rather shocked by that.

"Why not?" the woman shrugged. "Why shouldn't I? I'm not

surprised at the Circle, of course. Mages are only accounted useful for healing or for fighting darkspawn, so they only teach that. Strange that you Dalish haven't branched out."

Velanna said stiffly. "There are not enough of us to 'branch out,' as you put it. There are rarely more than one or two mages in a clan, and their powers are needed to protect and lead."

"Well," said Maggie, "there are lots of us here, and my mother learned to manipulate fire spells to roast, boil, and fry. It takes a delicate touch, but we don't need to cut down trees for fuel that way."

There was much to learn here, and Astrid agreed with Tara to stay a few days. The villagers knew a warding spell that would keep out intruders—and made sure henceforth to use it to ward the village gate and walls. The fences around the outlying farmholds were likewise protected. That spell could be of immense use to Wardens. Tara and Velanna were shown to the cellar study of Matthias' deceased father, Wilhelm, a mage who had been granted his freedom for his service in the Rebellion. Not trusting to the Chantry, he had moved out to this remote place, bringing some his magical friends with him. Magic had been used to build the walls and gateway; and the tall tower that was part of Wilhelm's home. When the old mage was not engaged in magical research, he devoted himself to the art of brewing ale, at which he had excelled.

"How odd," said Tara, "that after leaving the Circle Tower

behind him, he built a tower of his own."

"Ah, but you see," Matthias pointed out, "it was *his* tower."

Villagers and Warden mages traded spell for spell, and the rest of the Wardens rested or practiced. Tara wrung a pledge from them never to reveal the existence of mages in this little community. Astrid and Brosca concurred, with the proviso that Honnleath must agree always to support the Wardens. Velanna cared little for a village of shemlen, but was inclined to listen to Tara, who was teaching her the ancient skills passed on to her in the elven ruins.

"Another part of our history regained!" the blonde elf exulted. "The martial arts of Arlathan restored! Have you taught the Keepers at Ostagar?"

"I told Merrill about what I learned, but not everyone has the aptitude," Tara said. "It's like shapeshifting. Anders has picked it up from Morrigan, but I can't seem to get the hang of it at all. And I didn't want the priests at Ostagar getting wind of these new fighting skills. They'd say it was contrary to Chantry law or something. Here it's just Wardens, and nobody's going to tattle."

Velanna said slowly, "I would like to learn shape-shifting as well. You and Anders are friends. Persuade him to teach me. There are stories that some Dalish Keepers once practiced the art. More forgotten lore must be relearned."

There was no time to get through all of Wilhelm's excellent

library, but Tara had found his journal. After translating it—it was written in Arcanum, which Matthias had not bothered to learn—she came rapidly to the conclusion that the man was wrong about the cause of his father's death.

"It was a demon," she said, reading a relevant entry. "Not the golem. You've got a demon locked up at the base of the tower."

That caused a brief panic. There was nothing to do but get rid of it. It was in the form of a purple-eyed cat, but the Wardens did not find it particularly intimidating. Afterward, not only did the Wardens get another good dinner out of it, but a very substantial reward.

"Look here," said Matthias. "Obviously, I have to believe you about the demon killing Father. It wasn't Shale after all, but I don't want to see the thing anymore."

The Wardens glanced at each other, waiting.

Matthias cleared his throat. "The proper activation code is *"Dulen harn!"*

Astrid's face lit up, "Ah! Now that *is* proper dwarvish!"

Tara was out the door like a loosed arrow, her target the huge stone statue in the village commons.

"No, Habren," Leonas Bryland said wearily to his daughter, in

the quiet of his study in their Denerim townhouse. "You *can't* go to the Satinalia Ball. It's *too soon*. We're all in mourning, for Maker's sake! We'll have a celebration at home in the morning, and you can have your presents then."

The girl slumped in her chair despondently. "Well, when *can* I go out? This is *boring!* You can't expect me to shut myself up forever!" She wiped her nose, and muttered, "What presents?"

Bryland smiled slightly. "You'll see. And you will be getting out. By the fourteenth of Firstfall, you'll have finished the month of formal mourning. There's no reason at all you can't go to Bronwyn's wedding. You'll no doubt want a nice new gown for the event. That should cheer you up."

Habren's jaw dropped. Nearly to the floor. "Bronwyn's... getting...married?" she quavered.

He would have to break it to her eventually. Putting the best face on it, Bryland said, "Yes, Bronwyn is getting married. The wedding will be at the cathedral, and the feast at Highever House. She is marrying Teyrn Loghain."

An awful pause, like the ocean sucking backwards before a remorseless tidal wave. Habren's hair nearly stood on end.

"Bronwyn's going to be *Teyrna of Gwaren?*" she shrieked. "It's not *fair!* She'll outrank me again!"

"Yes," Bryland said, stiffening his sinews against the

onslaught. "She will outrank you. And with the upcoming Landsmeet, she may rise even higher." In quick, carefully chosen words, he explained the political landscape, in which he himself was deeply involved.

Another terrible pause, and the shrieks redoubled. Housemaids down the hall shook their heads and sighed. The young lady was in one of her moods again.

"A demon? In Stealcopper Court, of all places?" Anora wanted to disbelieve it, but could not.

Bronwyn's adventure was the topic of a lengthy and amusing conversation, and her splendid new sword and shield were admired rather gingerly. The four of them dined together: Fergus and Bronwyn, Anora and Loghain, in an intimate, ornate chamber.

"Anders looked them over carefully. He's says they're not cursed, anyway. I've generally fought two-handed, but the shield is so lovely I might make a change."

"You'll need to work on your technique," said Loghain. "Don't try to use it until you've done some proper sparring. Join me in the training ground early tomorrow."

Also under discussion was her plan to go north. Levi Dryden had duly presented himself, his maps were examined, and Bronwyn made up her mind to the journey at once. On disclosing her idea to Fergus, he swiftly coopted the scheme.

They would leave the day after tomorrow. Fergus had meant to install Hawke in Amaranthine himself, and here was the opportunity.

"Can this not be done after Satinalia?" Anora asked. "There is so much to be done before the Landsmeet..."

"We'll be back for Satinalia," Fergus assured them. "On my honor. Bronwyn says she just needs a look at the old ruins."

Bronwyn grimaced. "I also need to have a look at the deserted manor of Drake's Fall, which is in the same general area. According to our readings, there is an entrance there to the Deep Roads. It might be wise to check it for darkspawn activity. But as to Soldier's Peak, there might be artifacts remaining that the king's army would not have viewed as plunder."

"Books of lore?" Anora wondered. "Surely they would be long since decayed."

"Some other things as well," Bronwyn said, the words extracted from her as reluctantly as a stubborn tooth. "The Grey Wardens have secrets, and there might be some answers for me. I must go. After Satinalia, I shall be too busy for such a journey. And I, too, promise that I shall be back by the festival."

Although they were busy preparing for their journey north, Leliana had taken the time to visit the Alienage with Zevran

and Cathair. She reported back to Bronwyn that Amethyne had a sweet, trainable voice, a good sense of rhythm, and a superb ear. Bronwyn was in a mood to hear about something other than arms training, since Loghain, as promised, had put her through the wringer. She had upheld her honor, with the aid of her wonderful new sword and shield, but it had been hard-fought and bruising. Anders had tutted over her, and Aveline had said something about men whose idea of courtship was sparring. It certainly seemed to be Loghain's style.

Leliana was delighted to talk about Amethyne. "With proper training, she could become a fine musician and dancer. It would be a shame not to give her a chance."

"I have every intention of giving her a chance. Find me a teacher for her, and I'll pay the fees. It will have to be arranged once we're back in Denerim, of course."

"Oh, I have already found a teacher." Leliana beamed, proud of her arrangements. "Zoe Pheronis. She is from Nevarra, and I have heard her sing and play many times. Not so much now, of course..."

"Why not now? Has she lost her skill?"

"Not in the least. But once a musician's hair grows grey and her curves sag, the patrons—especially the men—lose interest. It is sad, but it is a fact of life. It is difficult for a woman minstrel when one begins to grow old. I called on her on my way back from the Alienage. She lives in a little house

in Red Dragon Street, and has arranged it charmingly with her remaining treasures. She will teach the little girl every other day for a very reasonable fee..."

Bronwyn smiled ruefully. "You have it all planned out very nicely, I see."

"I knew you wanted me to. It is better that the child begins learning at once. Zoe will teach her music and dance, and perhaps a little reading and writing."

"All right then. Finalize it all before we leave. I commissioned the child's Satinalia gift. Do you think I should include an instrument?"

"Not yet—or perhaps something small. I shall see to it."

Bronwyn went on with her packing, not doubting that Leliana would. For herself, she had arranged with a cabinetmaker to make the child a most lovely chest of her very own, inscribed with her name; and large enough to store her clothes, boots, and other possessions. Probably too large at the moment, of course. In it, Bronwyn would put some cheerful oddments: a pair of red mittens, a comb, an old cup-and-ball of her own from Highever House, freshly painted, a green hair ribbon, and some fine green stockings. If Leliana were to find her a little pipe or a gaily painted tambourine, that would make it quite complete. She must also find presents for her ex-werewolves, especially those two little boys and the young girl...

Why must she leave right away? Why could she not wait? "Books of lore," indeed! While the rest of the Palace settled down to their night's rest, Loghain paced in the privacy of his chamber, wondering what was on Bronwyn's mind. More Grey Warden nonsense, but it was clear she would not speak freely unless alone. Fergus was with her constantly; and if not he, then one of her infernal Wardens, or one of her other companions, the dodgy young witch or the even dodgier Crow assassin.

It was a risk, but one he must take. He threw on a drab, hooded cloak and soft-soled boots, and stalked out, glaring his guards into silence. Stepping out into the courtyard, he walked quietly along the wall. Years ago, he had learned to disappear into the darkness, and he felt the old skills return. The door to the Warden's Compound was not far, and Bronwyn trusted her housekeeper. He brought the knocker down...not very loudly. There was silence in the courtyard, but for the call of a nightbird and the distant crunch of a sentry's footsteps. Loghain waited impatiently, feeling like a thief and a bandit in his own city.

"My lord!" The housekeeper peered out over her candlestick, and let him in at once.

"I need to speak to the Warden-Commander."

The woman was too sensible to look shocked or disapproving or even curious. Rising to the occasion, she merely said, "This way, my lord."

She clearly wanted him to wait in the Wardens' Hall, but Loghain was too impatient to stand on ceremony. He followed her up some steps leading into a round tower. She tapped gently at the second door.

"Warden-Commander, dear. Someone to see you."

Loghain nearly snorted aloud. "*Warden-Commander, dear?*" What kind of military order was this?

The door cracked open. Bronwyn had been in bed, and apparently asleep. She frowned at them, clad in a thin white nightshift, her dark hair rumped. She looked very young. On seeing Loghain, her mouth opened just a little, then she bit her lip. She was pleased to see him. He almost smiled.

"My lord Teyrn. Come in. It's all right, Rannelly. Go on to bed. I have to speak privately with the Teyrn, and I'll see him out later."

The woman gave Loghain a brief, raking look, hinting that he had best behave himself, and walked away with a faint huff.

"Good night, Warden-Commander. dear."

"Good night."

Loghain slipped through the opened door, and Bronwyn shut it softly behind him.

"I'll light a candle," she said.

"No need. The fire gives light enough." He slipped off the cloak and hung it on the hook in the wall over her own. There was an uncertain pause, and then he moved to take her in his arms. With a soft cry, she pressed against, holding him fast. Her lips found his in a long kiss. Loghain decided he was happy to see her too.

"I'm so glad you've come to me!" she said. "So glad! I thought you wouldn't! I thought I'd go north without having taken a proper farewell of you."

There were all sorts of sensible things he meant to say, but she was kissing him again, and his body told him that there was a time for talk, and a time for action. She was already drawing him to her bed.

"Wait, my girl. The boots must go."

And then there was eager assistance with his boots, his shirt, his breeches; the quick, capable hands unfastened his smallclothes, fingers lingering and exploring. Somehow the thin nightshift fluttered whitely to the floor, a ghost of modesty. The bed was warm with her, and she was hot for him. Since he was here, it would be absurd not to make himself pleasing to her, and she was too starved for him to enjoy any delay.

"Who is next door?" he whispered.

"What?" she gasped, intent on other things. "The study that way. Leliana over there."

He scowled briefly, reminded of Bronwyn's pet Orlesian.

"Then we must be quiet."

Hot blissful release, quick and sure, his mouth muffling her cries. Definitely worth the risk. His mind was a happy blank for some time, until his thoughts coalesced in a slow, contented swirl. He rolled onto his back, smiling faintly as Bronwyn nestled into his side, her hand on his belly.

"I can see why you might want to check out that Deep Roads entrance," he said, his voice low, "but why the old ruin? Why is that so urgent?"

Bronwyn sighed. Trust Loghain to skip sweet nothings in favor of the hard questions, even after love-making. Relaxed and reassured, she saw no reason not to tell him the truth. He knew enough of it already...why not the rest?

"Because soon I won't be able to make any more Wardens. There's a vital ingredient that I haven't any access to. There might be some at Soldier's Peak, disregarded and forgotten. Not likely, I grant you, but it's my only hope."

"What ingredient?"

"If you must know—and this is another deep, dark secret—it's Archdemon blood. Without Archdemon blood, we'd just be ghouls. Riordan gave me some, but it's nearly gone. I won't be able to get any more from the Grey Wardens. The letters from the other Warden posts have made that quite clear."

"Archdemon blood?" His stomach turned. "How is that even possible? The last Archdemon died four hundred years ago!"

"The mages can preserve it nearly indefinitely. When the army sacked Soldier's Peak, they would not have known what it was. They would have seen only some nondescript vials. I'm hoping that not all of them were smashed."

"And you say the other Wardens won't give you any?"

"The First Warden is very angry with me. In his eyes, I am not Warden-Commander of Ferelden, but an insubordinate junior Warden who is supposed to be in Montsimmard as we speak. The other commanders want to know what is happening, but have been ordered to refuse me assistance. The Nevarran commander is sympathetic, and at least gave me some information. You'll find this interesting. It is generally believed that the assault on Ferelden is only a *feint*."

"A *feint*?"

Bronwyn rest her head on his shoulder, enjoying the warmth and strength of the arm wrapping around her. She felt rather forgiving. Perhaps he had been right to insist they wait until they could be more discreet.

"If it *were* a *feint*," she pointed out, "the Archdemon would want it to be convincing. There is no convincing the rest of Thedas, however. They want to keep their own Wardens close to home. I daresay we would have been much the same, had the darkspawn attacked Rivain, for instance."

He snorted at the thought of rendering military assistance to Rivain—or any other country, actually. "How many more Wardens can you make?"

"Maybe eight or nine. And of those perhaps only half would live. After that, there's nothing. I haven't found anything at the Compound. Perhaps Weisshaupt was doling out supplies to Duncan. It's not something that the housekeeper would know about."

On the other side of the wall, a woman's voice, hoarse with sleep, cried out, "*No! No! Maker save me!*"

Loghain tensed, wondering if the Orlesian were being murdered. Bronwyn held him fast, murmuring, "Only a nightmare. Only a nightmare. We have them all the time, when the darkspawn visit us in the Fade. Grey Wardens are unquiet sleepers, especially during a Blight. I hope you won't find it too taxing." Her hand drifted lower. "Now can we talk about something other than the war?"

They took their time, moving from position to position, happily adventurous. Afterward, Loghain dared no longer stay, for fear of falling asleep in this very pleasant place. His clothes and boots were reluctantly donned, and Bronwyn threw on a sumptuous red dressing gown.

"You should always wear red," Loghain said, his gruff sincerity more pleasing to Bronwyn than any studied compliment.

She smiled and lit a candle, and led the way through the

flickering shadows in the Warden's Hall. Loghain glanced about him, reflexively looking for ambushes. A wayward gleam shone on the portrait of Duncan as they passed. The dark eyes followed Loghain, amused and saturnine. Loghain spared the portrait a sneer.

They reached the outer door without discovery. Bronwyn demanded a last, fervent kiss before he slipped away into the dark.

The very large party that left Denerim on the nineteenth of Harvestmere had several objectives.

Fergus Cousland wanted peace restored to the Arling of Amaranthine. To that end, his company included Nathaniel Howe, who would spend a few days at the Howe fortress of Vigil's Keep conferring with his seneschal and getting a better grasp of the general situation. At Vigil's Keep, the party would divide. Fergus' squire Seyton—now Ser Daniel Seyton—would go west with a band of picked men to the bannorn of Knotwood Hills. If he were to be appointed the bann there, he must be known to the people. Many would be glad of the change from the squabbling and oppressive Pactions.

Fergus would go north, however. The city of Amaranthine beckoned. He wanted to get his man Hawke well situated there before Satalia. Money was granted to give the people some cheer for the festival. Fergus would get a great deal of the credit, but more would go to the new castellan. Fergus had faith in Hawke's good sense. Amaranthine was a rich and

immensely important city to the Fereldan economy. Much of the trade from Antiva and the Free Marches came through the Amaranthine docks.

From Amaranthine, Bronwyn and her Wardens would take the Coast Road west to Soldier's Peak. For various reasons, there was not much along that stretch of the Coastlands. Forlorn Cove had once been the bustling fishing village of Thymney, but had been laid waste during the Occupation—hence the name. A few hamlets made wide spots in the road, but were not more than a homestead or two and a fishing dock. At the point where the Coast Road dipped down beside the Coast Range and turned south to connect with the North Road, there was the little village of Breaker's Cove. Fergus had been through there once, and remembered that it was remote, undeveloped, and very, very small. There was a tavern there, at least, where the Wardens could take shelter. From there, they could penetrate into the mountains with their guide, Levi Dryden, and make for the ancient Warden fortress of Soldier's Peak.

Bronwyn had not been very forthcoming about her reasons for visiting the old castle, but it was clear that if she was going to go before spring, she must go now. Then too, she wanted to make certain the darkspawn were not creeping out of the Deep Roads entrance at Drake's Fall. They would have just enough time to return for the feast of Satinalia, and after that she would have only half a month to prepare for her wedding on the fourteenth of Firstfall. *That* was going to be quite the affair.

He, Bronwyn, and Loghain had already thrashed out some ideas about the wedding. The ceremony itself would be in the Cathedral—presumably thoroughly searched and returned to Chantry hands by then—but the debate had been over where to hold the ensuing feast. Loghain had a house in town, the ancient city residence of the Teyrnys of Gwaren; but since he had always lived at the Palace proper since the return of the king, the townhouse was shut up and looked after by a caretaker and his wife. Loghain would have to have major work done to put the house in order for an event like a wedding. There was Highever House, of course, and Fergus liked the idea of giving his sister a proper send-off to married life. Bronwyn seemed to like the idea herself. The other choice, of course, was the Palace itself. That was where Anora's wedding feast had taken place.

None of them thought that a particularly good idea.

"Presumptuous," said Bronwyn, dismissing it. Highever House it was to be, then.

In a way, it was good to escape Denerim for a few days, and thus escape the looks Loghain was giving him. The man missed nothing, and certainly had not missed Fergus' interest in the Dowager Queen. What did Loghain expect? That Anora would withdraw from society and rusticate in the country—or even take Chantry vows? Besides, it was absurd of Loghain to be touchy about giving away his daughter to Fergus, when he had not hesitated to give her to Cailan. For that matter, Fergus was entrusting his own sister to the man, which seemed him far riskier and more venturesome than a match

between Anora and Fergus, who were almost exactly of an age.

Anora was much too young and beautiful to live alone—more beautiful than ever, in fact. And Fergus hoped that a marriage between them would be blessed with children. Perhaps even *lots* of children. He might be flattering himself, but she seemed to return his own interest, smiling at him, encouraging him with her attention.

"You're miles away, my lord," a voice said, recollecting him to the here and now: the horse between his legs and miles stretching behind and before him. He grinned at Hawke.

"Full of plans."

"So it would seem." Hawke grinned back, rather excited about the opportunity ahead. He was to rule the city of Amaranthine on the teyrn's behalf—and that of his direct overlord, the Arl of Amaranthine. Mother and the girls were so proud. He was sorry that he would be far away for Satinalia, but he had left his presents with them, and had theirs in his luggage. They knew he was working for their future, as well as his own.

The horses jogged along, and the soldiers marched sturdily. It was damp and chilly, but the weather was holding. Tonight they would sleep at Vigil's Keep, and the rain could come as it liked. And then, only one more day to his destiny...

He had been introduced to Arl Nathaniel Howe, who was riding a little way behind them. At least everyone was

addressing him as arl. He would not be confirmed until the Landsmeet, but his prospects, with no rivals to challenge him, seemed bright. The young man seemed serious and decent, and no fool, either. Hawke knew he would have a fine line to walk between his professed loyalty to the Teyrn, and the formal oaths that would be expected of him as an Amaranthine vassal. The old man had been a swine and a bastard and a slaver, but no one had had a word of blame for the son, who had been in the Free Marches while he father went to the bad.

The arl was riding beside Lady Bronwyn, and they were carrying on a quiet, unsmiling conversation. Very sensible. If he had been in Howe's shoes, with a treacherous father who had murdered the Cousland kin, Hawke knew he would be doing everything he could to distance him from his father and build what bridges he could. The Teyrn was cool to him. Lady Bronwyn was kind, in a sad, aloof way, but today they were certainly talking.

"You know the Hawkes as well as anyone, Bronwyn."

"I know Carver quite well, and I think he's a fine boy. He's a Warden, of course, so I've spent time with him, and seen him fight, and seen how he deals with danger and pressure. Adam I don't know as well, but he's an outstanding warrior, and quite resourceful and personable. Very tactful. I think he's being considered as much for his ability to get on with people as he is for his fighting ability. Nonetheless, when I've asked anything of him, it's been done, and done well. And both the

lads love their family very much. The women are all very nice, and seem to be more than mere pretty faces."

"Arl Bryland speaks highly of the mage, Mistress Bethany."

"Bethany saved his son's life, Nathaniel. She saved quite a few others, as well." She paused, thinking, and then plunged on.

"When I was a child, I remember being terrified by the Revered Mother's sermons about the evil of the magisters and the perils of magic. Like a child, I pictured mages as sinister, ugly villains, plotting to murder little children, hanging over their beds as they bled them for monstrous rituals. I think I even had bad dreams about them...and I would not be the only child who did! If I have learned nothing else as a Grey Warden, I've learned how false—even wicked—it is to brand them as all the same. I've learned that mages are *people*, Nathaniel, just as elves and dwarves are people. Mage children are as innocent and charming as any other children. Forbidding them the sight of the stars in the heavens or the flowers in the fields is *wrong*. Mages can be power-mad—like many non-mages—but they can be high-spirited or serious, frivolous or bookish, tender-hearted or cruel. They are moved by the beauty of nature and music, they tell jokes and sing songs, and can be as silly as any nobleman's daughter. Bethany Hawke is a mage, but she's also a pretty young girl, with a young girl's hopes and dreams; all of which are circumscribed by the limitations of being a mage in Thedas. I know something about one's role in life imposing limitations, but I've also come to understand how fortunate and privileged

I've been."

She saw him looking at her, his brows knit, and she burst out with an embarrassed laugh. "Sorry! I promise not to preach any more sermons at you!"

Fergus turned in his saddle, scowling to see her laughing with Howe. Almost immediately, he was relieved to see that Howe himself was not laughing. No cheerful camaraderie there, he decided, and returned to his conversation with Adam Hawke.

Nathaniel looked ahead, and said quietly, "Some would call your views radical, but you are clearly not alone. Many are at odds with the Chantry at the moment. Do you reject the right of the Chantry to oversee the mages in their Circles?"

Bronwyn scowled briefly. "I don't know that I would put it exactly like that. Magic can be dangerous, but I do think that the Chantry's treatment of mages is disproportionate to the scale of the threat. I believe there are more humane ways to deal with the issue. I also believe that magic is so valuable that we ought to accept it as part of our lives and make use of it. The mages with the army—and among the Wardens—they've been of inestimable value as fighters and healers. They've been so brave and so resourceful. Is it impossible to credit that a mage might love his country and wish to serve it?"

Nathaniel smiled faintly. "No. Not when you are before him, inspiring him with thrilling speeches."

"Ha!" She shrugged. "I deserved that. But I retract nothing. I've met all sorts of people that ordinarily I would have been sheltered from all my life. Some of them were horrid, but many were kind and clever and brave, and some were beautiful. And they're all *people*."

She paused a moment, and then laughed again. "Well, all but the darkspawn, anyway."

After consideration, and with the advice of Seneschal Varel, Nathaniel went with them all the way to the city of Amaranthine.

It was the sensible thing to do, and showed teyrn and arl working together, united in their choice of castellan for the city.

Amaranthine had been restless since the departure of Bann Esmerelle. She had not been particularly beloved, or even a particularly good ruler of the city, but she was a known quality. People could predict how she would act in a given situation. Granted, it was usually in an unpleasant and venal way, but one could prepare for that.

Adam Hawke felt the eyes on him, anxious, hostile, questioning, hopeful—even admiring. He was presented to the Guard Captain, the Revered Mother, and the city worthies, and made a short speech himself. It was not hard to feel motivated. Teyrn Fergus had hinted that if Adam did well, this could be permanent for him, and would carry the traditional

title.

To be a bann of Ferelden! To sit in the Landsmeet! Such a dizzying rise had never been seen in the history of Ferelden. Even Teyrn Loghain had put in hard years of service during the Rebellion to earn his rank.

That was a sobering thought. Years had passed, and there were those who still resented the great man; who felt that a peasant had no place amongst them. Adam hoped that he could avoid that particular charge. People knew of his noble mother, and he admitted that Mother had been shrewd to call herself "Lady Amell" from the first. It would soften the feelings of those who considered nobles like themselves to be a race apart.

He looked out the window of his comfortable quarters. Up so high, he could look out over the city walls and see the harbor beyond, the water grey and glittering. Further off was the dim haze that he had been told were the shores of the Fair Isle and Brandel's Reach. This was where the Amaranthine Ocean blended into the Waking Sea: a point of ambiguity on the map of the world; a place of infinite possibility. He would make this work, and make all of this his own.

"I'd like Varel to have Hafterhold," Nathaniel said, apropos of nothing, as he and Fergus inspected the docks of Amaranthine.

Fergus scowled. Howe had been quiet enough when Fergus

told him what was in motion for the vacant fiefdoms. Perhaps he should have waited until everything was settled, and there was nothing else to be disposed of. He grunted noncommittally, thinking it over.

Actually, it was not a bad idea at all. He trusted Varel himself. He was a man had defied Rendon Howe's orders and been demoted for opposing his crimes. He was indisputably honest and certainly competent. And Hafterhold, so close to Vigil's Keep, was a shrewd choice. Nathaniel could keep Varel on as an advisor, and Varel could have a man of his own manage the small bannorn.

For that matter, it would be no bad thing to have a man of Varel's good sense and rectitude in the Landsmeet. Depending on who held multiple fiefdoms, the actual voting members of the Landsmeet usually varied in number between thirty and forty-five at maximum. At the moment they were actually down to twenty-eight, giving each vote additional importance. Too many in the Landsmeet were greedy half-wits, thinking themselves important because of things their great-great-grandfathers had done. Ferelden was short of nobles, and more importantly, short of *competent* nobles.

Finally, he said, "Does Varel have any children? I really don't know."

"There's a son in the army. In their cousin's company, actually. I don't think Varel thought his family had much of a future here in Amaranthine back in my father's day. There's a daughter, too, but she took Chantry vows years ago. Varel goes to see

her now and then."

Fergus nodded. "An heir. That's good. At his age, having an heir will help his claim."

It was strange, walking together...talking. At times, it was almost as if the horrors of the past year had never happened. Almost.

Bronwyn led the way out from the west gate of Amaranthine, rather glad to be on the move again. The tension between Fergus and Nathaniel was so painful and fraught; the air so charged, so full of ambivalence, that she needed to get on her horse and get away. And Soldier's Peak beckoned. She was restlessly excited at the prospect.

Most of the party was mounted. They had a wagon to carry their gear, driven by their guide, Levi Dryden. The wagon was something of a luxury, but it also slowed their progress as they traveled the Coast Road. Moving so slowly, Bronwyn could indulge Cathair, who preferred to walk. The elf seemed to be enjoying himself, as he admired the view of the sea or leaned over for a closer look at late-blooming blood-lotus. One would have thought him off in a world of his own, until he straightened suddenly and put an arrow in an overbold rabbit. Said rabbit was promptly stuffed into his game bag and designated as supper.

Morrigan rode out of town, but then grew bored and took to the skies, creeling scornfully over their heads. After a

moment, Anders joined her, leaving an indulgent Jowan to lead their horses. Cathair seemed to enjoy the shape-shifting, too, smiling and pointing. Aveline and Toliver were fearfully startled, though they had been quietly apprised of the mages' abilities, and told not to gossip about them outside the Wardens. The two dwarves, Hakan and Soren, were already so full of wonders that the mere fact of humans turning into birds seemed all of a piece with everything else.

Levi Dryden saw the birds, and smiled nervously. He had spoken to Bronwyn with some passion about his desire to uncover the mysteries of the Wardens, but some mysteries, when seen in person, clearly made him uncomfortable.

Hakan sat with him on the wagon seat, luckily, distracting him by asking questions about ox-driving. Soren lounged in the back, at his ease on a pile of blankets. As the breeze off the Waking Sea sharpened, Bronwyn thought he had the best of it.

"So, my Warden?" Zevran asked. "What do you expect to find in this mysterious, lost fortress? Ancient tomes? Forgotten wisdom? Weapons of virtue? Personally, I hope it is gold: a great deal of gold."

Bronwyn laughed. "I'd love to find a great deal of gold! Unlikely, though. The place was sacked during King Arland's siege, I believe, and it's unlikely that the attackers would have left any gold behind. Books, however...records of the Wardens...maybe a few magical items of no apparent worth to someone not a Warden...I think that's the most we can

hope for."

"What about a country estate?" Carver teased, rather enjoying the day himself. "If the castle isn't such a ruin as the Warden outpost down south, maybe it'll be a place to get away to in the summer!"

"We'll see," Bronwyn smiled. Very likely the roof had collapsed, but perhaps there was something there: some outbuilding or cottage or other. Everything seemed to indicate that Soldier's Peak had been a sizable foundation. Soren knew a bit about masonry, and could tell her what could be repaired, and what would have to be rebuilt from the ground up. A little castle of their own would be very nice, but how serious repairs were to be paid for was anybody's guess.

What she really hoped for were indeed books and lore, and more urgently, perhaps on a dusty shelf in some decrepit cupboard, those vials of Archdemon blood.

They passed the ruins of Thymney at Forlorn Cove, and rested the horses and oxen, gazing down to the sea. There was wreckage on the beach, and Zevran wandered off to do a bit of salvaging. Curious, Cathair and the dwarves followed him. No one found anything of particular value, but Cathair picked up a small piece of driftwood of unusual beauty. Bronwyn allowed him to stow it in the wagon.

"I shall use it to make a carving," Cathair explained in his dreamy way. "Carving is very soothing. I shall not destroy the natural shape, but enhance it."

Leliana approved. "Everyone should have a hobby."

They passed a few cottages and farmsteads. Up on a bluff was a stone house with a long staircase carved into the living rock, leading down to a dock. A very pretty fishing boat with striped sails was moored there. The boatmen stared at the passing company, their faces grim and their hands out of sight.

"Smugglers," was Zevran's opinion. "They fear we are the law."

"Ha!" Carver snorted. "I haven't seen much law anywhere north of Denerim!"

Bronwyn smiled ruefully, thinking of all the looting she had done. "They could be worse," she said. "They might be wreckers as well: putting out a light during bad weather, and luring in ships who think they've reached Amaranthine City. For all I know they're wreckers at Breaker's Cove. We'll want to be discreet in asking questions."

"My only question," Toliver muttered, "will be 'where do they keep the ale?'"

"Could we eat soon?" Leliana wondered. "Could we eat on the beach? That would be very nice."

There was a general consensus that eating soon would be entirely appropriate.

"We'll stop at the next stretch of good, *deserted* beach we see," Bronwyn promised.

This part of Amaranthine had never really recovered from the Orlesians occupation and the later Rebellion. Decaying piles of wood and stone marked the sites of formerly prosperous hamlets and farmholds. Amaranthine had born the brunt of the original Orlesian invasion, and the invaders had been ruthless in gaining a foothold. Bronwyn remembered Father and Rendon Howe discussing the matter on many occasions. Most common people wanted peace above all. Why had the Orlesians been so wantonly destructive? Had they restrained themselves even a little—had they proved benevolent masters—had they not sent a mad dog like Meghren to be king—they very well might have succeeded, and Ferelden might be an Orlesian province right now.

But the Orlesians had been greedy and stupid... and cruel. They had not *wanted* to restrain themselves. What they *did* want was to turn Ferelden freeholders into trembling serfs. It had amused them to hear of Ferelden nobles enduring Meghren's humiliations and torments. Their cruelty had been their undoing. Had people not been so desperate, they never would have risen in support of the dispossessed Rebel Queen Moira. If Meghren had been a decent king, Maric would never have had a chance, even with Rowan and Loghain at his side.

"In fact," Father had said, *"If Meghren hadn't allowed wholesale plundering and murder, it's likely that Loghain would today be a shrewd, respected farmholder, and not*

Teyrn of Gwaren. Driving people off their land drove them to banditry or rebellion. If Meghren had had a full set of wits, he would have snatched up Rowan himself and made her his Queen."

"You're very quiet, Bronwyn," Leliana said.

"I was just thinking about the power of dynastic marriages."

More ruins, a picnic lunch on the beach, with yet more rabbits courtesy of Anders and Morrigan. Scout had got one himself, but was not inclined to share.

Then more riding along the coast, accompanied by the music of the surf; more cottages, more ruins, more fishing boats. By mid-afternoon, they reached the tiny village of Breaker's Cove. At least Bronwyn told a man outside the single public house that it was Breaker's Cove, and he agreed with her.

The little tavern was called The Wardog Inn, and was about the size of a kennel. At least the ale was good. The innkeeper was taken aback at the size of the Wardens' party. Pallets and blankets were spread in the two small guestrooms, and the Wardens counted themselves lucky to have a roof over their heads for the night.

"And don't go telling people our destination," Bronwyn ordered. "That's Warden business."

They left at first light, only stopping long enough for bowls of thin porridge. It was dim and overcast, the low clouds a flat

expanse of iron in the sky. The winds vexed the sea beyond, and the surf roared up foaming onto the docks.

"It's not far," Bronwyn told her people, "but it will be mostly uphill."

Levi Dryden had a map of sorts, but was not perfectly skilled at reading it. The mouth of a tunnel was found, and torches lit. They dismounted and led the horses. It was pleasant to be out of the sharp wind, but confusing in the smoky darkness. At length, Bronwyn tactfully relieved the man of his map, oriented herself and kept her people moving until they saw a glimmer of light ahead.

They emerged into the splendor of the mountains, and to a steep grade, which forced them to lend a hand pushing the wagon. They turned a corner, sweating and cursing, and then there were gasps.

"Maker!" cried Levi. "Look at the size of that fortress!"

"Not bad," Hakan remarked to Soren. "There's some good stonework there. Must have hired dwarves."

Bronwyn stumbled, gaping. Bigger than Vigil's Keep, bigger than Castle Highever, the towers of Soldier's Peak pierced the sky. Its bulk spread over the summit, imposing and...intact. The air was fresh, the sky pellucid, and the castle seemed realer than real.

"I can't believe it!" she burst out. "Some broken shutters, here

and there, but even the outbuildings are still sound!"

"Magnificent!" breathed Aveline. "This is the greatest castle in Ferelden!"

"It's old, too," Jowan told them, "Really old. It was built by Commander Asturian in the Glory Age, three hundred years before King Calenhad united Ferelden. All the northern teyrns contributed to it, because Asturian arrived just after the end of the Second Blight, and it was fresh in their minds."

Levi Dryden, from his vantage on the wagon seat, said, "A hundred Wardens held off the whole army for over a year! In the end they were starving. Otherwise, I reckon they could have sat here forever, thumbing their nose at the King!"

"The terrain is too vertical for siege engines to be effective," Bronwyn muttered to herself. "This is an amazingly defensible position. A hundred men held it for a year? I believe it now."

The Wardens gathered in the gateway, some punching each other in excitement, some sizing up the edifice with warier eyes.

Leliana said, "It might not be so nice on the inside. There was a battle here, after all. It is unlikely that the victors tidied up afterward."

Anders chuckled at that, but Morrigan said softly. "Be cautious. Too much blood has soaked into the earth. The Veil is thin here."

As if in response to her words, misty figures coalesced before them: the past relived for all of them to see. Carver reached out hesitantly to touch one of the figures, but his hand went through the unheeding phantom.

"Don't, Carver!" Leliana whispered. "Watch!"

A big man in plate armor shouted at his men to fall back. The royal army had made an assault, and had failed. The soldiers looked...frightened.

"—and so we starve them out, then!" the nobleman snarled.

Abruptly the vision blinked out.

"Did everyone see that?" asked Carver, "Or am I losing my mind?"

"Yes, to the first question," said Morrigan. "To the second..."

"Everyone saw it," Bronwyn affirmed. "Astonishing. Is there some way to exorcise such spirits? A steady diet of them might be inconvenient and distracting."

"Not as distracting as *that*," Zevran remarked.

From the earth of the courtyard, skeletal figures were rising, bones assembling in swift order. Hanging from the fleshless shoulders were ragged Grey Warden tunics. With an eldritch howl, the skeletons lifted their blades, and charged.

Thanks to my reviewers: Tsu Doh Nimh, Kira Kyuu, Zute, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Amanda weber, timunderwood9, KnightOfHolyLight, Raxiselic, Jenna53, jackOfBladesX, Halm Vendrella, Have Socks. Will Travel, kirbster676, Phygmalion, Chandagnac, Hydropatypus, Mike3207, Nemrut, Shakespira, Biff McLaughlin, EpitomyofShyness, Josie Lange, almostinsane, mille libri, Crazy lemon, and Psyche Sinclair.

I do think that the Dalish would find the Rite of Tranquility revolting, alien, and a crime against nature. It's yet another reason for them never to let the Templars take their magical children.

I really cannot believe that I have written over a million words of Dragon Age fanfiction.

Oh—and check my author's page for my most recent publication. Only a flash fic, but it was fun.

To anon4625, who said: I like how in Chapter 28 Anora says it a very bad idea to give most of North Ferelden(Highever and Amaranthine) to one man when it is Howe, yet is very enthusiastic to do it in the latest chapter when it concerns Fergus. How the worm does turn.

Absolutely. If she's going to marry Fergus, she's wants him to be as powerful as possible, and the Crown's authority can go hang. She doesn't even perceive her hypocrisy, and would shrug if you pointed it out to her.

69. Last Man Standing

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 69: Last Man Standing

Bronwyn had seen the living dead before, with Zevran in the elven ruins. Others had fought ferocious phantoms in Orzammar. For the rest, these were enemies, in arms against them, and they fought back against the creatures, freezing them, hacking them apart, smashing them down, ending them. Not all the skeletons wore the insignia of the Grey Wardens. Others wore the rampant mabaris of the crown of Ferelden. Though they had fought each long ago, the dead were united in their hatred of the living. On the steps, leading to the castle door, a skeleton used an antique crossbow with formidable skill. Bronwyn threw up her shield before her and slammed the thing back. Carver's sword swung down and beheaded it. Whatever evil enchantments animated the creatures, beheading them seemed to be effective.

"More of them!" Morrigan shouted, pointing behind them to a slope near one of the towers. One of the dead was casting spells. Scout bayed at the attackers, and barreled toward them, knocking them flying. There were archers among them, too.

Once these unquiet spirits were put to rest, the Wardens ranged over the big courtyard, poking into outbuildings, peering into lofts. They tried the door to the nearest tower: a tall, freestanding structure connected at its top to the castle by a stone bridge. The door did not budge.

"Probably barred inside. Doesn't look like the king's men got in here," Carver said.

Anders took another look at the tower. "There might be a magical barrier, too," he said thoughtfully, hidden behind the door. That's subtle."

Aveline looked uneasily at the castle's arrow slits. "I would half expect ghostly archers to shoot down upon us."

"Fine with me that they're not," grunted Soren.

Everyone agreed with that.

"Clear here!" called Toliver from a doorway. "This was the smithy. It's all over dust, but the tools are still sound. Not even very rusty!"

"Something or someone has cast some serious preservation magic over the place," Anders told Bronwyn. "It's the only thing that explains the condition of the castle and courtyard."

"If the spells wore off," Bronwyn wondered, "Would everything collapse into decay?"

Anders shook his head. "Doesn't work that way. If the spells

wore off, the usual processes would take over, sort as if the battle happened that day." He thought a little more. "Except the spells weren't cast the day after the battle. Maybe months or a years later, which would explain the skeletons."

"I concur," Morrigan agreed. "Powerful magic has been done here. The preservation spells themselves are not malevolent. Neutral magic, if you will."

Cathair wandered about, curious and disapproving. "Do not humans dispose of their dead? Why were all these bodies left to rot under the sun and rain?"

"It's a puzzlement," Bronwyn agreed. "We are told that King Arland's forces triumphed, and the Wardens were exiled. That clearly is not the full story. The Wardens seemed to have been killed, rather than exiled, and the king's forces did not remain here long enough to burn even their own dead."

"I found the spring house!" Carver called, coming around a corner of the castle. "There's a spout that faces the stables. I think another one is on the other side of the wall inside the cellar of the castle. They had good water."

That was practically an invitation. The water bubbling out of the bronze griffon head was cold, clear, and fresh. They took turns drinking and refilling their canteens.

"Carver, water the horses before we enter the castle," Bronwyn ordered. "Levi!" she shouted. "Unhitch the oxen and bring them around to the watering trough!"

The trader had hidden in the wagon during the fight. Now he peeked out from the sheltering canvas, trembling.

"Is it safe?"

"For now. Out here," answered Bronwyn. "Who knows what we'll find inside?"

The man edged over to her, nervous and fearful. Bronwyn wondered why he was here. Why not give them the map and wait for them at Breaker's Cove? He had said something about wanting to redeem his family's honor. He wanted to find historical evidence that Sophia Dryden was no traitor, but the innocent victim of the tyrannical King Arland. Even if King Arland had been a tyrant, that in itself was certainly no evidence that Sophia had not rebelled against him.

With the Arling of Denerim vacant, did he hope to put in a claim for it? Sophia Drydan had been Arlessa of Denerim before she was made a Grey Warden and her children disinherited. The arling had eventually served as a dowry at the marriage of a royal princess to one of the Kendalls. The Kendalls, according to Cousin Leonas, were far from extinct.

Bronwyn thought nothing could be less likely than the Drydens being reinstated to the Landsmeet. Too much time had passed; too much opprobrium had been heaped on their name. Even if Sophia were found to be as innocent as a spring lamb, there was little, realistically, that could come of it. Perhaps the trader would find a scholar to write a revisionist history of the period. The question was: who would read it, or

act on it if they did?

After their rest, they opened the heavy double doors. The doors were unbarred, and opened easily, without even squeaking. The Wardens stepped into a high-ceilinged, chilly entrance hall, its rafters meeting at a sharp angle at the ridge line. Faded banners hung from the ceiling, a little shabby and threadbare, but still colorful. Dusty benches lined the plastered walls.

And abruptly before them was another vision. They gathered, pushing for the best view, as misty figures in Grey Warden gear met in council: a Dalish elf, a dwarf, humans; axemen and hammermen and swordsmen; archers and mages.

One mage, whom the others called Avernus, was reporting low morale to a slender woman in splendid plate armor, whom he called "*Sophia.*"

Levi, on the fringes of the group, leaned over with a quick intake of breath.

Yes, Sophia Dryden: last Warden Commander in Ferelden before the return of the order twenty years ago. The edges of the woman were blurred, but her voice was clear and powerful.

"Men, I won't lie to you. The situation is grim: our forces outnumbered, our bellies empty, and our hearts are sagging. But we are Wardens! Darkspawn flee when they hear our horns. Archdemons die when they taste our blades. So are

we to bend knee to a mere human despot? No! I, for one, will never give up! I, for one will never surrender, just to dance on Arland's gallows..."

It was a powerful appeal to their courage, but a counsel of desperation. Bronwyn scowled. This woman had led the Wardens to death and disaster. A charismatic leader, but perhaps not a very prudent one. And one of vaulting ambition, from all accounts.

The vision faded to nothing.

"That was quite the speech," Anders said cheerfully. "Sounds a bit like you, Bronwyn, though I don't care for the part about the gallows. Don't get us hanged, all right?"

"Or lead us in some heroic last stand in which everybody dies," Zevran added. "It sounds good in a song, but it must be very uncomfortable to experience."

"For me, too," she agreed, with a wry smile. She jerked her chin at the arched portal before them.

Carver and Toliver moved to either side and gave the door a nudge. It, too, swung open easily.

"Demon!" shouted Jowan.

The big, dark common room was occupied by three demons, in fact. One was the horrid apparition called an Arcane Horror: powerful in magical offense, but comparatively fragile.

Morrigan sneered elegantly when it at last collapsed to dust in front of the fireplace. The Wardens moved carefully about the chamber, looking for clues and treasure. There was a door on either side, and another opening directly opposite the entry way, but that was unusable due to the remains of hastily-constructed barricades.

Left or right? Bronwyn considered the exterior she had seen, and thought that the door to the left would not be as complicated as the other.

It was complicated enough. More of the walking dead attacked, one of them very powerful and aggressive. Once again, the mages' freezing and immobilization spells were essential. Some of the skeletons shattered to bits, leaving the leader to be mobbed and smashed.

"A barracks? " Aveline wondered, looking about. "A training room? "

"Both," decided Carver. "Which would *not* be conducive to sound sleep."

"And no privacy at all," Leliana added, disapproving.

It was a very large, high room on two levels. At entry level, there were archery targets and weapons stands, along with tin bathtubs and a table with the remains of its last card game. Up a short staircase was a gallery along the length of the room, filled with bunkbeds, trunks, and cracked chamberpots. There had been a battle here long ago, too.

"The bunks aren't in bad shape!" Toliver said cheerfully, sitting on a lower one and bouncing a little.

"If you don't mind sleeping on dead guys' mattresses," snarked Carver.

"I don't think I'd keep the bunks in here," Bronwyn remarked, thinking to herself.. "I'd have to see the rest of the castle, but perhaps this should be a training room only, with the level above for seating and observation. It's rather nice, really, and in bad weather very practicall."

"You sound," Morrigan said, "like you are ready to move in and take up housekeeping."

Bronwyn nodded. "If the demons can be destroyed and the Veil repaired, this could be immensely useful. If the rest of it is in this condition, it wouldn't cost a fortune to make it habitable."

"I want to see the bedchambers first," Leliana muttered. "The Compound is so pleasant in comparison."

"Not as many skeletons littering the floor, certainly," Cathair agreed.

They moved back into the big common room. Morrigan used a mild concussive spell to shake ancient soot and leave from the chimney. Part of the old barricades were used to lay a fire. In a short time, the blaze was taking the worst of the chill off the air in the room.

Carver found a scrap of parchment, which was, interestingly enough, a note from someone who appeared to be an ancestor of Arl Wulffe, begging Sophia Dryden for help against King Arland.

Sophia,

Arl Ruahn and his entire family have been slaughtered, even the children. The Ruahn line is no more and the arling belongs to the crown, for now. Arland believed Ruahn was plotting against him. Ruahn criticized the king's spending on Wintersend-that is all. It was an idle word, spoken out of turn. The king goes too far. His brain is filled with madness and he clings to the crown like a drowning man clutches at a straw.

Sophia, I beg you, help us. If nothing is done, more will suffer.

Your humble servant,

-Wulffe

"Told you!" Levi said smugly. "Old King Arland was a terrible tyrant, he was."

Everyone had a sip of water and a bit of food, and then it was time to move on.

"Door," Bronwyn ordered.

This led to a long hall, running parallel to the common room, and several doors led off from it. Blessedly, there were no demons or walking dead awaiting them.

The first door led to the kitchen: a large, big one, too, and well lit by high windows. A few human bones were scattered around the room, but nothing manifested from them.

"We should do something about these bones," Aveline muttered.

Bronwyn heard her. "If we are successful in clearing out the demons, we'll collect all the human remains, take them outside and burn them in a single place. We'll find a way to mark it too, and perhaps eventually put up a memorial stone."

Anders helped Morrigan clear this chimney as well, while Toliver poked into piles of sacks, crocks, and crates. Everything was empty. The Wardens had been living on air, at the end.

The door on the same wall at the far end of the hall led down some steps to a lower level. Once again, there were no demons here. No human remains, either.

"I don't think the king's men ever got this far," Jowan said slowly. "I think they killed all the Wardens, or thought they had, and then demons might have driven them off."

"I think you're right," Carver agreed. "There's a lot of stuff here. Dusty and dirty, but usable."

"It's interesting," Jowan mused. "I think that anything that looks particularly shabby or dilapidated already was like that. Maybe the Wardens hadn't been keeping up the place very well."

"Possibly," Bronwyn considered. Very possible, if the order was in bad odor with the King. Sophia had been forced to become a Warden in order to remove her as Arland's rival. Then Wardens went and elected her Commander. That must have stuck in the King's craw. Maybe the clash was inevitable, and maybe the Ferelden Wardens had been feeling his wrath in little ways before the outbreak of overt war.

She touched Jowan gently on the shoulder, to get his attention. "You know what we're *really* looking for," she whispered.

Jowan nodded, and Anders, nearby, gave her a wink. They had been privately briefed about their need for Archdemon blood. The Wardens could have hidden it anywhere.

They moved, alert and cautious, from room to room. They found the barracks. First there were twelve smallish rooms, each containing a pair of bunkbeds. Four even smaller rooms held a single bed each. Two big rooms held six bunkbeds. Around a corner and down some rather rickety stairs, they found the storage cellars, a clothing workshop, a still room, a wine cellar filled with shattered bottles and long-drained barrels, and finally the spring house, which, as Carver had guessed, did indeed have a spigot on the inside of the castle. It worked, too, and the water ran clear after a minute or so.

Down yet more stairs were dungeons, amounting to a pair of stocks, a whipping post, and three cells. Unsurprising, of course, but completely empty.

Bronwyn walked back upstairs, collecting her thoughts about her find. There was so much more than she had expected or dared hope for. There was potential here: a lot of potential. She glanced at an open cupboard of linens in puzzlement.

"Why haven't the rats got into everything?"

"No rats," Anders declared. "No mice. No vermin of any kind. Part of the spells that were laid down. Now that we've opened up the place again, we might think about getting a cat. I'd like a tabby, myself."

"It's a fine place," Hakan said to Soren. "Better than anything the Legion ever gave us."

"Very nice indeed," Bronwyn said, "but we'd best get back to the demon-infested main keep."

"Joy," sighed Zevran.

They stepped back into the hall, and across it was the last door: a door badly damaged by heavy blows. This was opened cautiously, and Bronwyn instantly got a very bad feeling. It was the ravaged ruin of the library, and it had seen plenty of fighting, judging from the scorch marks and jumbles of bones. Tables and chairs were overturned, and the pillars were scarred by swords and axes. Books were scattered

everything. Nearly incinerated, a large tome lay open on the floor. Jowan reach out a tentative hand, and instantly triggered yet another vision.

A greying man inmage's robes was writing furiously into a large codex. Muffled shouts and screams filled the air, and an ominous, regular, booming noise shook the stones. The man's assistant, a young female mage, frantic with terror, begged him to hurry.

"The door won't hold, Archivist!"

"Almost done. The truth must be told."

"What does it matter now?" the girl moaned. "We're dead."

The man kept on writing, his face strained and intent. "Our grand rebellion! So close! And to die here a stillbirth..."

"We never should have done it!" the girl cried. "Wardens aren't supposed to oppose kings and princes!"

"Should we stand idly by and—"

With the crash of a forced door, the vision blinked out, and in its place rose up Rage Demons, blazing like pillars of fire, bitterly aggrieved at their fate. The Wardens fell back. Scorching fire licked at their armor and crisped their hair. The mages shouting out freezing spells, but yet more of the demons emerged, rushing at them vengefully.

Everyone was burned, some of them rather badly. The demons were put down, and the mages performed healing spells. There was general interest in the book collection: some of it looked very old and valuable. The chairs and tables were righted, the floor cleared, and a staircase leading up beckoned them on.

They first found a little mezzanine, which Bronwyn liked the best of any room she had yet seen. It featured a little fireplace and a very dark and dirty portrait, which in archaic letters was labeled as that of Commander Asturian. It would be a very pleasant sitting room, once the grime was scraped away.

A few steps took them up to the second floor proper, which at first glance appeared to be entirely wasted space. A large dining table was arranged in a corner, but the big open area seemed otherwise empty. There were plenty of high windows in the walls, but most of them were tightly shuttered. The Wardens moved through the dim interior, some of them, like Leliana, already picturing partitions and improvements.

"Stop." Morrigan whispered. "Against the wall. A spirit mirror. And there on the floor... That part of the room was used for magical rituals."

"Summoning circles," Jowan squeaked. "It looks like some lunatic was summoning dem—"

They were in the middle of yet another vision, and this was the most violent and frightening of them all. Levi shrieked, and

flung himself away. King's men and Wardens cut and slashed at each other, and another element had been introduced.

"Make them pay for every inch, men!" shouted Sophia, her blade flashing. "Avernus! We need you!"

The mage's arms were lifted, as he recited an incantation in Arcanum. Demons boiled out of the summoning circles, falling upon the king's men, ripping and tearing at the screaming, horrified soldiers.

"More, Avernus!" Sophia cried, wild with battle. "More! Whatever it takes! Press them! Press them now!"

A soldier screamed in a demon's grip. Not sated, the demon lashed out, slashing open a Grey Warden's belly. More demons fell on any warriors within reach, caring nothing for their allegiances, but only that they were living prey.

"No!" shouted Avernus. "I command you! Attack the King's men only!"

A demon drifted toward him, and a deep, gurgling voice issued forth.

"So much death...so much suffering...and...oh, yes...blood! The Veil is torn. Your soul is mine, Avernus!"

"Acolytes," cried Avernus. "Retreat!"

The mages scrambled up the stairs. Some were caught by

demonic talons, and dragged down. In the midst of the slaughter, Sophia Dryden still stood, fighting to the last, her face a mask of pride and despair.

"Avernus!" she shouted. "Avernus!"

They hardly knew where the vision ended and the demons began. A Hunger Demon surged toward them, feeding off the spirits of the walking dead. Its single eye glowed red as flame until Cathair put an arrow in it. Scout worried at an ankle, while the rest of them hacked at it. It threw out sudden bursts of raw power, knocking them aside, but with every surge it grew weaker, and eventually lay on the stones, rapidly deliquescing.

"Raising demons!" Levi said, discontented. "I thought my family was better than that."

Bronwyn cast him a look, biting back the retort that rose to her lips. *Obviously they were not.*

"It was life and death," Jowan consoled him.

"It was interesting, though," Anders remarked. "That mage Avernus called the junior mages 'acolytes.' That's the old Tevinter term for apprentice mages. Maybe the Grey Wardens have some other Tevinter customs."

"Probably," Jowan agreed. "Whether we wish to admit it or not, it's perfectly obvious that the Grey Wardens were a Tevinter creation. Just as the magisters who caused mankind

to be cursed by darkspawn were Tevinter, so were those who developed the darkspawn's greatest enemies."

"The Chantry—" argued Leliana.

"Nope." Jowan cut her off, rather cheerfully. "The Chantry gets no credit at all for the Grey Wardens. The Grey Wardens predate the Chantry by hundreds of years. They predate the formation of the Orlesian Empire. We've been around before anybody."

"Not quite," Cathair disagreed, his voice suspiciously gentle. "The elven realm of Arlathan, destroyed by those very magisters, predates you all, and by a very great deal."

Jowan was briefly embarrassed. "Yes. Well. That's true enough."

"I don't think we need any summoning circles," Leliana said primly. "I think this entire floor needs to be completely gutted and remodeled into private bedchambers. Five...maybe six!"

Bronwyn sighed, thinking of their shrinking coin. Probably the little barracks rooms, after a good scrubbing, would have to serve. There were more than enough beds there for all her Wardens, and she would feel not the least shame in claiming one of the little private rooms for herself.

The next door they found opened on another staircase.

Anders murmured, "I don't think the king's men got past the

demons."

They opened the door.

"—and neither did the Wardens, " whispered Bronwyn.

Another handful of walking dead shambled toward them, all clad in filthy griffon tunics. These were frozen, beheaded, and the stilled bones kicked into a corner.

"Oh, what a lovely chapel!" cried Leliana, happily distracted from death-dealing.

The large room was devoted to a beautiful statue of the Prophet, set on a big dais and surrounded by votive candles. Personally, Bronwyn would have put a council chamber here, but Leliana was not the only one admiring the statue.

"Quite the looker, wasn't she?" smirked Anders. "I mean, she was a barbarian. How do we know she wasn't as ugly as a tusked wild boar?"

Morrigan snickered, but Leliana was shocked beyond words.

Bronwyn felt it was only reasonable to assume the Prophet had, indeed, been comely. "If she had been ugly as a tusked wild boar, Anders, a great warlord like Maferath would not have taken her to wife, and other people—and people can be so shallow—would not have followed her, no matter how pure or noble her nature. We know from the record that she had a lovely and ensnaring voice. It was a source of great power for

her. I think it's very likely that she was beautiful enough for people to take notice of her and hear her out."

"That's reasonable," Toliver spoke up. "That makes sense."

"Actually, it does," agreed Zevran, preening slightly. "The beautiful do have certain advantages."

"But we don't *have* to worship that goddess of yours, do we?" Soren asked. "'S'not *required*, is it?"

Before anyone else could say anything, Bronwyn replied, "Absolutely not. All Grey Wardens have a right to their personal beliefs and traditional customs."

"What if they are Chasind?" Morrigan inquired, with a touch of malice. "'Tis *their* custom to eat human flesh!"

Exasperated, Bronwyn snarled, "They'd better not try to eat *mine*. Now, come on!"

The room they entered next was occupied.

Bronwyn halted, staring stupidly at the back of quite a corporeal figure in splendid plate armor. The room was large, and had the look of a study: a reading stand by the fireplace; books on sagging shelves; a broad and well-appointed writing table, littered with parchment and maps. He—no, *she*, from the hair—turned slowly, and Bronwyn stepped into the room, sickened at the sight. Not a skeleton, but surely another of the walking dead, she thought.

"Is that—?" gasped Jowan.

"—Sophia Dryden?" whispered Carver.

"Grandmother?" croaked Levi Dryden.

Then the creature's mouth opened, and it spoke; and Bronwyn knew that no human spirit dwelled behind that blackened, rotting face.

"Come no farther, Warden!" the demon commanded in a hoarse, unnatural voice. "This one would speak to you."

Scout growled at the thing.

The demon growled back. "Get that annoyance away from me!"

"Quiet, Scout," Bronwyn said softly, her hand on the mabari's head. What new devilry was this?

"Why should I speak with you?"

The demon cackled its triumph.

"Because the Peak is mine! I am the Dryden. Sophia. Commander. All of those things."

"Sorry, Levi," muttered Anders. "Your grandmother's become a demon."

"Either that," the trader choked out, "or she's really let herself

go."

Leliana shook her head. "I would not speak to it. It will utter nothing but lies."

"Silence your fledglings!" the demon raged at Bronwyn. "They should be meek...subservient...quiet. This one would propose a deal."

Bronwyn spoke carefully, trying to master her disgust and loathing for the entity that had stolen Sophia Dryden's body. No one, however ambitious or misguided, deserved such an indignity.

"You cannot possibly give me anything that I would want...other than your immediate death."

"Fool!" snarled the Sophia-Demon.

It rushed on them, sword in hand, fighting not like a demon, but like a mere squatter inhabiting a body it had stolen. The body showed some skill with a blade; but without Sophia's quick wit and powerful will, it really was only a puppet. Other skeletons rose from the floor. Levi fled the room, while the Wardens engaged the creatures. Bronwyn chose to fight the Sophia-Demon herself. battering her down, parrying her attacks, always a move ahead of her opponent. The Keening Blade was a big sword, and a bit longer than Bronwyn's last weapon, but it obeyed her like her very flesh.

Scout fought at her side, distracting the demon, nipping at its

legs, snapping at its elbows. The thing tripped, and Bronwyn laughed sharply, kicking in to backheel the thing and bring it crashing to the floor.

"No!" shrieked the eerie, inhuman voice. Bronwyn's sword wailed its deathsong as it came down, beheading the animated corpse. A brief, frenzied thrashing of the decapitated body—a rush of foul air—and the corpse lay still at long last, her splendid griffon-chased armor still gleaming.

All around the room, the walking dead were falling. A skull, sent on its way by Carver, whizzed past Bronwyn's face and crashed into the wall, cracking plaster into a fine white powder. Another of the creatures scabbled behind the writing table, savaged by Scout. Bronwyn dashed to help and kicked the skeleton's ribs apart.

She stumbled, fearfully startled, as her booted foot went completely through the wall, shattering plaster and laths together. Zevran had come up to her side, and caught her, saving her an embarrassing pratfall.

"And stay down!" shouted Leliana, finishing off the last of their assailants. "What's that?" she asked a moment later, staring at the hole in the wall.

"A hiding place!" Zevran shouted. "I knew the Wardens must have treasure somewhere! They concealed this, so that their enemies would never find it. Quick! Let us see!"

Eager hands tore at the thin false wall, widening the hole.

"There *is* a chest in there!" Bronwyn cried. "And more than one!"

Hakan and Soren used their axes to chop away at the remaining lath. The plaster had hid an alcove built into the stonework. A large iron chest was revealed, and on the shelves above, two smaller metal boxes. Everything, of course, was locked, and no one wanted to hunt for keys.

Between them, Leliana and Zevran picked the locks, first succeeding with the smallest of the metal boxes. Opening it with fingers trembling with excitement, Bronwyn cried out in relief at the array of fragile glass vials, carefully packed in goose down. Two...four...there were two dozen of them!

"What are those?" asked Hakan, craning past the taller bodies.

"Potions!" Anders lied genially. They had agreed that the truth would not do in the presence of Levi Dryden. "Special Warden potions. The First Warden won't send us any."

Morrigan rolled her eyes with a superior, knowing smirk. Bronwyn saw the witch's face, and frowned. Had Anders blabbed to her about the Joining potion, or was this something she had knowledge of from Flemeth? Very likely the latter. The idea that Morrigan had special, secret information about the Wardens rather dampened her joy. What else did Morrigan know that she had never revealed?"

"Yes...well...please have a look at them and see if they're still

viable."

Anders took the box, and he and Jowan moved it carefully to the other end of the big writing table. Their faces intent, they began casting dark blue spells over the box's contents.

Leliana handed her the next box: it was wide and flat, and in it was Warden correspondence and recruiting records. Important in the days of Sophia Dryden, but not of much moment now. The tithing rolls would make interesting reading, Bronwyn supposed.

With more effort, the lock on the big iron chest was defeated. Zevran stepped away from the chest, with a bow and a sweeping gesture. the Wardens crowded forward, wanting to see.

Bronwyn took a breath and opened the chest. At first, her only impression was of rather smelly brown leather, and then she realized that she was seeing moneybags. Good sized ones, packed down together into the chest.

"Open them up!" cried Soren, losing control of his curiosity.

Bronwyn reached for a sack, and found it heavy. She untied the cord and poured the contents out over her hand. A river of gold sang sweetly, shining coins falling from the mouth of the bag in a torrent of treasure. They pooled on the tops of the leather bags, clinking: Tevinter coins and Orlesian coins; coins from Nevarra and from Rivain; plenty of Fereldan coins, stamped rather carelessly with the crowned profile of a

scrawny man with a nose like an axeblade. Cries, squeals, moans rose from the assembled companions: the sort of noises heard more normally in the privacy of a bedchamber at crucial moments. Toliver briefly described the Maker performing an unnatural act on Andraste, and Leliana was too numb to raise a hand to him.

"Is it all gold?" Hakan squeaked. "All of it?"

"Can I help count it?" asked Anders.

Cathair stared, enchanted. "It really is very pretty. Beautiful."

There was a brief, reverent silence.

Dazed, confronted with something beyond her wildest hopes, Bronwyn tried to collect her thoughts and take a guess at how much was in the chest. Perhaps not all the bags contained gold, but before her from only one bag was at least a hundred sovereigns. The Grey Wardens would eat and drink and cover their nakedness for the foreseeable future. Reluctantly, she pushed herself away from the chest and shut the lid.

"We don't have time to gloat over this," Bronwyn insisted. "Come on. Now. We're going now. We still have a castle full of demons to deal with. We can count the gold after that's done."

"I could stay and..." Levi tried to offer. Bronwyn gave him a look.

"Not for the world would I deprive you of the knowledge you've come all this way to find," she said coolly. Not that she thought he could carry that big iron chest down the steps on his own; but it would be easy enough to stuff his pockets and boots with gold, and make a run for it. Perhaps he even imagined he had a right to it.

Carver gave the trader a mild nudge and too-bright smile. Levi whimpered a little and let himself be hustled along, out the door. There were deep, melancholy sighs as Bronwyn shut the door to the room behind them.

"Pull yourselves together," she ordered.

The other door off the chapel opened to the outside. Bronwyn was a little surprised to feel the sharp mountain wind in her face. It cleared her head of gold-fever somewhat. A stone bridge was before her, leading to the freestanding tower.

She had seen the bridge before, but from the ground. They were up pretty high, and a few of the walking dead noticed them and headed their way. Cathair picked them off before they reached their side of the bridge. One of the skeletons toppled over the side of the bridge, far, far, down onto the rugged slope of the mountain. Bronwyn wondered if the bridge should have safety rails.

"I still don't think the king's men got this far," Anders insisted. "So where do the dead come from?"

"Clearly," Morrigan replied, "they died of wounds or were

killed by the demons, and then possessed by them."

"I suppose that's possible," Anders admitted, looking sick. "I've seen just about all of them I can stand."

To their surprise, the door at the other end of the bridge was neither locked nor barred. They opened it slowly, and were rushed by a few more of the skeletons. Everyone had a good grasp of how to destroy the things now. The creatures were frozen and beheaded within seconds. They then had a moment to look about them.

It was a antechamber, probably serving somewhat as a protection against the high winds. They pushed open the door on the far wall, and instantly Bronwyn had the feeling, however absurd, that this place was inhabited. It seemed to be a study of sorts. A short of flight of stairs led downward to a door. Another door was directly in front of them. Books lined the wall. A small lute rested on a shelf. Books and parchment were piled on a wooden table. Potion vials were neatly arranged on a wooden stand.

"No dust," Aveline said, gripping her sword more tightly. "No dust on *anything*. Someone's been here."

Bronwyn's senses tingled oddly. "You're right," she said. "There is a Grey Warden in the next room."

With excited trepidation, she opened the last door, and led her companions into a vast and lofty space. It was cold here, and

looking about it was not hard to see why. A large window at the end of the room was broken.

"What *is* this place?" whispered Leliana.

Anders peered at a square hole in the floor which held an iron cage filled with bones. "Some sort of...workroom?"

Jowan breathed in awe. "The most elaborate I've ever seen. There's nothing in the Circle like this!"

"Come," Bronwyn said, and walked toward the end of the room. The floor was raised there, overseeing everything else in the wide chamber, and a living Grey Warden was there, busy at a worktable littered with measuring devices and glass flasks and tubes, his attention on his studies.

He sensed their presence, however.

"I hear you! Don't disrupt my concentration."

An old voice. An old, old voice. It matched the man before them: nearly bald, his heavy eyebrows turned white with age. His task done, he looked down at them with quizzical detachment. Old yes: but still tall and straight.

"He's a mage!" Jowan whispered in excitement.

"Really?" Carver snorted. "You think?"

Cathair remarked, in all seriousness. "The robes and staff would indicate that Jowan is correct."

"He's not just a mage," murmured Anders. "He's *that* mage. That mage we saw. Avernus. Only a bit longer in the tooth, so to speak."

Avernus, after a brief assessment, spoke to Bronwyn, whose armor was unquestionably the grandest, and who, besides, was standing in front of everyone else.

"Even now the demons seek to replenish their numbers. Are you to thank for this welcome if temporary imbalance?"

"We've been killing the demons and the undead we have found here, yes." Rather astonished, she took a breath and plunged on. "You are the Grey Warden Avernus? Alive? After two hundred years?"

"I am indeed Avernus," the mage replied. "And I am alive, though only just. My magic can do only so much. Over the past year I have been plagued with dreams and visions. My end cannot be far off."

"Perhaps it is the Blight you dream of," Bronwyn said. "We dream of it, too."

Avernus's surprise was manifest. "Blight? There is a Blight in Thedas?"

"There is a Blight in Ferelden," said Bronwyn. "It began in the south, when the darkspawn began swarming up at Ostagar. We fought them there, and brought the invasion to a halt; but we expect it to break out again, somewhere else, and even

more furiously. We have come to reclaim Soldier's Peak for the Wardens."

"An admirable goal," Avernus approved. "So the Grey Wardens have returned to favor in Ferelden? That is good to hear. You command this detachment?"

"Forgive me," Bronwyn said, remembering her manners. "I am Bronwyn Cousland, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden. With me," she pointed to each in turn, "are Wardens Anders, Jowan, Leliana, Aveline, Cathair, Hakan, Soren, Toliver, and our friends Morrigan and Zevran. You will assist us in exorcizing the castle. then?"

"Cousland, eh? Extraordinary! But yes, of course, I have lived for this hour. To cut the demons off forever, I shall unravel the summoning circles I made so long ago. While I do so, waves of demons will come through the Veil. You must dispatch them."

"About those summoning circles..." Anders drawled. "Was there some reason you thought summoning demons was a *good* idea?"

Avernus sighed, setting his papers in order. "I did so at the commander's behest—"

"Sophia Dryden?" Levi squeaked out.

The old mage glanced at the trader and raised a brow. "Yes. At Sophia's command. We were desperate. Only twenty of us

remained, and the King's army was breaking down the door. It was a last hope, but a false one, as I am sure you know. Those of us who survived the king's soldiers fell prey to the demons who turned on us. Sophia herself was taken by the demons. I alone survived."

"We will speak more of this later," said Bronwyn. "Right now we must cleanse the castle."

"Very true," agreed Avernus. He stepped quickly down from the dais, and set off towards the door to the bridge, surprisingly spry. Bronwyn joined him, her thoughts in awed confusion. The stories this man had to tell!

"But how is he still alive?" Toliver whispered to Aveline. "It's been two hundred years!"

"There's only one way," Anders muttered, looking suspiciously around the room. "Blood Magic."

The back of Jowan's neck turned delicately pink.

Wave after wave of demons emerged from the summoning circles: Rage Demons, Hunger Demons, Ash Wraiths. Avernus intoned the incantations, and the rest of the Wardens destroyed the invaders from the Fade. Having some idea of what would happen, Bronwyn had carefully positioned her people so that the archers and mages would have a clear field of fire before the others closed with the demons. The mages watched Avernus, very impressed—in Anders' case,

reluctantly—with the old man's abilities. The last of the demons was the most powerful: a purple-fleshed Desire Demon. She fell at last, and then followed a last incantation and a curious sucking sound as the Veil was securely sealed. The arcane symbols etched in the floor vanished.

"Well!" Carver spoke up. "That was bracing! Do we get lunch now, or what?"

"I'm starving!" Leliana agreed.

"All right," Bronwyn said, "Since you brought it up, Carver, I want you to go down to the wagon with Levi, and bring back some provisions. We can eat in that little place down the steps over there. I didn't see any bones. Toliver and Aveline, go help them. Keep your eyes open for anything strange. Morrigan and Anders, please clear the chimney and get a fire going." She turned to Avernus. "You and I need to talk, but after something to eat. You are, of course, most welcome to join us."

"My dear Commander," said the old man, "it is too long since I subsisted on anything other than Strengthening Potions. Real food might well kill me, but I thank you for the invitation. I shall be at your service in my workroom whenever you are at leisure, and will be happy to answer all your questions. I have made many discoveries in my long life, and I think some of them will be of interest to the Wardens and of use to you." He strode away, staff in hand.

So, lounging on dusty chairs and stools, they consumed bread

and hunks of smoked mutton in front of the cheerful fire. There was much speculation about the total amount of the gold in the iron chest, and Hakan began a betting pool for the one whose guess came closest.

"Listen to me," Bronwyn said. "This is all very well amongst ourselves, but I want each one of you to swear an oath you will not tell anyone about this treasure. That means *anyone*: fellow Wardens, Chantry priests taking a confession, blood relatives. *Anyone. No exceptions,*" she said, with a hard look for Leliana and then for Jowan. "If word got out about this treasure, we'd have bandits down on us, and noblemen refusing to pay their tithes. That gold is going to refurbish this castle and pay your wages. And maybe give us some extras."

"I wish we could buy a griffon," muttered Carver.

"A *pair* of griffons would be better, mate," Toliver advised. Carver nodded thoughtfully.

"If only we could," Bronwyn sighed.

"Are you going to tell Teyrn Loghain?" Morrigan asked pertly.

"No," Bronwyn said instantly. She raised her right hand. "It's Warden business. I, Bronwyn Cousland, so swear."

She made each of them swear individually. Morrigan and Zevran would probably keep the secret, but Bronwyn's eyes fixed on Levi Dryden, and she wondered how much it would realistically take to buy the man's silence and keep it bought.

He had not found what he sought: exoneration for Sophia Dryden. If anything, he had confirmed her treason, and worse, had learned that she was complicit in Blood Magic and sorcery. He looked very disgruntled.

After they were fed and rested, it was time to apportion tasks.

"There's not all that much we can do today," she considered. "But for decency's sake we should take Aveline and Cathair's words to heart and collect all the remains we can find. Leliana, I'm putting you in charge of that. I want you to find some place on the grounds that's suitable for a memorial someday. Pile up the bones there and we'll gather later for the fire. Any gear or good armor, like that set on Sophia, I want you strip and store in a single place. Morrigan," she turned to the witch, who looked disgusted at the thought of searching for remains, "would you please work in the remains of the library? Shelve the books lying about—except for that damaged chronicle—and try to get some idea of what's in them, and how the shelves are arranged—if they are."

Morrigan was considerably mollified by the assignment.

"And the horses and oxen need to be taken somewhere to graze. Later we'll count the gold. We'll want an exact tally, and we'll need to write it down. At sunset we'll have the funeral fire. I'm going to talk to Avernus now—" Bronwyn began.

"But not alone," Anders said instantly. "I'm going with you."

Jowan grimaced. "He's right, Bronwyn. We don't really know Avernus, other than that he's a really powerful Blood Mage. He could do things to you that you wouldn't know about. Anders and I should be there."

"Besides," Anders added. "We're your magical advisers, so I think we should be there to advise you if the old man talks about magic."

That was true enough.

Carver sniped. "You just want to get out of picking up bones."

"That, too," Anders agreed equably.

"A Cousland?" mused Avernus. "It is rare for someone from one of the great families to join the Wardens."

"I was conscripted," Bronwyn told him. "I was conscripted because of the Blight. I certainly never volunteered to be a Warden, but here I am. Most of the Wardens were killed in the Bloomingtide Battle against the darkspawn, including Warden-Commander Duncan. Only one other junior Warden and I were left, and we have been trying to rebuild the order ever since. For that matter, the Grey Wardens were only readmitted to Ferelden twenty years ago, during the reign of King Maric."

"King Maric," Avernus repeated the name. "I take it from the way you speak of him that he is the *late* King Maric. Who is

king now?"

"Well..." Anders snarked. "*That's* a long story..."

Bronwyn flicked him a repressive look. She did not want to talk politics right now. "Maric's son, King Cailan, was killed last month in the Battle of King's Mountain. He left no heir. The kingdom is currently under the regency of his wife, Queen Anora, until a Landsmeet is held. That is scheduled for the sixth of Haring. Meanwhile, the Blight continues. The Archdemon seems to have left the south through the Deep Roads, and we do not know where the bulk of the horde is. I have sent patrols to the known Deep Roads entrances to see if they can detect any activity. We were ourselves going to Drake's Fall tomorrow."

"That is the entrance we used for our Callings, yes," said Avernus. "I cannot say that I know of any activity in the north, but Soldier's Peak is built on a granite foundation, and thus is secure from the darkspawn."

Jowan found that interesting. "Is that why the site was chosen in the first place?"

Avernus was pleased with him. "Indeed it was. That, and it was considered desirable to have a base by the sea for communication and for importation of fine weapons and arms, which were not exactly much in evidence in Ferelden in those days."

"So..." Bronwyn nodded. "A secure base, and very well

preserved. You cast those spells, I take it."

"Most of them," he admitted. "The demons also did their share, for their own reasons. I did not want the Peak to fall to pieces over my head, after all! If nothing else, I was resolved to preserve it for the future—if there was one." He sat back in his chair, looking at her. "You no doubt have questions of your own."

"Many," Bronwyn agreed. "Our companion, the trader Levi Dryden, brought us here, hoping we would find evidence that his ancestor, Sophia Dryden, was innocent of the charge of treason that sullied the family name. However, it's clear that she did indeed defy the king. Can you tell us something of what happened?"

"So much for our grand rebellion," sighed the old mage. "It seemed so pressing then, but the kingdom lives on and has forgotten us. Arland ruled with fear and poison. Sophia's noble friends begged for her help, so we met with Teyrn Cousland. With him on our side we had a chance of success. A truce was declared, and the parties met, but it was not to be. He was killed, and we were undone."

"Cousland!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "My ancestor...er..." She ticked off the family genealogy in her mind, hearing Aldous' voice reciting the tale of years. "Kurgan Cousland. There is no record indicating that he was killed in battle."

"Not in battle," said Avernus, with an ironic smile. "Why in battle, when a waiting axe behind a door would serve as well?"

I last saw Teyrn Cousland's decapitated head on the meeting table with an apple in his mouth. You lost many family members that day. Arland's butchers slaughtered enough to make them—pliable. And that was the end of that. The Wardens stood alone, and perished."

A long silence, as they digested the sad tale of old wrongs.

"So," Jowan spoke, a little uncertain. "You've been alone all these years, but it looks like you've been doing research."

"I have," Avernus granted him a little wintry smile. "And I have learned much. With trial and error, my experiments have yielded results beyond my dreams."

Bronwyn looked about the vast workroom. "What was the purpose of your experiments?"

"To stop the demonic tide, of course, but originally to make the Warden's even more powerful. Our joining ritual is crude. The darkspawn taint has power, yet all it is used for is to sense the creatures. Much more is possible."

"Blood magic?" Anders asked, his voice rich with disgust.

"Come, my young brother Warden. The very Joining itself is the darkest of Blood Magic. There is great strength in blood. Disregard the Chantry's lies for the children's tales they are. They know nothing, and invent rubbish to conceal their ignorance. Nothing is forbidden the Wardens. Honorable surrender is not an option when fighting darkspawn."

Anders did not look convinced, but Bronwyn held up her hand to quiet him. "To make the Wardens more powerful in what way?"

"Why, in every way. To make us stronger, faster, more dextrous. To improve our stamina, self-healing, and concentration. To reduce the chance of death in the Joining—I believe by a large measure. The physical toll on the Wardens was to be ameliorated. You will have noticed, obviously, that I have not experienced a Calling. That, too, was one of my goals—and Sophia's."

Bronwyn sat up and stared at the man. The Calling was a burden so dreadful, so unspeakable, that anyone who could prevent it had her instant and undivided attention. Jowan gave her a quick, excited glance. Anders was frowning, but he was listening, all the same.

"I certainly do not deny," Bronwyn said, "that the Calling seems a particularly horrible rite, as practiced by the Grey Wardens. To die alone in the dark of the Deep Roads, overwhelmed by darkspawn... And to experience worse than death, if one is a woman. In fact, it seems absolute madness, after what we have seen of Broodmothers, to deliberately send women to replenish the darkspawn."

Avernus was intrigued. "You have *seen* a Broodmother? With your own eyes?"

Anders looked away with a sigh, not liking that particularly memory. Bronwyn did not flinch from it. She pointed first at

the scar on her cheek, and then at her unnaturally green eyes.

"I received this—and these—during an encounter with a Broodmother. They spit poison. Anders saved my vision, but the color remained."

"Fascinating," murmured Avernus, leaning in for a closer look. "It seems that I, too, have many things to learn."

Bronwyn's mind was already on his research. "Tell me, Avernus... this improved Joining potion of yours... It apparently works on those who have already taken the standard formula?"

"As you see."

"And does it relieve other problems? For example, we are given to understand that Wardens are infertile. Does the potion—"

"—Remove that obstacle to conception? Yes, I am certain that it does. While the Wardens in general look upon their infertility as a convenience, Sophia found it irksome. She hoped to have more children after she had deposed King Arland."

Anders and Jowan were looking at Bronwyn, and even without the aid of Blood Magic, she could read their minds.

"Can you make this potion for us?" she asked. "For all of us? I have forty-two Wardens under my command."

Avernus smiled again. "Forty-three, I believe, counting me, Commander. But yes, I can make all you want with sufficient ingredients. I have four sample doses, but require more supplies to distill it in quantity. There is a supply of Archdemon blood in here in the castle. I have some here in the workroom, and there is more secreted—"

"We found that," Bronwyn assured him. "The need of it brought me here in the first place."

"Indeed? I shall also need some fresh darkspawn blood, and—this might be a sticking point—a good measure of the blood of a Warden."

Bronwyn did not hesitate. "I would gladly shed my blood to save myself and the other Wardens from the Calling."

"My blood," Anders interrupted. "Not yours, Bronwyn. My blood."

"Or mine," Jowan offered. He smiled weakly at Avernus. "You don't need it *all*, do you?"

Avernus shrugged, "There was a time... but no, I shall need no more than you can safely spare."

"You did experiments on Wardens, didn't you?" Anders asked, full of suspicion.

"I did, and I do not apologize for it. Where did you think the Wardens came from in the first place? The comforting fairy

tales would tell you it was a band of heroic volunteers, daring all for the salvation of Thedas. The ugly reality, I believe, is closer to this: a band of Tevinter mages, desperately trying to undo the disasters wrought by their fellows, sacrificing thousands of slaves in thousands of horrifically failed experiments. Through their efforts, they finally created the weapon—the superwarrior—known as a Grey Warden. The truth can be an terrible thing, but it is not as terrible as a Thedas overrun by darkspawn."

By the end of their conversation, Bronwyn asked Avernus to make out a list of things he needed, and gave him a conditional promise to get a relief party up to him before Firstfall. Then there was the matter of the improved potion. She was willing to take it herself, and immediately, but once again, Anders and Jowan restrained her.

"I'll try it," said Jowan. "I'll take it now, and we'll see how I perform on it, all right? All right?" he asked, turning to Avernus. "That's reasonable, isn't it, to have a field trial?"

"Quite sensible," Avernus allowed. "Record your impressions for me. I shall add them to the research notes."

A vial was presented, and Bronwyn and Anders watched, tense with worry, as Jowan downed it. He winced, and bent nearly double. Bronwyn came forward to support him, horrified that he might be killed. Instead, after a moment, he straightened and took a deep breath.

"Not so bad," he said. "Not so bad as my Joining. I feel... different."

"Different?" Avernus scoffed. "That is rather *vague*, isn't it? In what way different? Be precise."

Jowan looked up at the ceiling, thinking. "I feel very energized. I feel ready for anything. My mind is very clear...very alert... very sensitive to all impressions. I don't know if my vision is improved, or I'm just noticing things. I can feel my magic in a much more present way...like I could shape it with only my fingers."

Avernus was nodding, pleased. and took up parchment and a quill. He asked Jowan to cast some shielding and healing spells. Anders seemed impressed. There was some technical discussion that went completely over Bronwyn's head. Jowan did not seem about to drop dead.

In short, when Bronwyn left the old mage's workroom, her head was spinning with possibilities.

"Why were you so determined that I not contribute my blood to Avernus for his experiments?" she asked her companions.

Anders exchanged an uneasy glance with Jowan.

"For the same reason we didn't want you to meet with him alone. Bronwyn, we don't know this man, Warden or not. He's a dodgy old blood mage. If he had your blood, he could use it to control you, and as you are a Very Important Person—and

likely going to be more Important yet—that seemed a supremely bad idea."

"Ah, so it is no myth that blood mages really can control minds?"

Jowan looked pained. "It's not quite as simple as that. A lot of it depends on the subject's own will, and the willpower of the mage. He might not be able to put ideas in your head, but he might be able to give you a nudge to feel certain ways about ideas that were presented to you. Anyway, you should be careful of your blood. Even..." he blushed, "your moon blood."

"That's true," Anders agreed, unembarrassed. "I've heard of laundresses being paid for ladies' linens by ill-wishers. Queens should watch out for that."

Faintly alarmed, Bronwyn said, "I'll pass that bit of advice on to Anora."

Her people had been quite diligent in her absence. It was remarkable how the removal of scattered, decaying human remains improved the appearance and general ambiance of the Peak.

"Bones were everywhere!" Leliana told her. "We have had such a time, finding all the little pieces!" She made a face. "And all the brooms are dirty!"

"We used some of the empty crates," Aveline told Bronwyn

briskly. "Filled them up and pushed them along. Put them on timbers to carry them between us. It went quickly once we got into the rhythm of it."

"You've done well."

Carver said, "I hobbled the horses and left them and oxen out on the high meadow not far from here. We'd better herd them into the old stables for the night after we have the funeral."

"Good thinking."

"Can we count the gold now, Bronwyn?" Anders pleaded, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. "Can we?"

"Yes, we can. We should."

Each bag appeared to contain a hundred pieces of gold. Teams were arranged and assigned bags to make absolutely *sure*. There was swearing as people lost count and started again. Jowan found some dirty parchment and dug out a lead pencil he always carried. He set about making a tally.

Altogether there were fifty-four bags of gold. Fifty-three contained one hundred sovereigns each, of somewhat varying purity and weight. The fifty-fourth bag was the odd one, with only thirty-two pieces of gold in it. There was also a bag of gems and jewelry, which included a heavy gold seal ring embossed with a double griffon. Soren won the betting pool.

"All right," Bronwyn decreed. "Five thousand, three hundred

thirty-two sovereigns. We can maintain the order, fight the blight, and restore Soldier's Peak. A good day's work. In celebration of our success, I grant each of you present a reward of twenty sovereigns, payable *right now*."

This decision was a popular one. The coin was paid out, and the final tally of the Wardens' treasure noted down as five thousand ninety-two sovereigns. Everyone seemed perfectly pleased, with the exception of Levi Dryden. Twenty sovereigns was insufficient compensation for the loss of his lifelong dream of exoneration for a revered ancestor. Bronwyn resolved to talk to him privately when they were back in Denerim.

"Why isn't there any silver?" Carver wondered.

Zevran gestured at the number of chests, some of them empty and open, in the room. "Much was likely spent just before the siege in an effort to buy up supplies. The rest was not sealed away, and anything resembling coin was snatched. We found some silver on the bodies, remember, and we have certainly not found all the bodies of those who died...or retreated with the king's army."

"And on that note," said Bronwyn, "Let us give the dead we found to the fire."

That was done, with decent respect. An attractive spot had been chosen, in a place that might once have been the castle garden. The sunset splendor of the mountains was a fitting setting for the last rites of Sophia Dryden and her Wardens.

Leliana recited the Chant of Light, and sang *The Ballad of Ayesleigh*.

It was windy in the twilight, and the mages watched the fire carefully, lest it catch the grass and trees alight. Bronwyn asked for some bottles of wine from their supplies, and these were passed around. The Grey Wardens and their friends drank deeply, the firelight turning their faces to gold.

"Anyone have anything to say?" Bronwyn asked.

To her surprise, Carver Hawke spoke up.

"You know what this means, don't you?"

"No... I don't," Bronwyn said, wondering what he was getting at. He was clearly a bit drunk. "What does what mean?"

"Really," Carver insisted, waving his wine bottle. "This is big. They need to rewrite all the history books. We won."

"Carver, *who* won?" Leliana asked, bewildered.

"The Grey Wardens totally won the Battle of Soldier's Peak! We did. We won. We did not lose. We remained masters of the field."

Hakan and Soren looked at each other, squinted, and then nodded agreement. "He's right," said Hakan.

"Just how do you reckon that?" Toliver asked, bewildered. "I mean, you did see the dead bodies everywhere, didn't you?"

Bronwyn began to see Carver's logic, and chuckled almost against her will. She took the offered bottle from Jowan, and downed a long swallow, trying not to choke.

"All the laws of war," Carver pointed out, "say that whoever is last on the field is the winner. The 'Last Man Standing' rule. The king's troops left. Avernus was still here and still alive. Masters of the field, that is."

"And they didn't get the treasure, either," said Jowan, with a slow, delighted grin.

"That's right!" Carver lifted his bottle to the crackling fire in salute, smugly triumphant. "Totally masters of the field. Not sacked. No serious booty taken. Grey Wardens won. We won! *Yes! Grey Wardens!*"

Thanks to my reviewers: Chandagnac, anon, Zute, JackOfBladesX, Raxiselic, Kira Kyuu, Anime-StarWars-fanzach, KnighOHolyLight, truthrowan, Jenna53, Shakespira, Nemrut, Jyggilag, Phygmalion, Have Travel, Psyche Sinclair, darksky01, Rake1810, Oleander's One, kirbster676, JOdel, EpitomyofShyness, Mike3207, almostinsane, Girl-chama, Josie Lange, and mille libri.

No, Bronwyn and company did not have the chance to read Avernus' notes. Thus they do not know about the Wardens he killed in his experiments. Avernus prudently tidied up before they came for their chat. No, they did not find Asturian's

cache. Someone might find that later.

*I have used quite a bit of canon material here. Thank you, Bioware. I have also reused or refashioned some material from my other story, *The Keening Blade*, which also features an exploration of Soldier's Peak. The visions, of course, are identical. Some of the individuals' histories, ditto. What differs are the responses of different people to the same basic situation.*

I am always frustrated by the failure of Dragon Age exteriors to match the interiors, and sometimes the interiors do not seem entirely sensible or functional. Soldier's Peak in game give us four bunkbeds in total for a full complement of a hundred Wardens. Even Sophia's room is without a bed. And the second floor is indeed entirely wasted space. There must have been somewhere for them to sleep. Since there is that unusable door down from the kitchens, and since there is clearly a lower level on the east side of the building, I have placed the barracks there. Of course, the mages' tower is very large, and no doubt has lots of living space. Still, there had to be cellars, workrooms, and even a lockup for recalcitrant Wardens. Even if they had servants, and the servants lived in the outbuildings, the Wardens themselves needed facilities we don't see in the course of the game.

70. Wardens Asunder

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 70: Wardens Asunder

"Does the Cute Little Mage object to my questions? Are its diminutive feelings wounded?"

"No, Shale," Tara sighed. "It's fine. After all, I've been asking you questions, too."

"Oh, good. My world no longer totters on the edge of the abyss."

The western expedition was moving far more quickly, now that they had reached the Imperial Highway west of Redcliffe. A detachment of the Legion of the Dead was waiting for them near the entrance at Lake Belannas, ready to support them in their exploration of the Deep Roads. The Wardens would be two days later than planned, but the Legion had been warned to be flexible. And there had been so much to learn at Honnleath...

Shale was nothing like Tara had expected. Nothing like anything anyone could have expected. A golem with free will? With a mind of its own and a sarcastic turn of speech? With

no particular love of mages, due to its long enslavement by the mage Wilhelm?

At least it called her the "Cute Little Mage." That was better than being the "Abrasive Mage," though it described Velanna in a nutshell. Tara found Velanna rather difficult, and Tara was an *elf*. Velanna was far nastier to the humans in the party, as nasty as she dared to be, even after Astrid had given her a very stern talking-to.

Astrid was simply "Warden." to Shale. Unsurprising, since Shale clearly looked on Astrid as the leader of the expedition. To be honest, Tara did too. Astrid knew what she was doing: whether setting up camp or devising battle tactics.

They planned to pass through Redcliffe, but only long enough to pick up supplies at the store and have a meal at the tavern. Tara had no particular desire to pay court to Arl Teagan or to stay at his priest-infested castle. The Arl had been generous enough, but Tara believed that the Grey Wardens' welcome would be rather cooler, if they appeared before the Arl led by an elf and dwarf, rather than by a Cousland. Tara had had enough of his condescending servants, too.

Besides, the village was in a frenzy preparing for the Arl's wedding, scheduled for Satalia Eve. The words "dear Arlessa Kaitlyn—one of our own" were on everyone's lips, and the air was filled with sentimental sighs and tiresome praise to the Maker and Most Holy Andraste for the life and health of the Guerrins. Tara hoped that any child the new Arl and Arlessa produced did not become an abomination, run

rampant, and slaughter the villagers. Nothing like a wedding to shorten people's memories.

Most embarrassingly, the presence of Shale attracted attention. The villagers crowded up, shouting, "A show! A show!" Apparently, never having seen a golem before, the folk thought Shale was part of some sort of traveling minstrel troupe: most likely one tumbler sitting on another's shoulders, both concealed by a costume. And Aeron's lute was the finest musical instrument most of them had ever seen. Definitely a troupe of minstrels, something few had ever experienced. That they were heavily armed conveyed nothing to the villagers' minds—other than that the roads were indeed unsafe. Dogs barked; children squealed and pointed.

"Another flea-bitten village of drooling peasants," snarked Shale. "Delightful. How it recalls to me the happy bygone days at Honnleath. Do order me to squish a few of their heads, won't you?"

"No squishing," Astrid said curtly. She raised her voice. "We are Grey Wardens!"

"Oh, see the funny little woman in armor," bawled out a hulking laborer. "All dressed up like a Warden! Come on, darling! Cut us a caper!"

"Really? No squishing?" Shale murmured. "None at all?"

Astrid gritted out, "Let me think about it."

"—Look at the tattoos on that one!"

"—That's a nice lute that one's carrying! Give a song, minstrel!"

"—Reckon they're here for the wedding! I wouldn't mind getting to know that one better!"

"Have I ever told you," Velanna said loudly to Tara, "that I find humans physically and morally repulsive?"

Most of the village trooped up behind them to the tavern, gawking. Quite a few shoved their way inside, and stood over the Wardens while they ate, speculating on what 'acts' they could hope to see. The innkeeper shoed them out.

"Let my customers eat in peace!"

Not as stupid as most, the innkeeper, Bella, grasped quickly that these really were Grey Wardens, and not circus performers. She was friendly enough, and gave the Wardens a free round of drinks. (Shale coolly declined the offer.) She asked about the army at Ostagar and the struggle with the darkspawn. Her sentimental sighs were saved for poor King Cailan and brave Teyrn Loghain. She asked after some other soldiers, who, she said, had helped her during the battle here. Tara did not know the names, but Aeron and Liam did, and could assure the pretty redhead that they were healthy and uninjured.

Griffith and Walther were sent out to purchase supplies, since

they looked "normal" to these uneducated folk. They were back shortly with what had not been gathered up already for the wedding and the Satinalia celebration to come: oats and smoked fish, and a single stone bottle of Chasind Sack Mead. Bella made up the difference out of her own stores, and was well compensated for it.

Leaving Redcliffe was awkward in its own way. Astrid went out, and quietly informed the excited townsfolk that they were mistaken.

"We really are Grey Wardens on patrol."

This news did not go down well, where it was believed. Most simply thought it was part of the show. The Wardens hefted up their packs and stalked out, up the hill and out of town, still trailed by hopeful peasants. When the Wardens reached the village outskirts, and it became clear to the people of Redcliffe that they really were leaving, there was a wave of disappointment and anger. A few rocks were thrown.

"Well," drawled Shale, "That was a delightful interlude. When is our return engagement? I can hardly contain my impatience."

"This sort of thing *never* happens to Bronwyn," Tara said bitterly.

The steward of Gwaren was not easily persuaded of Danith's claims to be a Warden, either, despite her letter of

introduction from Teyrn Loghain. He looked at it for a long time, scrutinizing the seal for forgery. Finally convinced, he admitted the Wardens and found decent quarters for them in the lower Keep—certainly not in the luxurious quarters set aside for distinguished guests. Danith did not much care. The rooms were adequate, and her own chamber was not unlike the simply-furnished room she had occupied at the Warden's Compound. It was a place for rest and a meal.

The elves received some odd looks, but no outright insults. Prudently, they wore their armor at all times, after a brief, tense confrontation when Nuala had been taken for a housemaid. Niall, too, as a mage, was subject to stares and whispers.

No matter. They would be out of here tomorrow, resupplied with food. The Deep Roads entrance was near the city walls. They would descend, travel a few miles, then return and start their journey north. The thought of seeing Keeper Marethari again... of seeing Junar and Ineria and Master Ilen and old Hahren Paivel filled Danith with excited, nostalgic longing. She wanted another look at those ancient ruins, if she could manage it. They needed to be conceded to the Dalish as soon as possible: put in their possession past dispute.

"Warden?" A servant knocked at her door. Danith opened, and look warily at the human. The woman said, "Some elf asking for you at the servants' door."

Danith regarded her blankly. She knew no one who might ask for her. This shemlen city was smaller than Denerim, and for

that reason not so oppressive. Dirty and smelly, of course, and full of squat buildings and loud-voice shems. Not very interesting to her, actually.

"Take me to this servants' door," she finally answered.

An elf in poor city garments was awaiting. When he saw Danith, garbed in her armor, he blinked and stared. Then he looked closer.

"You're *Dalish!*" he blurted out. Then, uncertainly, he asked, "Aren't you?"

"I am Dalish," she answered. "I am Danith of the Grey Wardens. To whom am I speaking?"

"Er...I'm Kieyll," he stammered. "You're really *Dalish!* The hahren heard there were elven Grey Wardens in town, and I was sent to invite you to the Alienage. We didn't know you were Dalish."

"Does that mean that we are not welcome?" Danith asked, becoming more and more annoyed. Did she want to visit a dirty and depressing community of flat-ears? On the other hand, perhaps some of them would have the sense to leave and find the clans, if they knew they would be welcome. Perhaps it would be best to direct them to Ostagar, to urge them to mix in there and become acclimated...

"Oh...of course not! I mean...the hahren said to invite you. For supper. We eat earlier than the shems. I'm to bring you

there."

"I have two elven companions with me," Danith said, her face impassive. "I shall summon them, and tell the other Wardens that we are going out. Tell me about this hahren of yours."

The hahren's name was Indrianni. She was a woman of middle years, her black hair beginning to thread with silver. Her eyes were black, too, and sparked with life. She welcomed Danith, Steren, and Nuala very kindly to the Gwaren Alienage.

It was small and poor: smaller than the Alienage of Denerim. As half the population had not been sold as slaves, there were more people here. Chickens clucked underfoot; neat little gardens were filled with yellow and orange squash. A big Vhenadahl tree spread out over the center of the courtyard, its waxy leaves brown along the edges.

"If the weather were fairer," Indrianni said, "we would eat out of doors. Come inside, welcome guests. We long to hear of the deeds of the Grey Wardens, and of our cousins among them."

Danith nodded stiffly. Fair words: one could hardly ask for fairer. Indrianni had glanced at their faces, seeing the *Vallaslin*, but not commenting on it like a bumpkin.

The food was simple but plentiful, and decently prepared. These people spoke of Andraste and the Maker. They had

forgotten the Creators, but they remembered a little of the old ways. Danith could tell them that the war against the darkspawn was going well. The darkspawn had been defeated at Ostagar, and now the Wardens were patrolling the country to make certain that none had got away. Steren glanced at her, but Danith saw no reason to terrorize these innocent people by informing them that there was a nearby door to the underworld: a door that might be all that kept back a black tide of death.

They spoke of the horrible news of the Tevinter slavers, and the city elves asked how badly the Denerim Alienage had been affected. Danith disliked the subject, but could repeat some of what she had learned.

"The Teyrn of Highever drove the slavers out, and killed the shemlen lord who was their confederate. Nearly half the Alienage of Denerim was sold, and the Alienage of Highever was completely destroyed."

Murmurs of grief and horror rose, but they had already heard much of this. Danith was only confirming the rumors.

One of the older elves declared, "At least we need fear nothing of that sort. Teyrn Loghain will protect us."

"Elves can also protect themselves," Danith told him.

"According to the king's will, land will be given to the Dalish for a homeland. Our city cousins will be welcome there, when the war is over."

"To live like a wild beast in the forest, eating raw meat and berries..." the man said, clearly horrified.

"We are wild beasts?" Danith said, with ominous calm, pushing back from the table and rising to her feet. "If that is your opinion of us, I am astonished that you would invite us into your fine city house. Come Steren; Nuala. We did not fight the darkspawn at Ostagar to be insulted by flat ears."

"That was rude!" Indrianni hissed in the old elf's ear. "Stay, I beg you!" she implored Danith. "We are all elves, after all."

Danith stayed, but the evening never warmed up after that, Indrianni asked her questions, and Danith gave her the basic shape of the news.

"The land will probably be north of here, in a stretch of the Brecilian Forest, centered around an ancient building that was once a center of elven culture. There is talk of founding a town nearby. I have been there. Some repairs will be necessary, but there is much of beauty in it, and it is larger than Gwaren Keep."

They did not believe her. They did not believe that elves could have built anything to rival the largest building most of them had ever seen. She could see it in their closed faces. They did not believe that she had been presented to the Queen, though they admired her silver cloak pin that had been the Queen's gift.

What of her story did they credit? They believed that the three

strangers were indeed Grey Wardens, as they had been admitted to the Keep, and as Danith was wearing a griffon-embroidered tunic of fine cloth. Since they were Wardens, it was accepted that they had seen the famous Girl Warden. They were willing to believe that Danith had *seen* the Queen, and they asked after her. Some of the older elves had seen Anora in her youth, for some had served at the Keep in the days of Teyrna Celia ("*Maker rest her sweet soul.*") It was some comfort to see that a few of the younger folk, crowding by the door or peering around the corner, did not look so incredulous. A few beautiful, precious children gazed on her, eyes enormous. There was still hope for them, if they could be got away from this vile slum.

The adults, however, were hopeless. The darkspawn were only a fable to them, as they lived their downtrodden lives within city walls, the only tree they knew the vhenandahl in the Alienage. It was hard to believe that people like Tara, like Adaia had come from this kind of background. Of course, the Denerim hahren had not been so ignorant.

They left early. Danith did not talk at length of the Grey Wardens, nor did she repeat the story of the Hero Garahel, which she had learned by heart and had intended to share. Perhaps another night, or another group of elves would be more suitable. She had never imagined that she would be eager to leave the company of elves, in order to return to the castle of a shemlen nobleman; but at the moment she felt she had more in common with Loghain Mac Tir, warrior against the darkspawn and friend of Maynriel and Thanovir, than she

did with those who shared her blood and the elegant shape of her ears.

Their fellow Wardens were in the small chamber that had been given to the Wardens' use for meals and council. Idunn and Ketil were playing that game with a checked board and carved pieces that dwarves and humans found of endless interest. Everyone was sitting around the table, looking over the dwarves' shoulders, and praising them or urging new strategies.

Niall looked up and smiled. "Did you have a good time at the Alienage?"

"I had always heard that they were horrible places," Steren replied briefly. "But now I can speak from experience, and give my own opinion."

"Which is?"

"They are horrible places. The flat ears called us wild beasts and all but called us liars when we spoke of the Dalish land grant."

"Well, we believe you," young Quinn said cheerfully. "And my mum says not to mind name-calling. People call me 'bean-pole' and 'carrot-top,' but I reckon they're just jealous. And they haven't even seen the halla! Then they'd *really* be jealous!"

"That is true," Nuala said softly, rather mollified. "And to speak

more of the halla, Danith, it would be best if we left soon. I mistrust the servitors in the stables."

"We leave tomorrow," Danith decreed. "At first light. We shall go directly to the Deep Roads entrance, and when finished there, we shall turn north at once. Now explain to me this game called 'chess' again."

Levi had to be dealt with, sooner rather than later. On sober reflection, Bronwyn decided to leave the treasure at Soldier's Peak under the watchful eye of Avernus. She took some of the Archdemon blood, and a purse of a hundred sovereigns. There was cloth to be bought for more Warden tunics, and embroideresses to be paid. There was a payroll to be met, and yet more impressive weapons to be commissioned from Master Wade.

And on the march home they could not guard the chest every moment. There was first the detour to Drake's Fall, and they were forced to leave the wagon and horses behind, and make the last mile entirely on foot.

Drake's Fall was an old Tevinter fortress: established in the days of their power as a base for the equally profitable trades in dragon bone and human flesh. The land around it was nearly uninhabited these days, and in fact the Wardens came across no other people on their march to the sprawling edifice. The weather had turned to cold rain, and a mist lay over the ground, partly concealing the bones of ancient dragons thrusting up through the earth. There was money to

be had in Drake's Fall, had one the nerve to dig in the haunted hills and ravines. The Grey Wardens did not lack nerve, but they were too pressed for time. Perhaps on another occasion...

"A graveyard of dragons!" Morrigan exclaimed. "Few and far between in Thedas!"

Rendon Howe had talked about renovating the ancient castle and giving it to Bronwyn as a dower house. Another reason to give thanks that she never let herself be talked into a marriage with his son Thomas. Soldier's Peak, given time and coin, could be made liveable: she was not sure the same could be said for Drake's Fall. It was not designed in anything resembling a normal way: it was more like an enormous prison, with long descending staircases and inescapable rooms far underground where no doubt the dragonbone and slaves were stored until they could be shipped. There had been trade with the dwarves, too, which was why there was an entrance to the Deep Roads there. Everything was an absolute shambles: ceilings collapsed in places, pillars toppled, floors cracked. It probably could be restored, but restored to what? It was the ancient abode of Tevinter magisters, and looked it. It might do as a militia base. Transforming it into a home would be far more problematic.

There was no furniture in the castle. A few trunks and chests were tucked away, filled mostly with rubbish and occasionally with small, exquisite objects or curious crystals. In one of the chests, they found an old square Tevinter gold solidus, stuck by unidentifiable goo to the side. Leliana used the tip of her

dagger to pry it loose. What remained were fragments of a forgotten past. No one had lived here in many years.

The entrance to the Deep Roads was found, deep in the cellar, and then carefully unsealed. Hakan and Soren had learned the protocols in their time with the Legion of the Dead. There were no marks on the underside of the seal to indicate the the darkspawn had actively attempted to force their way out. The stone-and-metal hatches were marked with runes of great virtue. Bronwyn made notes, and a copy of the rune on the Drake's Fall entrance. The dwarven name was Kal Tunsha, and a small trading outpost had been located there: an offshoot of the big nearby thaig Kal'Hirol.

"There's *something* down here," was Anders' opinion, after slipping down the narrow spiral stairs by the hatch. "Not strong or close, but *something*."

"To the south?" Leliana guessed.

"It would be logical," Bronwyn agreed. "Kal'Hirol is that way, and we know it was overrun by the darkspawn long ago."

"Not much of anything, I think," said Jowan. "Nothing like enough to come swarming up. That's...good, isn't it?"

They followed the the tunnels for about a mile, not sensing very much. The Taint here was old. The junior Wardens sensed nothing at all.

A mile was enough to establish that there was no dangerous

activity nearby. They climbed to the surface, carefully resealed the entrance, touched the rune, and were off, in cheerful pursuit of Levi and the horses.

There was no sign of darkspawn in the Gwaren Deep Roads at all. None.

Danith had heard quite a bit of the story of this entrance from Maynriel, who had served with Loghain during the Rebellion against the Orlesians. Loghain, the old king, and a portion of the Legion of the Dead had traveled by way of the Deep Roads across Ferelden, all the way from West Hill in the northwest to Gwaren in the southeast. They had done this to evade the Orlesians, who Maynriel thought were the worst of shemlens, aside from the Tevinters. They did not admit to enslaving elves, though their customs allowed them to treat elves as slaves in all but name. The Dales, after all, had been in what was now Orlesian territory. It was the greed of the Orlesian chevaliers, coupled with the fanaticism of the shemlen Chantry, that had led to the invasion and destruction of the Dales: the land granted the elves by their own Prophet.

So Loghain had led the army through the Deep Roads in those days. Whatever they had done had scoured this end of them clean.

Danith ordered Idunn and Ketil to unseal the entrance, and they peered down, down, trying to make out anything by the stray shafts of sunlight that could penetrate the opening. Much of the Deep Roads, she had learned, was illuminated by the

ancient lamps of the dwarves that, if not utterly smashed, burned forever. Since she sensed no immediate threat, she led her party to the wide and pillared space that marked the southeastern terminus of the dwarven kingdom. Stone houses remained, crumbling and deserted.

"Gwaren means 'Salt-Marsh' in the common speech," Idunn told them. "This used to be an important trading post."

"It's a fine, big place," whispered Quinn reverently.

"Never thought I'd see this end of the Deep Roads," muttered Ketil. "'S'not bad, is it? Aren't we supposed to feel darkspawn? I don't."

Danith reached out, trying to feel what she had felt that ghastly day when facing the Broodmothers.

Nothing.

"I feel no darkspawn at all," she admitted. "Perhaps they have not come this way since the days of Teyrn Loghain and the Legion of the Dead. Perhaps the Archdemon is not interested in this place."

To her relief, there were none of the loathsome signs of a breeding ground: no tendrils, no spongy matter, no bulging, pulsing sacs. Nor were there the other common dangers of the Deep Roads, about which she had been warned. No chittering deepstalkers attacked them, and the only spider webs they saw were either very small, or very dusty and old.

Of the giant species of spider there was no sign.

Idunn tapped the copy of the map copied in the Shaperate. "It's not much good any more," she confessed. "The darkspawn dug a lot of tunnels here."

"Chart what you can. We'll stick to the original Deep Roads for now. We might as well go in a little farther."

Quinn grinned broadly. "We could walk all the way to Ostagar, if it's all like this! Never get rained on, either!"

They went far indeed, far enough that they grew weary and camped there in the Deep Roads. According to the map, they were within a day's march of where the Roads forked, north to the Amgarrack Road, and west to Ostagar. While there seemed to be no threats, and no sound other than the distant drip of water through stone, not everyone was comfortable with underground life.

Maeve whispered to Danith, "How can dwarves stand to live like this, with tons and tons of stone overhead? It could collapse at any moment!"

Danith really, really wished that Maeve had not said that, for she felt exactly the same.

Niall overheard them and whispered back. "Think of it as an old castle with a really high ceiling. Then it's not so nerve-wracking!"

Maeve, uncomforted, muttered, "The ceilings of old castles could collapse at any moment, too!"

Nuala sighed and put her arm over her eyes, breathing slowly and evenly to ward off panic. Steren took her in his arms and talked very softly, recalling the spring sky, and the stars twinkling through new leaves.

Aron Kendalls made his first visit to Bryland House shortly after the departure of the Couslands from Denerim. Clad in his best clothes, freshly washed and closely shaved, he still did not quite meet Habren's standards for a nobleman.

"He's such a *bumpkin!*" she tittered to her maid afterward. "Such a clodhopper! I confess I did not expect him to be such a brute—to be so utterly clownish. Did you see the way he bowed? The size of his boots? I expect they'd look more normal if they were completely covered in mud! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Her father was not so put off by Aron's lack of courtly polish. The reports he had about the big, strong-featured young man in front of him told of hard work, careful use of the resources at hand, no vicious habits that had made for talk—no drinking bouts, no whoring, no careless spending—not even when he had first inherited his nice little freehold. Granted, there were also reports that he was a stony-hard bargainer, and capable of holding a serious grudge.

Wanting to understand something of his personality, Bryland

had also inquired into how the young man treated his younger siblings. There was some tension between him and the younger brother, who disliked being ordered about—very normal, of course. The two young sisters, one twelve and the other nine, were at the Chantry school in Oswin, scrambling into a bit of education. Bryland liked that. Chantry school education was not cheap, and it showed a nice concern for the girls. Besides, if they were going to be living a very different kind of life now, they needed proper preparation for it.

"A pity you didn't bring your brother and sisters," he said genially, ushering the tall young man into his study. "I'd like to get to know them."

"Someone has to look after the farm," Aron replied, his square-jawed face impassive. "The cows need milking, and the girls need their schooling. If something better comes to me, there'll be plenty of time for them to come to the city."

A good, frank talk ensued. In fact, Bryland was a bit taken back by how matter-of-fact the young freeholder was. The Arling of Denerim was a great prize: the Arl of Denerim was a great man in Ferelden.

"If it's rightfully mine," Aron said briefly, "then it's right that I claim it. I'd be a fool, else. Nobody takes what's mine away from me."

All very proper, Bryland granted, but he pointed out the contentious nature of the Landsmeet. There would be others

looking with greedy eyes at Denerim. An unknown young man might require support from influential friends to put his claim beyond dispute. Bryland explained that he was just such a friend, and made his price for such influence explicit. Aron must take as his wife Habren Bryland Kendalls, Dowager Arlessa of Denerim.

Aron Kendalls frowned thoughtfully at that.

"I saw her at the door when I arrived. A very fine-looking young lady. A widow, though. I don't care for another man's leavings."

Bryland did not permit himself to express his dislike of this very crude way of speaking, when Habren's prize was just within reach.

"The marriage was not consummated. The attack took place at the wedding feast, where Arl Urien was fatally wounded."

Another thoughtful frown followed, and then a slow nod.

"All right. I'll take her. Should we wed before or after the Landsmeet?"

"Before," Bryland told him, with limpid mildness. "If you're married to Habren, no one will seriously challenge your confirmation. The wedding will, of course, be very quiet, given that Habren will not be out of mourning until next month."

"Quiet is fine with me."

"It's very important that you become known to the rest of the Landsmeet. We'll start small. Perhaps a dinner tomorrow night, and then, in a few days, the Satinalia ball at the palace. You can attend as my guest. There will be a number of events leading up to the marriage of Teyrn Loghain and Lady Bronwyn Cousland. It would be wise to make yourself known to those two individuals. Their goodwill is important to you."

Bronwyn had her talk with Levi Dryden in a private little chamber at Vigil's Keep. They would be back in Denerim in two days and she would be busy then. Better to do it now. The trader was very unhappy. He had gone looking for vindication, and instead found out that Sophia Dryden was guilty of everything she had been accused of, and more.

"All I wanted was to clear our name. Reckon that will never happen, now."

"Perhaps..." Bronwyn looked at him with some sympathy. He had led her to a fortune in gold and information, and deserved some substantial reward for it. "Perhaps it would be best to set the past aside and focus on the future. Nothing can be done to rehabilitate a woman who lived two hundred years ago; but what happened is old news now, forgotten by most. Devote yourself to making your family's name honorable by your own deeds, and let the past bury the past."

"We're traders now, we Drydens," he said, dejected. "Our family's belief that we were wronged...it gave us strength to make something of ourselves. Still, we're not warriors. My

cousin Mikhael is a blacksmith."

"Is he skilled?" Bronwyn asked.

"Mikhael? First-class. Loves his work. Makes a fair living, but with all the competition in Denerim..."

"The Wardens could use a blacksmith at the Peak," Bronwyn remarked. "I would like to see your cousin's work, but if he is as skilled as you say, he could have a permanent position with the Wardens. And we'll need a sutler, too. Wardens fight, and cannot spare the time for carting supplies back and forth and arranging repairs..."

"I could do that!" Levi burst out. "I could bring the family up there and settle in one of the outbuildings. Get the forge going, and set up a nice little shop..." he paused, his brow anxious. "Need some capital to fix everything up, but I can make that twenty sovereigns go pretty far."

"And I was certainly going to pay you for all your time and trouble," Bronwyn told him, liking this more positive attitude. The Peak would need work, certainly, and it would be best to have some of their own people established there. "Another fifty sovereigns. I would strongly advise you to stay away from the mages' tower, however. Warden Avernus would not care for intruders!"

Levi's eyes were the size of trencher-plates. "No fear! Wouldn't dream of going near that old devil! We'll keep the little ones away, too."

"I think that's best. The main thing is to give the castle a good cleaning and get some supplies carted up there. Get the ground floor fit for habitation. Perhaps one of your relations can do a bit of carpentering, too? Good. I'll want to post a few Wardens there, once they report in from their patrols. Toliver says that the blacksmith shop has lodging above it. And the building next door to the stables might do for a sutler's store." She had another idea. "I know some other people I might send up there as guards. It might be best to see if you could settle in before winter. Do you think it possible?"

"Possible?" he was on his feet, arms waving, his sallow face flushed with excitement. "O' course! We Drydens...we're *tough*. I'll talk to the family as soon I get back. Possible? I should bloody well say so!"

It would not be a large dinner, but the guests were a list of powerful Landsmeet figures. The absence of the Couslands and Arl Nathaniel did not mean there was no social life in Denerim.

Leonas Bryland had great hopes of this evening. Habren would spend time with Aron Kendalls, which he had decided was a very good idea. Habren might want to be an Arlessa more than anything in the world, but her father also wanted her to be happy. Aron Kendalls was in many ways a very respectable young man, but Bryland was not at all sure that he and Habren were compatible.

Wulffe would attend, along with his eldest son Rothgar, called to Denerim for the purpose. It was a shame that the younger boy must stay at home, but with so much chaos, Wulffe was uneasy leaving it all to a steward. Bryland felt the mild rebuke, and admitted to himself that he had been gone too long from South Reach. But there was so much to do: the war, the darkspawn, the Orlesians making trouble, Habren's woes, the King's death, the Landsmeet. Everything needed to be *settled*.

It was awkward planning such an affair without Werberga, too. He had sometimes been exasperated with his sister, but he could see now how much work she had done for him. It pained him that he would never have the chance to express his gratitude to her. Now he was being hounded by servants about menus and decorations, about Satinalia gifts and quarterly wages. Habren was too distressed by the tragedy on the seventh to take hold as the mistress of the household.

Another reason to keep the guest list to the minimum. The Queen, Loghain, Wulffe and young Rothgar, Habren, Aron Kendalls. On looking at the list, Bryland became uncomfortably aware that it was rather heavy on the masculine side. A number of the nearby banns had gone home to celebrate Satinalia. Who could he invite to balance the table?

Who but those charming ladies from Highever House? Mistress Bethany had visited a number of times, making certain that Lothar was perfectly well. If he was not mistaken, she was coming today.

"Down, Killer!" Corbus commanded. "No paws on ladies' dresses!"

Bethany enjoyed her visits to Bryland House. The little boys were always happy to see her. Their tutor was less enthusiastic, but perfectly polite. They talked, they played with the adorable puppy. In fair weather they practiced archery in the courtyard, and when it rained they drew, and built castles with elaborate building blocks. The Arl, when he was available, was the most affable of hosts, always calling for refreshments, and even joining them in the boys' schoolroom.

The loveliest presents had been sent to her: thankful gifts from grateful well-wishers. A gold and ivory inkstand, a bolt of rose velvet, a brooch set with emeralds. From the Arl had come a beautiful silver goblet, chased with a band of running mabarais. Mother had the rose velvet made up for Bethany immediately, loving the rich color and silky texture. It was being kept back for Satinalia, when they were invited to the feast and ball at the Palace.

Lothar's shoulder was perfectly fine now, but somehow there was always another invitation. The Arl was concerned about Bethany's safety, and thus always sent a servant to escort her to and from Bryland House. Lately, the visits had included Charade, once Bethany had told them what a fine archer her cousin was, and how she had protected her father when they escaped from Kirkwall.

Lady Habren was not present at these gatherings. The Arl said she was in deep mourning, and staying mostly in her own

apartments. Bethany was very sorry for her, unable to imagine how she would feel if her bridegroom was killed the very day of their wedding. It was so tragic. Something like that had happened to one of Carver's fellow Wardens, but he hadn't given Bethany all the details. They lived in terrible times.

Today the Arl dropped in on them, smiling, and mentioned that he was holding a dinner for the heir to the Arling of Denerim.

"Just a few friends," he said easily. "I don't want to drive the fellow away. It occurred to me that it might be a pleasant thing for you ladies, cooped up alone at Highever House. I'll call on your mother, Lady Amell, and invite her later today. It was remiss of me not to make myself known to her before, but we've all been desperately busy."

"I'm sure my mother would enjoy it very much, my lord," Bethany said.

Charade refrained from rolling her eyes. Probably, they'd never hear the last of how they had dined with "our friend the Arl of South Reach."

Leonas Bryland was as good as his word. In the course of his busy afternoon, he stopped at Highever House, and asked to see Lady Amell. Once ushered into her sitting room, he made his bows and extended his invitation, looking with surprised pleasure at the woman before him.

He should not have been surprised by her good looks. Her daughter and niece were remarkably pretty girls. Perhaps he had only expected a pleasant woman of a certain age. Instead, he was introduced to a woman whose face was still sweet and youthful, and framed with prematurely silver hair. Her manners were charming, her gown elegant, and her mild, well-bred voice commanded the servants with ease. A noble Marcher lady... Bryland began a rapid revision of his personal plans. Once Habren was married, he really must have someone to order his household and act as hostess. And if she were as kind to his boys as her daughter was...

He was looking forward to the dinner very much.

The Dowager Queen of Ferelden and the General of her Armies were in private council. While the Couslands pacified the north of the country, there was much to do elsewhere.

"Tonight should be interesting," Anora remarked. "I hope for Arl Bryland's sake that his dinner for the prospective Arl of Denerim goes well."

Loghain snorted. "The dinner for his daughter's prospective husband! He certainly hasn't wasted any time."

"Habren expects to find purpose in her life by marriage. She certainly isn't the first young woman to feel that way."

Loghain took the broad hint. "I suppose I can assume," he said, "that you have decided to pursue an alliance with Fergus

Cousland."

"There's no need to look so cross about it, Father," Anora said, with a hint of impertinence. "*You* suggested it. I happen to think it a very, very good idea."

"It's a good idea as long as you keep your head and don't make more of it than it is!"

"That is to say," Anora said, her pretty face hardening. "that you would prefer I feel nothing for him and treat him as a dupe rather than as a spouse! Is that your intention with Bronwyn?" With conscious dignity, she collected herself, sat down, and smoothed her skirts. "I've had quite enough of dupes, Father. I believe a partner would be far more agreeable...and efficient. I have reason to believe that Fergus is attracted to me and respects me. That is an excellent basis for a serious relationship—far better than basing a relationship on the friendship between my father and his!"

Those words cut deep. Loghain sighed and turned away, looking out the window. "You didn't always despise Cailan."

"No," she agreed. "I didn't. I didn't allow myself to look at him objectively, since he was my destined husband. I refused to acknowledge all the ways that it was bound to go wrong. I closed my eyes to his womanizing and his fecklessness and his self-absorption. I persuaded myself that they were irrelevant, since no matter who he slept with, I would always be Queen. But, as you see, Father, that's not exactly how it played out. I should have learned my lesson when he and I

were children. Whenever anyone dangled something new and shiny before him, he forgot all his old toys. And so it was with our marriage."

"I know," Loghain said wearily, "that it became a state marriage. But Cailan did feel something for you."

"Not much, and not for long," Anora said, the words opening old wounds. "He was perfectly willing to get rid of me in order to be an Emperor. He had to know that I would have to be killed, and that you would have to be killed. How do you think I feel, realizing that the last time he was in Denerim, he was already planning my disposal? He didn't care. But Fergus Cousland climbed the Chantry to save me, and carried me out in his arms. Can you actually picture Cailan doing anything of the sort? Successfully?"

"I take it, then, that you've reconciled yourself to being Teyrna of Highever."

"And Chancellor of the kingdom, if that offer still stands. Have you told Bronwyn?"

"She did not seem averse to the idea."

Loghain said nothing more about that. Who could foretell the future? He had made his share of predictions, and most had not played out as he had hoped. Anora should accept that they were all playthings of Fate. What if Cousland got Anora with child? She, too, when presented with something new and splendid, might set aside her former ambitions.

"Have you and Cousland settled it between you?"

"Not yet. Father, I've been widowed for less than two months! I've given considerable thought to the matter. By the statues of the kingdom, any child of a widowed queen born within a year of the king's death is deemed to be the King's. I suppose I could have tried that with some strapping servitor, but it would have blow up in my face like one of your dwarven lyrium bombs."

She paused at the shocked, revolted expression on her father's face. Did he still think of her as a child? Or did he imagine she would have seriously considered such a scheme? Such an ugly, *stupid* scheme?

More mildly, she said, "Fergus and I cannot marry until the beginning of Guardian at the earliest. But yes, we will speak, and speak plainly to one another on his return. Let us set the matter aside for now."

There was much else to consider. There was the matter of the raid on Gherlen's Halt. When the news had first come, there had been little Loghain could do about it. Now however, he had decided to strengthen the garrison. Haglin had arrived in good time, and his rescue of the garrison had thoroughly rehabilitated him in Loghain's eyes.

The Empress must know by now—or would soon know—that her schemes earlier in the month had failed. Loghain lived, and Bronwyn lived. Anora lived and was still Queen. The Landmeet had been savaged, but the attack had stiffened

their resistance. The Chantry's Orlesian agents were locked away in Fort Drakon. No one would dare put forth a pro-Orlesian policy at the Landsmeet.

Winter was almost upon them. Historically, the Orlesians had never launched a winter offensive. They relied so much on their horses that snowy mountain passes were impenetrable. Furthermore, they would not risk their warships on the Waking Sea at this time of year. No doubt they would send more agents, but Ferelden was safe from a major assault for at least a few months.

Perhaps he should go out to the border. Not now: that was impossible. But as soon as he was married, or perhaps right after Satinalia, he should take a look at the fortifications himself. In the meantime, he would send out reinforcements, plenty of supplies to see the border forts through the winter, and some of Dworkin Glavonak's fierce new inventions. They should work as well against Orlesians as they did against the darkspawn.

Bronwyn wanted to talk to her brother about his evident attraction to Queen Anora. She had wanted to talk to him ever since her eyes were opened to it, but she was very uncomfortable with the subject.

Oriana had been killed in early Bloomingtide. Fergus had lost his son and heir, darling little Oren. Ordinarily a year would be considered the minimum period of mourning, but of course Fergus needed an heir, and as soon as possible.

And the King was not two months dead! Anora had every reason to be angry at her late husband, but few others knew that, and many would be shocked if she immediately took up with another man—even one who had rescued her in such a heroic and romantic way.

And while she rather liked Anora, Bronwyn was not sure she would be the kind of wife that Fergus needed: she certainly would be nothing like Oriana: sweet, refined, bringing him specially brewed herbal tea of an evening. Anora was an educated, intelligent, cultivated woman, yes: but she was also calculating, proud, and fiercely ambitious.

Of course, being Teyrna of Highever might satisfy some of that drive to power, but it would be power shared with Fergus, who would not leave it all to her, as Cailan had.

There was also the essential qualification. Could Anora give Fergus an heir? She had failed to produce a prince of Ferelden. While that might indeed be attributed to some lack of Cailan's, it was still something to raise concerns.

Last of all, and deeply, deeply troubling: did Anora feel anything for Fergus, or was she simply seizing on the future heir presumptive to the throne in a preemptive power grab? The thought of Fergus trapped in a loveless marriage was beyond painful.

On the ride from Vigil's Keep, she finally forced herself to speak. Behind them, Adam Hawke was in conversation with Nathaniel Howe about the harbor fees on Marcher imports.

Bronwyn took a deep breath and said, with pitifully false ease, "So...you and Anora?"

He grinned at her, seeing through her in an instant.

"Could be. We'll have to see. It's early days yet. She's a splendid woman."

"I agree. As long as she makes you happy. It's just that..."

He raised his brows, "What?"

"She and Loghain are so close...so much in each other's counsels. Occasionally I wonder if there's room for anyone else."

"He seems to have made room for you. I think Anora can be similarly flexible...with the right encouragement."

"That sounds vaguely indecent."

He laughed. "I hope so!"

The dwarves had made an efficient camp on the shores of Lake Belennas. Tents were erected, latrines dug, and food prepared. Nonetheless, no one was particularly happy or comfortable. In Orzammar, there was no such thing as weather. Up on the surface, there seemed to be nothing else.

A sentry gave a shout.

"They're coming!"

"Not before time," growled the commanding officer. A motley group of Wardens came over the crest of the nearby hill, led by an elf and the woman who had once been the daughter of the King of Orzammar.

"You were supposed to be here on the *twenty-third*, Wardens!" Rodyk, Captain of the Legion of the Dead, gave the late arrivals a hard look, which melted into a gape of awe at the sight of what was towering over the dwarves, the elves, and even the humans.

Astrid smirked. "Sorry for the delay. We took a detour, and now we have a golem!"

Crystals glittering in the noonday sun, an army in itself, Shale lumbered forward, stopping only inches from the shocked and intimidated dwarves.

"Am I expected to take a bow?" Shale asked. "Make a speech? Yes, it does seem to expect something of the sort. At least it probably does not expect us to perform death-defying tricks, like the village idiots of Redcliffe."

"Yes, he does," Tara said airily. "Maybe not tricks, but definitely things of the death-defying persuasion. Everybody expects that of Wardens."

Thanks to my reviewers: Oleander's One, KnightOfHolyLight,

Blinded in a bolthole, Phygmalion, Rake1810, JackOfBladesX, Chandagnac, Mike3207, Zute, Guest, EpitomyofShyness, Shakespira, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Kira Kyuu, Jyggilag, Guest, BanGeekNinja, Raxiselic, Phalanx213, timunderwood9, kathik9, Jenna53, Have Socks. Will Travel, Josie Lange, Nemrut, almostinsane, darksky01, mille libri, Girl-chama, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

If I have not listed you by name, it is because ffdotnet's new system calls you "Guest" if you do not log in. I had a number of reviews labeled "Guest."

In reply to one of the Guest reviews: While Avernus does not fight using blood magic, he would certainly be considered a blood mage and a malificarum by the Chantry. All his research is based on blood, and the powers he grants each category of player with his new formula are all blood-based.

Hey, Leandra is only about 42 at this point, and is a beautiful woman with a terrific figure. So her hair is grey? So what? People often went grey earlier than they do today, since we now have effective hair dye.

The Architect might have established his laboratory in the Wending Wood mine by now, but has not built up his army of Awakened yet: I have decided that he did not dare do that until the Archdemon was gone. Nor has the Mother been turned. That will happen sometime in the next six months.

71. Satinalia

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 71: Satinalia

"...and Teyrn Loghain sent word, wanting you to report to him as soon as possible."

Bronwyn, elated to come back to Denerim the day before Satinalia and find so much done for her, kissed Mistress Rannelly's rosy, withered cheek.

"Dearest Rannelly, you are a queen amongst housekeepers. I really tore my hair, worrying about the Satinalia gifts."

Bronwyn dashed out to the courtyard and then round to the steps leading to the upper palace. What a relief! Rannelly had seen to everything just as she wanted: gifts for the Compound servants, gifts for the Wolf clan, and gifts for the Wardens, all already purchased and beribboned, and waiting in her room to be presented tomorrow.

Certain gifts she had seen to herself. For Loghain, who quite simply had everything he could ever need or want, she had commissioned the carving of an exquisite little dragon, left over from a piece of Flemeth's flayed bones. It looked quite

jaunty with a little bow of green ribbon tied around its long red neck. It was a frivolous gift on the surface; not so frivolous after a moment's thought.

It was, after all, customary to give sensible, useful, or expensively decorative gifts to servants or friends who were not on the same footing in society. Among the aristocracy, it was considered more appropriate to give pretty or amusing trifles.

For that reason, in Amaranthine, she had snapped up the ridiculous Black Fox chess set for Fergus. How many times as children had they acted out that rascal's adventures?

Anora's gift required more care and tact. Bronwyn was not certain that Anora's sense of humor was equal to Highever-style presents and pranks. She must be indoctrinated in it, but carefully. Therefore, Bronwyn dug into her chest of loot and selected something she had found in Orzammar: a little dwarven figurine representing a paragon, cast in silver. It was of the Paragon Varen, the one who had discovered that nuggs were edible, so there would be an anecdote to tell about it, in her note enclosed with the gift. A plump crystal nug stood by the paragon's left foot.

For the rest of her noble friends she had other keepsakes and oddities, amethyst geodes, curious boxes of malachite, silver paperweights in the form of mabarais, of bears, of horses. And of griffons, of course.

But all these would be given tomorrow. Now she must see

Loghain, and then dress for the Satinalia Eve service in the Cathedral. Her new green gown, she supposed, so she could wear the more vivid, festive red one tomorrow.

Scout trotted in ahead of her, tail wagging, glad to see Loghain. Scout had always liked Loghain. As was typical, Loghain greeted the dog and gave him a scratch behind the ears before turning his attention to Bronwyn. He granted her a slight smile and a grave kiss.

"You look well. You found everything you were looking for?"

He led her to the settee by the fire. It was all infinitely preferable to him interrogating her from behind his desk. He even poured her some Antivan brandy. That was very welcome. The last days in the saddle had been cold. She took a warming sip, and told her story.

"Surprisingly yes. And more. The fortress was not a crumbling ruin, but in fairly good condition. No, I don't mean it was currently the abode of foreign infiltrators. The demons had preserved it with their magic. We slaughtered them and the mages repaired the Veil. The castle is no longer magically preserved, so now we'll have to maintain it in the ordinary way. With a modicum of coin and effort, it can be made quite habitable. It might be very useful as a training garrison, since it's not far from that entrance to the Deep Roads in Amaranthine. I must look up the exact land grant that was attached to it. I dare say it's not much, but it would be nice to have pasturage for our horses, at least."

"Hmph!" Loghain was not pleased at the idea of giving the Grey Wardens so much as an acre of Fereldan soil. He wondered what Nathaniel Howe would think of it. Any territory held by the Grey Wardens would be his loss.

"And what about that Archdemon blood of yours?"

Bronwyn felt very smug. "Found it! The old Wardens had hidden it behind a wall. While we were scouring out the demons, I put my foot through the place. They had the Archdemon blood preserved there, along with their old correspondence and recruiting records. The latter are of interest only to antiquarians now, of course, but I plan on reading it all. I'd love to know if the First Warden then was as distant and unhelpful as his successor today."

"As you say, of antiquarian interest only. You've made it clear that the head of your order will not lift a finger to aid us. The question is, to what degree will he seek to *harm* us?"

"I don't think he will at all. Not directly anyway, since that, too, would require effort and resources. He might not mind if someone else did, of course."

"What about the Deep Roads entrance?"

"Nothing going on there. We sensed darkspawn, but only faintly. They haven't used the entrance to reach the surface. It can be marked off the list of possible dangers, at least for now. So what's happened here since I've been gone?"

"Politics and more politics, of course. The night before last we met the Kendalls claimant for Denerim."

"What did you think?"

Loghain's face soured. "I suppose he'll do. For those who think blood is everything, he'll *have* to do."

"You were unimpressed."

"I was unimpressed. Not a fool, but not someone raised to administer our capital city. I should be the last one to denigrate a Fereldan freeholder, but I'm not sure the fellow will have much interest in urban problems. He has ..." Loghain paused, brows knit. "...no ideas. No great plans. It's just another sort of farm to him, with profits to be wrung from it. Bryland is backing him, but only because Kendalls has agreed to take on Habren."

"Ugh! Poor fellow."

"I know that you dislike her, but possibly 'poor Habren.' The man has a hard look to him."

"Maker!" Alarmed, Bronwyn sat up straight. "You don't suppose he's another Vaughan, do you?" Briefly, she thought about her schemes for improving the Alienage, and hoped that this stranger would not hinder them...or follow in the footsteps of his predecessor.

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "No. I wouldn't say

that about any man without knowing him better. He's a respectable, hard-working farmer, from all accounts. I'll say this, he looked Habren over like a brood mare at a horse dealer's. He all but examined her teeth—" He broke off, with a harsh laugh. "Well, for all I know, he did that, too. They sat next to each other and talked a bit. He might have managed it then."

"He'd do better to examine her temper, rather than her teeth! Still, it sounds like he'll do his best, and not simply squander his tax income. What about the rest of the family?"

"We don't know. He didn't bring them with him. The little girls are in school. The younger brother is back at the farm. I told Kendalls that the Landsmeet will want a good look at them, as they're heirs presumptive. He didn't like it, but agreed to send for them. Complained bitterly about having to hire a tenant to farm the freehold. Mind you, in his shoes I wouldn't care for it, either."

He could have said more. In point of fact, he did not like Aron Kendalls at all. Had he grown vain in his old age? It had rankled a bit, just the least bit, when the man was presented to him and showed not the merest hint of being impressed. That had not happened to Loghain in a long, long time. The man was not impressed much by any of them, other than obviously noting Anora's physical beauty, and the prettiness of the young girls at the table. Instead, his manner reminded Loghain once again of a horse dealer...or perhaps more of a shrewd card player, assessing the other players for weaknesses, noting their 'tells,' pursuing his own advantage

with no regard for the rest of the world.

How could he explain to a daughter of the Couslands, the descendant of generations of high nobility, that he did not think a man like Aron Kendalls—a man whose only claim rested in an accident of birth—belonged in the Landsmeet at all? He was a sound freeholder. Well and good. That gave him no qualifications whatever to rule Denerim. He had no ties there...no love for the city and its people. In fact, like many Bannorn peasants, he had a real antipathy toward city folk. Loghain knew all about that, and had grown up with such ideas stuffed in his head, until the Rebellion had knocked them out of him.

Aron Kendalls did not care about Denerim, nor did he feel any responsibility toward it. He would collect his rents and his taxes and not a copper would escape his eye. He would vote his personal interest in the Landsmeet, never considering the greater good. Maker knew that the Landsmeet already had too many nobles like that. All in all, though it disgusted him to admit it even to himself, he would rather see a rank opportunist like Adam Hawke in the Landsmeet than Aron Kendalls. Hawke, at least, had risked himself in battle for the country's welfare. Kendalls had the look of a man who never risked anything.

Perhaps he was being too particular. Perhaps he had become snobbish as well as vain. Kendalls was an outsider, and a fresh eye might well see much to scorn in Denerim. The man had not been indoctrinated in the fine art of courtly bootlicking, after all. Even if he became no more than a tight-fisted, hard-

working landlord, he would be superior to many in the Landsmeet. Loghain had no illusions about the Fereldan nobility. For every Rendorn Guerrin, sacrificing wealth and security for his country's freedom, there was a Rendon Howe. For every Rowan or Bronwyn, there were a dozen empty-headed Habren Brylands, good only for spending coin.

Bronwyn's voice roused him from his thoughts.

"Was anything interesting said over the dinner?"

"What? Oh, the usual rubbish. The guests were more interesting than the conversation. Bryland thinks a lot of that Hawke mage girl, you know. Actually invited her to dinner, along with her mother and her cousin. I hadn't met any of them before. They're all extremely good-looking."

"I agree. A remarkably handsome family. The girls, especially, are very nice—very decent. It's bold of Bryland, accepting a mage on a social basis. And I thought I was the radical!"

"The Hawkes are certainly on the rise. Habren was very haughty with them, but I got the distinct impression that Wulffe was encouraging his son to pursue the cousin."

"Charade?" Bronwyn thought that over. "It's true there aren't a lot of appealing marital prospects of suitable age, unless Rothgar marries someone very young and waits a few years. But no: Wulffe is greedy for grandchildren and wouldn't like that."

"Bryland seemed to be doing his best to show the girl in a good light. He had his young boys brought in to meet us after dinner, probably to show Wulffe how good the Hawke women were with children. And they were: I have to grant that. It seemed sincere, too."

"I hope he understands that Charade hasn't a dowry. She and her father lost everything when they left Kirkwall. At least that was my understanding."

"With her brother proposed for the city of Amaranthine, perhaps Wulffe feels he can get something later. " Loghain snorted. "And thus, he's likely to support Hawke for the bannorn for just that reason!"

Bronwyn began laughing, carelessly draping herself over Loghain. Her thick long braid of dark hair trailed down across his hand and over the arm of the settee. Amused but puzzled, Loghain gave the braid a tug.

"It's not all that funny."

"No," she said, wiping away tears. "it's not. Carver will absolutely go raving mad if his brother is made a Bann. Lots of sibling rivalry there. I feel for him, but it's just too ironic."

"I've never understood sibling rivalry at all. I always wished for a brother. Surely they understand that they're stronger together!"

"I don't suppose you do. You're an only child, aren't you? And

the father of an only child. I love my brother very much, but I can tell you that from the day you are born, your siblings are the first, most ferocious competition for everything precious in life. It's bitterest in childhood, but even after, it can sink its claws into you. I've often wondered if Fergus and I would have been such good friends, had we been closer in age, or had I been a son."

"You must be good friends, or he would not have yielded you the throne so readily."

"There's something in that, certainly; but also the fact that Fergus really and truly has no desire to be king. If it were something that he wanted—or if he disliked me and wanted to thwart me—then things would be even more chaotic than they are at the moment."

A relentless pounding awakened Anders and Morrigan in the first light of dawn. Morrigan opened one eye to assess the time, and then groaned and buried her head in the pillows. The noise continued.

"Come on!" shouted Carver Hawke. "Breakfast!"

"Carver," groaned Anders, "stop knocking right now or we'll curse you. The sun isn't even up."

"It's Satinalia!" Carver whined, thumping the door again. "Everybody's got presents!"

A pause. Morrigan sat up in bed. "'Tis a consideration indeed..."

"Too right it's a consideration," Carver announced. "Come on!"

Zevran emerged from his quarters, not a hair out of place.

"I thought you were going to have breakfast with the charming ladies of your family."

"I am," Carver replied, unabashed. "I want to have breakfast here, too. We're going to have pancakes! I can smell them."

Most of the junior Wardens were already assembled in the Hall. Aveline had not yet made it down, not particularly excited about celebrating her first Satinalia since her husband Wesley died. The rest were gleefully poking at the piles of gifts, trying to guess what lay under the traditional red scarves.

"Pancakes?" wondered Soren. "D'you suppose they'll have nug in them? I love nug pancakes."

"Not a chance," Hakan growled. "Haven't seen a nug since we left the Deep Roads. They'll probably put some sort of surfacer *fruit* in them instead."

"Fruit?" quavered Soren, probing the horror. "They'll make us eat *fruit*? Did we sign up for that?"

"Berries," said Jowan, sitting comfortably on a bench, rather excited about the holiday. "They're really *little* fruit."

The dwarves' expressions indicated that no fruit could be small enough to suit them.

But in the end, there was something to suit everyone. When the problem was explained, Mistress Rannelly saw no trouble whatever in ordering the cook to make some pancakes with sausage in them. They still seemed foreign and exotic to the dwarves, but quite toothsome. Especially with spicy sauce.

"Anything left for me?" wondered Leliana, drifting sleepily into the Hall. The Satinalia Eve service at the Cathedral had been rather prolonged. She noticed a big steaming crock on the table and gave it a sniff. "Oh! *Soufflé de maquereau!* How marvelous!"

"This is Orlesian?" Toliver asked suspiciously. "I thought it was Feast-Day Fish!"

"It is." Bronwyn sat at the head of the head, and reassured him. "It is. Fluffy and delicious mackerel pudding. Leliana just told you what the Orlesians call it in their language."

Zevran immediately spooned himself a helping. "It smells divine. The sliced hard-boiled eggs are a delightful garnish. We have something a little like this in Antiva, but it is not so light." He took a bite. "Ah! But it contains Antivan pepper, all the same! Delicious!"

Cathair tried some, and politely did not spit it out. "It is very..." Words failed him. He poured cream into a bowl and submerged a thick slice of apple bread in it.

Aveline arrived at last, rather surprised that everyone was up so early when they had been told they could sleep in. Her fellow Wardens eagerly helped her to everything on the table.

"What about presents?" Carver complained.

Bronwyn pointed her spoon at his heaping platter. "Eat everything on your plate first. Then presents. Then everyone gets paid for the quarter."

A pleased murmur rose up. Carver turned his attention to his plate.

"Oh. Right, then."

There was a pause in the conversation, broken only by the sound of diligent, contented consumption. Bronwyn began with porridge, because she had been trained to fill up with porridge before taking any of the richer foods. It was very good porridge, too, with butter and salt, just as she liked it. Scout liked porridge, too, though he generally needed his muzzle wiped clean afterwards.

Then the red scarves were whisked away, and there was a general dive into the presents. Most were very simple: clever folding knives and traveling gaming sets; pencils with little cases and drinking flasks; holiday hand puppets and scented soaps.

Bronwyn smiled over her own charming haul. She loved anything scented, and Leliana had even found her some

scented candles tinted green, which she liked very much. Morrigan had created a wonderful pomander filled with dried herbs and flowers. Cathair had carved her a delicate little figure of Mythal the Protector out of fragrant whitewood. The most amusing present was from Anders, which was a hairclip as wide as her hand that concealed a tiny dagger. She said nothing about the presents that had been delivered to her private room: the gifts from Fergus and Loghain and her fellow nobles. Fergus had sent her "your very own grappling hook." Bryland had sent her a pair of miniature portraits of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland, based on a group painting at his Keep that had been made at the end of the Rebellion. Anora had sent her an exquisite windharp of crystal and silver wire, to be hung in a window. Loghain, in a fit of wry humor, had sent her a cookbook: *Mother Blandula's Compleat Housekeeper*. Bronwyn had laughed, and considered thumping him over the head with it. On the other hand, there was a very interesting section in it on camp cookery...

"There's going to be a puppet show in the Market," Carver told them, in a weirdly high voice. One of his presents was a Kiveal the Trickster puppet, and he was using it to annoy Aveline. "Around noon. Everybody should see that!"

"Have fun however you like," Bronwyn said, "As long as no one dies or is seriously hurt. And don't go anywhere alone! I'm serious about that. Be back at sundown to change for the feast."

Leliana looked up from the pretty dancing slippers given to her by Bronwyn, and asked, "Who do you suppose will be the

Fool?"

Bronwyn's hand paused over a flask of very nice perfume. At home in Highever choosing a Satinalia fool was as simple as someone getting the silver coin in their slice of pudding. At the Palace feast, it, like everything else, was political. No one wanted to risk labeling the Queen a fool.

"The Fool will be Pol Pollen, the professional puppeteer and clown," she told them. "He will come in when the pudding is served and put on a show. He's a well-known Ferelden entertainer, and his people have been carefully vetted. The musicians, too, will be searched for anything resembling weapons. They'll be lucky if they're allowed eating knives."

Carver snorted, "Nobody wants anything like the Dead Arl's Wedding to happen again."

"Exactly. I've got to get my presents delivered to everyone—"

Zevran said, "I would be happy to deliver the little girl's gifts to the Alienage."

"I shall go with you," Cathair volunteered.

"Thank you. You can ride on the cart I ordered," said Bronwyn. "The chest with her name goes to little Amethyne, but I am sending the Alienage some provisions to improve their cheer, since they have no Arl to see to them. Valendrian is also due the money for the child's keep. If the two of you will deliver it, that will be one less thing for me to worry about."

Carver," she added. "I have presents for Highever House, but I'm going there, too. Perhaps in an hour or two. You can help me carry them. All the rest of my gifts are being sent by courier."

"Er..." Jowan hesitated. "Leliana and I have presents for our friends there, too."

"Wonderful!" Bronwyn said. "Then I'll have lots of help. I'll be there for quite a bit of the day. Everybody's invited as soon they can make it. You should all try Highever Holiday Punch."

"What's punch?" Hakan whispered to Aveline.

"It's a drink," Aveline told him. "It's served in a big bowl."

"Sometimes it has *fruit* in it," sniped Jowan.

"Ewww. But why did do they call it 'punch?'" the dwarf persisted.

The well-traveled Anders smirked, "Because, my little friend, that's what it packs. A punch."

The dwarves took that in. Soren shrugged. "Sounds...*good*. I can pick the bits of fruit out first, can't I?"

Bronwyn then got everyone paid, and hoped that wherever they were, her Senior Wardens were paying everyone else properly, too.

At least everyone here was happy with their gifts. For her Wolf people, she had asked Rannelly to put together a variety of leather flasks, folding knives, and silver spoons for the men. For the women, there was a huswife apiece: a sewing kit comprised of thimble, a measure, two good needles, small scissors, small reels of black and white thread, and a little pincushion with a dozen straight pins. These had also been given to the Warden servants, and were regarded as treasures. Rannelly explained to Bronwyn that any woman with such an object had the means of self-support.

So they were regarded when she distributed the gifts at Highever House. Bronwyn was glad to learn that Fergus had been generous with them as well. In a few days she would get her ex-werewolves together and find out how they felt about going north to serve the Wardens. If they were amenable, it would solve some her problems with Soldier's Peak.

The second breakfast at Highever House was fairly hilarious, as Fergus had already mixed the punch, potent and fragrant, in a huge silver bowl. There was more hilarity, when the dwarves grasped that the bowl was for everyone to *share*, not an individual portion. They soon discovered that a goblet or two was quite strong enough for holiday cheer.

"Lady Bronwyn! May I speak to you? In private?"

Bronwyn found Lady Amell bearing down on her, and smiled. She hoped the Hawkes realized how fortunate they were to still have their mother; and that their mother was so

affectionate and devoted to each one of them

"Of course. I believe my old room is vacant at the moment."

It was not only vacant. Bronwyn was disturbed to find it nearly empty. Of course with all the people staying here, much of the furniture had been moved and rearranged. The ladies could at least sit in the window seat and have a chat unheard. Leandra Hawke, now Lady Amell, was fidgeting, wringing her hands in distress.

"I hoped to ask your advice on a personal matter of great importance. The most extraordinary thing has happened!"

Bronwyn smiled. Wulffe had no doubt given his son a push. Charade was quite a pleasant girl, and would no doubt—

"I have had an offer of marriage!" Leandra confessed.

Bronwyn blinked, trying to rearrange her thoughts. This woman was as old as her own mother. And someone had asked for her hand?

"You...yourself...have had an offer?"

"Yes! It was so utterly unexpected...not unwelcome, of course, not that...but such a surprise! I have not even told my children. I'm not sure how they would react." She reddened like a maiden. "I'm afraid they would laugh, at first. But then..."

"First of all, I suppose it depends upon the gentleman. Do you like him?"

"Yes! Well...I hardly know him, but he has been such a good friend to our family. And considering his position, one would not like to refuse him..."

Bronwyn stared at her, wondering who the woman could possibly mean. Who was so prestigious as to not be easily refused? Loghain? He was promised to Bronwyn.

"Who is—"

"Arl Bryland. The Arl of South Reach!" Leandra burst forth. "He came to here yesterday and made his offer. A handsome one. He understands that I have...no fortune. He understands that all our estates in Kirkwall were lost. He does not care that I am probably too old to give him more children, and said very kindly that three were quite enough for him to manage. He thought I would be a pleasant companion and a kind stepmother to his sons. And I would... I mean...they are darling little boys..."

Still too surprised to compose a rational reply, Bronwyn tried to make sense of this new development. She imagined Loghain's reaction, and nearly burst out laughing. If he thought the Hawkes ambitious before, what would he think now? This marriage, on the surface such an unexceptional union between two pleasant, middle-aged people, was rife with political implications.

Leandra Hawke, Lady Amell, would become Arlessa of South Reach. That changed *everything*. With Bryland as his stepfather, there was no longer any doubt that Adam Hawke

would be made Bann of Amaranthine. Nor was there any question that Charade Amell, even without a dowry, would be considered a suitable match for the heir of West Hill. Honors and titles would fall to the Hawkes like dominoes. From penniless peasants and adventurers a few months ago, they would abruptly become one of the most influential families in the kingdom. Clearly, Lady Amell understood this at some level, which was why she was more or less asking for Bronwyn's permission. For that was what this was all about, it seemed.

And Bethany. Mistress Bethany Hawke, a mage outside the Circle, would become the stepdaughter of one of the most powerful men in Ferelden: one who had declared her free of Chantry control in the Queen's name. Marrying her mother would wave a red battle flag in the Chantry's face, and declare to all Thedas Bryland's surprisingly radical stance on the issue of Chantry control of mages.

Not thinking so deeply on the matter, the Landsmeet likely would approve the marriage automatically, thinking it of little consequence, since Bryland already had heirs. The Chantry, however, thinking three steps ahead as they generally did, might actually refuse to solemnize it. Would that do them harm or good? Bethany was popular with a lot of influential Landsmeet members, even a devout woman like Bann Alfstanna. Refusing to allow her mother to marry would look to them like petty spite. The Chantry in Orlais already seemed opposed to Ferelden, but they could not easily use such an event to raise indignation in other nations. If the Arl of South

Reach were actually to marry a mage, yes, perhaps: but not the *mother* of a mage.

Was the marriage a good thing for the people involved? Personally, she could see it being very nice for Cousin Leonas. Maybe not so nice for Leandra herself once she got to know Habren.

Habren! *Andraste's nightgown!* There were no end of stories about wicked stepmothers, but Habren would likely be the wickedest *stepdaughter* of all time. Bronwyn hoped that Bryland intended to wait until Habren was out of the house and settled before introducing a wife into his household. There was a place to begin.

"My cousin is a wonderful man, and I am sure he would be a kind and considerate husband. Did he say when he would like to marry?"

"Oh, of course after his daughter's wedding. He has so much on his mind. With her gone, he'll have no one to help him with the boys and the household, and of course he'll be lonely. And he lost his sister, as you know, in such a cruel way so recently. Now his daughter will be marrying. I'm sure he'll miss her very much."

"Cousin Leonas loves his family deeply, and I am sure he would not offer marriage to a woman without some sincere regard for her. He could, after all, simply engage a housekeeper. That he wishes to give you his name and his rank is a profound personal compliment."

"I know it is!" The woman absolutely glowed, and looked years younger than her age. "I had never thought of marrying again after losing my dear Malcolm, but this... he's such a fine man, and so very kind. I'm sure my children would respect him as they should."

"Yes, I believe they would." Why not? They were sensible people. Not only was Arl Bryland a decent man in himself, but he was the gateway to a life of power and wealth for them.

Except for Carver. He was a Grey Warden, and would not personally profit from the marriage. However, Bronwyn could not see Carver giving his mother any difficulty if she wished to marry. Or did she? Even grown children could be difficult if they thought a beloved parent was being replaced. And boys could be possessive of their mothers, just as daughters were of their fathers.

Bronwyn considered it. She saw no valid reason to oppose the marriage. If Cousin Leonas fancied this woman, why should she take steps to thwart him? His sister had done enough of that over the years. In fact, it would be a bad idea for Bronwyn personally, since he was one of her strongest political supporters. She needed to tell Loghain about this—very soon—but did not like the idea of interfering in the personal lives of a grown man and a grown woman.

"As soon as you can," she advised instead, "I think you should gather your children—and Charade, too—together, and tell them your plans. Better to clear the air at once and find out if they have strong feelings against it."

"Then you don't think it...a *bad* idea."

Should she warn her about Habren? Bronwyn's conscience gave her a hard nudge.

"For you and the Arl personally? No, not at all. My cousin has been alone too long. The boys might be thrilled to have a maternal figure in their lives. They have evidently taken to your daughter, and might well be happy to acknowledge her as a sister. Lady Habren, however..."

The glowing face dimmed briefly. The nudge of conscience renewed. Habren could be so *very* nasty. Bronwyn was convinced that this marriage would enrage her.

"I think you must be prepared for some jealousy there. Forgive me for speaking plainly. After being so doted on by her father, it might be...difficult...for Habren to accept that he has affections for any lady other than herself. Of course, she will be married by then and distracted. Nonetheless..."

"I think I understand. Poor girl. Of course it would hard for her. You don't oppose it yourself?"

"No. Not at all. I'm sure you'll be a good wife to my cousin. You realize, surely, that you will have heavy responsibilities as Arlessa, but I know that the Arl will do his best to help you. You should visit South Reach as soon as possible and get to know your new vassals."

"How exciting it will be!" Leandra's glow was in evidence once

more. "He is such a good and pleasant person! So manly and brave! His house in town is so charming, and there is so much to do! He suggested the end of Firstfall, It will be a very quiet ceremony, but I feel I can hardly wait!"

She touched Bronwyn's hand in a moment of affectionate, grateful enthusiasm, and then excused herself. Bronwyn was left in her echoing empty room, musing over this new upheaval.

Loghain was suspicious of the Hawkes, but could not say anything publicly against the marriage. He would not dare raise the issue of Leandra's *déclassé* status, and the fact that she had been living on a little farm in Lothering with her commoner husband for the past twenty years. Loghain had married a commoner himself, and Teyrna Celia had had no trace of the noble Marcher blood that Leandra Hawke could boast. The fact that the lady had no dowry to bring the marriage was a matter between bride and groom. With the difficulties with the Chantry, Loghain would be the last man to bring up the fact that the lady had given birth to a mage.

Someone would, of course.

Zevran grinned at Cathair, enjoying the celebration swirling around them. They were the most popular men in the Alienage today.

The carter, paid extra for working on Satinalia, helped unload the cargo, and then smartly snapped his whip and was away

from the knife-ears as fast as his ox would move. Valendrian came out of his house, and threw up his hands in astonishment at the bounty before him.

Bronwyn had based her gifts to the Alienage on what her father had traditionally given the Highever elves. Had she asked, she would have found that Arl Urien had never been anywhere as generous...and Bann Vaughan had always expected a certain quid pro quo in exchange.

Thus, the cask of ale, the hams, the keg of salt fish, the big fruitcake, and the heavy bolt of blue wool were looked upon as the serendipitous gifts of the Maker. Valendrian did his best to attribute them more specifically to the kindness of the Girl Warden; especially when he was given the quarterly maintenance for Amethyne, and the wonderful chest was taken into his house to be opened and exclaimed over.

The little girl, when not interrogated by a tall and terrible shemlen lady, was talkative enough, excited about her music lessons with "Mistress Zoe;" and thrilled to have a chest of her very own, inscribed with her name, which she could spell out for them very proudly.

"And it has a key!" she said, examining that bronze object in wonder. "I have a chest that *locks!*"

Zevran explained to her that she should open the chest, because it had rattled a little and might have something inside. The womenfolk crowded around, urging her to have a look.

And then there were cries of excitement at the contents. Zevran reflected on little, how very little it took to make a child happy. For that matter, how little it took to inspire gratitude in these poor people.

A redhaired girl named Shianni quickly tied the green hair ribbon to the end of the child's long plait, and the effect was much admired. Red mittens were declared to be the last word in winter fashion for a little elven girl. The new green stockings, however, were judged too pretty to wear.

"I should wear them to my lessons," the little girl pleaded. "I should look nice for Mistress Zoe."

Cathair was curious about the cup-and-ball toy. For that matter, no one else knew what it was, so Zevran demonstrated.

"That's clever, that is," said one of the women. "If my man could put his hands on a bit of wood, he could whittle one himself for the children. I can always find a bit of string somewhere."

At the sight of the little tambourine, its drumhead painted with a red and green dragon, Amethyne was struck speechless. Then she snatched it up and was off, dancing out the door, rattling and jingling.

"Children love music," Cathair observed, "Almost as much as they love to run about and make a noise."

Bryland looked gravely at himself in the mirror, and decided he would have to do. Leandra would not mind his greying locks, since she had gone grey herself. He took a breath and strode out of his private apartments. He must gather up his guest. It was time for Aron to meet the rest of the Landsmeet present in Denerim.

Alas, Habren was waiting for him just outside her own door. Mourning did not become her, nor did the expression on her face.

"I thought we couldn't go to the Ball! I thought we were in *mourning!*"

"Habren," he said, his voice deliberate and calm, "I have to go. Aron needs to be introduced to the Landsmeet members here in Denerim. He won't be confirmed unless they know him."

"Then I should go, too!"

"No," he said, calculating the distance to the doors leading to the guest wing. He kept walking. "You're a recent widow. It's not possible."

The expected explosion was all he had dreaded. Habren ran after him screeching. "Then you shouldn't go either! How can you go and leave me here? Nobody cares about *me*. If I'm in mourning, so are you!"

Quite suddenly he snapped. Turning, he stalked up to her, and

snarled. "I wasn't married to bloody Urien! I'm doing this for *you*, you little fool. Now go to your room and bloody *shut up!*"

He was relieved to see her shocked into silence, and then ashamed. Quickening his pace, he left the family wing and gave strict instructions to his guards.

The Satinalia Feast and Ball was held in the Landsmeet Chamber. The long open space left plenty of room to dance, and the raised galleries on either side provide a vantage point both for the musicians and for people who wanted to watch rather than dance, or play cards without distraction.

Anora thought it looked quite nice, and not at all as overdone and decadent as the decorations for Arl Urien's wedding. Of course, the decorations were the same ones that had been put up, year after year, since long before she had come to Denerim. They still looked quite splendid, thanks to the assiduous care of the staff.

Red was the theme, of course. Red and harvest gold. Knowing that Bronwyn was going to wear red, Anora had opted for a gold gown, which became her better than red would have, and attracted quite a few eyes; most especially the warm brown eyes she most wished to attract. Fergus was looking quite handsome himself. Like his sister, he was wearing red; but in his case it was a red and gold doublet. They would lead the dancing tonight, and would make a handsome couple. Anora was ridiculously fluttered at the prospect; fluttered as she had never been as a young girl.

Bronwyn's stunning headpiece had roused the spirit of competition in her. She was wearing it again tonight, and it really was a lovely bit of jewelry. Anora had gone through her own jewels at length, and eventually found some pearls that she put to good use. One string was twined through the braided mass of her chignon, and another was fastened over her brow, with a tear drop pendant in the middle. She quite liked the effect. She would be Queen for only a little over a month now, and wanted to look the part until the very last moment.

"You could not look more beautiful, Your Majesty," Fergus said softly. She smiled in response, unable to moderate her expression. She was just able to restrain herself from taking his hand. It would not do, not with so many eyes upon them.

"Thank you. Perhaps it is the pleasant evening. I find myself in astonishingly good spirits, and I expect the dancing to be more agreeable than on the occasion of Arl Urien's wedding."

"Yes, not being shot at should certainly enhance the general festivities. The guards are on the alert. You should have no unpleasant surprises, unless I tread on your toes when we dance."

She laughed, her eyes surveying the cheerful crowd. "Look at how soliticitous Leonas Bryland is of those Hawke ladies! He's quite taken them under his wing."

"Leonas isn't one to forget a service—especially since he owes his son's life to Mistress Bethany. She's a very sweet

girl, and a formidable mage from all accounts."

"There's that, of course, but it's clear that he likes them personally. Of course, they are all remarkably attractive, and rather raise the whole average of good looks here."

"The broad-shouldered young man in the sober doublet...is that Aron Kendalls? He looks rather disapproving. Or is he simply feeling out of place?"

"Possibly a bit of both. It must be all very new and confusing for him. I'm sure the Arl will introduce him to you later. Or sooner, it seems," she said, as Bryland and his party approached.

"Your Majesty! Your Graces! My lords, ladies and gentlemen! Dinner is served!"

The first course, an appetizing array of lighter delicacies, was set before the guests, to loud appreciation.

Bronwyn studied the noisy room from her vantage point at the high table. Her Wardens seemed to be in good spirits. Loghain was placed next to her, of course. She leaned close and smiled mischievously. "Did you like your little dragon?"

"Very much," Loghain answered blandly. "A formidable guardian for my private papers. Did you like your cook book?"

"How very amusing. No recipes for dragon in it, though. I shall

have to substitute ingredients. I noticed there were some blank pages at the end for the creative housekeeper."

"While you're at it, you can devise something to be made from nug. Anora was amused by the little Paragon."

"Oh, there are heaps of recipes for nug. I'll pick the brains of my dwarven Wardens, too. One of them was talking this morning about nug pancakes, though I shuddered a bit. In my opinion, nug tastes like an unnatural union of pork and hare."

"Really? I didn't think it was all that bad. I was starving at the time, of course, which might have prejudiced me in its favor."

Bronwyn laughed. Loghain thought she looked very pretty. Red was certainly her color. "I'm glad you wore that gown again. How did you come by it? One of the quartermasters in camp?"

"No. This is the gown that Teagan gave me. Yes, really. He was in the process of giving away a great deal of Isolde's vast wardrobe to my friends and his betrothed, but nothing of Isolde's fit me, so the maid's found an old gown of Queen Rowan's. It was lovingly packed away with sweet herbs, and had hardly been worn. With a few alterations, it was as good as new. I wear this cape with it since bare shoulders are no longer in fashion."

Loghain looked at her in silence throughout this speech, his face unreadable. "Rowan's gown? I...see."

Bronwyn glanced at him from the corner of her eye, sipping her wine nonchalantly. She hoped the fact that the gown had once been the property of the late Queen Rowan did not make Loghain dislike it.

Loghain's relationship to the Queen had been the subject of some speculation within her family. While Bryce Cousland had fought the Orlesians himself, he had spent little time with the forces directly under Maric's—which was to say Loghain's—command. Everyone knew that the King, Queen Rowan, and Loghain had been inseparable during the Rebellion and had saved one another's lives on many occasions. However, when the usurper Meghan was killed and Maric took the throne, Loghain had quickly departed to his new teyrnir in Gwaren, and had stayed there for years. In fact, he had remained there until after Queen Rowan's death. At that point, he had gone north to support the grieving King, and Maric had demanded his nearly constant attendance ever after.

Had there been some sort of ill-will between Queen Rowan and Loghain? Had she commanded him to absent himself from her presence...and from that of the King? She was the daughter of an arl, and Father had wondered if she had resented Maric's friendship—his near brotherhood—with a jumped-up freeholder. No one could question Loghain's brilliant military gifts, but it might be only human to feel some resentment of the closeness between the two men. Mother agreed with Father, and got a rather unpleasant, disapproving look on her face when she spoke of King Maric's friendship with Loghain.

Once, at the breakfast table one day, she had even voiced her opinion. Bronwyn remembered it as taking place around the time that the betrothal between Cailan and Anora had been made public.

"One can hardly blame the Queen for wanting Loghain out of their lives once she and Maric were finally married. And for all that, she was never happy. Never!"

Father glanced at Bronwyn and Fergus, as if thinking this was a conversation they did not need to hear. "Eleanor, that's all in the past, I'm sure. And once the Queen is dead, Maric naturally turned to his best friend..."

"Well, I think it's disgusting. It all fits, Bryce. And then nothing must do but they must seal the bond by the marriage of their children!" She subsided, seeing his anxious frown. "But I see your point. And of course none of this is Anora's fault. She's a wonderful girl. There's nothing to be done about it now."

At the time, Bronwyn had been most interested in her share of the events: the fact that she would not have to marry the heir to the throne, because Anora Mac Tir had already gobbled him up. It had not disturbed her unduly, since she was only eleven years old, and thought the idea of marriage to anyone perfectly revolting.

While she loved and revered her parents, Bronwyn now felt they had been a little narrow-minded in disliking the King's friendship with Loghain. They were proud of their noble

lineage and their ancient heritage. That was understandable. Bronwyn was proud of it, too. However, she had now had the opportunity to meet and make friends with people from all races and degrees, and many of them were very fine people—better than many with a title and a Landsmeet vote. Loghain had risen to lordship and honors in Ferelden, not because he was the king's friend, but because he, more than anyone else, had driven out the Orlesians and restored the true king to his throne. These were mighty deeds, and deserved the noblest rewards.

Loghain spoke softly, quieting her concerns about her clothing's past provenance.

"It's a splendid gown, though I'd rather see what it looks like by firelight in your private room."

She pressed his hand, and whispered. "Then you will come to me? You will come to me tonight?"

"Nothing could keep me away. We can slip out later at the end."

"Not until you've danced with me at least once!"

"I suppose that's fair." He turned away discreetly, but the side of his mouth that Bronwyn could see was still smiling.

Voices rose around them, excited and pleased. The minstrels played a fanfare, and the herald announced the start of the dancing.

Anora, with Fergus as her partner, led the train of dancers with an opening pavane, stately and slow enough not to stifle conversation. Bronwyn and Loghain followed just after.

"I hope you will be satisfied," he said, rather grimly. "Not even a great deal of wine changes my opinion of dancing as a bloody silly thing to do."

"It's good exercise," Bronwyn disagreed, with a mocking smile. "And actually, you dance quite well."

"I'm not about to make a fool of myself doing *anything* badly. I can get through a pavane all right, but after that, I'll have to leave you to the gilded youth of Ferelden."

"What about the antivanel?"

"I am *not*," he growled, "going to be seen with *bells* on my wrists."

A long series of dances followed, and Bronwyn had partners for them all. A revolve with Bryland, a gathering dance with Bann Sighard's son Oswyn, a corrento with Rothgar Wulffe. Nathaniel surprised her by asking her to join him in the Miller's Dance. It suited him, slow and melancholy as it was. She remembered watching him dance when she was a young girl, and admiring his dancing. They matched well as partners. Nathaniel said little as they danced, but she was glad they were recovering a little of their old ease together.

Afterward, circles were formed for the antivanel: women in

the inner circle and men around them, and the bells jangled in a delightful, ear-splitting racket. The circle widened and the set finished with the wild dance, punctuated with kicks, appropriately called a "brawl."

Another course was served, and the guests, feeling they earned some refreshment, plunged their knives into the hapless roast geese with abandon.

"Here," Loghain said, handing Bronwyn a cup of wine. "You look like you need it."

"I feel wonderful," she declared, smiling. All the same, she took the cup. "Did you see my cousin Leonas? He danced with Lady Amell three times!"

Loghain had noticed. It was always very interesting and informative to watch Landsmeet members while dancing. He had noted Wulffe urging his son to dance with the Hawke cousin, and had noted that the young man seemed to like the girl well enough. He had noticed the way Fergus and Anora looked at each other over a dance floor. He had noticed all sorts of flirtations and guarded hostilities. He had noticed Nathaniel Howe's grave partnering of Bronwyn. He had certainly not missed Bryland making an ass of himself over the Marcher lady.

"I saw," he replied. "He's seems...infatuated."

Bronwyn leaned close and whispered. "He's asked her to marry him! Yes! The lady told me herself this morning and

was concerned that I would disapprove. I didn't, of course, though I thought it only decent to warn her about making Habren jealous."

Loghain stared at her, brows knit together, taking in the various consequences of an Arl of Ferelden marrying such a woman. "The Chantry won't like it much. Nor will all the ladies who had set their caps at Bryland over the years. And you're right: his daughter is going to be a problem."

"It could get very nasty."

"None of our business of course...unless someone makes it our business."

They ate quietly, for the moment lost in thought. Loghain scowled, a little put out at the undeserved good luck of the Hawkes.

There was a stir among the musicians. The herald and the seneschal had a brief conference, and the herald rapped his staff on the floor once more, giving notice that the entertainment was about to begin. Voices stilled, and all eyes were on the side door.

With a blare of trumpets (one of which played a wrong note loudly and repeatedly) and a thunder of drums, Pol Pollen made his entrance, wreathed in evergreen, his gaudy doublet padded to make him look even fatter than he was. At his heels lumbered a big mabari: grizzle-jowled, battle-scarred, and sublimely bored. A sprig of evergreen decorated his

stained and studded collar.

Scout sat up, ears pricked, staring intently at the dog. Perhaps there was something in this 'entertainment' business after all.

"Behold the crowned king of the festival!" bawled the Fool. "And his faithful hound, Grump."

Amidst applause, the musicians burst forth in a march, and the official fool paraded through the ranks of the amateurs, juggling the traditional nuts and sweets, then tossing them to the guests. A troupe of dancing girls, wearing headpieces—not Orlesian masks—to suggest deer, bear, badgers, birds, rabbits, and wolves, followed in his wake, trailing bright red scarves.

Loghain caught one of the walnuts on the fly, and ceremoniously presented it to Bronwyn. Others, lacking his dexterity, scrambled on the floor in undignified enthusiasm.

At the foot of the tables, the Fool halted and spread his arms wide. His dog looked up at him quizzically.

"Right!" He bellowed. "We all know why we're here!"

A cheer.

"And to celebrate the day, Grump and I plan to amuse ourselves with the noble sport of hunting!" He looked about him, puzzled. "—if I can find my bow."

And assistant appeared, and with an elaborate salute, presented the Fool with a ludicrously outsized bow and matching arrow. Laughter rose up.

With supercilious assurance, the Fool sneered at the guests. "A big man needs a big bow! And now, amidst the lofty crags and swift-flowing streams of our native land, I take bow in hand," he slapped his padded belly, "to earn my supper."

Lutes and drums struck up, and the Fool, bouncing ponderously on the balls of his feet, began to sing in a powerful, gravelly bass:

In Darland's time the hunt was fine, and the birds did sweetly sing.

Then Orlesians came, and all the game became the right of the king.

But Fereldan lads saw sport to be had, and swift to poaching turned,

And so in that way have we even today our pleasant supper earned.

One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe,

The hunting of the usurper's game shall feed us through the snow.

One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe,

The hunting of King Meghren's game shall feed us through

the snow.

*Seeking deer or hare in the greenwoods fair, the chevaliers
do ride.*

But rebels few are a-hunting too, though cleverly we hide.

*Time and again come Meghren's men chasing poachers
'round hill and dale*

*But our prey we've shot and we'll not get caught as we lift our
cups of ale.*

*So there's one for the partridge, two for the hare, and three
for the buck and doe,*

*The hunting of the usurper's game shall feed us through the
snow.*

*One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck
and doe,*

*The hunting of King Meghren's game shall feed us through
the snow.*

*Men say that port is the finest sport, that poaching's far too
cold*

*And they pass the year drinking fine dark beer or else some
whiskey bold.*

*But they'll find that wine is the thief of time and ale is a bitter
foe*

*And the Fereldan man has no better friends than his arrows
and his bow.*

One for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck

and doe,

The hunting of the usurper's game shall feed us through the snow.

Oh, it's one for the partridge, two for the hare, and three for the buck and doe.

The hunting of King's Meghren's game shall feed us through the snow!

The audience joined in on the last chorus, and the Fool bowed to cheers and more applause at the end. Bronwyn glanced at Loghain and saw him smiling, perhaps remembering simpler—if equally dangerous—times.

There was a comic dance, as the Fool, armed with his mighty bow, attempted to shoot the forest creatures. All but one of them fled, leaving the smallest and prettiest of them—the Rabbit—cowering before the Fool and his dog.

"Mercy, Ser Fool!" She batted her eyes, and lifted her hands in graceful supplication. "You wouldn't shoot me, would you, dear, kind, *brave* Fool? Think of my poor grey mother! Think of my eight fluffy little children! How will they learn to steal carrots, without their mother's tender care? Think of your own mother, Ser Fool! Would you want some terrible huntsman to threaten *her*?"

"My mother!" The Fool paused, and sniffed enormously, wiping his eyes. "My sweet, darling mother!" He produced a huge red handkerchief, and blew his nose like a trumpet. "Oh, memories so tender of years gone by! I can't do it, Grump! I

couldn't hurt a *mother!*"

The dog sat down and stared up at his human, all but rolling his eyes.

"I know...I know!" whimpered the Fool. "But it seems so *cruel*. Why can't we live in peace together? Why can't we just...*get along?*"

"Oh, Ser Fool, put aside your bow!" pleaded the Rabbit. "Spare me, dear Fool, and let us be friends!"

"I suppose I could..." the Fool hesitated. "but *should* I?"

"Of course you should," the Rabbit urged. "A new dawn will dawn for man and rabbit! Set aside your bow, and let us clasp hand...and paw... in fellowship! "

"That's a fair offer," the Fool granted. "But...unarm myself, in a forest? Surrounded by enemies? Is that sensible? Would... for instance...*Teyrn Loghain* approve?"

"No!" Loghain replied, very distinctly.

A surge of laughter. Wulffe slapped the table, guffawing. Bryland laughed uproariously, turning to Leandra Hawke and her daughter to see their amused expressions.

Grump glared at the audience, and then back at his master, uttering a deep low growl. Scout, now quite interested, gave a short, sharp bark. Bronwyn hushed him, and scratched his

ears.

"It's just a story, Scout!" she admonished him in a whisper.

"Give me your bow," the Rabbit implored, eyes full of cunning, "I can hold your bow, while you open the wineskin you carry. We will drink to our new alliance!"

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt..." the Fool considered. "For once, in a way..."

Grump lay down on the floor and put his paws over his eyes. There was more laughter, loud and prolonged. The Fool turned his back, fumbling with the stopper, while, one by one, all the wild beasts crept out from the doorway and surrounded him.

"I've got it!" he shouted. "Here, dear Rabbit, try some of this —*Maker's elbows!*"

The beasts lunged at him, and wine spurted out in a blood-red arc. Merry music crashed out again. Lords and ladies nearly slid from the benches, laughing helplessly, as the Fool fled in four-quarter time from the badgers, wolves, and furious bears, squirting wine on the downbeat.

After the cheers died down, the bows were taken, and the rewards paid with a generous hand, another course was brought out, and the guest settled down to serious eating. Down the table, they could hear Arl Wulffe booming out a

proposal.

"There's many a true word spoken in jest. A hunt! A hunt is just the thing! Get us all out, get a little exercise...get some of those boars the farmers have been complaining about. I'll host it, too. What about it, Rothgar?"

His son Rothgar, tall, impossibly gangly, and with a wry sense of humor, agreed. "If we're not drenched or frozen, Father, we'll have a splendid time!"

"'Drenched or frozen,' indeed! What a pack of sweet young damsels lads are today! Let's see—can't put it on in less than five days...need that much to organize the servants. I've got a hunting lodge not far from the city that might be large enough..."

"If you mean Stonycroft," Fergus put in, "it marches with mine. Rackley Fell. On the approach to Dragon's Peak. That would give us a wide hunting field."

"That's very handsome of you. How about the eighth?" asked Wulffe. "Give me enough time to get everything ready, and still give *someone*—" he positively winked at Bronwyn "—time to get the dirt out from under her fingernails before her wedding."

Anora did not particularly care for hunting, but she knew that Fergus did, and so raised no objections. Bronwyn was as eager as her brother. Loghain agreed that the boars up in the fells were becoming a problem.

Besides, he really liked smoked boar.

There was more dancing, for those who still had legs to dance. Loghain became engrossed in Wulffe's plans for a hunt, while Bronwyn danced and danced some more. She only smiled when young Lord Oswyn attempted to partner her for the faveline, and fell flat on his face instead.

A quick galliard followed. Bronwyn danced it with Anders, who had somehow learned to dance in the intervals between being rounded up by the Templars.

"What a handsome man!" commented a noble lady to her friend. "One of the Wardens. I declare that I wonder if Bronwyn did not choose her Wardens for their looks!"

Loghain looked up at that, and watched the dance to the end. He did not mind if Bronwyn danced with her Wardens, but there were those who knew that Anders was not only a Warden, but a mage.

When Bronwyn sat down again, flushed and happy, he inquired, "Whatever would the Grand Cleric say?"

She laughed, and was about to make an arch reply, when a servant approached and bowed. In a low voice, he whispered. "Beg pardon, my lady. I was sent to give this to you without delay."

Bronwyn took the proffered parchment, opened and read it,

and blew out a breath.

Warden-Commander—

I have found a worthy subject for your proof. A child lies dying. Come to see me early tomorrow.

Muirin,

Grand Cleric of Ferelden

Bronwyn looked up from the parchment, her face a mask of false brightness. "Invoking the Grand Cleric seems to have drawn her attention. She wishes to meet with me tomorrow." She nodded to the servant. "I shall be there. Inform her Grace."

Thanks for my reviewers: Raxiselic, Kira Kyuu, Phygmalion, Oleander's One, Guest, Jyggilag, Have Socks. Will Travel, JakcOfBladesX, almostinsane, EpitomyofShyness, MsBarrows, KnightOfHolyLight, Blinded in a bolthole, Zute, amanda weber, Mike3207, Shakespira, Halm Vendrella, Chandagnac, mille libri, Psyche Sinclair, Tsu Doh Nimh, Josie Lange, Koden21, anon, le-maru, Patchworker, and Mike3207.

I had several interesting reviewers from "Guest." Remember that you need to be signed in for me to be able to answer you.

The recipe for Feast Day Fish is in the Dragon Age Codex.

Fluffy Mackerel Pudding

2 stalks celery

1 green pepper

Half a pound of poached mackerel

1 small onion, finely diced

2 tsp mustard

1 tsp salt

half tsp ground Antivan pepper

eighth tsp ground mace

dash ground cardamom seed

2 eggs, beaten

2 eggs, boiled and sliced for garnish

- This book, found in Arl Eamon's Denerim estate, naturally falls open to this page.

I believe that Antivan pepper is black pepper. I also believe that the fish must be boned and finely flaked. All the recipes I have found online used smoked mackerel.

As to the huswives (aka housewives): in pre-industrial society, good needles were precious. There's a Restoration comedy partly built around a household trying to find a needle. Having your own personal sewing kit was a big deal.

Yes, Bronwyn is young, and still doesn't quite get what her parents were talking about. In this story, the elder Couslands completely misinterpreted Loghain, Rowan, and Maric's

relationship. I suspect they were not the only ones.

The song is adapted from Heather Dale's "The Poachers" from her album The Green Knight.

"Exit, pursued by a bear," is Shakespeare's famous stage direction in Act 3, scene III of A Winter's Tale.

72. A Priestly Conclave

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 72: A Priestly Conclave

Pleasant as holidays were, when they were over, they were over. The glow from the Satinalia Ball and a private, intense celebration in her room did not survive the cold light of morning. Bronwyn felt wrong-footed, not having sufficient time to plan her next move.

She had told Loghain that the Grand Cleric wanted to talk more about the Queen's healing, which was perfectly true. About the sick child and the upcoming test, she said nothing. It was quite bad enough that the Grand Cleric knew about the other Ashes, and no doubt would have witnesses present, who would then also know. There was just time to put a word in the ears of her chosen companions.

Leliana, of course. If she did not come, there would be questions. She had already done her worst, and was somewhat repentant. And she had been present, both at the gaining of the Ashes, and the Healing of the queen. Anders and Jowan. Jowan because he had caused this ridiculous affair, and Bronwyn was not going to let him sleep in when she had rise early on the day after Satinalia and be examined

by the high clergy. Anders was coming because she wanted this test subject examined by a competent Healer first. Perhaps this was all a trick.

Zevran she would not bring with her, nor would she disclose his name or that he had journeyed with her. Leliana had told the Grand Cleric that there were other pinches of the Ashes, but not the names of those in the party. That would not be all that difficult to discover, but Bronwyn wanted to protect Zevran and Tara from Chantry scrutiny as long as possible.

They met for a breakfast, glum and shadowy-eyed, all wearing their Warden tunics. Bronwyn dug into her porridge without conversation.

"Perhaps we should bring that golden bowl again," Leliana suggested gently, after a long uncomfortable silence. "It would not do to put the Ashes of our Lady in cheap crockery."

"I'll bring it," Bronwyn agreed. "Though the Chantry might not like it. They'll probably want to examine it, too, for traces of magic."

Anders spoke from around his mug of hot, strong tea. "Probably have a Templar do a Cleanse. With my luck he'll Smite us all for an encore."

"Leliana," Bronwyn said, very sternly. "Do not volunteer any more information. Do not give the exact location of Haven. Do not give the numbers or names of the others in our party. I don't want them hunted down like rabbits for those Ashes."

A submissive nod. Bronwyn hoped Leliana's obedience would hold.

It had rained very late in the night, dowsing the embers of the Satinalia bonfires. A heavy haze hung in the air. The smell of wet wood permeated everything, even dominating the odors of spilled ale and vomit. A few late revelers had failed to take their holiday home, and were sprawled under eaves or propped against walls, snoring.

The walk seemed long, almost unending. Bronwyn took her preferred route over the East Gate Bridge and then to Gate Street, walking past Highever House. She gave it a salute, and felt a boost of confidence and self-assurance. Fergus was there, still sleeping. He seemed to have had a very good time at the ball, and had not had too much to drink, which was always a good thing. No doubt he had wanted the Queen to think well of him.

Her head was still spinning from all the new ideas of the day before. Cousin Leonas would marry. That young freeholder would likely become Arl of Denerim. Charade Amell might marry the heir to the Arling of West Hills. The ant hill had been kicked apart, and was putting itself together in an entirely new way.

Her own impression of Aron Kendalls was better than Loghain's. Compared to Vaughan, he was a breath of fresh air: serious, willing to put his hand to the task, not mired in tradition. His demeanor toward Bronwyn was respectful, and she got the impression that he, too, was not perfectly

satisfied with Denerim as it was. Of course, who knew what would come of that? For that matter, who knew what would come of his marriage to Habren? They seemed an ill-assorted pair to Bronwyn, but she agreed with Loghain's view that this young man would brook no nonsense.

The Grand Cleric Muirin took her place in her chair of state in her council chamber. She tugged her fur cloak closer about her shoulders, despite the roaring fire. Somehow, she had never felt well and warm since Gertrude had dosed her with that horrible potion.

Perhaps she was cold because she was afraid. Oh, yes: very much afraid. Afraid that today's test would fail; more afraid that it would succeed. Afraid for herself, too, as shameful as it was to acknowledge. It was entirely possible that Val Royeaux had judged her an inadequate tool and had marked her for disposal.

Before her were a dozen reliable members of the clergy. Not all were close friends. Not all were Fereldan patriots. That was her intention, since she wanted the most objective, reasoned analysis of what they would see today.

Mother Perpetua was present, of course, now her deputy here in Denerim, since the demotion and incarceration of Gertrude. Rosamund, now confirmed in her priesthood, had replaced Heloise, who, alone in cell in Fort Drakon, was no longer smug and superior. Mother Boann, her sweet face concerned, was here as well.

Sister Justine, their curator, was essential to the investigation, of course. Her clerk, Sister Rose, was here to transcribe the conclave's proceedings. Revered Mother Damaris had come from South Reach, and Revered Mother Eudoxia from Lothering. Revered Mother Juliana, tiny and withered, had sailed all the way from Gwaren to attend. Revered Mother Hannah of Redcliffe had been invited, but had not come. It was possible that the summons had not reached her in time, or that events in the south made her presence impossible. Hannah would regret missing this.

The Revered Mothers of Highever and Amaranthine, currently under scrutiny for their collaboration with Arl Howe and his Tevinter blood mages, were not present. It was possible that within the year both would be demoted and relegated to a cloister.

Templars were also in attendance. Tavish had been imprisoned, too, for his reckless disregard for the guests at Arl Urien's wedding. It did not seem that he was a partisan of Orlais, but Gertude and Heloise had found it too easy to use him for their purposes. Muirin was considering elevating Ser Bryant of the Lothering Chantry to the rank of Knight-Commander. He was admired not only for his devotion and skill at arms, but for his compassion and good sense. She had asked him to accompany Mother Eudoxia, and to attend the session.

No one could reasonably accuse Ser Rylock of compassion, but neither could anyone question her devotion to the Chantry and her high-minded rejection of political intrigue. Muirin had a

specific role for her in mind. Ser Irminric and Ser Otto were also present, worthy knights both, and deeply devout. Their role in the release of the Queen would make them particularly acceptable to the Warden-Commander.

Knight-Commander Harrith, of course, was also in attendance. Muirin sighed inwardly, looking at the man. Well-born and well-connected, certainly, and because of that, this rather sleazy fellow had been promoted over the heads of better holy warriors. There was talk that he was involved in unauthorized lyrium dealing. That he had been recommended for his promotion by the Revered Mother of Amaranthine did not speak well for the woman.

"I have called you together for a high purpose. It is entirely possible that here, today, in this place, we will witness a true miracle."

Hope, excitement, skepticism were before her in the persons of the priests and Templars she had chosen. Everyone had heard the rumors, and some more or less garbled version of the truth. Muirin snuggled down into her furs, wishing that this had not come in her time: not the Blight, not the young King's death, not the upcoming struggle for the throne, not the frightening possibility of an Exalted March. She thought with rueful resentment of dear *Wealtheow*, her predecessor and mentor, who had managed to rule over the Fereldan Chantry from the fourth year of Maric's reign to the year before his disappearance: an enviable, uncomplicated period of peace and stability.

More especially, she had no desire to deal with what she must face today: the very difficult and challenging claim of a miraculous event. Muirin knew that miracles were inconsistent with the modern world as ordered by the Maker. Andraste, indeed, had performed wonders a thousand years ago, but she was the Bride of the Maker and His Prophet. After her death, the Maker had once again turned his back on his erring children. If they, by exercise of their free will, diligently pursued their duty, and spread the Chant of Light to every corner of the world, he would forgive. Until then, they were on their own, in the cold and the dark.

Nonetheless, she must face the challenge, and for that purpose, had yesterday been forced to make the ugliest choice of her priestly career. She was not at all sure, when she stood before the Maker someday, he would be very impressed with her.

But here was Bronwyn, whom she had known as an adorable little girl, the daughter of her dear friend Eleanor Cousland, claiming to have found the Prophet's remains, and to have healed the Queen with them. What would Eleanor say, if she knew what Bronwyn was up to? And arrogating the holy powers of the Prophet to herself was far from the whole story. The girl had essentially declared herself Commander of the Grey...in the absence of any superior in the order. Now, if rumor was true—and Muirin's own analysis of the political situation was correct—Bronwyn was reaching for the crown itself.

Wardens were not supposed to hold worldly titles. That was a

basic tenet of the order, but Muirin knew her history, and knew that there had been exceptions over the order's long and storied past. Duncan—with whom she had never got on well, especially after his conscription of Maric's bastard son Alistair—had been very wrong to conscript a Cousland. Technically, he had had the right, but Couslands liked to make their own rules; and while Bronwyn, from all accounts, had performed splendidly in her role as leader of the Wardens, it was clear that she still thought and acted as a high noble of Ferelden. So much for Duncan, and his penchant for collecting his betters' children.

Everyone was here and looking at her in suppressed impatience. It was time to tell them all.

"Bronwyn Cousland, Warden-Commander of the Grey will be here soon, and I have arranged a test, hoping that she has put her hands on the true Ashes of the Prophet."

"But it was claimed, Your Grace," Sister Justine said, confused, "That the Ashes were used to heal the Queen."

"I questioned Lady Bronwyn at length. She claims to have found the funerary temple of the Prophet in the Frostback Mountains. One of her party accompanied her to see me. Leliana is her name, and until a few months ago, she served as a lay sister in the Lotherin Chantry. She is also of Orlesian extraction. She let slip that each member of the party, after surviving certain ordeals, was rewarded with a pinch of the Ashes from the Urn."

A murmur of wonder, a brief exchange of significant glances.

Mother Juliana of Gwaren, too old to be afraid to speak her mind, piped up harshly.

"How many in the party? How many pinches of Sacred Ashes will be up for sale by every charlatan from here to Rialto Bay?"

"I do not know the exact number. It was not large: Bronwyn, Sister—now Warden Leliana— an ex-Templar named Cullen." She managed a faint laugh. "Presumably Bronwyn's large, loyal, and formidable mabari, though I find it hard to believe he was given a pinch! Beyond that I do not know. Ser Cullen was killed after securing his pinch of Ashes, in a battle with a dragon."

"The Prophet's Ashes and dragons to boot!" sniffed Mother Damaris. "Quite the adventure!"

"I knew Cullen," Ser Harrith said. "Young and idealistic. A splendid swordsman. I had no idea he'd become a Warden."

Muirin said, "He was conscripted at the Circle Tower when Bronwyn also conscripted a pair of mages, and where she recruited yet more mages for the army. The conscriptions were with the consent of Knight-Commander Greagoir. He knew of Ser Cullen's death, having received a letter of condolence from Bronwyn. She said nothing of Ashes or dragons in it, but said that Cullen died most bravely in the performance of his duty."

"Lady Bronwyn, " Ser Bryant began "—er—the Warden-Commander—came through Lothering several months ago, and did a great deal to calm the people and put them in the way of defending themselves. She did not strike me as one who would invent a story to inflate her own importance."

"I agree," said Mother Eudoxia of Lothering, "though ambition can play tricks on one's wits. Lady Bronwyn would not be the first to sincerely believe a falsehood."

Mother Boann had been brooding in silence, and but then looked up, "We must be careful how we behave to her. Right or wrong, she might well be our queen in a little over a month!"

That was something to consider, certainly, and a brief silence fell over the conclave. The Chantry was already in a bad odor with the Crown, Insulting a claimant would be, at the very least, imprudent.

"Can we not hear the whole story from her own lips," said Mother Juliana. "and judge for ourselves?"

"You shall hear it," the Grand Cleric assented. "You shall hear every word. But before that, we shall have the test. The consequences of that, as I am sure you can see, will very much determine how we shall proceed with our examination of her. I told Bronwyn that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof. After suitable search, we found a number of mortally ill individuals whose conditions did not yield to magic. While Lady Bronwyn was patrolling for darkspawn in

the north, I sent to the Circle for assistance. With Templar supervision, a powerful mage examined a dozen sick persons brought before him. After his best efforts, three remained uncured. They are even now at the point of death. After due consideration, I had one of them brought here today. Bronwyn will bring forth her Ashes, and we shall see what virtue they possess."

Choosing which one might live had caused Muirin considerable anguish. How to choose between an ailing mother, a young man long a suffering invalid, and a dying little girl? In the end, Muirin had chosen the child, because she thought that if Bronwyn were to be urged to make a sincere test of her supposed cure, her heart might be most softened by the little girl, perhaps seeing herself there. All three were poor commoners, which was unfortunate. It would have been better to have available a subject of more famous name, or someone of greater importance to the nation. These three, however, were what the Maker had put before them.

Another factor inclining Muirin toward the little girl was that she was a child of the Chantry, and could be brought here without raising false hopes in a family or even giving rise to rumors. Prudence and discretion were best.

A soft knock at the door roused them from their whispered gossip.

"Your Grace, the Warden-Commander is here, and with her Wardens Leliana, Anders, and Jowan."

"Admit them at once."

The Grand Cleric was not pleased to hear that Bronwyn had brought that blood mage Jowan, who had participated in the ransacking of the Cathedral and who was obviously a Libertarian of the most radical stripe. On the other hand, she had brought Leliana, who loved the Chantry. Perhaps Bronwyn, too, was trying for balance.

The Wardens were shown to a table in the middle of the room. It put them clearly in view of the priestly council, whose members were arranged in a semicircle in front of it.

"Be seated, Wardens, if you please."

Muirin called the conclave to order and greeted the Wardens formally, apprising them of her purpose today.

"Yes, Your Grace," Bronwyn replied clearly. "It was plain that you meant to make a test of the Ashes today. I brought them. And this." She laid a small, translucent gut packet on the table before her. From a bag slung over her shoulder she removed a footed bowl of pure hammered gold.

"Is that the bowl that was used to administer the Ashes to the Queen?" Muirin asked.

"It is."

"We will need to examine it for inherent, runic, or applied magics."

"I have no objection."

That was done by Ser Irminric and Ser Otto, who turned the bowl round and round and upside down. Ser Rylock performed a Cleanse, and after some pondering, asked Otto to perform one as well.

"I think there's *something* here," muttered Irminric, "but it might just be residue."

"Nothing malevolent, certainly," said Otto.

"If there is any trace of magic," said Mother Perpetua, "the bowl cannot be used for the test."

"Very well," Bronwyn shrugged. "I shall simply place the Ashes in the child's mouth with my fingers. Mind you, she might well want a drink of water afterwards."

The Grand Cleric gestured to Sister Justine, who took a plain cup from a cupboard, and filled it with from the silver ewer near the priests.

"Perhaps," suggested Ser Bryant, "the Warden and her people wish to check the water and cups for anything untoward."

"Well thought on," Bronwyn said and immediately took the cup from Sister Justine and drank it down herself. Jowan and Anders winced visibly, which curiously troubled the Grand Cleric. Had it really come to this, that Eleanor Cousland's child

would suspect her of using poison?

Bronwyn then set down the cup, and her challenging gaze swept the room. "I seem to be alive. Pour another cup, if you please, Sister Justine, and let us set it right *there*," she smiled wolfishly, "where everyone can see it."

"One last thing, Your Grace." It was Ser Rylock, her huge dark eyes gleaming. "Let us consider the possibility that Lady Bronwyn was able to infuse common ashes with some curative powers herself."

Leliana spoke up, bewildered. "But how could she do that?"

Anders and Jowan exchanged a grim look between them. They had foreseen this being raised, even if Bronwyn had not.

"Perhaps," Ser Rylock suggested, her voice deceptively mild, "Lady Bronwyn has sufficient *magic* to accomplish it? Could it be that she is a secret mage?"

Bronwyn stared back unflinchingly. A disgusted disclaimer from her would be insulting to her Warden mages, who had fought at her side, and were now sitting here, doing their best for her.

"I am no mage," she said clearly.

Anders rudely snorted a laugh. "Secret mage, indeed! Secret from her, too!"

Rylock did not rise to the bait. "That is not an unknown

scenario, *Warden*, despite your ignorant laughter. It has happened that magic manifests in later life. I believe this examination would be incomplete without considering the possibility."

"Bronwyn," the Grand Cleric said gently. "We are not saying this to insult you, but we must consider all possibilities. Ser Rylock will perform a procedure used to suppress magical ability. If you are not a mage, it should not inconvenience you."

"You mean a Smite, Of course I know about them. Cullen did them all the time to disable darkspawn mages. They're very useful. A Smite never knocked me out of a fight. Do your worst, Ser Templar," she said to Rylock.

"Er..." Anders got up and started backing away. "You don't mind if Jowan and I step aside right now, do you? I'd like to be functional for the rest of this party."

"I think a known mage *should* be within range," Mother Eudoxia suggested, "so we can be absolutely certain it was a full-power, effective smite."

Ser Rylock grimaced, not sure whether to be offended at the idea that she would do less than her best, or to be pleased to have a mage to discipline.

"I'll stand with the Commander," said Jowan, carefully not looking at anybody. "If I'm knocked out, Bronwyn will still have Anders to rely on, who's a better Healer than I am."

Anders burst out in anger. "So Jowan will be struck with a Smite. What will you do to get rid of the rest of us, I wonder? Then you'll all be looking beady-eyed at Bronwyn to judge her. Well, you know what? If she has to stand up to it, I think one of you priests who's so hot to find something wrong with her should be tested too, right with her and Jowan!"

"We are not the ones on trial here!" Rylock railed back at him.

"Oh," Bronwyn said, raising her brows. "I'm on trial? Actually, I think Anders' suggestion has merit. You all speak of a Smite as proof positive of being a mage, but have any of *you* ever endured one? No? It's a sensible idea. You can see from the priest's reaction what a normal, proper, unmagelike response *should* be, and judge me the better for it. Sister Justine: you're young enough not to be injured by a Smite. Do you dare face the test with me? If you do not, then I can assure you that you have no chance whatever of passing the tests to which the Guardian of the Urn of the Sacred Ashes would subject you!"

"Who is this Guardian?" Mother Juliana demanded. "Are you saying that there is a secret order protecting the Prophet's remains? Grand Cleric—"

"Grand Cleric!" Ser Rylock said, very angry. "This is a trick to manipulate me into easing back on the Smite. Well, I won't!"

"Nobody expects *that*," Anders sneered.

Muirin raised her hand for silence. "First the tests! Then the

story! Sister Justine, do you, as a gesture of good faith, agree to endure the Smite with the mage and the Warden-Commander?"

The mild-mannered curator stared at them all in dismay. "I suppose...it's not dangerous, is it? I mean, we're told it doesn't really *hurt* mages, so it couldn't possibly do me any harm..."

Mother Boann spoke up, swiftly and urgently. "Grand Cleric, Sister Justine is frightened. I will endure the test in her place."

"No!" Sister Justine squeaked. "I mean, no thank you, Revered Mother. I'm not afraid...really... I'll think I'd like a drink of water, first..."

They waited while she gulped down the water hastily. Then she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and walked over to Bronwyn, glad that her robes concealed her shaking knees. It was a very intimidating experience. The Warden-Commander was so very tall, and the blood mage was standing within inches of her. Ser Rylock was glaring at them all in a very hostile and unpleasant way. She was reeking of lyrium, too, and Justine, in that adrenalin-charged moment, made instantaneous connections among various facts she knew. Mages needed lyrium. Templars needed lyrium. The Templar in front of her was going to cast a Holy Smite, which was really, really, really like having a spell cast on her. What were spellcasters? Mages were spellcasters. The syllogism was already forming in in her head.

Casting spells makes one a mage.

Templars cast spells.

Templars are mages.

No! That couldn't be right! Ser Rylock drew her sword and raised her left hand on high, while light swirled around her. It brightened unendurably and then burst forth, with a distant *boom*. Startled, Justine cried out as the the light swept through her bones like a high wind, leaving dizzy, dull nausea in its wake. She put her hand over her mouth.

The mage was slumped on the floor, vomiting; the stink of it sharp above the scent of lyrium. Ser Rylock looked triumphant: enraptured, even. Sister Justine's stomach knotted again. She glanced up at the impassive Warden-Commander, who quietly asked, "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Fine," Justine managed weakly, a little frightened at her own reaction to the Smite. Had it just been the bright light, or was she a mage? It had made her feel a little sick, but the Warden-Commander had not changed color or her stern expression. Justine babbled, "Mind you, it's not a very nice experience. Do mages always get sick like that? Does he need help?"

"Yes," the other mage, Anders, said coldly, shouldering her aside. "He'll be sick and weak for an hour, even with care. Was that entertaining enough for this crowd?"

"Anders..." Leliana pleaded.

"Don't!" Anders snarled. "Don't tell me everything's fine. You can see that we're nothing but animals to them."

"Come on, Anders," Bronwyn said, tugging on his sleeve. "Help me get him over there. He can rest for awhile, and then we'll help him home. Cast a Rejuvenation on him."

Anders preened, his gaze ranging the room in an obnoxiously smug way. He cast the spell instantly, with a show of perfect ease.

"Now, *sit*," Bronwyn growled at him softly. He grimaced, but obeyed.

"So," Bronwyn said, turning to the Grand Cleric, "Is everyone satisfied that I am not a mage? And for that matter, that Sister Justine is not a mage? Though I will point out, Sister, in the interest of scholarly precision, that Holy Smites *do* actually hurt mages. That's the point."

"It was very disagreeable," Justine declared, feeling uncommonly bold. "Ser Rylock must be a very powerful Templar."

"I find the test conclusive," the Grand Cleric decreed. "Bronwyn Cousland, the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, is not a mage. Does anyone wish to register a dissenting opinion?"

A silence.

Bronwyn tensely waited for someone to say something, but no one did. In fact, she had found it as unpleasant as Justine had, but had not dared express any discomfort, lest that be pounced on as proof of her magical nature. In the heat of battle, a Smite could be shrugged off; in this uncomfortable cockpit, with every eye on her, it was not so easy to dismiss the nasty sensation.

The Grand Cleric cleared her throat. "Then let us move on. Mother Boann, is the subject ready?"

"Yes, Your Grace. She is in the private chapel next door with her escort."

"Then, Revered Mother, admit the subject, the mage, and the Templar supervising him. While you are doing that, I will explain our preparations to the Warden-Commander."

She turned to Bronwyn. "We sought out cases of illness that did not respond to magic. One individual was chosen. Her illness is not magic-related, to anyone's knowledge. It is not the result of a demon or a curse, but of a natural defect of the body. She will die, and very soon. There is nothing that either loving care or magic can do for her."

Mother Boann returned shortly, followed by two grey-beards whom Bronwyn knew.

"Knight-Commander! First Enchanter!"

Anders smirked, while Jowan shrank away, wishing he was strong enough to crawl away and hide under the table. Sure enough, First Enchanter Irving and Ser Greagoir entered the room, followed by a litter carried by two lay brothers. On the litter lay an unconscious child, dressed only in a white linen shift. The litter was set on the floor and the brothers dismissed.

The child was appallingly thin, her bony arms drawn up around her head. A soft, thin, unending whine issued from her throat.

"She cries even when unconscious," Mother Boann said sadly. "She seems to be in great pain."

"What is your opinion, First Enchanter?" asked the Grand Cleric. "Can the child be healed by magic?"

"I have attempted it repeatedly. I do not believe it to be possible, Your Grace," said Irving. "The tumor in her brain is resistant. With a heavier dose of certain potions, I could relieve some of the pain..."

"And very likely kill her!" Ser Rylock erupted. "This innocent child will die in the Maker's good time, and go to him unsullied!"

"So the *First Enchanter* says it can't be done. Do you mind," Anders asked, with a hint of acid, "if I at least *try*?"

"Do so," the Grand Cleric. "Do so now. By all means, do your best."

"Warden Anders," Knight-Commander Greagoir declared to the assembled company, "is the finest Healer the Circle has produced in the past ten years."

"Ooo, compliments!" Anders snarked. "Maybe I wouldn't have run off if I'd known you cared!"

He subsided at Bronwyn's grave expression, and when focused on healing, he was, as always, perfectly serious. His face turned intent and watchful; blue fire crackled through his fingers. He laid them on the child with great gentleness, and the magic boiled up and around, in a superb display.

But to no avail. The child continued to moan. Frustrated, Anders tried again. And again. Sweat streamed from his brow and dripped from his nose.

"Anders," Irving urged him firmly. "Stop. Tumors are vile things, and brain tumors the worst of all."

"I can almost get it," the young mage said, face strained. "I can *feel* it!"

"Enough!" said the Grand Cleric. "I feel this is a sufficient demonstration that the tumor will not yield to spells. Warden-Commander, I wish you to try the Ashes."

Bronwyn rose, and took up the packet of Ashes. She looked at the suffering little girl, her stomach turning again, not from the Smite, but from the horror of such a fate.

"What is this child's name?" she asked.

Mother Eudoxia was puzzled. "What difference can that possibly make?"

Some winced at her insensitivity. The Grand Cleric did not, though she felt it herself, and knew such an answer would rouse Bronwyn's ire again. Eleanor had been hot-tempered, too.

"I think I have a perfect right to know everything about this child," Bronwyn shot back, holding back the tide of anger and contempt. "I am giving my *life* for her."

The Grand Cleric took a breath, and raised her hand in protest, but Bronwyn pressed on ruthlessly.

"Yes. I am giving my life for her. Because I am using the Ashes to cure her, I will not have them on the day when I am grievously wounded or ill. Therefore...I will die because she lived. I do not begrudge her that life, but I will not let the exchange pass unremarked."

"You can use my Ashes..." Leliana urged softly. Bronwyn glared her into silence.

"Where is this child's *mother*?" she asked abruptly. "Why is she alone among strangers in her last hours?"

Mother Boann answered, her voice soothing. " Her name is Demelza. She is a child of the Chantry. And she is not alone."

"An orphan?"

The Revered Mother hesitated, being an honest woman. "No. She was...given to the Chantry by her family."

"Why? Was she crippled or incorrigible?"

Ser Bryant did not much like the truth himself, so he gave Bronwyn a soldier's stare. "She was... accepted to satisfy a debt owed to the Templar grange of East Ryecombe."

Anders muttered to Leliana, "So much for there being no slavery in Ferelden! No wonder they want her healed."

The Grand Cleric interposed, trying to remain in control of the proceedings. "We really must move on to the business at hand, Bronwyn. Will you, or will you not, attempt this test?"

"Yes!" Bronwyn replied. "But first...you ask me to prove my words...to prove my good faith," she said to the priests. ""Very well. I am here, submitting to your tests and your disbelief. On the other hand, you offer me *nothing*, even begrudging me a few questions about this child. You do not risk the danger that I do in sacrificing these Ashes. You did not earn these Ashes as I did, by fire and sword, yet you claim the right to dispose of them at your convenience in order to satisfy your curiosity."

She looked at them each in turn. "I think an exchange is order. We should receive some benefit for this sacrifice...other," she sneered, "than the privilege of not being called liars."

"What do you want, Bronwyn?" asked the Grand Cleric wearily.

"I want Mother Clarine and her minion Sister Polycarp recalled from Ostagar. I want them to submit to questioning about the late events of the seventh of Harvestmere. While we welcome the spiritual comfort of the Chantry, we do not appreciate interference in strategic planning. Mother Clarine very nearly cost us our victory in the Bloomingtide Battle. Her trouble-making *has* cost us countless lives. Out of bigotry and spite, she had murdered an innocent mage, sent here under my orders to serve the Queen. In short, I want her out of this war."

"She will be recalled," the Grand Cleric agreed. "But I wish to make clear that I do not think her an Orlesian sympathizer."

It was true. The Grand Cleric did not think Clarine party to these sinister foreign plots. She did recognize that she was a narrow-minded, dogmatic woman, who tended to see Blood Magic wherever there were mages.

Bronwyn had more to say. "And furthermore, I don't want my mages harassed or second-guessed. They have risked their lives to save this ungrateful country, and they deserve—if you absolutely *cannot* manage respect—at least a measure of peace."

Rylock drew an angry breath, but was silenced by the Grand Cleric's sharp look. Muirin said, "The Chantry Treaty with the Wardens is quite clear on the issue of immunity."

"For obvious reasons, I require that you do not reveal the existence of other Ashes to anyone who absolutely does not need to know. I would prefer that my people not be pursued like animals by every bounty hunter in Thedas!"

"I think it would suffice to record that there were some Ashes remaining after the Queen was healed," Muirin agreed. "That there were additional doses need not go farther." She looked around the room. "I charge you, on your obedience, to say nothing of additional Ashes."

Bronwyn was not satisfied, but there seemed little she could do about it. "That will have to do, I suppose. Finally, I want you to send this child to me. I am about to buy her life with my own, and therefore I should have some say in her future. She may well be happy with her life as a servant—"

"A lay sister—"

"—of the Chantry. If she is not, I shall see that she lives as she likes. Do you agree to this?"

Grand Cleric Muirin breathed a long mental sigh of relief. She had feared that Bronwyn would storm in, demanding liberty for every mage in Thedas. Her requests were moderate, all things considered.

"If the child is healed, she is yours."

"Very well, then."

Bronwyn kicked a footstool over to the litter on the far side of the child from the examiners. She wanted them to see exactly what she was doing. She opened the packet, and touched the Ashes, feeling once again their curious, magical heat. She took a breath.

"An interesting feature of the Ashes is their inherent warmth, as if they had only now been raked from a fire."

"Really?" Muirin was intrigued. "May I?"

At her gesture, Bronwyn brought them over to her. Muirin touched them very carefully with the tip of a finger and then gasped. Bronwyn's face was a study in grim satisfaction.

"That's...extraordinary..." Muirin said. "Sister Rose, annotate the minutes with the observation that the Grand Cleric touched the Ashes and confirmed that they are indeed very warm."

A pause, and a sudden, almost eerie transformation in the room's atmosphere. The air crackled with anticipation. The priests were silent. Irminric and Otto looked at each other in wild surmise and hope. Ser Bryant swallowed. Ser Rylock was perfectly still. And Ser Harrith was shaken—albeit slightly—out of his customary boredom. The two old men, Irving and Greagoir, exchanged a swift, uneasy glance. Everyone wanted to touch the Ashes, but no one dared to say so.

"Go on, Bronwyn," said the Grand Cleric. "Administer them to the child."

"Demelza," Bronwyn murmured, fixing the name in her mind. The child was not a mere experimental subject, after all, but a *person*.

She pulled the stool up and sat close to the little girl. Demelza's eyes were squeezed shut, all her muscles rigid from the onslaught of ceaseless pain. Carefully, Bronwyn touched the pale little mouth, and the moans grew louder. Scooping up most of the Ashes with her left fingertip, she managed to work them past the child's lips. The sensation must have been unpleasant. The child squirmed and cried, running her tongue over her teeth. That was enough, evidently.

With a sudden sharp cry, the girl sat up, clapping her hands to her head. Just as suddenly, she collapsed back on the litter, her breath coming in sharp little pants. The she exhaled slowly, and looked up at Bronwyn.

She asked, "Who're you?"

Bronwyn smiled at her, and gave her a wink. "I'm the Girl Warden!"

A gasp ran around the room. Leliana's face lit up in joy, and she lifted her hands up to the Maker. Anders shouted "Ha!" and pounded the table in glee. From his place on the floor, Jowan smiled in rueful relief.

The girl sat up again, and began rebuking Bronwyn in a voice copied from her priestly guardians.

"That's a story! Telling stories is very, very wrong. If I tell a story, I have to sit on a high stool in front of the class wearing the "LIAR" placard all day long!"

"Demelza, dear," Mother Boann asked, "How do you feel? You were so sick!"

The child considered that. "I feel fine," she said, matter-of-factly. "I don't feel sick any more. May I have a drink of water?"

Smiles of wonder were breaking forth. Sister Justine raced to the pitcher and nearly dropped the cup, filling it. Bronwyn took the cup from her and gave it to Demelza.

"Just drink it down." She lowered her voice. "And don't spit, whatever you do. The Grand Cleric is watching. Just drink it all down."

"Yuck."

"Shhh..."

First Enchanter Irving and Anders were both trying to edge forward to examine the girl. The Grand Cleric nodded in permission, and another round of puzzlement and wonder began.

Demelza, it seemed, was well. And not just well. She was in *perfect health*. She giggled when Anders insisted on looking her mouth and complimented her on her perfect, pearly teeth.

She was embarrassed when Mother Boann led her around to all the priests and Templars in turn.

"I don't have anything on but my shimmy!" she objected in a loud whisper.

"No one minds, dear," Mother Boann reassured her. During Demelza's long illness, Boann had forgotten the child's deplorable forthrightness.

"I'm cold!"

Bronwyn bit back a laugh, and gave the Grand Cleric a naughty smirk instead. Muirin sighed inwardly, remembering that look from years gone by.

"Fetch the child some clothing, Sister Justine."

The archivist was not happy to miss any part of the discussion, but actually, nobody was uttering much of anything other than pleased and wondering exclamations and general praise of the Maker and His Prophet. Ser Rylock had fallen to her knees in frantic, ecstatic prayer, and was oblivious to anything else going on around her.

Irminric and Otto smiled at each other, knelt, and joined their soft, deep voices to that of Ser Rylock.

By the time all the priests and Templars had seen the child for themselves, Sister Justine burst into the room, red with running, her arms full of clothing and with a pair of little shoes

slipping from her grasp. Bronwyn helped her get the child dressed.

"Arms up," she ordered.

"Are you really the Girl Warden?"

"Yes. Turn around."

"You're all grown up. I thought you'd be a little girl, like me. Or maybe like Luadhin. She's the proctor of my dormitory. She's thirteen."

Bronwyn turned her face away, suddenly realizing that she really was grown up. Somehow, between death and the darkspawn, everything in her that felt like youth had slipped away. It made her sad, somehow.

Demelza whispered, "Why am I here? Why is everybody so excited?"

Mother Boann whispered back, "You were very sick, dear. We thought we were going to lose you, but Our Lady Andraste healed you herself. We're going to have a prayer now and thank her!"

The Grand Cleric's prayer was long and rambling, and needed considerable revision and polishing later on, when the final record of the meeting was composed. Demelza grew restless, and had to be stopped from fidgeting.

Muirin knew she was hardly making any sense at all. Her mind

was in distressed confusion. She had read many books, and had always longed to have seen the miracles of the great old days—longed to have seen the Prophet with her own eyes, and to have defied her enemies at her side.

Well, now she had seen a miracle, and she realized that it was just as complicated a matter as it had been in Andraste's day, when the Tevinters denied her and called her witch and demon, and burned her at the stake.

She would send her report to Val Royeaux, detailing the events. Had it happened anywhere but in Ferelden, the Divine might even have lent the story some credence.

Divine Beatrix III, however, would never believe in anything good or marvelous coming out of Ferelden: not with the political situation as it was. The Divine was almost certainly—to some degree, at least—involved in Gertrude and Heloise's plots. She might even have given them their orders. Muirin had known, when the late King Cailan had first approached her about the possibility of dissolving his unfruitful marriage, that there was going to be serious trouble in Ferelden. She had also had hints from abroad that the King was looking westward for a new alliance. If the Empress had decided to conquer Ferelden by marriage, how angry and vengeful she must now be. The peace plan had failed. That she attempted it implied that she still wished to possess this land. And the Divine, Orlesian to the core, still regarded Ferelden as a rude, barbarous, and rebellious province of the Orlesian Empire. Muirin had experienced for herself the patronizing remarks, the little contemptuous snubs on her visits to the Grand

Cathedral.

No, she would not believe Bronwyn had found the true Ashes. It was pointless to send Muirin's own favorable report to her, because it would simply make her angry, and probably of yet more a mind to set Murin aside and put one of her own people in the position of Grand Cleric. Would she dare? In the current climate, could she imagine that Ferelden would tolerate it?

Of course she could. She would expect Fereldans to submit, like good little serfs...like the serfs in Orlais. Muirin's report would be denounced as ignorant heresy, and Muirin along with it. She would be disgraced and demoted. Worse things might even befall her. Muirin pictured them all too vividly, and was very, very afraid.

All the same, it had happened. These were the true Ashes. They had been found. They had virtue. The Divine might rule the Chantry, but Andraste was at the Maker's side, judging them all. If Muirin was any kind of priest, she must testify to the truth, and let the consequences take care of themselves.

Boann returned little Demelza to the astonished novice mistress, Sister Fidalma, with the amazing news that Andraste had worked a miracle on the child's behalf. The other girls who had not seen Demelza in several weeks gathered around her, curious and not particularly awed, since this was, after all, *Demelza*, and they knew she was no better than any one of them.

Upstairs, there was more excitement. Wine was served, and Bronwyn urged to tell every detail of the story of her quest.

There were certain things that were absolutely none of their business. She had previously impressed on Leliana that they would say nothing about the notes obtained in Denerim. They were not even supposed to have been in Denerim at the time, after all. Let the clergy believe that they had obtained the notes in Haven, along with Genetivi's other books and papers. Nonetheless, the story had to begin with one Brother Ferdinand Genetivi.

Sister Justine had known her fellow scholar Brother Genetivi well. She had even known that he was interested in the Urn, and she remembered being quizzed about him on occasion after his departure. Understandably, she was grieved when Bronwyn, not wanting to stretch the matter out, informed them that the good brother was dead.

Bronwyn told them of a chance meeting at the Spoiled Princess Inn, which all of them knew. A new name had been written on the map, and a warning had been given.

Then Bronwyn found it necessary to tell her auditors about the secret poisoning of Queen Anora, which raised considerable disquiet. The guilty party had confessed, and implicated a known Orlesian agent, who was also now dead. Jowan was asked to confirm that the poison had resisted magic. Wynne's name was raised, and some hard looks given. Irving sighed, and put his face in his hands. Greagoir looked nearly as sad.

"Everything I was being told," Bronwyn said, "indicated that magic could not cure the Queen, who was vital to the kingdom's stability. The only possibility that remained was the last, unlikeliest one: to seek out the Ashes. Of my Wardens, Leliana here and Cullen, once a Templar at the Circle, were the first to volunteer for this mission."

She glanced at Knight-Commander Greagoir, and saw the brief, pained, guilty look.

Then she launched on her story, expanding on the bones of the tale she had given the Grand Cleric. As these people were willing to believe her, she found it easier going. They were disgusted, of course, when they heard of the male priests and of the attacks on the party. They were grieved to hear of the books and notes belonging to Brother Genetivi found in the village shop.

Bronwyn said nothing of the other items they found: most particularly not about the fine Antivan boots that Zevran had appropriated. Bronwyn had come to the conclusion that they, too, had been the good brother's. He had been a rather small man. It was not surprising that a fairly tall elf could wear them.

"We looked over the books and notes," Bronwyn went on, "and among them was one entitled *Flame and Scale: The Secrets of Dragon Cults*. There was a bookmark at the chapter dealing with dragon worship. Among other things, it mentioned that such cultists often raise dragons, and drink their blood, becoming incredibly strong and aggressive, after the manner of dragons."

Murmurs of shock and horror rose, and grew louder.

"We fought our way to the Chantry," she told them, "and had words with Father Eirik. He spoke with reverence of Andraste, but despised us for our ignorance. He mentioned a sacred trust they must protect."

Leliana fidgeted next to her. Bronwyn supposed she was dying to tell them that the priest had also been a mage. Bronwyn gave her a stern look. That complication would only distract the clergy.

So she told of the fight in the Chantry, and how they took a prisoner. She told of the secret room that she believed to have been Brother Genetivi's sad prison. Then how they had taken a strange key from their prisoner and found a vast and magnificent complex within the neighboring mountain.

"It was immense and awe-inspiring!" Leliana seconded her. "And I have seen the Grand Cathedral!"

There were quite a few questions about this temple, and if it was there that they found the Urn. The brief answer, of course, was 'No,' and Bronwyn tried to keep things in their proper order. They had fought cultists, but also demons, and finally...

"You were attacked by dragons—" old Mother Damaris repeated, now a bit skeptical again. "How big?"

"In the caverns, we found no mature dragons," Bronwyn said

firmly. "However, a swarm of dragonlings is easily as dangerous as a pack of wolves. We were attacked by such swarms several times. The cultists were indeed breeding dragons. We also were attacked by mature drakes, and killed four of them in all. They are much bigger than a warhorse, and while they cannot fly, they can certainly flame."

"The remains would be valuable," Ser Harrith spoke up. "Very valuable. Were you able to retrieve them?"

"No. The bones still lie there, for all I know. We traveled by horseback, and one of our horses was killed. We took some gold, and some of their sacramental objects—" she nodded at the golden bowl, gleaming innocently at her left hand—"but our situation was never one that would permit us the time or leisure to dress out any dragonkind!"

Her throat was dry from talking, so she took a long swallow of wine.

"The caverns led all the way through the mountain. There's no need to describe all the adventures we had or all the dangers we faced. Near the end of the caverns however, we came up a large party of the cultists; and their leader, Father Kolgrim, rather than attacking us instantly, actually spoke to us."

"*Ranted* at us, you mean," muttered Leliana.

"He did, in fact, use a manner of speaking that could only be described as 'ranting,'" Bronwyn agreed. "I'm sure he had been drinking dragon's blood for years. He claimed to be a

priest, but was clad in armor and carried a huge doubled-bladed axe. His tone was loud and hectoring, but he was attempting to communicate. He said he wanted to give us a chance to redeem our sins. Since we'd done so brilliantly fighting our way through to him, we might be just the people he was looking for."

"He spoke only to you," Leliana corrected her. "You were the only one who interested him. He recognized you as a hero. And a hero was exactly what he needed."

Bronwyn glared at the faint smiles around her. "Be that as it may, he had a proposal for me. It was then that we learned that the Urn was not far at all: in fact, only across the valley floor to the nearby peak. The funerary shrine was there, but the cultists could not access it. He raved on about the glory of a 'Risen Andraste,' and that she could not ascend to her full glory without the destruction of her earlier incarnation. He wished me to defile the Ashes by pouring a vial of dragon's blood on them, after which she would rise in her new form 'in fiery splendor' and rule the world."

"It's always about ruling the world with that sort," said Anders to Jowan.

"You refused, of course!" cried Ser Irminric.

Bronwyn shook her head. "Not in so many words. There were only a few of us and a great many of them, and it was not a good place to be trapped. I thought I'd have a better chance in the open. I told them I wanted to see this 'Risen Andraste,'

and that I needed a pinch of the Ashes for healing. Kolgrim told me that I could have the pinch and then defile the rest, and then join them as an honored sister. And I asked him why he hadn't done all this himself. His story astonished me."

Her audience leaned closer.

"He told me that they had tried to enter the shrine, but that it was protected by an immortal Guardian who would not listen to their new revelation. This being drove off or killed any cultists to set foot in the shrine, but that I, whom he did not know, he would take for a pilgrim. It seemed the wisest thing to play along with this madman, and in the open, I believed we could make a break for the shrine. After all, we really were pilgrims, and this immortal Guardian could certainly be no worse than dragon worshipers! And so, this Father Kolgrim led us out to meet Andraste, so he could explain to her to let us pass and pave the way for Her Glory. Cullen thought we were being taken to see some sort of ridiculous idol. How wrong he was."

"It was a dragon," croaked Knight-Commander Greagoir.
"Their Andraste was a dragon."

The priests could not find words to express their horror.

"A vast, terrifying, and very healthy High Dragon," Bronwyn confirmed. "It was fully as large as the one killed near Ostagar. It seemed to enjoy Kolgrim's groveling flattery. The man even wore a special horn to summon it. This horn," she said, unslinging her trophy and laying it on the table in front of

her for their inspection. "It is, in fact, the only dragon relic we retrieved."

The dragon horn was passed around and wondered over. Harrith's fingers lingered over the gold fittings.

"After sufficient cringing from the cultists, the dragon flapped up to a high cliff overlooking the valley and we were sent past it to a distant portal. That was the entrance to the actual shrine of the Prophet, and the location of the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

Bronwyn noticed that Ser Harrith was scribbling his own notes. Perhaps he thought that if he could put bits and pieces of description together, he could find the place for himself. She wished him luck.

Now she came to the part of the story that made her particularly uncomfortable. Yes, she met the Guardian. He knew their names and all sorts of things about them. Yes, he seemed to be an immortal man, rather than an insubstantial spirit. No, they had not learned his name, only that he said he had followed Andraste when she had lived in the world. Everyone wanted to know every word he had said about the Prophet. Bronwyn indulged them, and then went on with her narrative.

"The Guardian told us quite a bit about the village and the temple. According to him, the founders of Haven were among the Prophet's most faithful disciples, who spirited away her Ashes to prevent them from falling into the hands of the

Tevinters. For many ages they lived isolated but worthy lives. However, a few generations ago, a dragon made its appearance, and an ancestor of Father Kolgrim's used the opportunity to stage a coup, claiming that the dragon was the true Andraste, and killing all who dared speak against him."

The interest and scandal this aroused so distracted them that she was able to avoid mentioning the intrusive questions that had hurt each of them. She said only that he had warned them of the Gauntlet, which was a series of tests to judge their worthiness.

"And the first test consisted of riddles, asked by phantoms of the past."

"Riddles?" asked Sister Justine. "What kind of riddles? Who asked them?"

They wanted to know everything about those silly riddles, down to the exact wording. Sister Rose wrote it all down industriously. They were intrigued by the appearance of Archon Hessarian, but most of them were not pleased to hear that Thane Shartan had been among the questioners. Bronwyn was unsympathetic. Just because the Divine had excised Andraste's elven friend Shartan from the Chant of Light, it did not follow that Andraste herself had forgotten him.

" And then," she forced herself to say, wincing, knowing that if she did not mention this Leliana would, "Then each of us met someone important in our lives, spoke to them, and was given an amulet."

"Who did you speak to, Lady Bronwyn?" asked Mother Perpetua.

"My father, the late Bryce Cousland, Teyrn of Highever."

"What did he say?"

Bronwyn was not going to tell them that. The remembered voice filled her whole consciousness, drowning out the whispers around her.

"... I must warn you, my child: you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity."

Leliana saw her face, and said hastily. "I saw my old bardmaster, and she mocked me for risking myself as a Grey Warden. We do not know with whom Cullen spoke, but he had an amulet like ours." She pulled off the curious token and passed it around. "And then we had to fight our phantom doubles. That was a strange challenge, and harder than you might think!"

Bronwyn let Leliana babble cheerfully of the chasm, and dither on in praise of Bronwyn's resourcefulness. The priests wanted every detail of the chasm and its curious runestones. They seemed convinced that there was another, more appropriate solution than Bronwyn's.

"And finally," Leliana went on, "we had to remove our clothes and walk through a wall of fire. Afterward the fire died down

and the Guardian said we had walked the path of Andraste, and like her, we had been cleansed. It was the most wonderful sensation!"

"Not everyone who got that far survived," Bronwyn said quietly. "We found charred human bones there, and later disposed of them decently."

She let Leliana do the talking about the Urn as well. Leliana, of course, described it in minute detail, rhapsodizing over the glory of the event, the beauty of the inner shrine, the divine heat of the Ashes between her fingers. Bronwyn felt not the least desire to speak of it at all. Being here was becoming odious...insupportable...to her.

"And then, Lady Bronwyn...what happened afterward?"

They had come to it at last, and Bronwyn told them briefly of the hot, furious confrontation with the outraged Kolgrim, the brutal fight that had ensued, the brief celebration at their safety and triumph afterward, and then the horror as the dragon swooped down on them. She reported the battle as objectively as possible—as dispassionately as possible—her voice breaking a little only when she told of Cullen distracting the dragon and paying the ultimate price.

"...and he was dead before he struck the ground..."

There was the rest. The bomb lodged in the wing joint, the dragon's soaring flight and the fireball that ignited it; a terrible, driving fall to earth, and then how they had slain the injured

beast.

"And that's the end. We held a funeral for Cullen and mourned him. He died, you must see, a worthy Warden and a very gallant gentleman. We also found where we think Brother Genetivi was...given to the dragon."

Sister Justine gasped, hand to her mouth.

"Then we went back to the Chantry to rest. The villagers did not dare attack us. The next morning we rode down from the Chantry, and I told them their false god was dead, and that they must never murder travelers again. And then we left."

She was so tired. She felt she could sleep forever. She felt that she would like to sleep forever. In a dull haze, she answered what questions she could. Anders broke in, and told the priests that he was going to cast a rejuvenation spell on her. Ser Rylock did not like it, but was repressed. Bronwyn felt a great deal better afterwards.

The clergy continued to ask questions, and would never have let them go, but the Grand Cleric, at least, could see that Bronwyn had had enough for them for one day. Bronwyn and Leliana were praised and thanked, and another prayer was offered. Then Leliana rose, and taking her own little packet of Ashes from an inner pocket, laid it before the Grand Cleric.

"If Bronwyn cannot have her Ashes, then I do not want mine either. Besides, I find that I think about them all the time, and how to have them at hand if I am in danger. I am sure you will

find a good use for them. So I give them to the Chantry freely, and of my own will."

"Don't be a fool, Leliana!" Bronwyn hissed.

"No," Leliana insisted. She curtseyed to the Grand Cleric. "Take them, Your Grace. They are too great a burden."

They left, helping Jowan along. It was quite clear that the clergy wanted possession of the golden bowl as well, since they believed it had absorbed some of the power of the Ashes, but Bronwyn was too upset to be generous. The bowl was packed away in her bag, and the Wardens said nothing until they were well out of the Cathedral and in the open air of the Market District.

"Leliana! How could you let them have your Ashes?"

"It was for the best," Leliana insisted. "I feel better already. I don't know if I could ever have used them anyway. It is so morbid...so indecent...to consume part of the Prophet. "

There was something in that, Bronwyn granted. If it had been anyone but the Prophet, the priests would have been horrified at the idea of devouring human remains.

"What do you suppose they'll do now?" Jowan wondered. Anders give him a sip from a flask and he stood straighter.

"Talk a lot," Anders snarked. "Then talk some more."

"I hope they talk for a very long time," Bronwyn said darkly. "I hope they talk until it's quite impossible to do anything until spring. The Grand Cleric will feel obliged to report this to the Divine. Even with a swift ship, the Divine will not receive her report for at least fourteen days—much longer, if the weather is bad. With any luck, by the time the Divine reads it, there will be heavy snow in the Frostbacks, and an expedition this year will be impossible."

"What if the Divine doesn't believe the Grand Cleric?" Leliana worried.

Bronwyn had thought about that. "The Divine will never admit to believing the Grand Cleric. However, she'll still want to investigate. After all, it would be a splendid excuse to send an army of Templars over the Ferelden border!"

Thanks to my reviewers: EpitomyofShyness, Patchworker, KnightOfHolyLight, Kira Kyuu, hakkai, Phygmalion, Raxiselic, Zute, Anon, Bigg McLaughlin, Mike3207, Chandagnac, Jyggilag, Blinded in a bolthole, amanda weber, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Psyche Sinclair, MsBarrows, RakeeshJ4, darksky01, JackOfBladesX, Have Socks. Will Travel, Shakespeira, sncrockz, Josie Lange, Enaid Aderyn, and to all my "Guests."

Some of the Guests asked questions:

I made up the antivanel. It resembles the morisco, but I

wanted to give it a Theodosian name.

Don't cry. Adam will not rule the known world. Just a little corner of it.

I have been asked to lay out all the various Wardens and their units. I decided not to do this in chapter notes, since readers would have to remember which chapter it was. I'll try to post it on my author page sometime next week.

73. Dangerous Lives

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 73: Dangerous Lives

"We're stuck inside again," Walther complained, sleet dripping from his cloak. "It's coming down even harder now."

The common room of the Spoiled Princess Inn was a cozy hideaway from the weather. Tara and her party had arrived here on Satinalia Eve, and had taken the two rooms available, waiting for word from Astrid.

Walther shook himself at the threshold, reminding Tara of a dog—but not one as well-trained as Bronwyn's Scout. He and Griffith had gone fishing, and he smelled like it. He tracked in sludgy clumps of melting snow, which rapidly became dismal little puddles. His string of lake trout spread their doubtful fragrance through the smoky room.

Felsi, the dwarven barmaid, snapped her towel in his face and snarled at him. "Wipe your boots on the mat, you great slobbering bronto! And take those stinking fish to the kitchen."

"Hey!" Walther protested without much heat. All the same, he made a great show of clomping back to the ragged mat and

meticulously stamping his boots clean.

The door opened again, and Griffith nearly tripped over Walther.

"Better wipe your boots," Walther muttered. "Felsi's on a rampage again."

The maid wasn't having any of that. "Try not leaving your filthy smallclothes lying on the floor when I go to do up your room. Then I won't tell the countryside that Wardens are pigs."

Brosca, Sigrun, and Jukka looked up from their game of knucklebones, sniggering. "Some Wardens *are* pigs," Sigrun agreed, elbowing Jukka.

"Pigs are good," Jukka replied, in sober judgment. "That roast pig we had yesterday was *really* good. Better than roast nug any day."

Tara raised her voice in command. "No leaving of smallclothes on the floor...or on chairs...or on the bar. That's an order. Wardens who behave like pigs will be roasted like them."

Mild chuckles. Everyone was too sleepy and too mellow for much excitement. The thing about a proper holiday, Tara reflected, was that you needed another holiday to recover from it.

"Fishing was good, though," Griffith said humbly. He and Walther tramped off with their catch, and there was

discussion and debate in the kitchen.

Tara sat back, resting her eyes from her book. Everybody seemed happy enough. Darach was industriously mending the fletching on an arrow. He glanced at Tara and gave her a brief smile, and then was engrossed again in his craft, only remarking. "Trout is good. Baked in the ashes is best, but lightly fried in butter is good, too. It is a shame, my friends, that you have not tasted halla butter."

"Mmmm, *butter*," Brosca murmured, the word lingering on her tongue. "I hope whatever we get for supper has lots of butter in it. I never tasted butter until I made it to the surface. Let's pity the poor blighters below! No butter for them."

Tara spared a thought for Astrid, spending her holiday in the Deep Roads. Of course, a dwarf wouldn't mind being underground, but there was a horrible world of difference between the city of Orzammar and the Deep Roads. At least Astrid had Shale with her. Tara was not looking forward to her own stint in the Deep Roads. Personally, she was absolutely thrilled to be sitting in a cozy little tavern, with a mug of good ale and an interesting book.

She had just enjoyed her first Satinalia in freedom—at least that she could remember. She had carefully paid everyone their wages, and she had laid out some of the company's coin for a tasty feast. They had all got incredibly drunk and noisy and it had mostly been fun. Also odd, and lonely in some ways. She would have liked to have spent the day with old friends like Jowan and Anders...and Zevran, of course.

A shame Zevran wasn't with her, but he was probably having even more fun in Denerim. It's not like they would have any private time together, with everyone crowded three or four to a room here at the inn. Luckily, the bed in her room was made for humans, and Tara, Sigrun, and Brosca fit on it quite nicely as long as nobody moved. Anyway, Zevran would be at Bronwyn's wedding, and she would not, worse luck. He could tell her all about it someday. The sooner Astrid joined her here, the sooner they could head north to that West Hill place.

They had meant to go spend some coin in the village today, but everyone was too sleepy and too hung over to get up before noon. They had spent a lazy day instead, possibly the laziest day Tara had ever known. It was rather...delightful, in its own way. Darach had gone for a long walk by the lake and gathered a basket of delicious little honey quinces for a snack; and Griffith and Walther had tended to the oxen and finally gone fishing. The dwarves had played games and gossiped. Tara had done nothing...blissful nothing.

Tomorrow. She'd get back to work tomorrow. If the weather let up, they'd go to the village and stock up a bit. Maybe buy a trifle or two with the coin burning holes in their purses. Jukka needed his boots repaired. No one had had time or coin to put together much in the way of gifts for Satalia, but Tara promised herself that if soap was to be had, she would buy everyone under her command a cake. And order them to use it.

They'd been lucky on the march along the Lake Road. Even the hungry wolves had kept their distance, though their distant

howls at night had made Tara long for a big brave dog like Scout. Bronwyn had warned her of bandits and darkspawn stragglers, but the worst they had encountered were some bold beggars, a charlatan selling fake magic books, and a pair of dour Templars going the other way.

The Templars narrowed their eyes at Tara's staff, but she smirked at them and tapped the griffon on her tunic.

"Grey Wardens! Saving the world since 890 T.E.!"

Her party had backed her up with ironic cheers until the Templars were out of sight. She didn't let her friends see her shiver. You never knew who was behind those big bucket helmets.

Musing by the fire, Tara wondered if the Templars were on their way to Redcliffe. Probably. Redcliffe Chantry was still understaffed when she was last there. Or maybe the Arl wanted some Templars at the castle to protect his fancy chapel. Or maybe they were invited to the wedding. Such a lot of weddings. Tara hoped that the Arl of Redcliffe's wedding was nicer than the Arl of Denerim's had been. Rumor said Arl Urien was dead. Tara thought it couldn't happen to a more deserving fellow. The Alienage elves had told he was a swine, even before he begot and raised Vaughan to be an even bigger swine. Bronwyn's cousin had had a lucky escape.

"Another round, Warden?" the innkeeper asked. He was a nice man, Tara thought. He had been nice when she had first come here after Bronwyn recruited her, too.

"Sure. Why not?" She lifted her brimming tankard. "Here's to leading dangerous lives...tomorrow!"

A very savory smell was drifting out to them from the kitchen. It seemed that the trout would be fried.

"Mmmmm, *butter*," Brosca sighed happily.

Quinn's great strength had proved most useful. Danith was pleased with him.

Even more useful was Niall's magic. He, with Keeper Marethari and five mages from related clans, had joined in cleansing the burial chamber in the vast temple in the depths of the Brecilian Forest. The torn Veil was repaired and the spirits laid to rest. The werewolves had been annihilated on their last visit. The dead dragon was found and its bones were even now in the capable hands of Masters Ilen and Valanthorn, being turned into the finest of elven weapons. Even the giant spiders were no more.

Danith felt that the entire trip had been worth it for this. Had Bronwyn intended it when she sent Danith on this mission? Perhaps so. If that was the case, then Danith was obliged to her, and would think better of her wisdom and her honor in future. The temple—or palace—or fortress—was enormous, and they had found yet more chambers in the upper levels. Some glazing even remained in a few of the windows, the glass now turned an opalescent pale purple with age. The clan had slain and exorcized the restless spirits there.

"It will need work," Marethari sighed, looking about her at the elegant decay. "It will take much work. It will be the work of generations before all this is restored to what it once was, but such secrets are here! I have found whole shelves of books in the ancient tongue. This can be our place of council! This can be our refuge! Rooted here, we elvhen can again grow strong!"

The Dalish did not work in stone, but that, too, must change. Her dwarven Wardens, Ketil and Idunn, looked about them, muttering and nodding. Neither of them were masons, either, but dwarves always knew about stone. And it would not be impossible to persuade dwarven masons to seek employment here and teach some young elves their craft.

First of all, the place needed a good cleaning. The boy Quinn labored willingly with many of Danith's clan, removing ages of filth and debris from the upper chambers and halls of the temple. The next order of business would be to destroy those great tree roots that were prying apart the great edifice. Elves revered trees, but these wayward roots were in the wrong place, and taking what was not rightfully theirs.

The clan had decided to winter here. There was good hunting in the vicinity, and plenty of room for everyone. Even the halla could be protected. The clan could continue their work of cleaning and purifying the place; disposing decently of the ancient bones, and plying their crafts in safety and comfort.

No darkspawn had been seen east of the White River. The clans were discreetly patrolling near the bridges at the

Brecilian Passage, and had seen little darkspawn activity. The resistance at Ostagar had been effective enough to prevent the darkspawn from spilling much past the occasional raids near Lothering. Dalish scouts had clashed with the monsters in the Southron Hills, but the darkspawn had been few and scattered. All in all, the war was going well.

Danith stalked through the long corridors, peering into dusty chambers not yet attended to. Memories were everywhere: some proud, some rather disturbing. She had not behaved well here, and when she had paid her Wardens yesterday, she had conscientiously not paid herself. Bronwyn had punished her lightly, after all. Danith knew she herself would not have been so lenient with a shemlen who had betrayed her. Besides, the stoppage of pay was no burden. Danith was not short of funds, what with the plunder she had amassed in her time as a Warden. Nonetheless, the memories here were a punishment of sorts, and an admonishment to do her duty in future.

Shemlen, it seemed, made a great deal about Satinalia, feasting and giving gifts. The Dalish traditionally made more of the coming of spring, but they were not farmers, as the shemlen were. Niall, as a mage, had never had coin or opportunity to give or receive presents, but Maeve had knit socks for everyone in her spare time. Maeve joked that it took more time to knit socks for Quinn's big feet than for all the rest together. The shemlen woman could not be much more than ten years older than the boy, but she tended to mother him, nonetheless.

Knitting was a curious art, and one not practiced by the elvhen, but the socks were warm, and Danith expressed her thanks by giving Maeve a pretty silver amulet she had found on a darkspawn. The shemlen worship of the woman Andraste meant nothing to Danith, but Maeve valued such things. The dwarves, too, seemed to like the idea of a holiday to celebrate their accomplishments and their newly won coin. In the end they had put together a little festival of their own, and everyone had given and received something. It was a good way to bring the band together. In a way, they were Danith's clan now, and she was their Keeper. She must look after their spirits as well as their bodies.

It would be pleasant to stay here, forgetting the war; forgetting the rest of the world. They could be safe here, cleaning and repairing the great temple; telling stories and singing songs; hunting and fishing and gathering. Danith was tempted to settle down here, where one could be as snug as in a spider's cocoon.

For that very reason, they must leave soon. There was much to do. She had achieved part of her mission: she had explored the Gwaren Deep Roads entrance; she had made contact with her clan and others, and had received reliable intelligence that the darkspawn had not penetrated into the Brecilian Forest east of the White river; she had reconnoitered at the temple and confirmed that this place would be the one most suitable for the Dalish homeland.

However, Bronwyn wanted her to make her way to Denerim, to join her there at the Compound, unless the weather made it

impossible. In all honor, Danith could not claim that. While the weather was turning cold, there was no reason they could not move on to Denerim. Before she did that, there were matters at hand.

Most importantly, there was more scouting to be done west of the river, where Danith had encountered darkspawn herself, long before she was made a Warden. After assessing the degree to which they had infiltrated, she could give Bronwyn a much better picture of the general security of the southeastern portion of Ferelden. And there was another matter than gnawed at her.

This great temple was not the only elven structure in the Brecilian Forest. Last spring, when out hunting with with her dear Tamlen, Danith had found the mysterious cave that led to a hidden structure very like this—though much smaller. It was there she and Tamlen had unleashed an ancient horror that had taken Tamlen from her and nearly cost her own life as well. It had forced her from the clan, to live on in exile and as a Grey Warden. Deep within an inner chamber, Danith and Tamlen had found a large and curious mirror. Occasionally, Danith wondered what had become of it. Perhaps she should find out.

"The mirror, Keeper," Danith said finally, coming to her for a private word one evening after supper. "The mirror that took Tamlen..."

Concerned and not pleased, Marethari looked at her doubtfully. "What is it that you wish to know, dal'en?:"

"What became of it? We tried to smash it, and I remember nothing more."

"The mirror was Tainted, da'len," the Keeper replied gently. "It was full of darkspawn poison. I think it had been there a very, very long time. Perhaps it was set as a trap, and then forgotten. Or perhaps..." she smiled faintly. "Perhaps it had been there for many ages, a useful tool of the elvhen, and then the darkspawn happened on it and corrupted it. Yes," she mused. "that is most likely."

"Is it still in the cave, Keeper? I had thought to look at that place again, since it is on the other side of the river and we found darkspawn there at the time. However, I must warn my people to take care near it."

"It is...gone," Marethari confessed, her clear eyes grown shifty and reluctant. "It was in our camp for some time, but later I hid it away. It attracted too much attention of the worst kind."

"Who would want a broken mirror?" Danith laughed.

"Merrill."

Seeing Danith's astonishment, Marethari looked away in shame. "I sent Merrill to Ostagar to get her away from the mirror. She was taking an unhealthy interest in it. She had found a reference to it in one of our few books preserved from the time of the Dales."

"Tainted mirrors?" Danith objected, all at sea amidst the Keeper's obfuscations.

"It is an artifact of ancient Arlathan," Marethari whispered, staring deeply into the fire. "It was an eluvian."

"I have never heard of such a thing."

Speaking very softly, Marethari told her an astounding tale. Eluvians had been only one of the many wonders of the ancient empire of the elvhen. Much of what they were used for had been lost to history, but some knowledge had survived. Among other, secret things, eluvians had been used for communication over vast distances. An eluvian in distant Arlathan could have communicated with the one in the Brecilian Forest with just as much speed as it took Marethari and Danith, seated here together, to exchange words.

"But they are lost," Marethari mourned. "Only this one has been discovered in all these long ages, and it is broken and defiled."

"What did Merrill want with it, then?" Danith asked, puzzled. "It is useless."

"Merrill believed that it could be repaired, and untold wonders would be revealed. She means well, but talked too much of it. She even wanted to take it to Ostagar with her, but I managed to persuade her at the last minute that it would be completely shattered by such a long journey. She had brought it to camp to study it—a piece of hideous recklessness on her

part. Once she was gone I tried to destroy it with fire, but failed. The enchantments are powerful. So, with great care, I took it to a remote part of the forest and buried it deep in the earth." She smiled wryly. "And planted a tree over its grave. Thus passed the last known eluvian of the elvhen. Merrill will never forgive me, but it is for the best."

Danith sat back, considering. Part of her longed to see that wondrous mirror again, and was deeply disappointed that she would not. She almost asked the Keeper where the mirror had been buried, and then, with a trickle of fear, wondered if that was the evil magic of the thing, tempting her as it had before. She must think no more of it.

"It is well," she said briefly. "The hidden place will make an excellent camp for hunters, especially in inclement weather. If the spirits are indeed gone from it, we should let the clans know of its existence. While it would not lie within the borders of the realm of the elvhen, our scouts and hunters will still range far and wide. Since we found darkspawn there once, I will take my party there, and we will scour the land for more signs of them." She gave Marethari an odd, sad smile. "Perhaps I met yet find Tamlen."

"Tamlen is lost, dal'en," Marethari said, touching her hand gently. "Lost."

The Wardens departed the next day, looked back wistfully at the marvelous temple, and headed west. It was one of those brilliant autumn days of cool, still air and radiant sunshine. The

halla stepped daintily on the carpet of fallen leaves, and the Wardens grew cheerful with the pleasant walk. Danith noted how much better Niall was keeping up. The unhealthy layer of white flab she had noted in many of the Circle Wardens was now lean muscle, and he seemed happier, fitter; more his own man and less a poor prisoner of the priest-folk.

Life was easy, and game plentiful. Even the dwarves were learning the lore of stream and tree; which animals were good to eat, and which should be avoided. They camped, and journeyed on. They did not take the wide dirt road that led to the town of South Reach, but instead plunged into the forest, following a game trail south. This narrow path was often used by the Dalish, as they passed quietly through the trees, evading the shemlen villages. Danith had a written pass which gave her and her Wardens the freedom of the Arl of South Reach's castle, but she would go there only if she must.

Her preference was to explore the trails, seeking out darkspawn; then to see the little hideway with eyes unclouded by fear and pain, and finally, when she had done all she could do, to turn north, and make for Denerim overland by the lesser backroads. Enough people traveled on the West Road that word would spread if darkspawn were seen there. Better to discover what might be lurking in secret.

A time-worn but excellent bridge spanned the White River east of South Reach, just below The Falls of Cormac. It was a place of astonishing natural beauty, and Danith took great pleasure in leading her Wardens here. They stopped to eat their midday meal under a sheltered slope, a fine view of the

falls before them. Their halla cropped the verdure with graceful content. White spray diffused the light into soft glints of color. The rushing water boomed as it crashed down and swirled under the bridge. The air was chill, but still full of life. Danith loved this spot.

"My clan camped in this place early last spring," she told them. "It is not far from here that I encountered darkspawn and found an underground dwelling of the elvhen."

"It still sounds very strange," Steren remarked, "for the elvhen to live underground."

"I think it's clever," Maeve spoke up. "You said it was accessed by a cave. Caves have the same temperature year round. If you didn't want to spoil the countryside, but wanted a snug place to live, why not construct it in the most sheltered way? In the Southron Hills, where I'm from, people often build their homes into hillsides, and roof them with sod, so you can hardly tell there's a house there."

"I've seen those sod houses!" Quinn waved his enormously long arms in excitement. "One had goats browsing on the roof! The place was covered with clover and meadowsweet."

Idunn shrugged. As a dwarf, all of this made sense. "*Obviously*, it's smarter to live underground, even if it's *just* underground. Those ancient elves were supposed to be smart, so it follows that they would build smart, too."

Ketil shrugged. Living underground was so obviously logical

that there was no need to belabor the point.

The conversation struck Danith deeply. There was much in what they said. The great temple to the east was not entirely below ground. A handsome dome rose imposingly above the trees crowning the structure. In addition, there was a large wing on the south side that was three levels in height. Most of that wing had not been explored when she was here with Bronwyn, for the door was concealed and had only been located when Marethari had had the time to walk completely about the entire structure and consider ways in which the inside did not match the outside. Then, after painstaking search, doorways had been revealed and opened. Most of these new chambers and passages were unhaunted, but were instead the lairs of birds and mice. Many were bright and airy, and might be most pleasant abodes in warm weather. The ones at the topmost levels were open to the sky, the roofs having collapsed long ago.

However, the greater part of the structure *was* underground, safe from weather and insulated from great variations in temperature. One was used to the idea that an important building must be a tower, for that was the way the Tevinters built. But perhaps the elvhen of old did not think that was necessary or beautiful, and created buildings that harmonized with the natural world, rather than flaunted their domination of it. It was...a *pleasant* thought.

At the temple, the clan had taken up housekeeping in the big entry chamber and the rooms opening from it. There, they would be sheltered against the fiercest winds and heaviest

snows. Summer grass was being dried and stored for the halla, even though the resourceful creatures could subsist well on tree bark in the cold of winter.

The hidden place she was seeking west of the river was entirely underground, with some openings among the rocks cunningly arranged to permit light. She remembered seeing sockets for torches and brackets that appeared to be some sort of fixture for more illumination. Danith knew that the dwarves had created underground lighting that burned for ages. Perhaps her elven ancestors had also devised such wonders.

She needed to see the place again: the place where Tamlen had disappeared and her old life had been taken from her. She needed to see if the darkspawn were still there, or if they had left traces of their passing. She needed to be sure—if there was the least possibility—that she had done all she could do to find out what had become of Tamlen.

The underground place had other uses as well. Word was out about the elven temple, but the shemlen did not know about the other, smaller place Danith had discovered. The shemlen Chantry would come prying eventually, making the same sort of trouble that had ultimately caused the loss of the Dales. The Keepers were taking council about that. There were old magics that could be used to hide part of the Dalish lands. Not all of them, Marethari advised: let the priests think they had seen everything, but protect the temple and deflect their attention to the deep forests. They would wander round and round, convinced that the Dalish were few in number, and

living exactly like the animals they hunted. If they found the smaller place, they might think that that was the ancient temple, and go home, satisfied and contemptuous.

She thought the mouth of the cave was graven in her memory forever, but it was not so. Fortunately, she had spoken at length with Marethari, who had not only come to rescue her when she was injured, but had returned there twice. After striking the false path a number of times, she at last struck on the true one, and soon found the curious opening in the earth. It was late, and the sun's rays slanted at a low angle. The forest murk was close around them, and little light penetrated into the cave mouth.

"Is this it, Dantih?" Niall asked, anxiously peering into the depths. "It looks like a hole in the ground."

"That's what a cave *is*, mageling," Ketil grunted.

Danith smirked at Niall, and sniffed at the air, but smelled only old mold and dust.

"Yes. This is it. I am certain. It is growing dark, and the halla need tending.. Let us camp here tonight, and explore in the morning. We need to examine this site for darkspawn traces, anyway."

Marethari had assured her that they had burned the Taint where they found it, but Danith would not be easy until she done it for herself. Black scars here and there showed where

Marethari's fires had cleansed. Now at the beginning of Firstfall, the forest was no longer lush. Many trees were entirely bare of leaves, and after careful search, a few near the cave revealed threads and blots of Taint that might before have been concealed by foliage. Niall carefully seared this away, hoping not to kill the trees altogether, but to prevent the slow decay of Taint.

"The Deep Roads are foul from the darkspawn," Danith said. "Black and foul. We cannot let the Taint take this great forest, as it has the Deep Roads."

Ketil demurred. "The stone of the Deep Roads isn't Tainted. You can't Taint stone. The Taint grows on the lichen on the rocks, you see, and builds up in creeping strands," he explained. "And if blood is spilled or flesh hacked, it grows there, too. All this wood is in a lot more danger than any stone."

"All the more reason to cleanse it thoroughly," Danith said primly, thinking back to the underground building. She was of two minds about seeing it again. It was where she had last seen Tamlen. Filthy spiders had lived there, and evil spirits. Yet while haunted and dirty, it had not shown the kind of Taint they had seen in the Deep Roads near Ostagar. For that matter, the entrance at Gwaren had been thick with crackling black dust of old and rotten Taint, but she had seen nothing of that marring the little underground elven dwelling. Some elegance remained, like the fine bones in the face of an aged beauty.

So they searched the area carefully, brushing branches aside and poking through dead leaves and fallen trees. After a while they grew thirsty, and Quinn and Maeve were sent to fill everyone's canteens in the nearby stream. Danith returned to her examination of the forest, hearing their laughter and horseplay from afar. Her eye was caught by a jewel-like beetle, scuttling busily up the bough of a beech tree. It was a harmless creature: its green carapace iridescent and shining. Danith reached out to pick it up, thinking to show it to her friends.

Steren sniffed the air and quickly lifted a hand in silent warning. Danith caught it, too, hardly noticing as the insect made its escape. Half scent, half some nameless sense tingling at the back of her thoughts, she knew that their enemies were upon them. She thought with horror of Maeve and Quinn, gone to the stream for water...

"To arms!" she shouted. Dwarven voices ceased in the tents, and Ketil rolled out onto the stony ground, already drawing his weapons.

"Move!" growled Idunn, stumbling over him. The dwarf woman crouched, sword and dagger clenched in white-knuckled tension. The air moved and rippled, and a horrible chuckling rose up behind them. There was an ominous pause, and with a loud and horribly musical cry of "*Hoon! Hoon!*" the darkspawn revealed themselves and rose up to claw at them.

"Shrieks!" screamed Idunn.

"They're all shrieks!" Nuala screamed back, stabbing one of the monsters in the eye with an arrow.

The knowledge that all these creatures had been born of an elven woman made them even more horrible to Danith. Grotesque, pointed ears rose up like horns from their skulls. They did not run, like elves, but bounded like monstrous hares. They did not even carry weapons or wear armor, but fought like beasts, with fang and claw.

Danith brought down one, or nearly. It thrashed and screeched, pinned to the earth, until Ketil swung his axe.

Creators! They were surrounded. There must be six of the creatures, barreling toward them, rearing up, claws extended

A blade clove one of creatures' brain in two. It fell, and Quinn was revealed, canteens still slung over his shoulders.

Niall had been too shocked to respond at first, but he was fighting now. He froze a pair of the shrieks into bizarre statues of ice. Maeve, running up, shattered one to bloody shards. One by one, the creatures were brought down and destroyed, still hooning.

The last of the shrieks was smaller than the rest, and clothed in ragged leathers. His gait was different, too...not the loping beast-charge of the shriek, but more man-like. It was running at her. Danith took careful aim and sighted down the shaft... The creature paused, staring at her.

"Lethallan," it croaked.

Shocked stupid, Danith lowered her bow and stared. The creature came forward, walking like a man, hands outstretched. Danith scrambled back from the thing—the dead thing—the blackened and foul, hairless and white-eyed thing.

"Lethallan," it pleaded.

"It speaks!" Steren shouted. "It is an...elf!" His pause made his words almost a question, but who could recognize one of the elvhen is this pitiful monster?

Danith, tempted to hope, came forward. She had survived. Perhaps...

"Tamlen?" she whispered.

"Back, monster!" shouted Nuala, planting an arrow deep between the creature's feet.

It cringed away, hiding its ruined face with unnaturally long fingers. "Danith, *lethallan*, do not look upon me! I did not know it was you in this camp!"

"Friend of yours?" Idunn asked outright, ready to strike him down.

Danith stared the more, her worst fears realized. She had been saved. Why not Tamlen?

"Tamlen..." she managed. "I can help you. Cure you. There

must be some way."

Bronwyn had told them the formula for the Joining potion... what was it? Darkspawn blood... Niall had some lyrium... surely she could get to Denerim... Bronwyn must have the Archdemon blood...

"No," came Tamlen's distorted, muffled voice. "There is no hope. Nothing can help me. I hear the song now, and it is my only comfort."

"The song?" Quinn whispered to Maeve. "Does it mean the Archdemon's song? Is that a darkspawn?"

"It's a ghoul," Ketil grunted, his axe still raised. "It happens to dwarves, when they get the Taint in them. They start looking like darkspawn, and then they go crazy. Never saw an elf ghoul before, though. Better to kill it, Danith. It'll spread Taint, and it's likely to turn on you in a flash. Once they start hearing the song, they're the slaves of the darkspawn."

"He's right," Idunn agreed, sturdily backing up her friend. "You'd be doing him a favor. I'd rather be dead than a ghoul."

The Wardens hefted their weapons. Without a sound, the ghoul fled, rushing silently back along the forest path toward the stream.

"Tamlen!" Danith cried, racked with grief. Hardly conscious of herself, she dashed after him, forgetting her companions, forgetting everything.

"Danith, wait!" shouted Niall, trying to follow. A branch hit him in the face.

"Come on!" Quinn roared, sprinting away.

Danith raced ahead, wanting to find Tamlen, talk to him, help him; but hardly knowing what she would do if she caught him. The bare branches formed an endless tunnel, keeping her from Tamlen. She crashed through them, calling his name. Her Wardens chased her, puffing and shouting, but she paid them no heed.

The trees thinned out near the stream, and she saw him at the bank: his back turned to her, crouched, trembling. She slowed her pace and put out her hand to touch his shoulder.

"Tamlen..."

Like a snake, he struck out at her with a dagger in each hand. Her reflexes were good enough to evade the right-hand stab, but his left-hand dagger slashed her across her ribs, grinding against them. She screamed out in pain and surprise. He lunged at her again, his eyes mad, his teeth bared in a snarl. Danith stumbled backwards, and fell, her breath knocked from her, blood slicking her belly. Tamlen shrieked in triumph, and reared back to strike.

And in that instant, Niall's hex turned him to ice, and he became a moment of violence frozen in time. A second later Quinn's greatsword cut him in two. The bottom half fell to the water's edge. The top half, spurting blood, collapsed forward,

arms outstretched.

"Well struck!" bellowed Ketil. "That was a mighty blow indeed!" He slapped the boy on the back, like a proud father.

"Niall!" Maeve shouted, "Danith's hurt!"

They crowded around Danith, concerned and sympathetic. Nuala fetched water, and the wound was cleaned and mended.

Idunn patted her on the shoulder. "An old friend of yours, wasn't he? That's hard. We see it in the Legion from time to time. Too much Taint, too many darkspawn, and a friend turns ghoul. It's never easy. I know."

"His name was Tamlen," Danith whispered, not wanting to look at the horror nearby. "He was of my clan."

Steren gave her a serious, compassionate glance. "His body is Tainted, and must be burned. You must rest, while we see to it."

"I shall build up the fire," Nuala said softly, "and make us all something to eat."

Niall finished his healing, and Maeve helped Danith clean herself, her hands gentle. Quinn and Steren were moving the... body away to some flat rocks, talking quietly to Niall, who would destroy its Taint with fire. Tamlen would be free and could go to the Creators cleansed. Burning tears flowed

freely, and Maeve put her arm around her, holding her fast. Never, in her strangest dreams, had Danith imagined being helped and comforted by a shemlen woman.

But they had all stood by her: shemlen, durgen'len, and elvhen alike; stood by her when she had lost her head and her judgment; spoken kindly to her and not blamed her. They were all her true clansfolk and friends, and Danith swore she would not fail them again.

It was not so bad, being in charge, Alistair reflected. At least not this time. Aside from Ser Cauthrien, nobody Alistair was particularly in awe of had remained in Ostagar, so there was no need to be embarrassed. And he had lots of help.

Petra and Emrys were better at sums than he was, and they saw to it that he got everybody paid on Satinalia. Better yet, they actually toted up the amounts and made the proper entries into the account books, so nobody would think Alistair was stealing from the Wardens. It was very convenient.

Satinalia had been tremendous fun. They had made puppets and put on a show. Perhaps the most fun was the look on Sten's face, as he sat in the audience watching the Adventures of Black Fox. Maybe it was the quality of Alistair's Orlesian accent as he portrayed the wicked lord of Val Chevin. Oghren wasn't the only one to get completely and utterly stinking drunk. A lot of the garrison had, actually.

He half-sang to himself, *"When Loghain's away, the Wardens*

will play..."

All the cellars under the great complex of buildings at Ostagar had been thoroughly cleaned out. No horrors remained there. Alistair had led a expedition to move along the Deep Roads where they could access it at the Blightwound. Aside from a few blind tunnels, they had encountered no darkspawn in the five miles they had traveled north, nor in the three miles they had gone east. They had found the actual Ostagar access point, which for some reason the darkspawn had not used. Asa thought that perhaps the tunnel there was too narrow and the rock too hard for the horde's convenience. And besides, they had given Ferelden a much nastier surprise emerging in force out of sight.

Right now, more darkspawn were to be found in the mountains and forests overlooking the fortress. The creatures seemed to be impervious to snow and cold, but Petra insisted that couldn't be entirely true, because freezing spells worked on them perfectly well.

It had been Nevin's brilliant idea to try to hunt darkspawn in the mountains while wearing snowshoes. Actually the hunting part had been super. There was absolutely no problem hunting darkspawn through the snow while wearing snowshoes. The problem, as Alistair put it later, was *fighting* darkspawn while wearing snowshoes. It was tricky. They were lucky that Petra was an absolutely super mage, and that Adaia had brought along enough bombs to blow up all of Ostagar.

As it happened, the bombs had also caused an avalanche, but that had been all right too, since most the snow had fallen on the darkspawn and the Wardens had dug Sten out in time. The Qunari hadn't been very pleased though. Spoilsport.

And tonight, the snow was so heavy and the wind so bitter that there was no question of going anywhere, snowshoes or not. There was nothing to do but sit by the fire and play chess. Or not play chess, since Alistair was a terrible chess player. Emrys, having a gentleman's education, could play the lute a bit, so they all sang songs and got drunk again.

Asa rose to her tiny dwarven height, and announced, "I will now teach all you ignorant sods a good dwarven song. A *traditional* song. '*Nug Pancakes!*'"

"Ewww!" groaned Adaia. "Somebody squashed a nug?"

"Hey!" rumbled Oghren. "Nug pancakes are tasty!" He leered. "Oughta give 'em a try, cutie!"

"Ewwwwwww!"

"Let the dwarf recite her traditional lore," Sten demanded. "it would be less insipid than the conversation."

Asa stared at him owlshly. "All right! Just for that...I will!" She took a deep breath, and then began chanting in a loud, nasal whine:

"Nug sits in the mud

*Nug wiggles his ears
You catch the nug, he slips away!
Nug gets to live another day!*

*Nug sits in the mud
Nug wiggles his toes
You hook the nug, he slips away!
Now the nug runs off to play!*

*Nug sits in the mud
Nug wiggles his nose
You tickle the nug, he laughs away!
Now the nug sits on my plate!"*

Petra, not nearly as drunk as most of them, rolled her eyes.
"It sounds like a nursery rhyme!"

"It *is* a nursery rhyme!" Oghren guffawed. "So what?"

They all laughed themselves silly...well, all but Sten, and he looked like one the novice masters at the monastery: tolerant of holiday idiocy, but looking forward to making their lives hell tomorrow.

Adaia, on the other hand, looked incredibly pretty: dressed in her nice gown, her dark gold hair shining richly in the candlelight. She saw Alistair looking, and leaned over to kiss his cheek. At the moment, he couldn't imagine anyone with whom he'd rather be snowed in.

The long dark of the Amgarrack Road was one of the more grueling experiences of Astrid's career. She was deeply glad that she had the support of Rodyk and his Legion veterans. While the Road was not actively defended by the darkspawn, there were pockets of them everywhere, popping out from side tunnels, ambushing them a half dozen times in the course of every march. There was no doubt in her mind that Tara would beat her to the meeting place, unless things had gone disastrously wrong on the surface. Astrid cherished every rest stop. Grey Warden stamina was a fact, but it could be challenged by constant combat.

Shale had proven its worth a hundred times over. Not just because it had a golem's strength and resistance to damage, but because its mind was whole and unimpaired, and it could fight cleverly, attacking at just the right moment. Astrid had not heard of independent golems, but in her opinion they were definitely the best kind. And her admiration was not one-sided.

"It seems to me that it is superior to most squishy creatures," Shale remarked to Astrid. "It must come of superior origins."

"I am an Aeducan, and the daughter of a king of Orzammar," she replied. "I suppose that might be considered 'superior' in some circles."

"Perhaps that explains it." Shale allowed. "At any rate, its fighting is most satisfactory."

There was another new ally, too: a man she had once known fairly well. She wondered why he was here, but supposed that

he would tell her in his own time why he had chosen to travel the Amgarrak Road.

Darion Olmech was a notable scholar, not a warrior. He had chosen to march with the host of Orzammar in order to document their achievements. The Shaper of Memories would want detailed records of the events, of course, and Darion was not the only scholar traveling with the army. He was curious about Shale, and often questioned the golem at length. He had also struck up a friendship of sorts with Aeron, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of songs and stories from Ferelden, Orlais, and the Free Marches. The two of them exchanged lore at every stop. It was very entertaining.

They were at it again. Aeron was reciting an old tale, rhythm and music in his voice.

"...When Luthias grew to manhood, he became known for his charisma and bravery. While shorter than his fellow warriors, Luthias was stronger and doughtier than any warrior in the tribe. When Luthias was still a young man, Mabene sent him to the dwarven city of Orzammar to negotiate an alliance. Mabene's tribe had come into conflict with other Alamarri, and he needed as much help as he could get.

"Luthias was unable to convince the dwarven king to aid his tribe, but fell in love with the king's daughter, Scaea. Luthias and Scaea fled the dwarven realm and returned to his tribe. Scaea taught Luthias the art of fighting without pain, the berserker state known as the 'battle wrath;' and with it,

Luthias became a renowned warrior..."

She would like to hear more of the story, but the rest break was over. "Wardens! Legion!" Astrid shouted, "Prepare to move out!"

"I'll tell you what happened later," Aeron promised Darion, under his breath.

"What was that story you were telling?" Astrid asked.

"The Tale of Luthias Dwarfson," Aeron told her. "A very old Alamarri legend."

"Was this hero really the son of a dwarf?"

"No. Just short."

"It ends badly, does it not?"

Aeron grinned at her. "It's a heroic adventure! Somebody always dies."

"Not if I can help it."

Hunting was the most exhilarating of sports, in Bronwyn's opinion. Nothing less could have coaxed the high nobility of Fereldan out in questionable weather to race and chase about the lower reaches of Dragon's Peak.

Decimated as their numbers were, they still made a brave

display: tents with the colors and arms of the Crown and great houses of the land; splendid horses in brilliant trappings; a mob of servants assuring that the their betters would enjoy the simplicity of outdoor life without lifting a hand to anything other than a weapon or a wine goblet; and the lords and ladies themselves, in their finest riding array.

Bronwyn had been promising herself a day to investigate the rumored blood mage hideout, but had not had a moment to herself. She was pulled from one place to another: first with fittings for her wedding gown, then with arrangements for the feast at Highever House. She must attend meetings of the Crown Council. Her Wardens needed her guidance, and Loghain demanded her attention. And every noble in the city seemed to be seeking her favor and inviting her to banquets and balls and salons. A traveler from foreign parts, seeing all the festivities, might never guess that this nation was at war with unnatural ancient monsters, and threatened by its nearest neighbor. Despite the whirl of gaiety, Bronwyn had plenty of serious business to think about.

What was she to do with Leliana? Bronwyn was fond of her. Leliana was brave and skilled and a delightful companion. Because of her, Bronwyn had learned of a deep and sinister conspiracy against the security of Ferelden. However, Leliana was fanatically devoted to the Chantry, and could not be kept from telling them everything. She was incapable of seeing that she was doing wrong or causing trouble by doing so. Bronwyn was now extremely sorry that she had brought her to Denerim. She should have sent her off on one of the patrols,

and let her fight darkspawn, which, to be honest, Leliana did extremely well.

Well, she must think of something. Jowan had also annoyed her, but she had already decided that Jowan would return to Soldier's Peak and act as a liaison and assistant to Avernus. She would send him immediately after the wedding, with a pair of new Wardens, a wagon train of supplies, and perhaps the Wolfs. Jowan had shown no ill effects from Avernus' potion—rather the contrary—and Bronwyn was inclined to ask for her own dose.

But Leliana, Leliana, Leliana! What to do? Perhaps she should send Leliana to Soldier's Peak as well, and put her in charge of refurbishing the place. That was the sort of work her bard would do well, as long as she was given a budget and orders not to exceed it. Yes, perhaps that was the thing to do. It would get her away from Denerim altogether. Leliana would be sorry to miss the Landsmeet, but Bronwyn did not want her talking to every priest, brother, and Templar in Denerim.

Today was meant to be a day of pleasure, and Bronwyn determinedly put her Warden issues aside. When had she last gone on a great hunt like this? Not for over a year, and that was just a family hunt in Highever. She sighed, and put her parents' faces from her mind as well.

Arl Wulffe's little hunting lodge at Stonycroft was too small to house his guests, and Fergus' neighboring manor was even smaller, so they had fallen back on the common expedient of bringing tents. Dinner would be served indoors—at least for

the nobles. Bronwyn hoped the weather would not disappoint them.

She was dressed for hunting in elegant hunting leathers, brown highlighted by green dagging at shoulders and hips. She was carrying her sword and dagger, of course, but had also brought a bow and arrows, in addition to a cylindrical case containing a number of Master Wade's special spring-loaded spears. It would be interesting to see what they did to a charging wild boar. Slung across her shoulder was Kolgrim's magnificent dragon horn. It should do splendidly in the hunting field.

Scout was excited and restless, obviously eager for action. Everyone in Denerim was spoiling him with treats, Palace and Compound alike, and he needed to work off the excess smoked sausage with a long run on the mountain.

Another party was arriving, their herald carrying the South Reach ensign. Habren's shrill voice rose up from the riders, complaining to her maid about her hair. Of course Habren would insist on coming along. It happened that the day for which Wulffe had arranged the hunt was just beyond her prescribed thirty days of deep mourning. Arl Urien, it seemed, was utterly forgotten. Life went on.

The Hawkes were nearby, talking in low, excited tones. Fergus had found horses for them, and even Leandra would ride part of the way, though she had not promised to keep up with the hunters. They all looked very nice. Bronwyn noticed, with a hint of amusement, how Leandra was fussing over

Charade, whose prospects were almost as shining as her own. Had Rothgar approached her? Carver was here, blooming with the notice his good looks attracted, no doubt happy not to be compared today, at least, with his absent brother Adam.

Fergus emerged from the largest of the Highever tents, smoothing his hair.

"Is that the Queen?"

Bronwyn smirked at him. "No. South Reach. You can practice your courtliest bows on Habren. We can only hope her betrothed will not be jealous."

"Who's that with them?"

Bronwyn looked, recognizing all but one of the party. Cousin Leonas had brought his three children, and was accompanied by Aron Kendalls. Riding beside the prospective Arl, on a rather middling horse and accompanied by a mabari, was unquestionably the handsomest young man Bronwyn had ever seen.

Really.

Bronwyn had known quite a few handsome men in her life. Most of her relations among the nobility were good-looking. The nobility, in a sense, bred for looks and courage, just as kennelmasters bred mabari for the same qualities. For that matter, many of her Wardens were remarkably handsome

men.

This young man, whose golden hair rippled back from his brow, whose clothes did not *quite* fit him properly, was quite another order of being.

Fergus grinned at her, whispering, "Don't stare."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were staring. I saw you. I'll bet my jaunty hunting chapeau that that's Aron Kendalls' younger brother!"

"Holy Maker!" Bronwyn felt herself blushing, and then burst out laughing at herself. "I'm glad I saw him before he saw me!"

"And you must think of your own betrothed," Fergus reproved her virtuously, shaking a finger in the manner of their old tutor Aldous. "Don't let yourself be led astray by a pretty face!"

The South Reach party stopped to chat with acquaintances on their way, and so the Couslands were prepared and Bronwyn moderately in command of herself by the time Bryland brought his family and guests to their tent to greet them. Cousin Leonas and Lady Amell actually blushed, conscious of their situation. Bronwyn gathered from the expressions on the faces of the children that they had not yet been informed of their elders' plans. The Bryland boys were happy to see all of them, and complained about Killer being left at home.

"He's too young, boys," Bryland said, for what sounded like the hundredth time. "He would only get hurt. Next year."

Habren whispered something to Kendalls, probably telling the younger brother the identity of the people before them. Without permitting Arl Bryland to make the proper introductions. Aron Kendalls gestured to the handsome man behind him to come forward.

"My brother Kane," he said carelessly.

Kane Kendalls' white and even teeth showed to advantage in a broad smile.

"My lord teyrn. My lady."

Bronwyn felt like laughing again. The young man's voice was as alluring as his looks. He bowed gracefully, while his brother looked on with ill-concealed impatience. Habren regarded the younger Kendalls as she would a nicely underdone lamb chop, and seemed ready to eat him up. Fergus and Bronwyn exchanged brief, discreet glances. No wonder Aron Kendalls had not been eager to bring his brother to Denerim.

Scout, for his part, liked the stranger's mabari bitch. She had a lovely chestnut coat.

More horses thundered up the road. Anora arrived with Loghain, and the talk became lively and general. Bronwyn smirked at her brother, who was admiring Anora's long legs, nicely displayed in her hunting leathers and high boots.

Oh, dear. Loghain was glaring at Fergus. Bronwyn nudged her brother, who raised his eyes to Loghain's, and gave him a limpid, innocent smile.

More dogs joined them, baying and jostling. Wulffe waded into the midst of them, greeting everyone affably, talking to the huntsmen. They had a scent and a trail, and word of a big sow not far from the lodge.

"All right!" he roared. "Your Majesty, I pray you do us the honor of leading us out!"

Anora smiled graciously, though Bronwyn suspected she had no great love of hunting. She rode well, however, and looked very attractive on horseback. They set off at a good pace, horns blowing and dogs baying.

Bronwyn winded her own horn, and the music of it echoed off the mountainside. She dug her heels into her horse and followed the hounds.

They would not ride the boar down, of course. Once the dogs had it cornered, it was customary to dismount and finish off the beast with swords and spears. As usual, the hunt all too soon dissolved into chaos: huntsmen galloping hither and yon; dogs distracted by rabbits or taking what they imagined to be shortcuts.

And, as always, some of the participants vanished for most of the day, trysting rather than hunting. They generally made their appearance hours later, very disheveled, with stories of

falls and twisted ankles and lame horses.

Loghain seemed as inclined to hunt as Bronwyn, so they stuck with the bulk of the pack. Quite early on, they lost track of Anora and Fergus. Loghain's lips thinned noticeably. Bronwyn forbore to laugh at him. She was having too good a time. She blew a Highever call on her horn, so Fergus would have some idea where she was.

Up a rocky slope they scrambled, and then were in the bracken. A group of riders detached from the main body and began shouting. Scout barked, and took off in pursuit. Laughing, Bronwyn spurred her horse after him. Loghain smiled at her enthusiasm and followed. It was shaping up to be a splendid day.

Well, this is a splendid day, thought Anora. The sun was shining, the air was fresh, and she had for once escaped her tiresome retinue of bodyguards and servants. She and Fergus had turned off down a little narrow path which led them away from the bloody-minded hunters. The horn calls and shouts and barking were fading, and they rode peacefully among tall fir trees.

Fergus cocked his head listening. "That's Bronwyn! She's off after her quarry, I expect."

"It was very thoughtful of Arl Wulffe to plan this escape from our usual daily tasks. My father enjoys hunting, though he rarely has time to indulge himself."

Fergus grinned knowingly. "And you? You don't enjoy hunting? Your appearance would suggest the contrary. I have never seen such a splendid huntress."

She blushed, knowing that she had made an extra effort for him. "Well, a queen must appear like a queen, after all. I do enjoy riding and I don't mind shooting fowl." She gave him an arch look. "In fact, I am a more than adequate archer. As for this sort of hunting? Well...it seems to me all too often to be merely the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable."

He shouted a laugh, and startled a flock of magpies from their trees. They rode on, smiling. After a time, Fergus decided it was time to speak.

"Your Majesty...Anora... it is no small pleasure for me to have you to myself at last."

"Indeed?"

Oh dear, she was being coy, like some dithering milkmaid.

They rode very close, their knees almost touching. Anora risked a quick glance at him, and found him looking at her, steadfast and kind. Cailan had never looked at her in such a way.

He asked, "Have you made plans for what you shall do after the Landsmeet?"

"My father has suggested that I stay on in some

administrative capacity. Perhaps even Chancellor..."

"I did not ask what your father planned. What do *you* want to do?"

Live life! Have a child! Be loved!

She did not speak her thoughts, but instead replied, "I suppose that depends on what is offered me."

He reached out and caught at her reins, halting both the horses.

"Then let me make my offer. I cannot express how much I admire and love you. When I found you alive at the tower chapel, my blood rejoiced as it never did before. My heart, my hand, all that I have is yours, if you will do me the great honor of accepting them."

No man had actually ever asked her to marry him. It all been...arranged. For that matter, it had all been arranged before she had ever met her future husband. She tried to control her face, but some painful hope must have seeped through, for Fergus went on.

"I am no king, but I am an honest man, and I will love and honor you as an honest man loves and honors his wife. We will have a good life together... or as good as the two of us choose to make it. So tell me, lady... will you have me?"

She mastered herself, and said, "It is too soon for any public

acknowledgement. People would talk if I did not mourn Cailan for at least a year."

"Let them talk. I was thinking of Guardian."

A wry, helpless laugh escaped her. "And so was I."

He clasped her hand in his. "And so it begins! We think alike, in spite of all the world!" His brown eyes crinkled in a smile, and he pulled her closer. "Do not think me overbold if I seek a pledge of your good faith."

The kiss surprised her. It surprised her that he would dare, and then that she should like it so very much. When he broke it, her lips sought his again, and the kiss deepened, warming her blood.

"Your Majesty!" Riders were pounding down the narrow lane, coming into view. It was Anora's royal bodyguard, their voices smugly joyful that they had found their royal quarry. Anora and Fergus moved a way from each other a little, and Fergus dropped her hand reluctantly.

"Your Majesty!" the captain burst out. "We beg your mercy for failing to keep up with you!"

"That's quite all right, Fenton," Anora said graciously. "I have had the protection of Teyrn Cousland."

There was nothing to do but rejoin the hunt. Fergus led the way, following the distant horn calls. Hunters flashed through

the trees ahead of them like shadows. A riderless horse, wild-eyed, came at them at a dead run, coming the other way.

"No one ever said that boar-hunting was a *safe* sport," Fergus remarked. He urged his horse forward, wondering if someone needed help. The trail was narrow, and they rode for some time before they entered a small glen, hemmed in by dark evergreen.

"Man down!" shouted the captain, pointing.

The party moved forward. Fergus saw what the captain meant. Someone was slumped behind a rocky outcropping. A *red* rocky outcropping. Fergus dismounted and beckoned to the captain to follow.

Aron Kendalls had not had a very lucky hunt. He lay in a pool of blood, quite dead, arms and hands bitten, his face bruised nearly black. There was a deep stab wound in his belly. The captain whistled.

"Reckon a boar tusked him, poor gentleman! What a shame! The beast mauled him right fierce."

The ground was certainly trampled. Horses could panic when a boar charged. A pity the man had not had his own mabari to fight at his side. It looked, in fact, as if most of the trampling had been done by a horse, since there were hoofprints on the man's hunting leathers, but that was not that surprising, after all.

Fergus was about to order the men-at-arms to take up the body, when he remembered the conventions, and that he had no right to order the Queen's men to do anything.

"Your Majesty," he said instead, "if it please you, some of your men should take him back to Stonycroft Lodge, and some others should seek out his brother. It will be heavy news."

"Of course," Anora agreed at once, thinking quickly. "I think we had best return as well, to offer what comfort we can. Lyde, you and Roark search for Master Kane Kendalls. Tell him that his brother has met with a misadventure, and escort him to the lodge. Then find Arl Wulffe and let him know. Arl Bryland should be notified as well, as the Kendalls are his guests."

One of the guards dismounted, and the bloody corpse was put over his saddle. Slowly, they headed back in the direction of the Lodge.

Anora glanced over to Fergus, sorry that such a happy occasion would be marred by a death. She refused to take it as an omen, or anything else so silly. If people *would* rush about chasing dangerous animals, such things were bound to happen.

Denerim's succession was once again in question, but the man had heirs. His good-looking younger brother was here, and no one knew anything against him. Very likely the Landsmeet would accept one young Kendalls cousin as easily

as they did the other.

She glanced again, and Fergus understood her, very much to her satisfaction. They rode a little ahead of the sad procession, talking softly of other, happier, things.

Thanks to my reviewers: Oleander's One, Hydroplatypus, Chandagnac, Nemrut, Phygmalion, Girl-chama, JackOfBladesX, KnightOfHolyLight, Guest, Patchworker, Herebedragons66, Mike3207, Enaid Aderyn, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, timunderwood9, darksky01, Kira Kyuu, Robbie the Phoenix, Sarah1281, amanda weber, Jenna53, Blinded in a bolthole, Shakespeira, truthrowan, Raxiselic, almostinsane, Costin, pocketcucco, mille libri, Zute, Josie Lange, Sakura Lisel, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

There are no forensic investigators in Ferelden.

74. Secret Enemies

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 74: Secret Enemies

Carver Hawke strolled into Highever House, wondering what was on his mother's mind. He thought he could guess. Charade had made a good impression on the Wulffe family. For that matter, he had, too. They'd had a wonderful time hunting together. Afterward, they had done a bit of shooting, and Charade's skill with a bow had won due praise. Arl Wulffe thought she was a fine girl, and the heir, Rothgar, seemed to agree. Wouldn't it be something if Charade were an Arlessa someday? She'd do well, Carver predicted. Charade had good sense, and deserved better luck in life than she'd had so far.

And that Kendalls fellow had got himself killed. Carver had never met the man to speak to, and so hardly cared one way or the other, but he caught the gossip in the town about Habren Bryland. People were wondering if she was under a curse. A few were even wondering darkly if she was some sort of Black Widow, leading men on to their doom. Very likely Arl Bryland would rope in the pretty boy younger brother, and then the gossips could talk about the girl who had been betrothed to *four* different men in the course of the year.

The servant showed him upstairs to the parlor his mother used, and he found Mother and the girls already there, solemn as Chantry novices. There was tea, and there were pastries, so it couldn't be too bad. He kissed them properly, chose the biggest and creamiest of the pastries for himself, and then flung himself onto the settee by Bethany.

"My darlings..." his mother began, and stopped. She seemed very nervous. "I've had a letter from your brother..."

Bethany was alarmed. "Is Adam all right?"

"Oh, yes, yes... perfectly all right. He's working terribly hard, of course, but he's doing well, he says. Actually, his letter was a reply to mine. I had written to him, asking his advice on a personal matter, and I decided to call you all together, too, just as soon as I had word from your older brother."

Carver grinned at Charade, and waggled his brows.

This is it! Arlessa Charade...well, Lady Charade, for some years yet, probably...

Bethany held Charade's hand tightly, but Charade herself only lifted a hand in protest, proclaiming her complete ignorance of what her aunt was getting at.

Leandra cleared her throat. "Your brother gives his blessing, and so I thought I should speak to you all immediately, so you can think about this and let me know if you're uncomfortable with it..."

Her voice trailed off again. She blushed.

Bethany asked, "Uncomfortable with what, Mother? What's going on?"

"Well..." Leandra took a sip of her tea, set down her cup, and folded her hands. "The fact is that I have received an offer of marriage." She sensed their lack of comprehension, and added, "For me. Arl Leonas Bryland has asked me to marry him."

"Mother!" Bethany practically shrieked, first startled; then very, very pleased. "What an honor! He's such a nice man!"

Trying to conceal her intense disappointment, Charade smiled and said, "How wonderful!"

Carver's jaw was still hanging. Mother was going to get married again? But...she was *old!*

She seemed to be happy about it, but Carver couldn't imagine why. She'd be an Arlessa, and that was something she'd like, but to be married, with all that entailed... Surely, at her age, she didn't want to go through all that again... did she?

Leandra was blushing again, and smiling, pleased at the girls' responses. Their patent approval loosened her tongue. "He asked me before Satinalia. He was so very kind and noble in his ideas. He understands that I have no money—"

"We're not beggars!" Carver snapped.

"Of course not, darling. That's not what I meant. But you must understand that ordinarily a man in his position would expect a sizable dowry. Arl Bryland said he was too rich to care about that, and what he wanted was a pleasant companion and friend, someone who could help him with his responsibilities and be kind to his little boys—"

"Oh, I know they'll love you!" Bethany cried.

Leandra had a very odd look on her face. "And...he thinks me quite...beautiful. He said so. He likes my looks and my gentle manners. I think he has been very lonely for a long time. And so have I."

"It sounds like you've already made up your mind," Carver growled.

Leandra looked at him gravely. "I know what I would like to do," she agreed, "but I will do nothing that makes any of you unhappy. However, if you are going to object, you will have to explain exactly why."

Bethany stared at him, exasperated. "Well?"

"It's just..." Carver flailed for a reason. "What if...he's not nice to you?" he managed, sounding lame even to himself.

"Oh, my darling!" Leandra murmured, coming over to put her arms around him and hug him. Even the girls relented.

Bethany crowded in, to rub his back and reassure him. "Arl

Bryland is nice to his whole family, and so patient. I know he'll be nice to Mother."

Carver, still at sea with the idea of his mother being married to a man other than his father, wanted to ask, "*But what if he expects to have SEX with you?*"

But he did not dare. Not surrounded by all these women. He absolutely did not dare. They would probably scream at him and flay him alive. Besides, the Arl was old, too. No doubt it was a non-issue.

"I just want you to be happy," he mumbled, wincing at all the smothering affection.

"I will be," Leandra assured him, bright-eyed. "Think of it! My own home again! And Bethany safer than ever! I know the Arl will be a kind step-father to her, for he always speaks so highly of her. And then, too, I can do so much good in such a position."

"You can do so much good for *Adam*," Carver grunted. To his annoyance, no one heard the snark, but took his remark at face value and agreed with it and thought it very fine and proper. "Anyway," he added, "you'd better tell Teyrn Cousland about it. You've been staying here as his guest, and Adam's his man. You owe it to him to tell him before it gets out."

"That's so true!" Leandra said, much struck by Carver's good sense. "It would never do for him to think I had done anything behind his back. I shall request a moment of his time as soon

as he returns from the Palace today!"

"Oh, Mother!" Bethany sighed happily. "When is the wedding? You'll need a new gown!"

"We thought the second of Haring. Yes, I know, that it's not much time, but it needs to take place before the Landsmeet. I'll certainly order a new gown, but the wedding will be very small and private, with only the immediate family. Lady Habren's wedding is the day before, and of course, that will necessarily be very quiet, too."

Charade and Bethany could not repress their smirks. "I should hope so!" Charade laughed. "The Arl can't very well host *two* big weddings for her, two months apart!"

"And she already got the wedding presents," Bethany giggled. "And since she hasn't returned them, she'll need to be married to justify them!"

"All right!" Leandra frowned. "That is just the sort of talk that has to stop, right now. Lady Habren suffered a terrible tragedy. Now she's lost Aron Kendalls, and will have to enter into an arranged marriage with a man she's known for all of two days..."

"But a *gorgeous* man!" Bethany put in, pretending to swoon. Charade punched her lightly, laughing. Carver snorted. He'd seen enough of Habren Bryland to have her pegged as a haughty little minx with an unjustified sense of her own importance.

Leandra did not smile, and Bethany hugged her. "I'm sorry! We won't laugh at awful Habren and her collection of dead suitors. She hasn't been very nice to us, but maybe that's because of everything that happened."

"No doubt," Leandra agreed, mollified. "Let's give her a chance. Think of what she's suffered, after all!"

"I can't believe you're going to marry that *pauper!*" Habren shrieked. "She's nobody! She's *nothing!* She married a commoner and lived in a hovel for years! Her daughter's a *mage!* Everybody knows that!"

Bryland waited for the screaming to stop. It went on for some time, so he used the opportunity to think over his situation. Kane Kendalls had already agreed to marry Habren on the first of Haring, in place of his late brother. Habren was very pleased by that, approving of the younger brother's handsome looks and good manners. Bryland thought those manners rather overdone and even a little vulgar, but the boy seemed willing to learn: far more willing, in fact, than his brother had been.

"*I'll send for my little sisters right away!*" young Kane had declared. "*They should be at the funeral, and then with me. They hate that school, anyway. I know they need an education, but don't they have people to do that at home?*"

Bryland had assured him that tutors were to be had, and that his family feeling did him credit. On further, private

consideration, Bryland thought that the little girls might be appropriate playfellows for his own boys. It was never too early to teach boys how to behave nicely to the opposite sex.

At any rate, Bryland was certainly determined to wed the woman of his choice, and that marriage would be utterly impossible with Habren still under his roof. There was nothing for it but to accept Kane and give him his brother's inheritance. The two would marry and take up housekeeping at the Arl of Denerim's estate as soon as Kane was confirmed in the arling. The day after Habren's wedding, Bryland would marry Leandra and bring her home—first to his townhouse here in Denerim, and then, after the Landsmeet, to South Reach, so she could get to know his people there. It would be a new epoch in his life, and one he was looking forward to with considerable anticipation. For a short time before the Landsmeet confirmations, Leandra and Habren would be thrown together, but with luck, that would be no more than five or six days. Surely they could all survive that.

After Habren grew tired of screaming, and fell into her usual sulk, Bryland briefly told her how it would be. She would accept Lady Amell, the descendant of an ancient noble Marcher line. She would be polite to her. Habren's other option was that Bryland would *not* marry, and thus would need Habren to remain at home with him and act as his hostess. She did not care for that idea? No? Then the marriages would take place: first Habren's, and then his on the following day. She would attend that wedding and behave properly. If Habren were rude to the Arlessa of South Reach after their

marriage, she would only cause political trouble for herself and her husband, and make herself look ill-bred.

The news of his impending nuptials received a much better welcome in the schoolroom. The boys were thrilled at the idea of a mother of their very own to come and live with them, and also that Bethany would be their sister and live with them, too. And Charade could help them with their archery, since she was so good at it. In fact, they thought it all so wonderful that they did not quite understand why the ladies were not brought home to them that very day. They scampered about the room, accompanied by Killer's excited yips, planning which rooms would be nicest for the girls, and what would be the best wedding presents they could make for their new mother.

Bronwyn warned her Wardens that she wanted them up very early the next morning. If she was going to look into that rumored blood mage hideout, she needed to do it tomorrow. It was the only time before her wedding that was not totally scheduled to the minute. And after her wedding... She sighed, feeling briefly overwhelmed. After the wedding, she knew, she would be busier, if anything. Furthermore, if she waited much longer, the mages might have moved, or they might get wind that they had been discovered.

Carver was bursting with his news, and no one had told him it was a secret, so he sidled up to Bronwyn as they were all turning for the night and whispered, "My mother's getting married! To Arl Bryland!"

Bronwyn did not dash him by telling him she knew all about it, and had been approached to give her permission.

"Really? How wonderful! I hope they'll be extremely happy together."

"I hope so, too." The young, strong-boned face was anxious. "He seems all right, but it's my *mother*, you know."

"My cousin is a very nice man who loves his family. I know he would never ask a woman to marry him without feeling respect and affection for her." Tactfully, she said nothing about his occasional drinking bouts. Perhaps they would not occur so often, if he had a new interest in life. And then too, he was not one to become quarrelsome when in liquor, but cheerful and loquacious... until he passed out on the floor.

Carver seemed reassured, and Bronwyn patted his back and bade him goodnight.

She did not expect Loghain this evening, as he had a late meeting with some people from Gwaren. Instead, she would have her room to herself, and could turn in early...another reason for going out on the hunt tomorrow. And she was in a mood to enjoy her private little room, since it would not be hers much longer.

In five more days, she would be married, and work was already underway to convert some rooms in the Palace adjoining Loghain's into her own private apartments. Bronwyn had never been one to fuss over housekeeping or worry much

about fashion, but it was rather exciting to be asked to choose amongst colors and fabrics for her hangings, to judge if her splendid new bed was comfortable, and to tell the seneschal what furnishings she required. From Highever House, Fergus had sent a wide, low chest of rosewood that had been their mother's. It stood on legs carved to resemble a dragon's, and could serve for seating as well as storage. When Bronwyn opened the chest, her mother's scent suffused the room, recalling things past.

Most probably, she would be in the new rooms less than a month. If the Landsmeet granted her and Loghain the throne—as planned—they would be moving into the royal apartments. Therefore, it would be foolish to waste too much time and effort on temporary quarters. However, Bronwyn felt she must make the gesture: first of all, in order not to seem arrogantly overconfident of her election; and second, because she felt it was quite important to keep her role as a Warden separate from her role as Teyrna, and possibly Queen.

As a Teyrna, she needed to choose a personal maid. Bronwyn accepted that this was essential. She certainly had no time to mend her own gowns and clean her own shoes, and without help, her hair would be less than impressive. After some thought, she chose one of the compound maids, Fionn, whom Mistress Rannelly told her was the best at keeping secrets. She was also an excellent seamstress and handy with an iron. Bronwyn would be moving back and forth between her roles, and Fionn would have the flexibility to manage that. As a Warden servant, she had also absorbed

some squiring skills, and knew how to serve a lady warrior. Bronwyn knew enough about her own hair to tell the girl what she wanted and how to achieve it.

Fionn was quite pleased at her elevation and increase in pay, and also with the prospect of her own private room, which was a cubbyhole behind Bronwyn's temporary office. It even had a tiny round window, which was a refreshing change from the dark servants' quarters in the Compound's lower levels.

At any rate, Bronwyn would soon be bidding farewell to this nice little room in the Wardens' Compound. In future, the locked desk in the study would do for her administrative work, and she would be in and out every day, keeping contact with her Wardens. After the Landsmeet...if the Archdemon did not make an appearance and throw the world into utter chaos...she would have to plan a campaign against the darkspawn, based on the intelligence her patrols were gathering. She hoped that Danith, at least, would report in this month.

Enjoying the luxury of time to herself, she washed in the plentiful hot water, admiring the rich lather from her new cake of lavender soap. Satinalia had come just in time. She slipped into a fresh nightshift, and then into bed, trying to compose herself for sleep, unsure if she was ready to blow out the bedside candle or not.

She turned her head, looking at the candle...

...and quite abruptly, the candle was a a fire, burning in her

heart. She was in the Deep Roads, searching, searching... Tainted hands scabbled at stone, burrowing a new path for her. She moved on, up the tunnel, and stood on a jagged stone, overlooking a precipitous drop. Red-hot lava flowed sluggishly below her. Above was the high ceiling of a huge cavern. Stalactites glittered, reflecting the fire. She sighed deeply, and the flames of her breath licked at every corner, brightening the darkness to sudden day...

Bronwyn blinked, the light of the single candle dazzling her eyes.

I must have fallen asleep...

Clumsily, she propped herself up on an elbow and blew out the light. The shadows closed around her like soft grey blankets, and she was asleep in a moment.

She opened her eyes to dim grey light. There were faint noises coming from the Wardens' Hall, the usual noises of the servants laying out breakfast. Bronwyn swung her legs off the bed, got up, and dressed quickly. Scout grumbled sleepily and shook himself. Bronwyn opened the door for him, and he trotted off to make his own ablutions.

Had she slept badly? She could not remember awakening in the night, but perhaps her dreams had disturbed her, for she was in a rather sour mood. Her dreams about the darkspawn were so jumbled and distressing that she had no desire to remember them, but something had obviously set her off.

She found the key to her correspondence box, considering having another look at the recent letter from the First Warden. She must compose an answer to him. Not now, though. She must have breakfast and be on her way. Later.

It was truly alarming to remember that without the intervention of Riordan and Fiona, not only would she and Alistair still be the only Fereldan Wardens—at least until Avernus made more of his potion—but that they would have absolutely no idea how to slay the Archdemon. They would not know the central vital role of the Wardens, and it was not beyond the realm of possibility that they could have made the situation even worse than it was. Exposed to the darkspawn, but not yet Joined, their recruits might have contracted Taint and died. Danith would certainly be dead by now. Their resistance to the horde at Ostagar would have been compromised, and perhaps the onslaught would have continued and finally broken the defenses there, sending the darkspawn north in a sea of Tainted murder.

So. The First Warden was *not* her friend, and certainly no friend to the people of Ferelden. In fact, he was behaving very much like an enemy.

The available information sent them to a shabby building in an unsavory part of South Docks. The building was tallish, but the entrance to the upper levels was accessed by a decrepit staircase. According to the notes, the hideout was on the ground floor. This part of the building had its own door at the center of the front wall. A brief reconnaissance revealed small

windows on the right and left sides of the building. Both were shuttered from the inside. There was nothing to do but knock at the door for some time. Then Leliana demanded alms, claiming to be a representative of the Chantry.

"Which I am," she excused herself. "Sort of."

Zevran snorted, already at work on the lock with his high quality set of picks.

The door yielded at last, and was opened carefully, everyone getting out of the way of a possible crossbow bolt from the interior. None came, nor were there any indignant plaints. Only a faint odor of must and decay floated out of the doorway. Bronwyn gave Zevran a nod, and he slid inside, clinging to the shadows.

Because the windows were tightly shuttered, the only illumination was from the fire on the hearth. Bronwyn looked around her, a little mystified. A family lived here, or had until recently.

It was a better house than many commons in Denerim could boast. Yes, it was only one room, but the room was broad and long, occupying the entire ground floor of the building. The walls were dingy, but plastered, and the floor was good oak. An alcove, screened with some old rugs, gave decent privacy to those who used the basin or the tin tub. In the corners at the end of the room there were two beds: a large one to the left, and a small one to the right. On the small bed was a rag doll, and beside it a toy horse.

One could call it a well-kept house, but for the layer of dust over everything. Whoever lived here, lived here no more, but had left everything, including the books, their clothes, and the moldy food on the table. Well...perhaps *not* everything. They might have had to leave abruptly and travel light, and taken a chest or two with them, but they had left a great many things that most people would wish to keep.

Perhaps they had taken the books they cared for, since in the middle of the far wall one of the two bookcases was completely empty. Zevran frowned, and walked over to examine it. He sneered.

"Sloppy—very sloppy. Very confident, too. See here."

"A door frame!" Leliana said softly.

Bronwyn could make out the lintel easily enough. The empty bookcase concealed the doorway from a casual observer at the front door, and perhaps that was all that was needed.

Anders whispered, "These could be apostates with a child, or a family whose child turned out to have magic. They must be terrified. We can't do anything to hurt them!"

"I can't allow them to hurt us, either," Bronwyn replied.

"Desperate people can be dangerous. All right. This is what we're going to do. Mages forward. Stun or paralyze anyone behind the door. That way they won't be damaged and we can talk to them. No, Anders, I won't inform on a magical family. Carver, you'll vouch for me, won't you?"

Carver grinned at Anders. "Love to."

"Toliver and Aveline: move the bookcase away from the doorway as quietly as you possibly can."

"Hey!" Soren objected in an rumbling undertone. "Don't forget the dwarves! We're short, not children!"

"It only takes two to move that bookcase," Bronwyn told him impatiently. "Or would you prefer that I do it all myself?"

The bookcase was moved, and a door revealed. Zevran brushed Bronwyn's hand aside, and pressed lightly on the door. It moved easily, on oiled hinges. The elf raised his brows.

"Not even locked!" he whispered. "Are they mad?"

Leliana peered through the crack. "Not so mad. There is a staircase going down, and traps on the steps."

"Slowly, then," Bronwyn mouthed.

Leliana slipped through the door and bent to disarm the first trap. Then she managed the second: difficult work in the shadows. The last trap was further down, and a step squeaked loudly.

"Who's there?" demanded a gruff, foreign voice.

"Move!" Bronwyn hissed. Leliana pressed herself flat to the wall, while Anders dashed down the stairs, followed by Jowan

and Morrigan. Grunts, curses, and flashes of light followed. Bronwyn shouldered her way in front of Carver and galloped down after her friends.

No terrified apostate family here. Instead, she saw a Qunari mercenary in heavy plate armor, a man-at-arms in light plate, and two archers. They were all bent on killing trespassers. A mage in exotic robes was clearly the leader.

"Take him alive!" she ordered. Jowan avoided a hex, and managed to paralyze the mage, surrounding his captive with glittering light. In the close quarters of the cellar, it was difficult for the mages to cast without harming their friends. It was work for knife and hand-axe. Morrigan managed to freeze the big Qunari, and he was hacked down. The dwarves charged in at the archers, and Bronwyn hardly blamed them for dealing summarily with them. The man in light plate was a good swordsman, but there was no room for fine fencing here. He went down under a pile of Wardens, and when he grabbed at Leliana, trying to snap her neck. Cathair slit his throat.

That left only the mage alive. Bronwyn looked him over, puzzled.

"Tevinter," Anders informed her. "Those are Tevinter robes." His face fell into uneasy lines. It occurred to him that maybe, just maybe, they really had stumbled on a nest of blood mages.

The mage stirred, and bared his teeth like a dog. He twitched

his fingers toward his fallen staff, and Aveline trod on it hard. He glared at them.

"Fools. This is the last house you should think of robbing."

"We aren't robbers," Brownyn said, frowning at him. "Who are you?"

The mage saw Scout and sneered. "I don't answer to dog-fucking Fereldans. Get out of here and you might live to see another day."

"Bastard." Toliver touched the tip of his sword to the man's neck, but Bronwyn restrained him.

"You're Tevinter?" she asked. "You're a long way from home. What are you doing in Ferelden?"

"Minding my own business!" he shot back. "What are you doing...Warden? he said, jerking his head at her griffon armor. Suddenly he snorted a laugh. "You're the 'Girl Warden,' aren't you?' his tone slurring contemptuously over the title. "A puffed-up little barbarian princess. They'd dig deep in their pockets for you in Minathrous." He looked at her a little closer, "or they would have before your face was spoiled. Pity, that. Turn around and walk out of here and go fight some darkspawn. You'd have a better chance against them."

"Am I totally confused?" Zevran asked, with an air of wonder. "Do I not see a unarmed man lying on the floor, with eleven...no..." he bowed courteously to Scout, "*twelve*

warriors surrounding him? It seems to me, my friend, that it is *you* who are at the disadvantage."

"Well," the Tevinter chuckled, licking at a trickle of blood from his lip, "that's what *you* think... *Na via Ierno victoria!*"

Darkness enveloped them: a choking, nauseating darkness. Disoriented by sudden blindness and—yes, deafness, too, Bronwyn groped out for her smirking enemy, stumbling. She tripped and fell, sprawling on the floor, hitting her chin. She thrashed there, hardly sure what was up or down, almost helpless.

Abruptly, the hex dissipated, leaving a ringing in her ears.

"Stone preserve us!" snarled Hakan from somewhere behind her. "That was sodding scary! What happened?"

Soren chuckled rather nastily. "Dog got the bastard."

Bronwyn sat up and Scout trotted over to her, whining in concern. Two yards away the savaged body of the mage lay torn and bloody on the floor. Scout licked his chops, and sat down to scratch an ear.

Morrigan dusted off her robes, and regarded Scout with new respect. "A dog does not need eyes or ears, as long as he has his nose. That was very clever, Mongrel. I salute you."

Scout barked back cheerfully.

"'Tis a lesson to us indeed," Morrigan continued, with a

meaning look to Anders. "There are times when a different shape can overcome temporary incapacity. I should have thought to change. A lesson I shall not soon forget!"

Bronwyn got to her feet, rubbing her bruised chin. She stared down at the dead mage, furious and rather embarrassed.

"We'll still need a prisoner. I want to know how this place came to be."

"Easier said than done, Bronwyn," Jowan said, determined not to play by the rules anymore. "If we come across any other mages as powerful as this one, we'll have to take them down very quickly, and *keep* them disabled."

After the rest of the party picked themselves off the floor and satisfied their anger by stabbing the mage's corpse a few times, Bronwyn told them to pull themselves together. She did so herself with some effort, looking about her.

It was a well-equipped guard room, complete with armor and weapon stands, gaming tables, chairs, benches, and water barrel. The room was well-lit with sconces set into the wall.

"A Qunari mercenary," Soren said, kicking at the huge body. "They don't come cheap."

"They're all first class, and that's a fact," Toliver agreed. "Best quality armor and weapons."

"And a hired Blood Mage," Aveline said with distaste.

"Since this is a guard room, with such expensive guards," Bronwyn mused, "clearly they were guarding something of value." In the far wall was another door. She gestured at it. "Something behind *this*."

Zevran and Leliana were systematically searching the bodies, with the aid of Toliver, The dwarves joined in, obviously willing to do their bit along those lines.

"The mage had a key," Zevran said, holding the object up to the light. Bronwyn nodded, and Zevran went to the door and unlocked it as quietly as possible. He pushed the door open and stood on guard, flicking a glance into the interior.

It was empty. Another large, well-lit stone room was revealed: the walls plastered, the ceiling coffered with black oak.

Everything about this secret cellar spoke of boundless coin, first for the materials, and then for the workers who would build this and never disclose its existence. The room was packed with barrels and crates of supplies: foodstuffs, blankets, fine linen, dried herbs, and weapons. One crate was marked in bold letters, which Bronwyn could not translate.

"Arcanum," Anders said, "It says, 'fragile,'"

"'Fragile?'" Toliver quoted, "Does that mean, like... 'fragile?'"

Morrigan snorted. Bronwyn glared at her, "Yes, Toliver, it does indeed mean 'fragile' in the King's Tongue."

"Let's see what's inside," Jowan suggested. The crate was

pried open, and wads of wool padding set aside.

"Glass tubes?" Soren sneered. "And empty! Those aren't big enough to hold a proper drink!"

"These aren't meant to be drunk from," Anders said absently. "...I hope. Look...there are some corks packed in here, too. These are phylactery vials." He explained, "For holding blood. As in for doing blood magic," he clarified for the dwarves. "You could fill them with other potions, I suppose, but these definitely look like phylactery vials to me."

"Let's move on," ordered Bronwyn. "I think at this point we can safely say this is not the hiding place of a harmless family of apostates."

Carver grumbled, "*My* family of apostates never had this kind of coin!"

Another door, another storage room. There were even rugs on the stone floor: ragged, but better than most common homes could afford. Some had gone to great expense to equip this...what to call it? Hideout? Base? And it did not look new. This had all been here for years.

The next door opened into a kitchen, with half a dozen guards, also wearing fine armor and carrying excellent weapons. Hesitation would be fatal. The Wardens stormed in and overcame the surprised men fairly quickly.

Leading off the room was a big dining hall, partly on the same

level, and partly on a mezzanine above. Archers, a pair of mages, another Qunari, and more men-at-arms came running around the corner. One of the men shouted to another who ran for a door behind him.

"Don't let him get away!" cried Anders. "He'll give the alarm!" He shot off an ice spell, catching the man in flight.

That didn't sound good. 'Giving the alarm' implied that there were more guards here: a lot more. And it was impossible to fight this many men without making considerable noise. Luckily, the rooms were so large that Carver had plenty of fighting room to swing Yusaris. Scout knocked a guard down and seized him by the throat.

"Try to take a prisoner!" Bronwyn shouted. "Who *are* these people?"

But the strangers had no intention of doing anything but fighting to the death. They were superb professionals, and true to their code. Or they were superb professionals, completely in thrall to blood mages. Either way, they were formidable. The Wardens took them down, but with wounds to themselves. They paused to catch their breath and then to look in wonder at the place. Anders and Jowan set about casting healing spells.

The room they were in was nearly as big as the Wardens' Hall, though the coffered roof was much lower. Long tables were laden with haunches of beef, with baked and smoked fish, with rich meat pies, with fine white bread, and with

platters of baked red apples. Pewter cups were set on the table, and pitchers of chilled wine sweated with coolness.

"Hunh!" Toliver grunted. "Maybe I should have joined *this* outfit!" Aveline boxed his ear with her gauntlet. "Just sayin'," he mumbled, by way of apology.

"Oil paintings! Fine carpets!" Jowan marveled. "Chandeliers!" He looked closer at a statue in a corner. "A Tataroki!" He moved on to a spindly, bat-winged, six-armed image. "An Ultius," he said, and then translated, "A spirit of vengeance. Someone here is deeply into the occult."

"Of the bad sort," Anders added.

"Takes all kinds," Hakan said, more interested in the food on the table. "Almost enough here for the whole Legion!"

"Looks good," Soren said, sniffing at a pitcher. "Not poisoned, is it?"

"We're in the middle of a battle," Bronwyn explained kindly. "And you had a very good breakfast."

"That's true," the dwarf replied, unabashed, "but I vote that when we clear out this lot we come back here and collect some rightful plunder."

"We'll see," Bronwyn said repressively, and then could have headslapped herself for sounding exactly like her mother. "Come on."

"Let's be careful," Jowan advised, "Surely somebody's heard us coming by now."

The next door opened on a broad corridor. Several doors led off of it. Bronwyn really did not want to get boxed in and surrounded. She gestured to Jowan and Zevran to check out the door to their left, which was closest. Zevran opened the door and the two men stepped a little inside. There was no sound of resistance. In a moment, the two were back, and Zevran was breathing in her ear.

"Another storeroom...and full of riches! Silk carpets, Antivan wine jars, fine robes, golden girdles!"

Smugglers? This theory made some sense. Smugglers running a well-financed operation might well afford this kind of set-up, with the accordingly fine guards. But something did not quite fit...

A dark head showed briefly in the doorway ahead and to the right, and spellfire flashed from a staff.

Bolts of sickening, crackling pain rattled Bronwyn's bones. Anders darted out, running low, and fired a spell back at the mage, disrupting the hex. Bronwyn stumbled back, and abruptly vomited on the meticulously clean floor. A handful of mages and soldiers rushed them, and were knocked down by Jowan's shouted curse. The door at the end of the corridor crashed open, and an archer shot at them. Cathair snarled something in Dalish, and put an arrow in the man's eye.

"Watch out! A trap!" cried Leliana, as the Wardens surged forward, engaging the defenders, who were struggling up from the floor.

Bronwyn shoved herself forward, shouting. "A prisoner! I need a prisoner!"

Carver found himself facing a big man, with a handsome, intelligent, foreign face. He surprised his foe by slamming his sword pommel into the man's jaw, and then kicking his legs out from under him.

"Get him!" Carver yelled to Hakan, "He looks important!"

Hakan kicked the man in the head and rolled him up against the wall, out of the way. Then the dwarf roared in pain, caught by a blood mage's spell that heated his blood. He clutched at his head, wailing in agony.

Jowan, firing spells left and right, felt himself still brimful of power.

Is this effect of the new Joining potion? he wondered.

A glancing blow laid his forearm open. Impatient, he chose the line of least resistance. He let the blood trickle into his hand... felt the force gather and build...

The mage crouched behind the door shrieked as his head exploded. An echoing silence followed.

There were a lot of injuries, and everyone was fairly unsteady.

Anders peered behind the door to the right-hand room.

"Maker's breath, Jowan! What did you do to him?"

Jowan was tight-lipped, partially healing his own forearm. That spell had really worked well, and he was not at all tired. Was this old Avernus' potion, or his improving magical ability? "I wanted him to stop. I just wanted him to stop right away!"

Hakan grunted weakly, leaning against a wall. "Good on you! I felt like I was being boiled like a nug!"

Anders frowned, but concentrated on rejuvenating Bronwyn. Her view on the matter was unequivocal.

"Anything goes with these people. They're dangerous, and we're going to put a stop to them. And now we've got a prisoner."

"He's pretty much out of it," Jowan said, "A broken jaw and a cracked skull."

"See that he doesn't die, and keep him unconscious until we have time for a chat," Bronwyn ordered. She found her canteen and took a long drink, trying to dilute the horrible taste in her mouth. "Let's check these rooms out."

Cathair slipped past her, right behind Zevran. The two of them paused and Cathair uttered a low cry. Impatient, Bronwyn pushed forward into the room. A bloody altar stood against the wall, framed by those odd, attenuated figures of Fade spirits. Then, over Zevran's shoulder, she saw the bodies on

the floor.

"What is this?" Carver gasped, "Some sort of chapel?"

"Maker save us!" cried Leliana.

"Yes." Anders said, pushing forward and looking around the room in disgust. "It's some sort of chapel... to the nastiest spirits of the Fade. And they require sacrifices."

"There's no time to examine the room," Bronwyn said, her eyes sliding from the flayed body on the floor and the dismembered torso nearby. She had seen skinned carcasses of animals of course, but never a human. The face, its muscles revealed, was particularly disturbing. This had been a *person*.

"And there are the phylacteries, over there by the altar!" Morrigan declared, pointing to an elaborate stand. She was resolutely determined to show no distress at the sights in this room. To do so would be a weakness.

"It's not just blood magic," Jowan whispered to Bronwyn. "The Chantry talks about that all the time, but blood magic can have all sorts of uses. This is ritual Death Magic. It's powerful, malignant stuff. Rituals are also frowned on by the Chantry, unless they're the one doing them. They take time to set up, but you can do amazing things with rituals..."

"Later," Bronwyn replied softly. "Tell me all about it later, Jowan. Right now we have to survive this. This is monstrous,

and from the looks of things, it has been going on for a long time."

She tugged on Carver, who was still staring at the skinned corpse in horror.

"This wasn't the darkspawn." he whispered. "*Men* did this."

There was a great deal more to explore. The room at the far end was a dormitory and scriptorium. The bunks were clean and neatly made with good blankets. Diligent pupils were pursuing their studies here, for on the writing desks were notes in progress. Life was going on, in this underground palace of horrors.

The corridor took a sharp turn and Leliana moved forward cautiously, finding a pressure trap to disarm under a thick silk carpet. This...*compound*... was a good description...had elaborate defenses that could be armed at a touch. Bronwyn hoped they found all these traps before setting them off.

A door led from the handsomely planked and carpeted portion of the building to a somewhat ruder structure. Here the floor was fitted stone, though the walls were still plastered and the ceiling coffered. More fine rugs lined the way, no doubt to muffle the noise of booted feet. A L-shaped corridor led around a bend. Leliana and Zevran searched for traps. Cathair watched them carefully, wanting to learn this new skill.

Ahead, they could hear alarms and raised voices, and startlingly, the excited barking of dogs. Scout lifted his ears,

but Bronwyn gave him a stern look. There was no need to reveal their numbers and kind to the enemy.

They eventually discovered that the enemy had three dogs: sturdy, loyal, and strong mabarais. It was cruelly sad to put them down, but the beasts were all too willing to fight for their masters. There were more traps, and a barricaded inner hall that the mages and archers cleared with grinding patience.

High yips burst from a side room that reeked of dog. Scout dashed away to see, and Bronwyn chased him, muttering curses. The kennel, of course. One of the cages was full of mabari pups: four in all, from their size newly weaned but still in the adorably fluffy stage. Scout barked them into quivering submission, though they whimpered for their dam, now dead in the corridor of traps. More plunder, Bronwyn thought, and more valuable than anyone not Fereldan could guess. Carver was already grinning goofily at the pups.

"Later," Leliana said, pulling him away.

Nor was that the end: they fought their way through a storeroom, and then found themselves in a long practice room, also barricaded and well-defended by blood mages and what could only be Tevinter soldiers. These Tevinters shouted orders and replies back and forth in their own tongue: too fast for their own mages to understand them. This room really was as big as the Warden's hall: long enough and high enough for arms and archery practice. A large number of weapons and armor stands were ranged along the walls. The mages there were prepared, and not shy about using fireballs, even though

they were underground in a wooden building. Either they were suicidal or supremely confident. It was very satisfying to see the looks of surprise and dismay on their faces as they died.

Another large room followed: and this was like a tavern or a private club, a big comfortable room with a long bar and barrels of ale; with tables and games and musical instruments, and pictures of lovely naked elves. Bronwyn realized with a start that all their enemies so far had been man. There were no enemy women in the compound at all. Still, this place was quite the home away from home, furnished as well as many a nobleman's mansion. A comfortably cushioned settee stood before a big fireplace. Like some other parts of the compound, it had a fine planked floor. At the end of the room were two doors. The door to the left was locked, but Zevran had it open in trice.

This empty room was the large and handsomely appointed bedchamber of a very wealthy man. The bed was wide and made up with silk sheets. The elegant desk of northern spicewood had a locked drawer. There was no time to go through it now, but Bronwyn promised herself a long examination of any documents here.

"A potions cabinet!" Anders said, very eagerly pointing out a curious piece of furniture in a corner. It had at least sixty small drawers, presumably for storing herbs and minerals. It too was locked.

"It's almost like a secret Circle," Jowan muttered, reading over some notes left on the bed. "They're studying, doing

research, while they do...everything else."

"Better food here than *our* Circle," Anders snorted, "and far plusher accommodations."

"If you don't object to a spot of flaying and dismemberment," Carver snapped.

"Let's go," Bronwyn said, thinking longingly of the secrets to be discovered here, "We still haven't met whoever is in charge of this enterprise."

"I bet he's slimy," Carver said, "I bet he's slimy and he has a goatee. I'll bet anything he does."

"Shhhhh..."

Zevran put his ear to the door at the end of the room.

"Silence. I hear nothing. This definitely does not lead to outside."

It was an small, carpeted anteroom. Praying that the door leading from it was the last, Bronwyn pushed it open. Brilliant candlelight made her blink. This room was also set for a feast, though a grander one than in the guard's mess room, and it was adorned with arcane statues and symbols/ A long table shone with silver and gold. Bronwyn felt like a country bumpkin, intruding on a nobleman's feast. And the host in question... was, indeed, a man with a goatee. He looked them in indignant contempt, already lifting his staff.

"I know not how you have survived thus far, but you shall not...survive...this!"

Her own mages began casting, trying to disrupt the man's massive curse. Meanwhile his lackeys launched an attack: a Qunari, another big Tevinter, and a young mage. The Wardens broke into smaller teams and set about dividing and conquering. The warriors were strong but not as strong as dragonslayers. The young mage went down to the joint efforts of Morrigan and Aveline.

"Don't kill him!" Bronwyn shouted.

A lightning storm erupted in their corner of the room by the door, and Bronwyn led her Wardens out of it at a run, rushing the bearded mage. A bubble of light closed in around him, protecting him from hostile magic. It did little, however, to protect him from edged weapons. The shining sphere thickened, and in response, Jowan pushed out a dark cloud of malevolent energy. Goatee was astonished and rather horrified, without time to effectively rearrange his plans. He was obviously too powerful and too dangerous to allow to live. He stumbled, stunned and white-eyed, and Bronwyn sheared his head off. The body collapsed to the floor, and the head rolled under the table. The man's magic evaporated slowly, leaving her weary and sick. And terribly hungry and thirsty. They must have been fighting non-stop for over an hour.

"They've got wine here," Soren remarked into the exhausted silence. "Looks like good stuff. They're all set up for a party."

"And for rituals. Dangerous rituals," said Morrigan. "Spirit mirrors, demonic idols, defiled statues of ancient archons...and more phylacteries. Undoubtedly where the Chantry got the idea in the first place."

"And another door," Bronwyn said, trying not to sound exhausted. Maker, would this never be over?

This door, however was the way out. It led up a long flight of stairs and to a heavy, metal studded locked, barred, absolutely-the-last door. It opened out into a narrow alley, and stepping around a sheltering bit of masonry, Bronwyn found herself in Alewives Lane only yards from the docks. The smell of salt air blended with the odor of stale piss. The door they had emerged from would appear to the rest of the world to be a cellar door of a dockside tavern, The Condemned Man.

"All right," she said, "I know where I am, now. Carver, I want you to take a message to Teyrn Loghain. Get him here—only take him to the other entrance. I want him to see just how extensive this is. Let's go back downstairs and I'll write out something for for you."

Parchment and ink were not hard to find. Bronwyn swept silver spoons aside as she sat at the elaborate table to write to Loghain. The other Wardens explored the wonders of the room, some of them mightily impressed. Anders and Jowan tested the food and drink for poisons or potions. Morrigan, superficially blasé but bursting with curiosity, focused on the magical elements here.

"These phylacteries appear to be labelled," she said, "and here is a fine one." She pointed to a vessel of swirled and molded glass. "A line is through the name, indicating, perhaps, that the donor is dead. As indeed he is, for the name is Rendon Howe."

They barred the door to the dockside, briefly stuffed themselves with the food and drink that the mages had determined was safe, and then began a systematic search of the compound. Carver and Aveline set off to find Loghain. It would no doubt be some time before he and his guard arrived, but they had plenty to do.

Bronwyn decided that their prisoners could sleep for a bit longer. She wanted to get a better handle on what was here.

Their three mages could all read the Tevinter script. In the grand... council chamber... Bronwyn called it mentally, Jowan acted as scribe, noting down the names as Anders and Morrigan read them off. It was a frightening assemblage of important figures, along with other people whose names Bronwyn did not recognize at all. Some people were dead, and lined out, and those phylacteries were kept on a separate shelf. Jowan explained that the blood of the dead could still be used for some rituals, such as summonings.

The Tevinters, perhaps by bribing or bullying servants, had somehow gathered blood from Arl Urien and his son Vaughan, from the commander of the city guard and a number of his lieutenants, from priests and Templars, from the now

deceased Bann Ceorlic and his surviving widow Lady Rosalyn, from a number of minor banns from the Bannorn. And of course from Rendon Howe.

To what extent were these secretive people, with their human sacrifices and blood magic, culpable in the massacre of her family? Bronwyn feared that the whole story was forever beyond her reach. Had they twisted Howe to their own ends, knowing that her father's agents would have warned him about the slave trade? Or had the seeds of treachery and murder always been there? Had the murder of her family anything to do with these people at all, or was that Rendon Howe's independent nastiness?

Perhaps they despised Fereldan barbarians so entirely that they simply did not care about consequences. Perhaps they were here only to grab what they could, not troubling themselves to know much about the country, other than the best way to rape it.

Morrigan and Anders went to the blood chapel to decipher the names on the phylacteries there. Bronwyn, with the help of Jowan and Leliana, set about rifling the leader's desk. Everyone else was given guard duty, either watching the prisoners or waiting for Loghain in the upper room. Anders was told to begin examining all the stored foodstuffs and the meal in the messroom, and see if it was fit to eat. If so, she would confiscate much of what they had found here.

"I'm surprised," she remarked, "that Howe's phylactery was here. Surely they could not control him from so far away as

Denerim?"

"It doesn't work that way," Jowan tried to explain it to her, steepling his hands and moving into lecture mode. "Your blood is your blood. A blood mage can use your blood *anywhere* and it will affect you. Proximity doesn't much matter, though it's true that some spells work better if the mage casting has seen you and knows what you look like. I guess we're lucky these phylacteries weren't sent home to Tevinter. It's just like how the Chantry can use your phylactery in Denerim to find your location anywhere. Mind you, I would guess that the farther you are, the more general the direction it would give. Probably across the Waking Sea it would be too vague to be of use. But it would still indicate that, for example, you were alive somewhere in the Free Marches." He gave her a serious look. "However, if they were simply trying to make you amenable to suggestion, or make you sick, they could perform that magic *anywhere*."

Rather alarmed, she went on with her work. At least no one had found a phylactery with her own name on it.

As she pulled all the papers out of the desk and searched for secret drawers, she wondered if everyone stationed at the compound had been caught by her invasion. Perhaps some were running errands. It would be a good idea to keep watch on this place, and see who turned up.

Not only were there letters, notes, and obvious account books in Arcanum, the Tevinter language, they were also in some sort of shorthand code. Jowan thought he could unsort the

matter in time, but the Tevinters had not wished to be obvious. The Wardens worked diligently, finding caches of coin and other treasure. Toliver brought them more food and drink. It was very good. After some time at this, Bronwyn heard a noise coming up the hall. Loghain sounded angry. He would not like her putting her life in danger a few days before their marriage.

"Maker's Breath!"

Jowan disappeared from the room at a run, leaving Bronwyn to her fate. Loghain stormed in, took her by the shoulders, and gave her a shake.

"You could have been killed!"

"I'm perfectly all right," she insisted, giving him a smiling kiss.

She made light of her danger and her injuries, since they were healed and invisible now. Before Loghain could draw breath for another attack, Hakan arrived with the news that their prisoners were awakening. Jowan was waiting anxiously on the fringes of the group, scuttling along at Bronwyn's side, wanting to tell her how to protect herself.

"The soldier is no trouble, now that he's bound. It's the mage I'm worried about. We can drain the his mana. In fact, it's the only safe thing to do. He doesn't need a staff, or even his hands untied. He could bite his tongue and if he drew blood, he'd have something to work with. You need to be *careful*, Bron...er, Commander."

The soldier grinned at them insolently, and pretending not to speak the King's Tongue, though that was a lie, since he had cursed them fluently when they were fighting. He was sent to Fort Drakon, and Bronwyn did not envy him his fate there. They would get quite a bit out of him eventually, she believed, but it would take time. And then he would certainly be executed. She was, for obvious reasons, not going to conscript him.

The youngish mage, whose name was Justin, was another matter. He talked volubly in Arcanum, as soon as Jowan told him that the Blood-Boiling curse was no secret to him and that he, Jowan, was prepared to use it. He was too alien for Bronwyn to comprehend, and his poor grasp of a mutual language made it difficult to find common ground. What Jowan did express to her was the fellow's feeling that he had fallen off the edge of the civilized world. This was supposed to be a lark, a year of adventure and apprenticeship among the barbarians that would be useful in making his way back home in proper society.

He could tell them that the Tevinters had been established here for the past fifteen years. Loghain, outwardly impassive, was shocked at the news. He wanted to know how all this—he gestured around him—had been paid for, and was told that after the initial investment, it had paid for itself. Many people came to Ferelden: travelers from foreign lands; lads and lasses fresh from the countryside, hoping to make their fortune; deserters from the army hiding in Ferelden's largest city. Approached the right way, they could be duped and lured

away. The unpromising goods were used to keep the Tevinter's magic strong; and the likely specimens stowed aboard one of the Tevinter's ships. A ship was always at hand, since there was, after all, a Blight in Ferelden, and the Tevinters might need a means of escape. When a ship was filled with cargo, it was sent home. A highly profitable trade had been going on for many years. After a glare from Loghain, he divulged the name of a fine ship currently riding at anchor in the harbor, and of its captain, an "enthralled" Marcher from Kirkwall.

The Blight, of course, had provided the Tevinters with an unparalleled opportunity. There would be refugees, displaced persons—whole families—who would be most vulnerable. Magisters Caladrius and Magorian, working together, had raised the stakes considerably, obtaining at great risk phylacteries not just of harbor captains and inspectors and city guards, but of noblemen. Their analysis of the high noblemen indicated that Rendon Howe was the most dissatisfied and volatile of the lot; the most vulnerable, if nudged, to break the bonds of law and custom. Arl Urien, too, was greedy and fond of intrigue. His son enjoyed harming elves. There was much to work with here. Blood was collected from shaving cuts, from wounds taken in the hunting field, sometimes from slipping into their rooms when they were sleeping off drunken bouts.

Loghain was tempted to beat the arrogant little twit bloody, but he was not worth his time. They continued the questioning. When pressed, Justin said that they had not quite expected

Arl Rendon to lash out so violently against his overlord, but they were delighted to make use of it. Enslaving the entire Highever alienage and a good portion of the one in Denerim was a coup beyond all their hopes. All the Tevinters—everyone but the disposable thralls—would be made men for life. Justin spoke of the great wealth he himself had earned, and hinted—clumsily—that he would be willing to share it if the mighty Fereldan chief would look aside and let him go his way.

That insulting bit of condescension was met with a stony stare. Loghain then asked about the leader of the expedition—the one who had sailed from Amaranthine

They were told that yes, Caladrius had escaped Amaranthine just ahead of Fergus Cousland, and had sent a small ship to Denerim to apprise Magorian of his hasty departure. Yes, of course Caladrius would return, most probably in the spring. Or, if the voyage was particularly profitable and Caladrius had retired, another from the The Fereldan Venture Company would come in his place.

"He might be lying..." Bronwyn began, but Loghain silenced her, and pulled her out of the room with him.

"He might be lying," Loghain said softly, "Or he might be shamming ignorance of our language, looking for any advantage. He doesn't quite seem to have grasped that he's going to be executed for his crimes. He doesn't quite grasp that he's committed any crimes, for that matter."

He would be a very dangerous prisoner, in Jowan's opinion, and it was best to get the most from him now, execute him, and rely on the papers to tell the rest.

"I notice that you're not raising the issue of conscription," Loghain remarked.

Bronwyn thought of the flayed corpse in the bloody chapel. She shuddered. "Not for anything!"

They had Jowan interview him alone, listening outside with Anders. Most the conversation ended up being about the minutiae of spells and how the Tevinters went about disposing of the bodies of their victims. Most of the time, bodies and body parts were secreted in barrels, which were then dumped out to sea in the offshore current. Justin had no idea what had become of the family who had been living on the ground floor of the entry. People were allowed to live there from time to time for verisimilitude, and if they grew too curious they were escorted into the compound and put to good use before they were eliminated or taken to be sold. Occasionally residents of upper stories met the same fate.

It appeared that the early morning attack had served its purpose in capturing all the important members of the coven—above all, all the mages. A few enthralled servants and some of their contacts were roaming free. With the destruction of their phylacteries, they would revert back to "normal"—whatever that was—and either wander away or seek vengeance.

To Bronwyn, the realization of the extent to which a foreign power had infiltrated Ferelden was in every way horrible. Orlais had always been the enemy, but it was rather frightening to learn that there was another, secret foe lurking behind the scenes. She had been naive to think that politics and commercial rivalry stopped for a Blight; that the nations of Thedas would unite against a common threat. The Tevinters clearly could not care less if Ferelden was destroyed, as long as they could steal people's minds and reap the rewards of their vile slave trade. The Crows, for that matter, had not scrupled to attack a Grey Warden, and the Orlesians were clearly as hostile as ever, though the hostility was masked. like an Orlesian bard, with courtly manners.

Father had warned her about this, one day when she had asked if some of the Marcher cities were Ferelden's "friends."

He had made her stand right in front of him while he stared her in the eye, and he had dismissed such a foolish notion.

"Nations have no 'friends,' pup. They may have allies, but each nation has a secret life of its own: its own goals, aspirations; its own prejudices and its own values. And they have them all the time. While you are engaged with enemy, another nation uses your distraction to gain what it wants, whether that means stabbing you in the back or not."

"But wouldn't that be dishonorable, Father?"

*"The honor of a nation is to **succeed**, pup. And to survive. Life is not some moral practice yard where you exercise your*

personal virtue. A leader owes it to his people to keep them alive and well. Smile at your rivals, because it confuses them, but do not be deceived when they smile back."

Loghain was not smiling at the mage. He had got what he deemed of value from him, and wanted to move on.

"Leave us, Warden," he said to Jowan. Jowan glanced at Bronwyn, and when she gave him a slight nod, he bowed and hurried from the room.

Without giving the Tevinter mage time to be terrified and thus lash out, Loghain quietly dispatched him with a dagger. The young man had only time for a disbelieving, high-pitched squeal before he stretched out on the floor. Bronwyn grimaced, not much pitying a professional slaver, torturer, and murderer, but tired of death.

"I'll assign some guards here," Loghain said thoughtfully, quite unaffected by killing the mage. "They'll arrest anyone who seeks entrance. And we'll want to translate all the papers. I'll have some wagons brought so we can clean the place out: bodies and plunder both. I'll lead a party to that ship the mage told us about. There might be captives there."

"We need to find out who all the people named on the phylacteries are," Bronwyn added. In fact, some of her people had recognized additional names already. Toliver knew the name of the owner of The Condemned Man. That name on a phylactery label explained why the man might be complacent about the entrance to a den of blood mages located in a side

door of his establishment.

"And we need to do something about these!" Carver appeared at the doorway, giving Loghain a cheeky half bow. Loghain was in no mood to be offended, since four puppies trotted into the room, sniffing. They were curious about the dead body, but Scout herded them away, toward Bronwyn and Loghain.

"They had trained mabarais to serve them?" Loghain asked, taut with anger. The boldest of the puppies came up to him, pawing at his knee.

Bronwyn smiled faintly at the sight. "I suppose it's not surprising. After all, according the story, Tevinter mages bred them originally, but the dogs met the Alamarri and defected to them!"

Scout seemed to have nothing against the innocent puppies. Carver said, "We had to kill three adult mabarais. These little fellows seem friendly enough."

"So they do," Loghain relented, gently picking up the intrepid puppy. "So they do."

Thanks to my reviewers: RakeeshJ4, anon, LadyoftheDrow, Nemrut, Oleander's One, EpitomyofShyness, Herebedragons66, Judy, MsBarrows, Zute, timunderwood9, truthrowan, Mike 3207, butterflygrl, Verpine, KnighOfHolyLight, Raxiselic, Nonahtanha, Tsu Doh Nimh, Anime-StarWards-fan-zach, Storyteller44, amanda weber,

Spoit0, Blinded in a bolthole, Guest, HalmVendrella, Girlchama, Shakespeira, Jenna53, Phygmalion, Tirion, darksky01, Josie Lange, JackOfBladesX, Costin, JOdel, Have Socks. Will Travel, Jygilagg, xxCaspa97XX, and mille libri.

I absolutely refuse to believe, despite canon's pronouncement, that Eleanor Cousland did not have a lady's maid. Right, I believe she got those braid buns perfectly symmetrical all by herself! No, really—it's absurd.

While the blood mage hideout is very much a sidequest, and gives the player no real rewards, I think it is incredibly ominous that this huge place is under Denerim. I also refuse to believe that all those phylacteries were for street vendors and low-level guards.

75. Borders Yet to Be

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 75: Borders Yet to Be

Five shocked and appalled people listened to Bronwyn's description of the secret Tevinter base under Denerim. Loghain was still appalled, but no longer shocked, and actually was uncommonly relaxed at the moment. A happy puppy was flopped on his thigh, enjoying an ear-scratching. Loghain was debating whether to name the puppy Amber or Brandy. Either name suited her color. Such a nice little girl. It had never occurred to him to try to imprint on a mabari after losing Adalla so many years ago, but the puppy had her own ideas, and had cried so piteously when he tried to leave her behind that he had relented. Scratching a mabari's ear was remarkably calming. He listened to Bronwyn's story, able to distance himself a bit from the horror of it.

"My *father*..." choked out Nathaniel. "My father was enthralled by blood mages?" The anguish on his face made the others look away. "I should have known! He never would have done those terrible things of his own free will. Haglin wrote to me, warning that something was wrong... If only I'd come home sooner!"

Loghain said, "We don't know that you could have helped. It appears that they had their claws into him for some time. And he wasn't the only one. Urien and Vaughan, Ceorlic and his wife... Rosalyn's phylactery was destroyed, and Bronwyn's mages tell us she should be free of that infernal influence now. We've kept all the phylacteries of the dead as proof, and written down the names of the living victims."

There had been other phylacteries in the leader's room: ones not ready for use. Some had small amounts of blood in them, some were empty. The role of names was much of the Landsmeet, and at the top were the Queen and Loghain. The Queen's phylactery, indeed, was a quarter full. Loghain was been furious to see that they had blood from him as well.

Some incomplete phylacteries had been tossed aside in a box. Among them was Bryce Cousland's. No longer worth pursuing, and not enough blood for a ritual. Jowan had shown it to Bronwyn, with a sympathetic look. She had taken it and put it away with her things, unable to decide what to do with it. Her own phylactery was new, empty, and not even labeled correctly. She hardly knew whether to be insulted or relieved. Someone had labeled a phylactery for Fergus, but it too was empty.

Cailan's was almost complete. That opened up such frightening possibilities that everyone flinched from thinking about them.

"Should we share this with the Chantry, do you think?" wondered Fergus. He was not sure how he felt about all this.

Nothing could excuse Rendon Howe, in his opinion.

Leonas Bryland made a sound of disgust. "I see nothing to be gained by sharing *anything* with that lot!"

"I agree," Bronwyn said at once. "If we tell the Chantry anything at all, we'll end up having to tell them everything, and that underground hideaway needs to be kept as secret as possible. The mage we questioned thought that more Tevinters would be coming in the spring, and it would be a good thing to snap them up before they can do further harm." She added, "Besides, I honestly don't know what practical help the Chantry would be. We destroyed Knight-Commander Tavish's phylactery, and that of Mother Calendula. There were some other priests and Templars among the phylacteries, too: mostly those who assigned to mission work in South Docks. The Tevinters, I suspect, wanted to curb the Chantry's interest in their comings and goings. I would never have known about them at all, if Ser Friden's mother had not come to me and given me his notes. Unlike his superiors, I was not being influenced by the magic of those who murdered him."

"Very well," Fergus said, "I agree. We won't share this with the Chantry. The main question, as I see it, is: what can we do about—and to—the Tevinters? This kind of vicious, predatory crime calls for retaliation. At the very least, we need to make sure the Tevinters smuggle no more human contraband out of Ferelden."

"Maker!" Wulffe rumbled in agreement. "It sickens me, thinking of those poor people."

"The Denerim harbormaster was under their control, but no more," Loghain said, "As was the captain of the *Fade Spirit*. Unfortunately, while his phylactery was destroyed, he was still under the influence of long suggestion, and he and his crew resisted us when we boarded the ship. In his hold we found fifteen people. Some had been prisoners for months, and were being kept alive and docile by the mages' arts. When they were recalled to their senses, some of them were... distraught."

That was understating the matter. There was the anguish of the woman who realized that her children were dead, of the man who had lost his wife, of the wife who had lost her husband... It was a grim thing to witness. Of course they had been robbed of everything, too. Some had relatives or friends to go to, some were alone in the world. Loghain passed out substantial alms to them, and advised the women, at least, to go to the Chantry for further help. They seemed to think they had been drugged, and Loghain did not tell them the whole story.

He had impounded the ship, laying down the law to the bewildered harbormaster. That man was not so resistant. Loghain supposed it might be because his phylactery had been used mainly to make Tevinter ships of no interest whatever to him. It took some time before the man could even acknowledge that such a ship as the *Fade Spirit* was tied up in Denerim Harbor.

"Infamous!" Anora said, fuming. "Infamous!"

Bronwyn's teeth showed white in a bitter smile. "They really despise us, you know. They regard us as savages, only good for exploiting, unworthy of respect or regard. One of the Tevinters told me that I'd fetch a good price in Minathrous. If we sent a strong letter of protest to the Chief Archon, he would only laugh. There are, however, some things we *can* do. Not only should we be careful of the Tevinter ships leaving this country, we need to alert the harbormasters of all the deep water ports to notify us of the arrival of any of them, lest they find somewhere else to burrow in."

"I agree," Anora nodded. "The letters will go out this very day."

Nathaniel roused himself to ask, "And who is to say they haven't already?"

This was an alarming thought, and everyone in the room gave it some consideration. Fergus wondered about the Tevinters' efforts in Highever. They had already abducted the entire Alienage. Would it be worth their while to maintain a continuing presence? He would have to look into it. Loghain, aware that he claimed the only untouched Alienage in Ferelden, thought that he had best have his people keep a close eye there. Having made such a profitable haul, the Tevinters would be eager for more.

Scout rose up ponderously from the floor and went over to Loghain; first to sniff at Loghain's new puppy, and then to lay his jaw on Loghain's knee to claim his rightful share of ear-scratching. Loghain smiled, and indulged him.

He said, "I've ordered my men to keep secret the existence of the Tevinter lair, and Bronwyn has done likewise with her Wardens. The place will be kept under close guard, and anyone attempting to enter it will be detained and questioned. I'm sending for a dozen of the mages serving in the army, some of whom will assist in this duty."

"Meanwhile," Bronwyn said, "There are certain things we can do to protect ourselves from undue influence. My Warden mages have warned me to be very careful with my blood—any blood *at all*," she said, with a pointed look at Anora, who paled a little. "Blood mages can reconstitute blood from cloth bandages, and can use, it seems, even the amount that would issue from a shaving cut."

"We'll need to give our laundries some scrutiny," Bryland said, bemused. He then smiled slyly, "I'll have to tell my new wife."

This was news to Wulffe, who wanted to know everything, approved heartily, and then slapped Bryland on the back, laughing.

"You old dog! I should have known you were a-courting when you dressed up like a fancy-man for Satalia!"

The air of anxiety and horror dissipated entirely: there was general talk about weddings and inheritances. Nathaniel Howe remained on the fringes of the conversation, brooding over his father's wrongs, but clearly feeling somewhat validated that a beloved parent should be proved not a villain, but a victim.

Fergus met Bronwyn's eye, rather skeptically. Personally, he had never much liked his father's friend, and thought Rendon Howe enough of a swine in himself to dream up most of his crimes. Still, a man could conceive of things in the shadows of his soul that he would never actually do in real life. Very likely Rendon had needed no more than a push.

However, if the push had made the difference, the Howes could be excused to some degree. Nathaniel had done them no harm and seemed comforted by the revelations.

Bryland claimed everyone's attention when he said, "And what about Teagan? Has anyone heard from him? I sent him word of Habren's marriage and my own. Surely he'll be coming to Denerim soon!"

"And he's been told of Bronwyn and Loghain's wedding," Fergus said. "I've had no reply. I presumed he was already on his way." He shrugged. "It's a good seven-day journey from Redcliffe to Denerim at the best of times."

Bronwyn had a quick, dreadful image of Teagan going to Ostagar to collect Alistair and force him to come to the Landsmeet. Surely he would not dare? Surely Alistair would not be bullied into deserting his duty? She made herself smile at Wulffe, who was speaking, and attend to him. Teagan might not even know where Alistair was at the moment. He might think that Bronwyn had brought him to Denerim with her.

She wondered if he would arrive in time for her wedding. He was no fool, and would understand what the wedding

between a Cousland and the Hero of River Dane meant. No doubt he would disapprove. Well, too bad.

"And what news from the Wardens?" asked Wulffe.

"None, I'm afraid," Bronwyn replied. "I'm hoping my Dalish Warden comes before the end of the month. She was told to scout Gwaren and the Brecilian Forest. She should be able to tell us about South Reach and the eastern bannorns. The others were sent west, and may not come for some time, especially if they encounter resistance in the Deep Roads, or the weather turns bad. As to the Wardens abroad," she smiled, dismissing them, "they seem to know nothing, either."

She had put off replying to the First Warden for so long that she had decided not to bother to write to him at all. What good would it do? He had more or less cast her off anyway, and firing back denunciations would waste her time. He was not going to help her, and she was not going to grovel, and that was the end of it.

Instead, she had written to Nevarra, Ansborg, and Antiva, from whom she had received civil letters, and informed them of the horde's curious withdrawal. Since the Battle of King's Mountain, the darkspawn had not been seen in large numbers, aside from the nesting ground near Ostagar. As to where they had gone, she knew no more than anyone else.

Fergus was recovering his good humor, despite news of blood mages and Rendon Howe's partial exoneration. Bronwyn gathered that he and the Queen had come to some sort of

understanding, though he had not shared the particulars. It would be silly to plague him about it. Fergus fancied Anora, and really, Bronwyn could not think offhand of any woman in Ferelden who would suit him better. Nor would it be practical to send him tramping off abroad to find another foreign beauty. Besides, Anora, too, seemed much happier in the past few days. Despite finding Aron Kendalls' mangled body, their hunt had been most satisfactory.

Nathaniel asked Bryland, "And what of Kane Kendalls? Does he seem...adequate?"

Bryland spread his hands. "Habren certainly fancies him. The lad is fond of his sisters—sent for them right away. He's eager to learn—not so aloof as his brother." Bryland was inclined to prefer the younger fellow. No such words as "*another man's leavings*" had crossed the lad's lips. That alone was an improvement. "I can't say much more. I introduced him to Biggert, Urien's seneschal, and they talked quite a bit. And the lad's a good horseman, at least."

"Better than his brother, I hope," grunted Wulffe.

They were all reminded of the fact that Aron Kendalls would be given to the fire tomorrow evening. The pyre was already prepared in the courtyard of the Arl of Denerim's estate: ironic, given that the man had never had the opportunity to live there. Nonetheless, all had agreed that it was a suitable place to hold the funeral, as the man had been the heir presumptive, and was unquestionably a Kendalls. The Kendalls seneschal had been contacted, and all the preparations were in place.

Bryland said, "I was hoping the girls would arrive today, but no such luck. Faline is twelve, and Jancey only nine. Kane thinks they're not happy at that Chantry school, and wants to find them a tutor so they can live with him."

Bronwyn left the meeting reminded of Chantry schools and their pupils. Had the Grand Cleric forgotten her promise to Bronwyn regarding the child Demelza? Bronwyn decided that she had, or that she was stalling for some reason. She sent a polite note to Mother Boann, informing the priest that she, Bronwyn, would be quite at leisure to see the girl the following morning. It was not exactly true, since she was really quite busy, between arms practice and the Queen's Council. In the evening she would have to attend the Kendalls funeral. Nonetheless, she could spare some time for the little girl saved by Andraste's Ashes.

Thus, mid-morning the next day, Mother Boann came calling at the door of the Warden Compound, leading the little girl by the hand.

Neatly dressed in a Chantry pupil's robe, and with hair washed and braided, she made a very different appearance than when Bronwyn had last seen her. The child curtsied to her stiffly, and in stilted tones, repeated the words she clearly had memorized.

"I thank you, Lady Bronwyn, for saving my life. I am forever in your debt."

"You're very welcome, Demelza. Why don't we all have some cake? My housekeeper made some especially for your visit."

Bronwyn, relying on memories of her own youth, could not imagine a little girl immune to the charms of cake. She was not disappointed. Cake and milky tea were evidently rare treats at school.

"I missed Satinalia," Demelza said sadly. "That's when we have cake."

Mother Boann said gently, "You'll have cake on First Day."

"That's a long way away!" the child objected. "This is good," she told Bronwyn, and then poked at one of the cakes. "Why is that one dark?"

"It's flavored with chocolate. That's a kind of spice that comes from the far north."

"I like it. We only have honeycakes at school, but they're good, too."

"Are you happy at the school, Demelza?"

The child shrugged. Mother Boann was scandalized.

"Answer Lady Bronwyn properly, child!"

"Yes, Lady Bronwyn. I like it."

That was hardly a satisfactory answer. Bronwyn persisted.

"What do you like best about school?"

Demelza scowled adorably, in deep thought.

"I get to be clean, and I don't have to feed chickens. I'm afraid of roosters. They're mean! And pigs bite."

"So, if you could do whatever you wanted to, would you go home, or stay at the school?"

"Stay at school!" Demelza said forcefully, with a nod at each word. "I didn't like it at home. Nobody hits me as hard at school as they did at home, and I'm not all over muck all the time. And I have shoes."

"I don't like being dirty or being hit either. And shoes are good," Bronwyn agreed. She had imagined the child brutally torn from a happy home, but apparently that was not quite the case. "What is your favorite thing to do at the Chantry?"

Demelza opened her mouth, and then looked guiltily at Mother Boann. In a resigned monotone she said, "My favorite thing is to hear the Chant of Light in praise of Our Lady."

"Yes, yes, of course," Bronwyn said, with sharp glance at the priest, who, to give her due credit, blushed slightly. "Aside from your religious duties, what do you like? Do you like music? Are you in the choir? Or do you like reading? Do you like learning to embroider vestments?"

Demelza clearly found the idea of singing in the choir very

funny. "They'd never let me sing where anyone could hear! All the notes sound the same to me. I like my friends. I like reading. I'm a very good reader."

"It's true, my lady," said Mother Boann, "She's learned quickly."

"Would you read to me?" Bronwyn asked. She drew a book from the shelves and offered it to the child.

"I know this!" cried Demelza. "That the 'Adventures of Black Fox!'"

"Why don't you read me a little? Please?" Bronwyn asked.

Demelza considered, and then asked, "Do you mean 'just-read,' or 'really-read?'" She clarified. "That's when you do all the voices."

Bronwyn blinked. "Oh, 'really-read,' by all means."

"All right!" The child's voice throbbed with drama as she began.

"Now it was told before how two hundred sovereigns were set upon Black Fox's head, and how the Lord of Val Chevin swore that he himself would seize the naughty varlet. But the knights of Val Chevin knew more of Black Fox and his doings than the their lord did, and many laughed to think of serving a warrant upon the bold outlaw, knowing well that all they would get for such service would be cracked crowns; so

that no one came forward to take the matter in hand.

"Thus a fortnight passed, in which time none came forward to do the lord's business. Then said he, 'A right good reward have I offered to whosoever would serve my warrant upon that knave Black Fox, and I marvel that no one has come to undertake the task.'"

Demelza's voice had dropped alarmingly to a gruff bass. Bronwyn nearly laughed aloud.

"Then one of his men who was near him said, 'Good master, thou wottest not the force that Black Fox has about him. Truly, no one likes to go on this service, for fear of cracked crowns and broken bones.'"

Now she was speaking in a broad Bannorn accent. A moment later, her voice was the blustering villain's once more.

"'Then I hold you all cowards,' said the wicked lord. 'And let me see the man in all Val Chevin that dare disobey the warrant of our sovereign Emperor Pherelon, for, by Andraste's blood, I will hang him forty cubits high! But if no man in Val Chevin dare win my bounty, I will send elsewhere, for there should be men of mettle somewhere in this land.'

"Then he called up a messenger in whom he placed great trust, and bade him saddle his horse and make ready to go to Arlesans to see whether he could find anyone there that

would do his bidding and win the reward. So that same morning the messenger started forth upon his errand..."

They let her finish the little story, with the chevalier outwitted, and Black Fox triumphant, as usual.

"You read very well, Demelza," Bronwyn praised her. "And you're right: 'really-reading' is much better than the other kind. If you didn't have to go home, and you could do anything besides being in the Chantry, what would you like to be?"

"Oh, I'd be a lady, and do nothing, like you," Demelza replied at once.

Mother Boann nearly spit out her tea, and remonstrated at once. "Demelza! Lady Bronwyn works very hard to protect all Ferelden."

The child looked guilelessly at them both. "I didn't mean that. I mean," she kindly explained to Bronwyn, "you don't have to do what people tell you."

Bronwyn only laughed. "Even I have to do my duty, Demelza. So you like getting a good education... Once you've finished, you may decide to take orders in the Chantry, but there are many other things you could do. What do you say to becoming a lady-in-waiting? You would only have to do what I told you to do."

"Would I dress like a lady?"

"Yes. You would help me with my clothes and sometimes you would read to me."

"That sounds nice. I'd better work on being the best reader in all Ferelden!"

Aron Kendalls' funeral was an odd affair. Aside from the spectacle of Habren holding hands with the brother of her late betrothed, it was all very political. Ironically, aside from the boar hunt, this was the best opportunity for Kane Kendalls to put forward his claim.

He certainly was winning over the women. Loghain watched the debacle, unable to turn his eyes from awfulness of it all. Unseemly as it was, Kane Kendalls, on the basis of his handsome face, had probably won enough votes tonight to make him Arl of Denerim. Anora managed to keep her dignity, and Bronwyn seemed to find it all mildly entertaining. Lady Amell had eyes only for Bryland. and her sister and niece were discreetly snickering at Habren and her swain. Every other lady at the funeral however, seemed to be afflicted with the desire to be either the handsome lad's sweetheart or mother.

Mothering him was silly and sentimental, but not as revolting as the women who flirted with him. Even sensible women like Alfstanna were starry-eyed in his presence.

His little sisters, too, seemed to adore Kane. Loghain viewed that more tolerantly. In fact, the girls did not seem to be

grieving over their stern elder brother at all. Instead, young Kane was whispering plans for treats and amusements, for ponies and puppies, while the flames crackled higher and higher. Carefully, properly, he watered their wine for them like a good brother. Silly women cooed over the sight of so much family affection. Some others, keeping their heads a little better, eyed the girls speculatively, assessing their future value on the marriage market.

Loghain thought them pretty enough, though it was hard to believe that they would ever be as peacock-gorgeous as their brother. One of the Amaranthine banns was discreetly pointing out the older girl to Nathaniel Howe, who looked pained and faintly horrified. She was a grave, grey-eyed, fair-haired child, and would be marriageable in three or four years. As most people reckoned it, it would be a perfectly suitable match. And after all, he thought, with a pang of guilt, the age gap between himself and Bronwyn was far greater than the one between Nathaniel and the child Faline.

Habren appeared annoyed at the attention her newest suitor was paying his sisters. She kept a death-grip on his right hand, forcing the girls to remain on his left. The older girl let the little one have Kane's left hand and kept the child between herself and her brother, already showing more sensitivity and kindness that was in Habren's nature. Loghain wondered how well keeping the girls with him would work out, knowing how jealous Habren was likely to be. Bronwyn noticed it, too, giving him a nudge, and a faint, amused smile.

The following morning was devoting to wedding planning: first with Fergus, and then with a dressmaker. Bronwyn's wedding gown weighed as much as her dragon armor.

Well, perhaps not *quite* as much, but it was embroidered with countless seed pearls, gold beads, and crystals, and thus the silk and velvet did not rustle, but rather clanked a little as she walked.

Fereldan women typically wore their best clothes to their wedding. Unlike Orlais, where noblewomen were customarily married in white, silver, or gold, Fereldan women chose the colors that suited them best, as their wedding gown would generally henceforth be their best gown until it fell to rags. Bronwyn need never wear rags, but not even she could afford an infinite number of gowns.

This was quite a gown, indeed. Since Loghain had expressed his opinion that Bronwyn looked well in red—and since Bronwyn agreed with him—the asymmetrical draped overskirt was red velvet, its border rich and glittering. The closely-fitted underdress was heavy white satin with long embroidered golden vines rising up from the hem like soldiers at attention. The bodice was red brocade, spangled with jeweled flowers, and the white satin sleeves were cuffed and embroidered to the elbow, coming down in points over the top of her hands. The high collar was a complex matrix of beading and gold thread. Her boned corset of cloth-of-gold actually fit properly, fastening almost invisibly with tiny hooks down the back. A pair of red leather ankleboots had been made to match.

It was altogether an amazing gown, and would serve to receive dignitaries for some time. She felt rather like a bird of paradise in it. However, she was determined not to wear it to her possible coronation. That would make her look, once again, insufferably overconfident. The coronation would require another very elaborate gown, which could not be ordered until she was actually elected by the Landsmeet. Two gowns of the best quality should suffice for some time.

For her wedding she had decided to wear her hair down, falling almost to her waist, and braided back from her face. Her ruby hair ornament would be her only jewelry, aside from her betrothal ring.

Knowing Loghain, he would probably wear black, but she was determined not to care. While she felt that he would look splendid in crimson velvet, she was not going to nag him about trifles. There would be plenty of disagreements in their future, Maker knew.

He was still somewhat annoyed that she had run off on her adventure at the blood mage compound, but Bronwyn gloated over what a lot of glorious loot they'd won. Even the foodstuffs were a gift of the Maker, considering how much Wardens ate. The splendid carpets and silken bedding had been taken away, and some of them were now decorating Bronwyn's own private chamber. The herb cabinet had been installed in the Warden's study, where it would prove useful for their mages. Perhaps they would ultimately take it to Soldier's Peak, where the mages could work in complete privacy.

She had been thinking about Soldier's Peak quite a bit in the past few days. Jowan had performed splendidly during the battle with the Tevinters. Clearly, Avernus' improved potion was all the old geezer claimed. Bronwyn wanted her own dose as soon as possible. Not only did it offer greater strength and stamina, but freedom from the inconveniences of infertility and the horrors of the Calling. What was there not to like about it?

As soon as her dress fitting was complete, she summoned Jowan. He, Morrigan, and Anders had been very busy, attempting to translate the letters, notes, and memoranda found in the Tevinter base. At last report, they had not got through a third of it.

He arrived quickly, but not alone. The runt of the rescued litter, a little black female, had taken to him and imprinted. Bronwyn was glad for him, though she was concerned about such young puppies being exposed to the regular dangers Wardens faced. A mabari did not reach its full adult size and weight until it was two years old. The puppies could be trained, but until they were bigger, they were not fellow warriors, but children, requiring care and protection.

When they had time, leisure, and safety, Bronwyn thought that breeding mabarais to fight beside the Wardens would be feasible and advantageous. At the moment, it seemed too great an investment in time and resources to undertake. Still, the serendipitous puppies were here, and no one could control with whom they imprinted. So far, all her predictions had been proved wrong.

First of all, she had not expected Loghain to carry off one of the puppies. She could hardly begrudge him the kind of companionship that was so dear to her, and it had somewhat mellowed him for the moment. Then, too, while she knew that Anders was a cat person, and that Morrigan disapproved of domesticated wolves on principle, she had thought that Leliana or Aveline might prove attractive to a mabari.

Wrong. Carver Hawke was celebrating his great good fortune, and now this little one had taken to following Jowan about, much to the mage's delighted astonishment.

"Jowan, I need to talk to you." She gestured to him to sit, and he did, his puppy at his feet.

He looked both nervous and anxious to please, reminding her, as always, of a dog who had been kicked too often. No matter what the Circle had done to him, Jowan had many good qualities, and more power than he admitted, even to himself.

"As you know, I promised to send a relief party up to Avernus at Soldier's Peak before First Day. I want to put you in charge of that party."

"Me?" squeaked Jowan. He blushed, and lowered his voice to a baritone far below his natural pitch. "Me?"

She smiled at him, amused. "Yes, you. I need someone to act as liaison between Avernus and the rest of us. He may need assistance with the quantities of Joining potion that we

require. Furthermore, he has much to teach. I thought you might find it interesting."

"I would!" Jowan agreed, rather intrigued at the prospect. Avernus was an intimidating old man, but he was also a powerful mage.

"I'm glad to hear it. I want you to leave in a few days. I was thinking on the sixteenth, two days after my wedding. There is some darkspawn blood stored here at the Compound, and you will take it to him, along with foodstuffs and brewing equipment.

"You will not go alone, of course. I have decided that Leliana will go with you. She will have the duty of making the Peak habitable once more. I do not want her, however, included in discussion of magical matters, nor in the history of the improved potion. Leliana's devotion to the Chantry might cause her to speak of secret matters. That cannot be permitted." She gave him a very stern look, so he would understand that she was not in jest. She added, to make herself perfectly clear. "I do not want priests or Templars permitted into Soldier's Peak, nor do I want them given the information that would allow them to make their way through the tunnels."

"Will anyone else go?" he asked.

"Yes. Hakan and Soren. As dwarves with some knowledge of stone working, they can give an assessment of how much actual reconstruction is required, and help Leliana put together

a plan. I'm sorry to send you up to such a remote location by yourselves, possibly for months, but I feel it's very important to secure the Peak and Avernus' discoveries. I'll send some more people up to you if weather and events permit."

"I think it will be really interesting," Jowan said meekly.

"Good," she said, pleased with him. "I'll call in Leliana a bit later, and tell her what I have in mind for her. Remember: you will be in command, and you will not share details of the Joining potion improvements with her. It's enough that she will be administered the potion, and be told that it's a refined formula. Other details are not to be shared with her. Speaking of secret matters: I want you to examine the library for books containing Warden secrets. They are to be put in a locked bookcase. While Wardens can read them, I do not want them available to anyone else."

"I understand."

"Another matter that I would like you to look into: I have not been able to determine the extent of the lands originally granted to the Wardens. There is nothing about them in the books here. Very likely Avernus would know. Please find something in writing that I can present to the Landsmeet, so that the Warden rights can be confirmed at that time. I'll make sure that your party is large enough that you can spare a messenger. Perhaps such a messenger might also bring us more of the improved potion."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Mistress Rannelly was there, and rather excited.

"Warden Danith has arrived, Warden-Commander! And all over mud, she and the rest, too. I served them all bowls of good hot broth, and bread to dip."

Bronwyn was pleased to hear about the arrivals, and thought that hot broth sounded good. A chilly rain had pounded the city since just before dawn. She pitied Kane Kendalls, who would have to mess about in sodden ashes and soaked wood to retrieve something for his brother's urn.

"They're in the Hall?"

"That they are, and worn out, poor lambs."

Tired as they were, they all rose to greet Bronwyn, and were surprised and interested in Jowan's little black puppy. Everyone had had some exposure to war dogs at Ostagar, because of the kennels. A puppy, seen close to, was far more endearing.

"This is Lily," Jowan told them shyly. Bronwyn did not quite see that 'Lily' suited a puppy that was black as a moonless night, but she was Jowan's puppy, after all.

Danith's hair was growing out, Bronwyn noticed. It was still wet, and so darker than she remembered. She was immediately concerned to see that the number at the table was one short. She searched her memory for the name.

"Good day to you all," she said. "I'm glad to see you well. Where is Ketil?" she asked Danith.

"Sleeping in his quarters. He was badly wounded a few days ago, and it slowed us down. Niall thinks at this point he only needs rest."

Niall confirmed this. "I managed to save his left arm, but he shouldn't use it for another few days."

"Well done. Sit down and eat before your soup is cold," Bronwyn ordered. "I think I'll have some myself. How was your journey?"

They all looked to Danith to reply, which Bronwyn thought a good sign. There seemed to be no tensions within the group. A maid brought two more bowls of broth. Jowan attacked his with thanks. Bronwyn spooned hers up slowly, watching the newcomers. No, there was no hostility within the group, but neither did any of them seem particularly elated. Relieved mostly, and glad to be in a safe and comfortable place.

"A success of sorts, Commander," Danith answered. "We found no darkspawn east of the White River, nor any in the Deep Roads near Gwaren. The seal had not been touched from the inside."

Gwaren was safe from darkspawn, at least for the moment. That was plain good news. That the darkspawn had not succeeded in crossing the White River—also good news.

"What about west of the river?"

Danith and the rest looked at each other grimly. Quinn burst out, "It wasn't our fault!"

Danith held up her hand, and he subsided, angrily slurping his broth.

She told Bronwyn, "We found no darkspawn north of South Reach. When we swung down into the Southron Hills, however, we came upon a large party that had attacked a farmhold. The people and animals were killed, and the darkspawn had made themselves at home. It was necessary not only to kill them all, but also to burn the house and all the buildings and to put the Tainted fields to the torch. Seeing the smoke, more shemlen came, and were displeased. Some, I think, wanted to loot, and roused others against us. Rocks were thrown...and some blows were exchanged."

In fact, it had turned into a serious incident, and they had been in considerable danger. Even after the dead darkspawn were pointed out to the mob, some had blamed the Grey Wardens. Danith would never forget the shemlens' insults.

"We never had darkspawn until you Grey Wardens came skulking around here!"

"Aye! They're a devious lot!"

"If you hadn't brought the darkspawn here, Ottis and his family wouldn't be dead!"

"Maybe they're not even Grey Wardens! Them over there are nothing but knife ears! Reckon they're in league with the darkspawn!"

Jowan said, "That's a shame. How could they be so stupid?"

Bronwyn said, "There will always be fools. You did right, even if the locals were too idiotic to realize it. After you're done with your meal, you might enjoy hot baths. Mistress Rannelly will arrange it. Then get some rest yourselves. We can talk more after dinner, Danith. You all look done in."

Quinn spoke up, "Begging your pardon, Commander, but I think you should know about those Qunari."

Everyone groaned. Maeve said, "That's where Ketil was wounded."

Bronwyn raised her brows.

Danith told her, "We did not come to Denerim by the West Road. Instead we took the country lanes along the foothills by Dragon's Peak as we approached the city. We stumbled on a camp of armed Qunari who attacked us."

"And?" Bronwyn asked, read to groan herself. *More foreign invaders?*

"Well," Quinn grinned slowly, and then leaned over to give the puppy a pat. "We killed 'em all, didn't we? But we got pretty bashed. Good thing we had old Niall here."

Niall turned red, and tried to shrug off the praise. Danith was not having that.

"A very good thing indeed. The power of magic saved us then and at other times, too. The Qunari were formidable."

"How many of them?"

"Fourteen. It was unclear if they were a strong scouting party or if they had...how did you put it, Maeve?"

Maeve said, "I thought it was more likely they'd gone into business for themselves."

"Mercenaries?" Bronwyn considered this. That would be a less worrying explanation. "We might want to ride out and have a look at the camp. We'll talk more about that too. Anyway, finish your meal and rest."

Yes, definitely something to think about. She left them, and went to find Leliana.

The bard was in her room, playing her lute. Bronwyn came in and told her that Danith and her party had returned, and then about her plans for Soldier's Peak. She relieved when Leliana glowed with excitement.

"There is so much that one can do!" the red-haired Warden burst out. "So much potential in that fine old place. Even if one only disposed of the trash and broken furniture! And then... some fresh plaster and paint...yes? A carpenter and a mason

could enclose part of the second floor and create a series of fine bedchambers..."

"I was thinking about giving you a set sum. Say...three hundred sovereigns?" Bronwyn smiled at Leliana's enthusiasm. "I would like you to start very prudently. See what can be done with simply cleaning and removing rubbish first. Move on from there. Why don't you start noting down some ideas, and before you go we can talk them over."

"When would we leave?"

"Soon. Perhaps two days after the wedding, or as soon as we can get all the necessary supplies together. We'll send a great deal of what we seized from the Tevinters with you. Jowan will be in command, as he will be working with Senior Mage Avernus. You will have help, of course. Levi Dryden is readying some his family to come up to the Peak and work, and there are the Wolfs at Highever House. They might be agreeable to working for the Wardens..."

"Working for *you*," Leliana corrected her, dimpling.

"Be as that may," Bronwyn went on. "You will be in charge of the renovations, and will have people to do the labor. You may have to order in materials. Dryden will be your teamster. What you cannot find in Amaranthine, you may obtain later in Denerim, but Amaranthine has many shops and sound craftsmen. The Coast Road, I fear, is not in sufficient repair to bear cartage from Highever."

"I shall begin working on my plans at once!" Leliana said, fire in her eyes. "Our castle will be a wonder of the world!"

"Let's start with 'livable,'" Bronwyn suggested, "and move on from there."

Dinner was a little early that night, since everyone wanted to talk to Danith and her newly-arrived patrol. Ketil joined them, his arm in a sling, looking a bit tired.

The Dalish Warden had come by earlier to give her more particulars of the patrol, and the news that Danith's old clan was occupying and repairing the ancient elven temple. Probably, it would be best to give the Dalish the territory at the upcoming Landsmeet, rather than stringing them along.

She passed along Danith's news to Loghain, too. He was relieved to hear that the darkspawn had no presence under his own city. Hearing about the Qunari camp and its location, he immediately sent out a patrol to reconnoiter and bring back anything they could find indicating the band's purpose and allegiance.

Dinner was festive and plentiful. Carver swaggered in, proudly carrying his puppy. The little fellow attracted a great deal of attention.

"What are you calling him, Carver?" Maeve asked, turned to pudding by big brown eyes.

"Hmmm... I was thinking maybe... Magister."

Bronwyn half-laughed, half-groaned. "Holy Maker, Carver!"

"Well, that's where we found him: in a nest of magisters. It's not as sissy as Jowan calling his dog 'Lily.'"

There was more laughter, and then Carver told the newcomers about their adventures under Denerim. Bronwyn told everyone that they were not to talk about it with anyone else, since they hoped to capture more Tevinters. Since no one at the table liked Tevinters, they were all quite happy to keep the secret.

Jowan arrived with little black-furred Lily, and there was more "ooohing" and "aaawing." Trailing behind was the other, yet-unnamed puppy, a tall, tawny pup with a brisk trot. Bronwyn had decided not to sequester the pup. As long as he imprinted in the Compound, his choice was his own. It was never wise to force a partner on a mabari. If he took to Mistress Rannelly and guarded the Compound, that was fine with Bronwyn, too.

"As you all know," she said, after they were mostly done with dinner, and only filling up the corners, "I'm getting married the day after tomorrow."

"To Bronwyn!" cheered Anders, lifting his goblet, and shouts echoed around the table. Most seemed pleased with it, aside from Morrigan, who only rolled her eyes.

Bronwyn inclined her head, grinning. "Thank you. All of you are

invited to celebrate with me, first at the Cathedral where the wedding will be held, and then at the feast at Highever House. Wear your dancing shoes."

Idunn asked, "Can we go into the Cathedral if we don't worship your goddess?"

"Andraste is not a *goddess*..." murmured Leliana.

"Yes," Bronwyn said, her voice overriding Leliana's. "Of course. No one expects you to do anything, and no one will do anything to you. Just enjoy the spectacle and the music. There will a special place for the Wardens and their allies, roped off with grey cording. Leliana will lead you there. The Grand Cleric will give a sermon—which is just a speech—and the choir will sing. Then she'll declare the union binding and we'll all go to Highever House for the party."

"There is more to it than that," Leliana insisted. "If you have no fine clothes, wear your Warden tunics. We cannot leave until Bronwyn and Loghain do. I will give a sign when we are supposed to leave. We should form up by twos in the central aisle."

People looked blank, so she shrugged and said, "Just do what I do."

Soren grunted, still suspicious. "As long as it doesn't involve *singing*."

The Wardens murmured amongst themselves, wondering

what to wear and if they would have to pay admission. Anders solemnly told them 'yes' to that, and Leliana kicked him under the table and denied it.

"Then," Bronwyn said, taking command of the conversation once more, "two days after the wedding, I'm sending a relief party north to Soldier's Peak." She told the newcomers, "When we were in Amaranthine, ascertaining that the darkspawn had not made inroads there, we took the time to visit the Warden fortress of Soldier's Peak. Rumor said that it had been abandoned for two hundred years and was a ruin, but we found that to be untrue. It's essentially sound, and we found an elderly Warden there, working on research. I am sending Jowan up there with Leliana. Hakan and Soren, you will also be of the party. I want you to examine the castle for structural damage and consider whether we need to hire some good dwarven masons. You will be accompanied by some other people I have engaged, and begin work on renovating the castle for our use. Duncan never had time to see to it, but I think it would be of great value to us."

Everyone was interested in this mysterious castle, and some expressed a desire to see it for themselves. Bronwyn told them most of the story, and then those who had been there added bits and pieces.

"This old mage has been there for years?" Danith said, frowning in thought. "I did not know that Grey Wardens could live to be so old."

"Well..." Bronwyn said, deciding to prevaricate a little.

Morrigan and Zevran were not Wardens, after all. "There are exceptions to every rule."

The next morning, the first snowflakes of the season sifted down from a leaden sky. It was extremely unlikely that they would be seeing any ships from sunny northern climes until spring. It put to rest one of the many fears that plagued Bronwyn. They would not have to deal with either an Orlesian invasion or a Tevinter infiltration for at least a few months. If only she knew what the darkspawn were up to...

She went to Highever House, to look over the final arrangements for the wedding feast, admire the growing mound of gifts, and talk to the Wolfs. She found them more than amenable to her wishes.

"We wish to serve you, Lady. We owe you a debt that can never be repaid."

"Excellent. You could do much by guarding and maintaining the Warden's fortress. Some other people will be there as well: the Dryden family. They too have my trust. There should be room for you all there at the Peak. Warden Jowan will be in command. Obey him as you would me."

Fergus was told that the Wolfs would be leaving with a party of Wardens two days after the wedding. He raised his brows, but certainly did not object.

"They're your people, pup. And a fairly mysterious lot. Have

you ever learned why they all have yellow eyes?"

She smirked at him. "Yes."

"And?"

"A secret."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"No," she admitted cheerfully. Then more gravely, she added, "Their past is past, Fergus. Let it stay there." She gave him a quick hug. "And now I've really got to get back to the Palace."

Loghain had scheduled some sparring with her that afternoon. Bronwyn almost groaned at the prospect. He was a formidable opponent, and was insistent that she learn the proper way to use her splendid new shield. The Fade Wall was light, due to the enchantments on it, but it was still heavier than the dagger she was accustomed to wielding with her left hand. And then there was the whole issue of walking about with a shield clanking against her back. She could hardly imagine how Loghain had put up with it all these years.

After a bruising training session, a long, hot bath, and a good dinner, Bronwyn put the finishing touches on her new quarters in the Palace. Admittedly, Fionn had done all the real work, but Bronwyn liked to do some things for herself. She organized her few books on the bookshelf, and arranged her keepsakes on her newly-claimed spicewood desk. She

frowned and pulled the desk a little closer to the window, then remembered to lock her correspondence box. She sensed a presence, and looked up to see Loghain watching her from the doorway.

"The rooms suit you?"

She smiled. "They're very nice. I love the entire process of making loot my own, and what better way than furnishing my private quarters?"

He snorted at that, and came in, his new puppy trailing at his heels. Bronwyn could hardly imagine a more adorable sight: the tall, grim warrior and the wide-eyed, waggle-tailed little mabari. Scout whuffed at them sleepily.

Bronwyn bent to stroke the puppy's silky head, and asked, "What name have you chosen?"

"Amber. I was considering 'Brandy,' but I suppose if I went about calling for 'Brandy' all day long, I'd soon be known as a hopeless drunkard."

She laughed. "Amber's a lovely name and very suitable. "You're a very pretty girl, Amber!"

Loghain waved his hand at her shelves. "You're not going to leave that out in plain sight, I hope!"

He obviously was referring to her golden bowl, which was gleaming effulgently, in pride of place.

Bronwyn shrugged. "I suppose I should lock it away when I'm not here, but I do like to look at it. And it's...magical. Or at least the Templars said it was. It was might have somehow absorbed some of the power of the Ashes."

Loghain grunted, "Then you should definitely lock it away. The Chantry's likely to send agents to steal it!" He scowled. "That rug there was in the Tevinters' place, wasn't it? How are your mages doing on their translating?"

"Almost done," she said. "They're trying to get everything in some sort of chronological order now, so it makes sense. Anders told me that it's clear that Tevinters have been here for a long time. They weren't much interested in our politics until recently, though."

"I suppose we can thank the Maker for small favors!"

Amber grew interested in Scout and clambered over him, finding the corner of his blanket a wonderful chew-toy. She was very fierce with it, pulling and growling. Scout remained tolerant but unimpressed.

Loghain pulled up a chair and watched the dogs, smiling faintly, Bronwyn kicked over a footstool and sat beside him, leaning comfortably against his knee. Loghain's big hand stroked her hair, and she leaned into the caress, at peace for the moment.

"So, you've seen mine," she remarked. "When do I get to see yours?"

"My dear girl," he chuckled, "You've *seen* mine."

"How droll. I meant your private apartments here at the Palace. They're supposedly very close."

"Come." He rose and took her by the hand, leading her away and down the hall. The dogs looked up, hurt to find themselves no longer the center of attention, and scrambled after.

Loghain's quarters were very nice. There was a study full of books and bows, swords and armor. An arched, mullioned window was set in a deep embrasure, leaving plenty of room to sit. A big chair was clearly made to fit Loghain's proportions exactly, and a battered leather footstool stood in front of it, bearing the marks of spurs and steel-shod boots. The fireplace had an attractively carved mantel, and on the wall were framed maps and a striking portrait of Queen Rowan in armor. Her dark hair was blowing in the wind, and under one arm she held her green-plumed helmet. She was looking away from the viewer, gazing into the distance. Bronwyn had not realized what a pretty woman she had been.

"That's a wonderful portrait," she said, a little surprised to find a picture of the late queen in Loghain's private study, given what her parents had led her to believe.

"I like it," Loghain shrugged.

The study led to a simple but comfortable bedroom. Off that was a private bathing room with an enameled tin tub. The bed

looked very nice. One thing led to another, and Loghain did not try to resist her advances. The dogs, left behind a closed door in the study, responded in their individual ways. Scout, accepting that his people were mating, grew bored and curled up by the fire. Amber whimpered and pawed at the door, worried that her Loghain might be harmed by the alpha female's unprovoked attack. After some time, her protests had an effect.

"Oh, for Maker's sake," Loghain growled, opening the door. "Come on in."

In blithe innocence, the dogs trotted in, nosing about. Bronwyn, wonderfully relaxed and happy, smiled drowsily up at Loghain from the bed. He shook his head.

"You couldn't wait another day?"

"No. Why should we?"

"Don't go to sleep, I don't want to have to lug you all the way back to the Wardens' Compound."

"I won't." She bounded up, gathering her scattered garments. "Do you have any wine?"

"Maker's Breath, you're demanding," he muttered. "You're be the end of me yet."

She smiled at him archly. "If you're lucky. Where's the wine?"

"The table near the desk. Pour me some, while you're

ransacking my belongings."

It was very good wine. Bronwyn decided that she, too, needed a decanter and goblets in her apartments. She moved around the room, sipping, examining all his personal treasures, which included a huge codex of maps. On his desk, the edge of another map was barely visible under a pile of books. Curious, Bronwyn pulled it out. At first glance it was an ordinary map of Ferelden. On closer scrutiny, one saw the changes.

"What's this?" she asked, as he came into the study, tying his laces.

"Don't pry, or I won't invite you here again," he told her. He grunted his thanks when she handed him a full wine goblet, and with his left hand, he smoothed out the map she was examining. "This is just something I've been working on in my copious spare time."

"Borders yet to be." Bronwyn read off the scribbled legend at the bottom of the parchment. There were dots and circles to the south and in the foothills of the Frostbacks, and notes indicating that settlements should be established in those places. A red x here and there along the coast, according to the legend, marked a likely spot for a watchtower. More red was spilled on the islands of the Amaranthine Archipelago: watchtowers and settlements proposed, and roads drawn in to facilitate trade and troop movements.

She could barely read the notes next to West Hill, the vast

and dilapidated fortress to the west that faced the islands of the Waking Sea bannorn. She squinted, seeing Loghain's exasperation with Bann Frandarel's reclusiveness and sloth in the number of exclamation points there.

Her smile faded as her eyes traveled west to Gherlen's Pass. Roc des Chevaliers was circled in red. She almost snorted. *Good luck with cracking that nut.*

And then...

"Jader?" She asked, disbelieving. "You want *Jader*, too?"

He was unfazed by her skepticism. He traced the red dotted line down from the Orlesian port city to the Frostbacks.

"It makes perfect sense," he said quietly. "The northern tip of the Frostbacks end only a short distance south of the Imperial Highway, some forty leagues *west* of the city. The Frostbacks are ours...or should be. Our relations with the Avvar tribesmen living there are certainly far better than those they have with Orlais. The chevaliers hunt them like game. It's a natural boundary that would be far better and more defensible than anything we now have. That fortress—" he pointed to the small dot by the Imperial Highway, "—Solidor, that would be our western limit. We don't want *too* much of Orlais. That would water down Ferelden, after all. But this...*this* much we could swallow. We could use a proper city to the west. This whole area—" his broad index finger swept over the territory northwest of Lake Calenhad "—would be something a buffer zone, safer for Ferelden than a precariously held border

crossing. Besides, don't they say that Jader is the most Fereldan of Orlesian cities?"

Bronwyn refrained from repeating Leliana's dismissal of that, saying. "I've been told it's a fine city—beautiful, even. It's certainly known for its craftsmen." She laughed. "And after all, why make anything but great plans? Small plans have no power to stir men's blood."

"Well said." He smiled, his eyes fixed on the map of his imagination.

Thanks to my reviewers: Chandagnac, Blinded in a bolthole, truthrowan, KnightOfHolyLight, RakeeshJ4, Jyggilag, Zute, Nemrut, Kira Kyuu, Graffiti My Soul, Raxiselic, EpitomyofShyness, EmbertoInferno, Guest, Mike3207, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, almost insane, Herebedragons66, JackOfBladesX, amanda weber, MsBarrows, Phygmalion, Jenna53, Enaid Aderyn, Costin, Oleader's One, Shakespeira, Have Socks. Will Travel, Robbie the Phoenix, Josie Lange, Tsu Doh Nimh, Psyche Sinclair, and mille libri.

Thank you. Howard Pyle, from whom I stole a bit of Robin Hood.

There need to be more dogs in this story. While everyone talks about Fereldans and their dogs and how omnipresent they are, we don't actually see many dogs in DAO, other than at Ostagar at the very beginning. Nobody has mabaris in

Lothering, or in Redcliffe Village, or in Denerim, other than the pitiful curs at the Alienage or mabaris in the blood mage hideout. There are only a few dogs in Redcliffe Castle, and they all have to be put down. Surely a lot of the noblemen in the Landsmeet should have dogs with them. In Awakenings, there's the sick mabari below Vigil's Keep and a dead mabari in the Blackmarsh. There are no mabaris trotting around the city of Amaranthine. We actually see lots more dogs in DA2, off in Kirkwall. I'm still puzzling over that fact that they all seem to be carrying money. Do they have little mabari purses attached to their collars?

Is anyone else bugged by Anora having only one gown, which she wears for all occasions? She wears armor when she addresses the troops before Denerim, but otherwise always wears that rather tiresome blue dress. Even when she drops in on the Warden at the beginning of DAA, to pointlessly inform him/her that no help will be forthcoming, she's still wearing that same dress. Get thee to a seamstress, Anora!

As a Chicagoan, I had to let Bronwyn paraphrase the great architect Daniel Burham. There are many reported variations, but I like this one:

"Make no small plans; they have no power to stir men's blood."

Have a look at the Wiki's map of Ferelden that's excerpted from the full map of Thedas. You will see that Jader is

almost exactly the same longitude as Haven. Going all the way to the northernmost end of the Frostbacks squares off Ferelden's borders very nicely.

If anybody's going to GenCon in Indianapolis next week, let me know. I'll be there. They have a lot of interesting programs and writer's workshops planned.

76. Songs of Love and Death

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 76: Songs of Love and Death

Weddings were supposed to be the happiest day of one's life. Bronwyn was not sure that was true in her case. Her midday meal roiled uneasily in her stomach. It was all a little like going into battle, without the comforting feel of sword in hand. She had been pleased with her gown and jewels before, but now found them heavy and confining.

Mostly, it was all rushing and hurrying and worrying, and then being made to sit still while Leliana and Fionn arranged her hair, and then painted and dressed her like a doll. Perversely, she was annoyed at Leliana's careful application of cosmetics to conceal her scar. Others came to witness the ritual humiliation: Morrigan cynically amused, Aveline a little bemused; Idunn appraising her with the professional objectivity of a jeweler.

Then the Dalish female contingent, Danith and Nuala, came to offer her their felicitations on her marriage, and tried not to stare disapprovingly at the extravagance of her gown. Maeve, being, like Leliana and Fionn, only human, thought it all wonderful.

"Oh, Commander! You look like a queen!"

Some polite, assenting murmurs followed. Morrigan merely cackled.

"Ha!"

She swept away shaking her head.

Leliana whispered to Fionn, "That woman is *evil!*"

Scout found the whole process tiresome, and abandoned Bronwyn to scrounge for treats in the Wardens' Hall. Fergus was coming with his knights; and they, along with her Wardens and other friends, would escort her to the Cathedral.

Actually, Bronwyn was finding the whole process tiresome too, and began to wish it was already over. She felt more than a little ridiculous, this being prepared like some sort virgin sacrifice. She could hardly blame Morrigan for laughing. It was unfair, too. Loghain would do no more than shave carefully and put on a handsome doublet, and be done with it. She wondered if he would bring Amber. That might be amusing. He ought to, really, since she was newly imprinted. She herself had absolutely no intention of leaving Scout behind. She had given him a bath this morning, brushed his coat until it shone like satin, and warned him not to do anything to dirty it. Now that he was out of sight, he would probably find a dust pile to roll in.

She would have to ride in a carriage to the Cathedral. Why

had she let the dressmaker talk her into this style? However beautiful and becoming, it was quite impossible to ride a horse in this gown, and as chilly and wet as it was, she would likely to soil her clothing—and certainly ruin her boots—if she walked. So, yes. She would have to ride in a carriage like some sort of Orlesian princess. She should have proposed to Loghain that they both wear armor instead. He probably would have agreed to it. If there was a coronation, perhaps they could wear armor then.

Her handmaidens having done all they could do for her, Bronwyn left her room, head high. At least the men did not make her feel as absurd as her own sex did. They, indeed, seemed to think her appearance not contemptible. It pleased her: yes, it pleased her to see their admiration. Jowan, Niall, and Toliver blushing and diffident, Quinn and Carver grinning, Anders and Zevran clutching their hearts, pretending to be overwhelmed. Even the dwarves and elves had kind words, and nodded sagely amongst themselves.

"You'll do, Commander," rumbled Hakan.

Fergus arrived, looking splendid. His face lit up at the sight of her, and he embraced her gingerly, respectful of her gown and cosmetics, whispering. "Father and Mother would be so proud." Bronwyn hoped so.

Her amazing sable cloak was fastened over her gown, and Fergus, beaming, gave her his arm as they walked to the door. Bronwyn was glad of it, since she was forced to admit to herself that she would have to have some help climbing the

steps into the carriage, unless she drew a dagger and slashed her skirts open. That would certainly make an impression, but perhaps not the one she desired.

And then, at least, she did not have to ride in the carriage alone, like a caged monkey, for there was room for Leliana and Morrigan and Scout, whose paws she hoped to keep moderately clean. The three puppies were put in a basket on the floor, and Scout was ordered to keep them there. Carver and Jowan would look after their own friends, and the little orphan, too, once they arrived at the Cathedral..

With the squirming puppies, and Scout's stern barks, and Leliana and Morrigan sniping at each other, Bronwyn was hardly aware of the crowd along the streets, and merely waved and smiled automatically. It seemed to suffice. They reached the Cathedral, and there was some sort of muddle or other, with various horses and carriages in the way, and people pushing and shoving to look. Scout leaped down, right into a puddle, gleefully splashing. Jowan and Carver quickly took the puppies and got out of the way.

In a blur, Fergus was handing her out, treating her like a piece of rare porcelain. Leliana removed her cloak, and tugged her gown to make it hang correctly. Awash with the sweet voices of the Chantry choir, Fergus escorted her up the aisle toward the front of the Cathedral. Loghain was waiting for her, not scowling, but not smiling, either. After all, he had been married before, and none of this would have the charm of novelty for him. She passed a sea of faces, some smiling, some impressed, some solemn, some crafty. In the front

were the nobles, many of whom truly wished her well. And there were her Wardens. Leliana was hurrying up a side aisle to join them.

"Commander!" hissed a grinning Quinn, waving madly. "Over here!"

Feeling better, she grinned back at him. Maeve gave him a swat, no doubt telling him to behave himself. The dwarves were pointing out various pieces of Chantry regalia, debating their value. The elves looked ready to fend off any sudden attacks. Danith caught her eye for a moment, and seemed to be of the mind that Bronwyn was out of hers to put up with all this. Anders was winking at Morrigan, who appeared profoundly unimpressed at all the pomp and circumstance.

The Queen was in the royal pew, and Bronwyn and Fergus paused to make the appropriate obeisance. She was looking very nice, and gave Fergus a startlingly sweet and secret smile.

Sure enough, Loghain had worn black. For all that, he looked very imposing and splendid in a gloomy way, with enough metal on him for him to look normal: superb chased bracers on his forearms, and a heavy gorget at his throat. It was generally considered very inappropriate for a man to marry in armor, unless he was marrying a ruling queen. Even then, marrying in armor smacked of marriage-by-capture, which while no longer openly practiced in Ferelden, was something remembered and retold in many Alamarri legends.

Where was the puppy? Oh, one of his knights was holding her. She was much too young to be able to play a dignified role like Bronwyn's own Scout, who was trotting along at her side, unruffled and debonair.

This marriage was something she had longed for since she was fifteen. Why was she so... unenthused?

Perhaps it was the oppressive smell of incense, or the knowledge that not all her companions thought she was making the right choice. Perhaps it was the presence of people like Habren, whom she disliked, or Kane Kendalls, about whom she cared nothing. Perhaps it was the Grand Cleric's voice, droning on about irrelevancies. Andraste was certainly not the shining exemplar of a woman who succeeded at marriage. She was, in fact, a woman whose husband had hated her enough to have her killed.

Or perhaps it was the knowledge that the only reason Loghain was marrying her was that he wanted to be king.

That was certainly a romance-killer.

She felt her pleasant smile slip, and forced her face back into its serene mask. She must not allow herself to grow maudlin. The likelihood of her marrying for love had never been particularly high. After all, she could have been sent abroad to a stranger, or she could have found herself bound to that ass Cailan. Loghain at least respected her and found her desirable enough. He was making the best of it, as should she. All the same, in none of her youthful dreams had she felt this cynical

weariness.

Thank the Maker, they were standing before the Grand Cleric now, with their backs to the rest of the Cathedral. It was still important to maintain her facade, though, facing that sharp-eyed old woman and her minions.

Loghain thought Bronwyn was looking quite beautiful—very much the queen she would soon be. He approved of her restraint and dignity. She seemed quietly happy, too, having achieved the prize she had worked toward since she was sixteen. He hoped she found it all worthwhile. At least, she still seemed to want *him*.

That meant more to him than he would have cared to admit openly. From those first days at Ostagar, he had always thought her a remarkable girl: attractive, gifted, brave, and no fool. She often exasperated him with her independent spirit and her hot temper, but the fact was that she had grown on him. Quite a bit. He had not had a true companion since Maric died. Anora had come closest, but she was always, first and foremost, his daughter, and the best of her mother Celia lived on in her. Bronwyn, in contrast, combined much of what he had loved in the other people closest to him.

She was a strong, beautiful woman, like Rowan: a mighty warrior well on her way to becoming a shrewd politician; and still capable of great passion and tenderness. Like Maric, she knew what it was to suffer. Also like Maric, she was interested in the world, and had an odd, amusing way of

looking at it. Only last night, he had enjoyed their time together—the way she had of instantly understanding what he was getting at—and her uninhibited love-making. In that respect, she resembled neither Rowan nor Celia at all. Celia was modest by nature, and had feared losing the respect of their vassals, and Rowan... Rowan had feared wounding her father, disgracing her family, and above all, becoming pregnant with a bastard. Perhaps, since Bronwyn believed that being a Grey Warden made her infertile, she did not worry about that last at all. He hoped she was mistaken. If they had no children, they each had heirs, but it seemed to him that Bronwyn would be a remarkably good mother, and furthermore, would enjoy being one, very much.

The Grand Cleric joined their hands, and began the wedding prayer. Bronwyn's face had closed down a little. He knew she did not trust the Chantry, and given all that had happened in the past half-year, she was right. There must be some way to rein in their power, without inviting an Exalted March. His people were gathering information on the Templars even now, trying to get a handle on how many were actually in Ferelden. Of course, if they were no more competent than the Templars here in Denerim, who had let blood mages prosper under their very feet for fifteen years, Ferelden had nothing to fear from the Chantry but hard words.

They would be crowned in the Landsmeet Chamber. The Grand Cleric could say the prayers, but Loghain did not like the idea of appearing to receive the crown from the representative of the Divine in Val Royeaux. Calenhad had

made the Chantry one of the pillars of his rise to the throne of Ferelden, and ever since then the role of the Chantry had been a powerful one. Was there any way of minimizing the Grand Cleric's role without egregiously insulting her and the devout nobles? Probably not. However, holding the coronation in the Landsmeet Chamber rather than the Cathedral would somewhat emphasize the secular over the spiritual.

At last, the old woman was done talking. He and Bronwyn turned to face Ferelden together, and the choir burst into high, ethereal song once more. His eyes swept the surging crowd, glancing over to the pack of raffish outcasts that were the Grey Wardens and Their Campfollowers. They were more or less behaving. Some of them were more tolerable than others. That wretched blood mage he had commissioned to get rid of Eamon actually had a mabari!

He realized that he was smiling. Yes, things were working out well. Eamon was gone, and with him the most dangerous leader of any opposition to his plans. The bastard prince, Alistair, had been effectively neutralized by Bronwyn, and was happily—and even effectively—playing the Warden down in Ostagar. Loghain wished no harm to the lad, indeed. Perhaps when Bronwyn was tired of trying to be both Queen and Commander of the Grey, she could delegate the latter to Alistair.

Taking the throne had before seemed impossible, implausible—indecent even. Now Loghain realized that he wanted it. He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything. How strange.

It was true, though. He wanted the power of the throne to shape Ferelden to his will: to make it the Ferelden of his mind, no longer the rather third-rate nation it now was. This country was rich with resources and fruitful land. There should be plenty for all. With prosperity would come strength and productivity. If they could be free of this darkspawn threat, Ferelden would move into the future he had always wanted for it.

The empty lands to the west and south—and yes, even in the war-ravaged northwest—could be settled anew. Loghain would offer freeholds to those willing to work and earn them. The Dalish would be granted their own territory, and relieve the constant petty banditry and strife they caused with their endless traveling. Perhaps even some of the city elves might join them there. The loss of so many to the slavers had already driven up the price of wages, which was a good thing for the lower classes. Half of these nobles were nothing more than parasites, and could well pay a decent wage instead of buying Orlesian fripperies to put on their backs.

And he would have to do something about the mages: Ferelden's best weapon, locked away in a Chantry prison and their powers stifled, except for the few kept as nobles' pets. He had sent that letter to Ostagar, and Uldred would be among the mages coming to Denerim. Torrin, too was on his way: an intelligent man. With the Chantry wrong-footed as it currently was, Loghain felt that at the very least, he could lengthen the mages' leash. The precedent of Bethany Hawke, and years before of Wilhelm, would prove useful. Some,

whose service in the war was outstanding, would be declared free of Chantry supervision as a reward to them and an encouragement to the others.

The Grand Cleric was pronouncing them husband and wife; teyrn and teyrna. It was an essential step to power. How odd, and oddly agreeable, that his path to the throne should lie between a woman's legs.

"Oh, how wonderful!" cried Leliana, on her first sight of the decorated Great Hall of Highever House. "This is really old-time Ferelden on a grand scale!" A babble of happy agreement broke out behind her.

Tables were set with silver and white napery. Light from colored glass in the high windows shone down in rainbow hues. The air was sweet with herbs and the enticing scents of the coming banquet. Easily identified by the grey ribbons on the chairs, the Grey Wardens' table was soon filled. Hungry Wardens speculated on the first course, fingering their spoons eagerly. Servitors filled the cups with what one fancied, whether wine, ale, or mead, so they could drink the health of the bridal couple.

Nuala murmured to Danith, "The rite in the priest-house was not as offensive as I feared, *lethallan*. The music was agreeable, and the old woman did not reproach those who do not follow her way."

"True," agreed Danith. "It is their custom, and one must allow

for shemlen peculiarities. Nevertheless, it was not an experience I wish to repeat very soon."

"I thought it was nice," Idunn spoke up, overhearing their talk. "I like to see decent people getting together, though I don't quite see why they need those people in robes to tell them it's all right. Back in Dust Town, if you fancy a fellow, you take him, and that's that."

Aveline raised her brows. "Just...take him?"

Idunn made a snatching gesture and declared, "*Take* him!"

Hakan winked at her. "Sounds good to me!"

"Me, too," Anders agreed, speaking low into Morrigan's ear. "All the posh goings-on tempting you to make it official?"

"They do not!" Morrigan scowled at the table in general. "The inheritance customs of the nobles demand such officiousness, but I see no reason for any rational woman to wish to bind herself down."

Leliana looked at her solemnly. "It is not a mere binding. Both Teyrn Loghain and Bronwyn have made a mutual and honorable pledge of love and respect. I think it is a very beautiful thing."

"'Tis *'beautiful,'*" sneered Morrigan, "only to the extent to which they each keep their pledge."

Carver did not like what Morrigan was insinuating about

Bronwyn. "Well, I'm sure Bronwyn will keep her word. She always has."

Morrigan shrugged. "I suppose she will keep her word even if it kills her, but is it the best thing for her? Will it make her happy?"

Anders whispered, "Morrigan! I didn't know you cared. You're *fond* of Bronwyn, aren't you?"

She squeezed his thigh just enough to hurt, and hissed back, "Perhaps I am, but you shall not make sport of me for it. I do...regard her as a friend. I had not expected it, but there it is."

"Don't be mad. I like her, too."

The hall hushed, as people took their places and Fergus Cousland rose to speak.

"A hearty welcome to you all, guests of my house! Your Majesty, Your Graces, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen, welcome! A glad day, when I celebrate my sister's marriage to the man of her choice. Let us lift our cups to the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren in the good old Highever fashion." His own goblet, massive silver sloshed a little as he raised it on high.

"Hail!"

"Hail!" the guests echoed.

"We can do better than that!" Carver muttered.

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!" grinned Fergus, pleased by the enthusiasm.

"Hail!" roared the hall, and as one, they downed their cups.

Fergus wiped his beard. "So tonight is a night to remember, worthies all! Eat and drink your fill. Dance while you still have legs for it, and set all care aside. Let the feast begin!"

An army of covered dishes surged into the hall, and were distributed amongst the tables in marvelously good order. The Wardens, by now ravenous, were soon face-down in the trough.

Habren felt some satisfaction in seeing that Bronwyn's wedding was not at all as elegant as her own. Or at least as elegant as the first part of it, before everything turned horrid. Highever House today was arranged to avoid the least hint of Orlesian influence, which in Habren's opinion meant a decided decline in standards of food and decorations.

She looked at Kane, sitting next to her, and was glad that everything had turned out for the best. Bronwyn could have Loghain! He was old and rather scary, and was really just a jumped-up peasant, when all was said and done. He might be a hero, and all that, but no woman in Ferelden would have a husband as handsome as Habren's!

Kane gave her a smile and a wink. She was so glad he was wearing his new doublet. Now he looked as he should. What did she care if Father married that dowdy old woman? She herself would be married at the beginning of next month to Kane, and live in splendor at the Arl of Denerim's estate.

Father had given Bronwyn an expensive present, even though Bronwyn had never given Habren one. He felt that Fergus' big silver platter counted for the Couslands, and pointed out that it would all work out anyway. Bronwyn and Loghain would probably give something when she married Kane.

Now Kane was bending to the other side to talk to Lady Amell about those grubby little sisters of his. That was really the only thing to trouble her. Just as she was able to get away from her awful little brothers, she now found she was saddled with those wretched girls. Kane *liked* them, and insisted that they would be no trouble at all. Habren had given it some thought, and decided it would be all right. She had been all over the estate when she was being practically kept a prisoner there after Urien got himself killed. There were some perfectly nice rooms upstairs that would do for a nursery and a schoolroom for the girls. Kane was already looking for a tutor and a nursemaid for them. They were really too young to dine in company every day. Once they had their own apartments—upstairs and on the *other* side of the mansion—it was likely as not that Habren would hardly ever have to see them.

At least Father's prospective bride and the rest of the poor relations had made themselves useful, hurriedly making some

dresses for the girls to wear, so that Habren did not have to be ashamed of their appearance today. They were mourning their brother, so that had to be taken into consideration. Habren was annoyed that they were not left at home, since they *were* in mourning. She was still angry at Father for making her stay home an entire month! Here were the girls, their brother only a few days dead, stuffing themselves with delicacies and staring about them as if they had been in decent company all their lives. The only concession to mourning was the boring dark colors the Amell woman had dressed them in. At least the cloth was good, and someone had taken the trouble to comb their hair.

Kane, for his part, was genuinely grateful, "Lady Amell, I'm so obliged to you for all your kindnesses." He nudged Faline. "Did you and Jancey thank Lady Amell for your new dresses?"

Leandra laughed. "Of course they did! And very nicely, too!"

"Yes, indeed," Faline said softly. "You were very good to make them. Thank you again, Lady Amell."

Jancey echoed her, "Thank you, Lady Amell, for giving me a blue dress, so I could come here today. This is fun."

Corbus and Lothar were not quite sure what to make of the little girl visitors, but Father had insisted that they had to be polite. At least these girls weren't cowards, as many girls were, and didn't scream at Killer the way Habren did. It was too cold to play outside much, and so the boys had to share their toys. The younger girl had a doll, and that was no good

at all; but they knew how to play hide-and-seek, which was fairly good fun in the big townhouse. The ceiling was high enough in the schoolroom to play at battledore and shuttlecock—when their tutor was out of the room. And when Lady Amell visited, she had the strange idea that it would be a good thing for them to learn to dance together. Bethany brought her lute and played, and Charade pushed them through the steps, pointing out that they might want to dance at all the weddings that were upon them. Corbus had to dance with Faline, and Lothar with Jancey, who giggled all the time, but it could have been worse. In between the grand dances they played Musical Chairs or Musical Statues or A Cold Wind Blows, and there were treats afterward.

Lothar whispered, "Do you suppose we'll have to dance today?"

"Absolutely," Corbus whispered back. "And we'll have to dance with those girls. I heard Father talking with that Kane fop."

Lothar bubbled with laughter. "Habren *likes* him."

Corbus, older and more cynical, muttered, "Habren would like the Archdemon if he'd make her an Arlessa."

Lothar clapped his hands over his mouth and kicked the table in glee, earning a brief glare from his father.

Corbus, even faced with the prospect of dancing with girls, was in a fairly good humor. Killer had been allowed to come,

as long they didn't let him wander away. It was only fair. The Girl Warden had her big dog Scout with her, and Teyrn Loghain had a new puppy that was smaller than Killer. Bethany's brother had a puppy, too, and one of the other Wardens as well. The dogs were getting along together, with Scout in charge, and who could be a better watchdog than Scout?

The guests looked up from food and drink to cheer Pol Pollen, dressed as a wooer, here to entertain them with a song and dance. With him was the pretty young thing who had played the part of the Rabbit in the Satinalia masque. She was dressed in not much more than some flowery scarves. Pol accompanied them with a big theorbo, the neck of which he handled with a decidedly phallic air. The song was traditional and mildly bawdy, and half of the guests sang along with the jester.

***"I sow'd the Seeds of Love
And I sow'd them in the spring,
I gather'd them up in the morning so soon,
While the small birds so sweetly sing.
While the small birds so sweetly sing.***

***"The gardener was standing by
And I ask'd him to choose for me.
He chose for me the Violet,
the Lily and the Pink,
But those I refused all three;
But those I refused all three.***

"Instead, there was a red Rosebud—"

Here he gave Bronwyn, glorious in scarlet, a naughty wink. She took it in good part, while the hall rocked with laughter.

"—And that is the flower for me.

I pluck'd then

that red Rosebud,

And it opened its petals free,

And it opened its petals free.

"Come, all you false young men,

Do not leave me here to complain,

For the grass that has oftentimes

been trampled underfoot,

Give it time, it will rise again.

Give it time, it will rise again."

Everyone was in the spirit for dancing themselves. Pol tuned up with the other musicians—for he was actually quite a good player of lute, theorbo, and flute—and people sorted themselves out for dancing. Loghain had resigned himself to dancing with his new wife, and Fergus and Anora had made their own arrangements beforehand. Bryland led Leandra to the floor, and Kane took a glowing Habren by the hand. Rothgar Wulffe asked Charade, and the little Bryland boys were frog-marched into doing their duty to the little Kendalls girls.

Nathaniel Howe caused a great deal of talk by asking Bethany

Hawke to dance with him. He was perfectly aware she was a mage, but she was also the prettiest girl sitting down, and it was not as if he had asked her to marry him. Nonetheless, the Grand Cleric and her priests whispered together, looking concerned.

After the next course came more entertainment, but this was a grander and more serious affair. A minstrel-scholar, Benedick Agravaine, presented himself before them. His tall harp was positioned so all could see and hear him, and the old man bowed low.

"We are not the first," he proclaimed, his voice resonant and strong. "We are not the first to face the threat of the darkspawn. Let us all take comfort in the tales of battles of old, and know that those who lived before us endured similar trials, and lived to tell of them. I shall recite to you a part—only a small part—of the Lay of Hafter, a great hero of Ferelden, and the noble ancestor of many before me tonight. This is the Tale of Hafter and the Darkspawn."

"Hafter?" Lothar piped up. "I like Dane better. He was a werewolf for awhile."

"Hush, Lothar," Bryland said, ruffling his son's hair. "Hafter is our ancestor, too." He leaned over to the Kendalls, smiling kindly. "And yours as well. It is a fine thing to hear of the deeds of our forefathers. As the scholar says, we are not the first to live through hard times and the threat of Blight."

The Minstrel's Tale of Hafter and the Darkspawn

*Hear me! We've heard of the lords of the Alamarri,
Doughty teyrns of old, and the glory they cut
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!*

*Greatest of swords Dane gave to Hafter,
Yusaris, Bane of Dragons, a blade of worth;
Well-forged the steel, shining and sharp.
And gave him eke a helm and byrnie,
hard and hand-linked.*

Carver blushed happily, thinking about the greatsword in his quarters. Hafter had used it long ago, and it had passed through countless hands. One could hardly claim to *own* such a blade. It was passing through time, and he was simply a link in the great chain of its history.

*All these he had; and had beside his lady,
Daughter of Helming, ring-bedecked teyrna,
Often in hall to offer the jeweled mead-cup
To young and old, the loyal retainers.*

"'Tis a translation," Morrigan remarked dismissively. " A translation only. The poem is far more impressive in the original Alamarri."

Her tablemates hushed her. Luckily the rest of the hall had not noticed the exchange.

Across the seapaths came tidings;

the ancient evil risen and raging.

***Up rose the mighty one, ringed with his warriors,
Shieldmaidens and thanes, bravest of bands.
Some bode without, battle-gear guarding, as bade the
chief.***

***Then hied that troop where the hero led them,
To front the fiends and fight for life,
Foe against foe.***

***Then spoke Hafter, wise words and ready,
"Oft luck spares a man if his courage hold."***

***Through wan night striding came the walkers-in-shadow,
Foulest of fiends, the children of darkness.
Wakeful, the warriors, war-weal weaving,
Bided the battle's issue.***

***Then splintered many a shield,
And many a worthy warrior went down to the halls of the
dead.***

***The sky resounded with the strain of the struggle.
Alamarri with fear and frenzy were filled, each one,
Who from the strife that wailing heard,
The foes of the gods in their grisly song,
Cry of the Tainted, clamorous pain from the
Captives of hell.***

***Not in any wise would the hero Teyrn
Suffer that slaughterous spawn to survive.***

***Many a thane brandished blade ancestral,
Fain the life of their lord to shield,
Their praised prince, if power were theirs.
They slew the foe, hardy-hearted heroes of war,
Aiming their swords on every side
The accursed to kill.***

***To Hafter now the glory was given,
And the death-sick spawn their dens in the Deep Roads
sought,
Noisome abode. To all the clans
By that bloody battle the boon had come.
Their burden of battle borne so long.***

***Many at morning came the wonder to view,
Folk-leaders faring from far and near.
The fulsome foe, blood-dyed in death,
On the mirksome moor lay slain.***

***Then Hafter's glory eager they echoed, and all averred
That from sea to sea, or south to north,
There was no other in Thedas,
Under vault of heaven,
More valiant found;
Of warrior none more worthy to rule!***

***Then Hafter spoke, foster-son of Dane:
"This work of war most willingly
We have fought, and fearlessly dared the force of the foe.
No longer live they, loathsome fiends,***

Sunk in their sin.

***In baleful bonds they bide until such awful doom
As the Mighty Maker shall mete them out."***

***There was hurry and hest in the hall of Hafter
For hands to bedeck it, and dense was the throng
Of men and women the wine-hall to cleanse,
The guest-room to garnish. Gold-gay shone the hangings
That were wove on the wall, and wonders many
To delight each mortal that looked upon them.***

***Bowed then to bench those bearers-of-glory,
Fain of the feasting. featly received.
Many a mead-cup raised the mighty-in-spirit,
Kinsmen who sat in the sumptuous hall.***

***Glad rose the revel, with harp and hail.
Came forth the Teyrna Winifrith, hand in hand with the
hero.
A brimming cup she gave him, with kindly greeting
And winsome words.***

"Kill darkspawn, and then have a party," muttered Hakan approvingly. "You can't improve on a classic."

***Then gave Hafter from his own rich hoard:
Gold rings and war-steeds and weapons,
Wished his warriors joy of them.
Manfully thus, the mighty teyrn, hoard-guard for heroes,
That hard fight repaid with jewels and treasures***

***contemned by none;
An heirloom to each that did his due.
Home then rode the clansmen from that merry journey.***

***Past and present, forever prevails the Maker's Will.
Therefore is insight always best,
And prudence of mind.
For whoso endures long in this mortal life,
How much awaits him of pain and pleasure!***

Master Benedick was applauded and rewarded, and the descendants of Hafter were sufficiently flattered into a glow of self-satisfaction. Even Bronwyn felt something of the general pride in having such an ancestor. Of course, while many Fereldan nobles claimed descent from Hafter, only Nathaniel Howe had the documentation to prove the links. For that matter, the Couslands claimed descent from Hafter through their intermarriage with the Howes, as did the Brylands and Wulffes.

After the last round of dancing. Fergus promised them a special treat: the Warden minstrel that many of them had had the privilege of hearing down in Ostagar. Wulffe began applauding immediately. Leliana smiled, sweeping gracefully into the center of the room, accepting from a servant the lute she had sent to Highever House earlier in the day.

"The most beautiful song I know is a song I learned from the elves," she said, her sweet voice easily filling the hall. "Tonight

I share the best I have you." She strummed her lute thoughtfully, and then her voice rose, swirling like perfumed smoke, singing in a language known to only a few.

***"Hahren na melana sahlin
emma ir abelas
souver'inan isala hamin
vhenan him dor'felas
in uthenera na revas"***

Danith hardly knew how to feel about this. How had Leilana learned such a song? Her voice was agreeable and her pronunciation correct. Still—it was a thing of the Dalish.

"She sings beautifully," whispered Nuala. "It is an honor. Still—it is odd to hear this song at a wedding..."

Steren agreed. "Perhaps she does not understand the words."

Leliana's voice soared on, filling her listeners with a kind of silent peace.

***"vir sulahn'nehn
vir dirthera
vir samahl la numin
vir 'lath sa'vunin'"***

Carver leaned forward, urgently whispering to Danith. "What is she singing about?"

Danith murmured, unwilling to miss a note. "It is difficult to render it in the common tongue." Seeing that the boy was still eager to hear, she relented.

***"Elder your time is come.
Now I am filled with sorrow.
Weary eyes need resting;
Heart has become grey and slow.
In waking sleep is freedom.***

***We sing, rejoice,
We tell the tales,
We laugh and cry,
We love one more day."***

Bronwyn leaned on Loghain's shoulder, the song working its magic on her as well. After a day of such frantic bustle, it was sweet to have a moment of peace like this. Faces had softened with the lulling of the gentle music: the guests would depart in a glow of good spirits, happy to find their beds, but glad they had spent the evening here.

She told Loghain, "Keeper Lanaya gave me an elven songbook, and I passed it on to Leliana."

Loghain nodded. "She made good use of it."

The wedding guests, gorged and drunken and merry, cheered the bride and groom as they left for the Palace. Fergus embraced his sister, a little maudlin with drink.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you, pup?" he asked plaintively.

"I'll be fine. And this way I won't have to put up with anything resembling the hideous old bedding customs. It's time to put those traditions behind us. Loghain and I will retire in decent privacy, and I hope to someday do you the same courtesy."

"If that's what you want," he said, smiling fondly and smelling a bit like a distillery. He gave her another hug, and escorted the Queen out to her carriage, with Loghain giving his arm to Bronwyn.

Bronwyn was once again resigned to riding in the carriage, with small, incredibly hard pearl beads pressing into her back, packed in with Leliana, Morrigan, and the dogs. They were now joined by the dwarf Soren, strapped to the top of the carriage, completely overcome by West Hills brandy. Once secured, no one in the street would see him, and it was really too dark for residents of upper stories to look out and be puzzled by the sight of a snoring dwarf on top of the Teyrn of Highever's carriage.

Loghain, for that matter, smirked when he was handing his lady into to the coach, their conversation nearly inaudible due to the atrocious noises issuing from just above their heads.

"Fortunate for him that that we can hear him," Morrigan remarked contemptuously. "Else he would likely sleep all night and the following day up there."

Truly, not all the guests were the highest spirits. The children were exhausted. Rather than force them to stay until the bride was seen off, they had stayed just long enough for Leliana's performance and the serving of the aromatically spiced wedding cake, and then were sent home, accompanied by their tutor and a suitable guard.

Others were made sad by too much drink, or too many memories. Nathaniel brooded over his own prospects, rather put out, now that it came to it, that Loghain should carry off such a prize. Habren was tired and sulky, loath to share Kane's attention any longer. There were those, like Aveline, who were widowed, and for whom the celebrations of a wedding brought home their own bereavement.

For that matter, Anora had had all the feasting she cared for. She liked to keep regular hours, and it was now considerably past her usual bedtime. She looked forward to returning to the Palace and the familiar comfort of her bed. Not wishing to seem a poor sport in Fergus' eyes, she smiled graciously, but he, made observant by love, could see how her eyelids drooped and her smile faltered. He handed her into her own carriage with careful tenderness, and his arm received a discreet pressure in thankful acknowledgement.

Loghain mounted his horse and rode just in front of Bronwyn's carriage, tolerating the usual quips and drunken advice in good part. He certainly did not need the input of noble lackwits, but it would be foolish to antagonize them, and thus lose the good will the marriage had gained him. It was growing cold, and a thin, icy mist lay heavy on the city. The

horses' hooves struck the cobbles with a sharp and heightened clatter. Altogether it was just the sort of night, and just the sort of scene, that one could imagine being the setting for an attack. Loghain peered into the shadows, into dark alleys and up at nearby rooftops, searching for the tell-tale glint of steel.

A pack of random beggars at the end of the Gate Bridge briefly alarmed him, but they were no more than they seemed, and the guards got rid of them without trouble. No doubt they were making for Highever House, and would be among the first in line for the remnants of tonight's feast come tomorrow morning.

Anora fell asleep in her coach; and somewhat to their later embarrassment, so did all the occupants of Bronwyn's. Even the puppies were quiet in the basket, twitching a little in soft and milky puppy dreams.

Morrigan roused first, hearing the raised voices in the Palace courtyard, as the staff (many of whom had attended the wedding at the Cathedral) came out to welcome home the bridal couple. She laughed sharply at the sight of Leliana fast asleep, her mouth open, and at Bronwyn, her ruby headpieces askew, Bronwyn heard the sound dimly, and then sensed the brighter light and sat up.

"Holy Maker!" she groaned. "I must look a sight."

"You do," Morrigan agreed helpfully.

Leliana, when awakened, went to work repairing the damage, and Bronwyn emerged from the conveyance with dignity intact. Anora's seneschal was a considerate man, and quietly awakened her and gave her time to put herself in order before stepping from her carriage.

Bronwyn, still dozy, smiled on the assembled staff, deferring politely to the Queen. Loghain, who had had just about enough of ceremony for the day, hurried things along, reaching into the coach to claim the sleepily whimpering Amber. Bronwyn said her farewells to her grinning...or smiling...or wistfully nostalgic Wardens, and entered the front gate of the Palace on Loghain's arm. In his other, he held his puppy close. Scout trailed behind, eyes half-shut, tail down, ready to sleep at a moment's notice.

"Don't forget Soren!" Bronwyn reminded them, and disappeared behind the heavy brass-bound oak doors.

The coach she had ridden in was Fergus', and the driver was obliging enough to take the "Warden ladies" around to their own entrance.

"I wonder," mused Anders, swaying gently, "how many Wardens would fit in the Teyrn of Highever's carriage."

It was the signal for a crazed scramble. Seeing Anders lunge, Carver grabbed him by the back of his doublet and dashed in ahead of him, pulling the basket of puppies protectively onto his lap. Anders shouted, "Oi!" and fired a spark in his direction that hit Jowan instead.

"That was a mistake," declared Hakan. "He has the power to boil your brains."

"That's 'cos he's e-e-e-e-vil," said Anders.

"Am not!" Jowan shouted. He scrambled up the steps to the carriage. "Let me in!" he demanded. "Lily needs me!"

"Are too," Anders muttered, dusting himself off.

When Hakan dwarf tried to get into the carriage next, Idunn roared, "Ladies first!" and slugged him.

By this time Anders had managed to get into the carriage, his arms around Morrigan, taking advantage of the dark interior. Morrigan's throaty laughter was later agreed to be "creepy and inappropriate" by Leliana and Aveline, who had discovered that they saw eye to eye on many matters.

"I can walk," Danith said with stiff dignity. "It is but a few steps to the Compound."

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no!" Anders protested, coming up for air from a liplock. "Plenty of room, plenty of room! Everybody in!"

"It's a bit hard on the horses, Warden," the driver protested mildly.

"There now," Quinn interrupted. "You see? Not right to hurt the horses."

Steren thought the same. "I wish to stop at the stables and see to the halla anyway. I shall return to the Compound later."

"Good idea!" cried Quinn, looping his huge arm over the slender elf's shoulder. "I'll go with you and help!"

"Have fun!" called Carver. "Meanwhile, I would like to recapitulate tonight's fine...old...song!"

"Oh, don't!" pleaded Leliana.

"I sow'd the seeds of lo-o-o-o-ove,

I sow'd them in the spri-i-i-i-ng..."

Servants and officials, knights and men-at-arms waited in the entry hall of the Palace and lined the corridors to the private wing. Once inside, almost impulsively, Anora and Bronwyn kissed each other's cheeks, while Loghain looked on, inscrutable. It was a long gauntlet of bows and the reciprocal gracious nods until they bade Anora good night and were within sight of their own apartments. At Loghain's darkening scowl, the beaming or merely curious servants who did have an extremely good reason to be there slipped away, and the newly-married couple could converse quietly in something resembling privacy.

"Well," said Loghain. "That's done."

His new wife stopped in her tracks, and threw him a look that

suggested that that had not been the most tactful remark to make at the moment. Scout stopped too, staring up at Loghain quizzically. Bronwyn took a long, deep breath, and resumed walking.

"Yes," she said. "What's done is done."

He must not let her retire on that note. He walked her to her door, which opened to reveal a smiling, excited Fionn, waiting to help her remove her finery. Ignoring the maid's presence. Loghain took Bronwyn's hand and pressed a grave kiss on it. Amber whimpered sleepily.

"Soon," he said, raising his brows.

That wrung a smile from her.

"Not *too* soon. This wedding regalia is more complicated than my armor!"

He gave a half-smile in return, as the door shut behind her. He picked up his pace and strode into his quarters without ceremony.

His manservant, Cashel, bowed in greeting.

"Good evening, my lord. May I offer my felicitations on this happy occasion?"

"You may make me presentable to my bride, Cashel."

"Indeed, my lord. The bath is drawn and ready."

After an afternoon and evening of ornate and heavy clothing, dancing, feasting, drinking, and breathing in the exhalations of hundreds of people doing exactly the same things, Loghain thought that was a brilliant notion. He sank into the hot, herbed water, wishing briefly that he could just sleep in the tub. Impossible. He must not disappoint his bride and scandalize the servants. To his annoyance, Cashel was proposing to shave him for the second time that day.

"One ought to put one's best foot forward, my lord. Shows respect for the importance of the occasion."

"She'd better not expect me to shave *every* night,"

The girl ought not to expect him to make love to her every night, for that matter, though she was a young thing and hot-blooded. A man needed his sleep sometimes, and they had been together only last night. Still, it was her wedding night, and she had a right to his undivided attention. Possibly he could pleasantly surprise her...

Bronwyn was so tired of her finery that it was difficult not to snap at Fionn and rip it all off. She forced herself to sit, hands folded, while the maid untangled tendrils of hair from her beaded collar and her headpiece. The jewels were removed and put aside, and then, in a tiresome reversal of the earlier process, the massive weights of corset, bodice, skirt, and underdress were lifted away.

"Let me get your hair up out of the way, your ladyship," Fionn said soothingly, "and I've got a nice hip bath waiting for you."

"Thank the Maker!" Bronwyn moaned. "I feel so grubby!"

Scout snorted and found his cushion by fire. Bronwyn smiled fondly on the dog.

"Maybe you should be next, old fellow. You're pretty ripe, too, after such a busy day. A bath would be just the thing for you."

Scout feigned sleep—or total deafness— with the skill of a bard.

Much refreshed, Bronwyn allowed Fionn to dress her in her prettiest silk nightdress and her mothers gorgeous scarlet dressing gown. Thus washed and arrayed, she felt better about being a noble bride, and sat complacently while her hair was brushed and braided.

"And now," Bronwyn declared solemnly, "We await the enemy's next move. I'll stand the watch. You go to bed."

"I should be here to open the door..."

"I am perfectly capable of opening my own door," Bronwyn assured her. "To bed with you. We'll be busy enough tomorrow."

Fionn paused, her eyes wide and damp with sentiment. "My lady...Teyrna Bronwyn... Maker watch over you!"

Bronwyn rose, and kissed the maid's brow, and then smilingly gave her a little push to send her on her way. Did the girl imagine she was some sort of trembling virgin? It was

possible, she supposed. The maid went back through the study and shut her own door. Bronwyn at last had a moment alone to reflect on the day.

Teyrna Bronwyn. It did sound very well. To be Teyrna of Gwaren was *something*.

Should she pour some wine for Loghain? No. She could not imagine that either of them needed anything more to drink. Better to get on with it right away. Or did the proper protocol demand that they talk to each other for a specified period of time? Mother would have known, but Mother was not here. Were they supposed to protest their affections to one another? Doing that in cold blood would make her feel very, very silly.

"Bronwyn?"

Loghain's voice was low and questioning, muffled by the heavy door. Trying not to seem pathetically eager, she slowly opened the door, and could not help smiling at the sight of him, prepared for bed in proper Palace style, in a velvet dressing gown. She looked again, and noticed that there was no sign of a night shirt underneath. Perhaps the evening had real possibilities, after all.

"Where's Amber?"

"Dead asleep in her basket. Just as well. Come."

Ah, so much for romance. No sweeping off her feet, but a

practical walk, side by side, into her bedchamber, and a brief discussion about who preferred which side. Loghain, of course, wanted the side nearest the door, so he could leave when duty called.

She sniffed. "What about when *my* duty calls?"

"Then you can crawl out over me. I don't mind." With a shrug, he cast off his splendid dressing gown, and stood naked before her. Being a sensible man, he folded it carefully, and laid it on her long rosewood chest, lest it be creased.

Bronwyn wondered if she was supposed to disrobe so casually, but he had different ideas: unfastening her red wrapper with a dark smile and a searching glance; and then gently unlacing her fragile white nightdress, allowing it to pool on the floor. Bronwyn noted—in the back of her mind—that he was not so particular of her clothes as he was of his own.

But these were minor matters. She was in his arms, and he smelled very nice and clean, which was something of a surprise after today's events.

"I had a bath, too," she murmured, responding to his hands and lips.

"I noticed. You deserve a special reward for such thoughtfulness."

"I didn't really... what are you doing?"

"Shhhh...."

She was being pushed back onto the bed, onto the lovely silken pillows that were lately the property of diabolic blood mages. They were very nice pillows all the same. Loghain was intent on kissing her: his lips warm and agreeably soft, traveling from her brow and mouth and jaw, to the joining of her neck and the curve of her breast. And he kept moving down, tickling her, warming her and startling her all at once. His fingers were gentle and probing, and his tongue... She had heard of such things, of course, but they were foreign... arts... and Loghain surely would not...

"Oh!"

"Shhhh..."

Outside, the mist thickened, and as the temperature dropped, snow fell softly on Denerim. Everything sordid was masked in purest white: the open sewers of the Alienage, the filth of the streets. Even the rough stone and timber of the buildings was made beautiful—if only for a brief moment in time. The snowfall grew heavier. and Denerim grew quiet: the curses of drunkards, the cries of lovers, the pleas of beggars, and the moans of the dying all muffled alike.

Thanks for my reviewers: Chandagnac, Oleander's One, Blinded in a bolthole, EmbertoInferno, Jyggilag, almostinsane, riverdaleswhiteflash, Nemrut, Shakespeira, Zute, Guest, Mike 3207, Robbie the Phoenix, Have Socks.

Will Travel, Raxiselic, KnightOfHolyLight, EpitomyofShyness, timunderwood9, ShyWriter413, Jenna53, MisterSP, Phygmalion, JackOfBladesX, Juliafied, mille libri, Herebedragons66, DarkSky01, AD Lewis, COL-Goodall, Josie Lange, arutka2000, Cobar713, Doom-N-GloomGal, Psyche Sinclair, Tsu Doh Nimh, and chocolatebrownie12.

The Borders Yet to Be map is canon. If you recruit Loghain, it's part of his equipment. He's not exactly planning war, but he has a picture in his mind of what Ferelden ought to be, and he'd be quite opportunistic about making it a reality. If you look at the whole map of Thedas (especially in the compressed view), it becomes even more obvious that Jader geographically should be part of Ferelden.

If you look at the compressed map of Thedas, the fact that Jader seems to be geographically a part of Ferelden is very apparent. Based on what we know about Orlesian history, I suspect that Jader—since it's so remote—was an independent territory until around the times that the Dales fell. The nearest large city to the west is Halamshiral, which was the elven capital. I believe that Jader was in fact an Alamarri settlement, and the Orlesians extended their border to include it only after they had conquered the elves. I find it interesting that one of the DA wiki's maps of the Orlesian Empire does not even extend far enough to include Jader.

As to the Arl of Denerim's estate. It is clearly from the outside not all on ground level plus dungeons. There have got to be

some staircases to upper case of the outside not matching the inside.

My excerpt of the Lay of Hafter is obviously a shameless pastiche, using bits of Beowulf taken from various translations: the impossible-to-translate opening from Burton Raffel, and other parts from Seamus Heaney, Howell Chickering, and R. M. Liuzza. A huge debt is owed to the brilliant site Beowulf in Hypertext. Look it up! And some of it I just made up.

I've published another story! See my author page for the link. Reviews would be appreciated.

77. All the Way to West Hill

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 77: All the Way to West Hill

"Darkspawn!"

Rodyk's man on point screamed a warning, just a split second after Astrid sensed the Taint the air.

They had grown complacent in the past month, seeing little of the darkspawn. In the stretch of the Amgarrak Road close to the meeting place at the tip of Lake Calenhad, things were about to change.

"Form ranks!" Rodyk roared. "Assemble the ballistae!"

The darkspawn were coming from the east, on the Amgarrak Road. Astrid had time for the ironic reflection that her ability to sense darkspawn did not mean much, since the darkspawn could sense her just as readily.

"Wardens!" she shouted. "To your positions!"

The obscene chuckling echoed from stone to stone. The darkspawn were rounding a turn, not half a league away. No one could see them, but everyone could hear them. The

Wardens could *fee* them. Shale thundered up beside Astrid, the crystals embedded in its rocky skin gleaming richly in the dim light. Everyone moved carefully away from the front of the ballistae, as the explosive bolts were loaded into the grooves.

Rodyk lifted his arm.

"Archers! Make ready!"

Catriona and the Dalish Ailill stood with the Legion bowmen, their arrows on their bowstrings, drawing back...sighting down the shafts.

The first scabby heads appeared in the distance. Velanna moved up to Astrid's other side, breathing slowly and deeply, staff at the ready.

"Loose!"

Bows twanged high and the ballistae low. One of the ballista bolts scraped along the side of the wall, striking sparks. Deflected, it bounced to the left and slammed into a hurlock, and finally struck the tunnel wall behind the creature and exploded. More darkspawn surged out of the turn.

"Now, Velanna! Now!"

The ensuing fireball knocked the darkspawn down, and left everyone's ears ringing from the shock. The archers recovered and sent more arrows winging at the enemy. Swordsmen and axemen adjusted their grips.

More darkspawn rushed them, howling. It was a big band, Astrid realized. A *very* big band. The earth trembled, and an ogre charged out of the shadows. Velanna screamed out a spell to weaken it and slow it down. The ballistae got off another bolt each. One impaled the ogre through the side of the chest and then exploded, destroying the creature's heart and lungs in a single blinding thunderclap. This blow briefly halted the darkspawn charge, but soon the battle was rejoined, and it was up to steel and magic to save them.

At the trot, Astrid led the vanguard forward to engage the darkspawn hand to hand. The archers shot high, aiming at the darkspawn shoving behind their leaders.

"You engineers!" Rodyk shouted. "Get your ballistae up on that rise and shoot over our heads!"

More darkspawn were coming: pushing and trampling in their eagerness to attack the Wardens; hopping, squealing. This was no mere band: it was a small army.

Rodyk roared commands, and the Legion formed a shield wall the width of the Road. The darkspawn surged up around the Wardens' skirmish line.

The vanguard was being mobbed. There was scarcely room to strike a blow. A human shriek rose up above the horrid grunting of the darkspawn. Astrid caught a glimpse of Liam's sunbright head, his mouth open, his eyes staring, until they dimmed suddenly, like candles blown out. The man collapsed, and the Blighted tide covered him.

"Wardens! Get back!" Astrid screamed. "Behind the shields!"

They were swimming in the flood of darkspawn, fighting to stay upright and armed. Astrid snarled as a genlock gibbered in her face, clawed hands scrabbling at her. An immense blow and the genlock and three of its fellows were flying backwards, slamming into the wall.

"Move, Warden!" boomed Shale. The golem halted, suddenly made sluggish by the backlash of Velanna's entropy spell. The mage's face was sickly with fear. She scrambled away from a circle of paralyzed darkspawn, and made a dash for the shield wall. A pair of overlapped shields briefly parted, admitting her. From that comparative safety, she unleashed another fireball. It passed within inches of Astrid, singeing the hair on the back of her neck below her helmet. It exploded further down the passage, and flames licked backwards. Unholy screams echoed from wall to wall.

Explosive bolts sailed over the squirming mass, and smashed the darkspawn. Bits of the creatures flew up to the ceiling, and then dropped heavily on all the combatants. Velanna frantically fired spell after spell, downing lyrium potions, trying to rally her mana. Gathering all her strength, she unleashed a firestorm on the rear of the tunnel. Darkspawn screeched as flames roared up from the stone floor, consuming them. More fire dropped from the ceiling, clinging to heads and arms and breastplates. As some of the creatures withered in flame and fell dead, more rushed up behind them. They too, perished horribly. The fire spread, fed by the darkspawn, tongues of flame leaping from corpse to corpse and on to the living.

Aeron was stumbling, his helmet knocked off, his hair afire, blinded by blood from a slash to his forehead. Astrid shouted, "It's me!" and herded him along with her, trying to shelter him with her own shield. A hurlock was exactly where she wanted to push through the shield wall. Astrid bashed the creature from behind. When it turned on her, a Legionnaire stabbed it. Astrid gave Aeron a push, and the dwarves reached out to help the man inside and smother the flames.

Askil was not far, his face intent as his axe swept away a genlock's head. Astrid shouted at him wordlessly, and he nodded slightly, and began trudging doggedly back. Falkor, she feared was nearly lost in the beserker-rage, but Shale waded through the press and tapped him lightly—for a golem—on the back of the neck. Falkor dropped behind the golem, and Shale crushed another half-dozen of the darkspawn with a single sweep.

"Come on!" Astrid shouted. "Come on *now!* You, too, Shale!"

The dwarves made it back behind the shield wall. Astrid slipped through. Slinging her own shield onto her back. Astrid concentrated on using her sword to stab at the enemy from under the shields; stabbing at knees and groins. Darkspawn were made like other races. If you could nick the femoral artery, they would bleed out in seconds, just like dwarves, elves, and humans.

Shale positioned itself just in front of the shields, so its back was protected. It could still lash out with its mighty arms and grab at individual darkspawn, ripping them apart, throwing

them back onto their fellows. The ballistae loosed bolt after bolt and the archers poured a rain of arrows down on the attackers. Now and then someone stumbled and fell in the shield wall, but others were there to take their places. The shield wall strained, but held. Some of the archers moved up and shot directly into the darkspawn. When the darkspawn dead mounded up too high, Rodyk ordered a withdrawal of five paces, executed on command.

The attack slowed, the darkspawn numbers dwindled, and the unbearable noise diminished. Dying and wounded darkspawn gobbled and thrashed. The archers took careful aim and finished them off. The ballistae engineers had no more targets, and leaned on their carriages, exhausted.

A terrible silence fell. Some of the Legion slid to the floor and curled up, unable to do anything more at the moment. Astrid found Velanna, sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, eyes blank.

"The wounded need help," she said. Velanna gave her a hot, resentful look, but got up, drank another potion, and set to work.

Rodyk strode up to Astrid. "That was... grim, " he said. "We must have got soft. I lost eleven."

"I lost one dead," Astrid said, the reality sinking in. "And one may not be fit to fight for some time." She climbed over dead darkspawn, looking for Liam. It took some time to find him.

Liam *had* died. She had lost a Warden. Perhaps they had been lucky not to lose more, but this one was hers, and he had been a good fighter and a cheerful companion. She bent and tugged the young man out from under the stinking darkspawn. He had once mentioned some family. Catriona would know. And Bronwyn would want his service and his death recorded.

Velanna was busily casting healing spells, though Astrid noted that she had gone to Ailill first, though he was unhurt. She pressed her lips together, controlling her anger. Aeron needed Velanna's help *now*, and plenty of the Legion did as well.

Askill was pressing a bandage to Falkor's face, which would likely never be the same, considering the jaw wound. Aeron had lost his hair, and Astrid wondered if it would ever grow back. The minstrel, though in pain, was cheerful about it.

"I shall pretend to have shaved it deliberately, and set a new style. Maybe I'll set it off with an earring."

Catriona gave his arm a squeeze. "It makes you look like a real badass, Aeron."

A few scouts were sent to see if more darkspawn were coming. Ailill volunteered to go with them. Other unwounded warriors began opening up rations.

"Good work, Shale," Astrid said. She meant it, too. It seemed likely to her that the shield wall would not have held without Shale's support. The ballistae were good, and magic had

played its part, but Shale had been *crucial*.

"I am always overjoyed to receive my little crumbs of praise. How does it feel? It appears relatively uninjured."

"I am quite well, Shale, though others are not."

"Yes, I have noticed that it is not as squishy as most."

Darion Olmech had fought with them, naturally, and well, too, though for the most part his contribution had been to load ballistae. The battle left him shaken and appalled. He was taking long swallows from a stone bottle.

"How can we hope for final victory without the power of golems?" he asked Astrid, his voice low. "What chance do we have? You saw what Shale did, and so did I. It made all the difference. All the difference! The Anvil of the Void is truly gone?"

"So they tell me. The golems were made by pouring molten lyrium over a living dwarf encased in metal or stone. The process was excruciating, and Caridin pleaded with the Warden-Commander to destroy the Anvil. She did, since she needed a Paragon's moral authority to resolve the succession."

"She was wrong. The Anvil of the Void belonged to the dwarves, and the Grey Wardens had no right to make such a decision." He wiped sweat and soot from his face, and slumped on a ballista carriage. "There must be another way.

What has been invented once can be invented again. We understand the principle. It only remains to find the means."

"You mean... discover another way to make golems?" Astrid bit her lip, thinking. "That could be the salvation of Orzammar."

It would be a way to go home, too. Astrid was instantly swept up in exciting new possibilities. If she could present Orzammar with a new supply of golems, she would unquestionably be made a Paragon. Bhelen would not be able to touch her. A Paragon of Orzammar was greater than any king or queen. In fact, she could *be* queen if she so chose.

"You know," Darion whispered. "I have come upon references in the Shaperate to Amgarrak Thaig. They carried on experiments with golems long after Caridin was lost. If we could find the Thaig, something might remain."

"Ah," said Astrid, things becoming clearer to her. "So this is why you traveled with us."

"Yes. Why deny it? I'm looking for Amgarrak Thaig. It should be somewhere northeast of here, and not far at all. I have maps, but the way has been blocked for generations."

"I have my mission to complete, but after we arrive at the fortress of West Hill, we have orders to we explore the Deep Roads in the area. That might be the best opportunity."

Darion smiled slowly. "I was hoping you'd agree."

Astrid gave the scheme more thought, drawn in by the possibilities. According to the lore, Grey Wardens were not supposed to interfere in politics, but that was plainly not how it worked in practice. From what she had gathered in Denerim, the First Warden cared primarily for the affairs of the Anderfels, and his lack of support for Ferelden in this time of Blight appeared to be politically motivated by a desire to appease Orlais. Then, too, Bronwyn was not in the least impressed by the Grey Warden restrictions against holding titles. She was, in fact, clearly determined to make herself Queen of Ferelden. Astrid did not gainsay her for her ambition, but felt that what one Warden did, another could do. If a Warden Queen could rule a surface kingdom, could not a Warden Queen rule Orzammar?

Orzammar certainly needed something better than Bhelen. Given Bronwyn's situation, she could not blame her commander for choosing against Harrowmont, who, to be honest, was not the strong leader that Orzammar needed. Harrowmont was the traditionalists' choice, and tradition would be the doom of the dwarves. But Bhelen... Did the deshyrs know what they were getting in Bhelen? A kinslayer, a greedy manipulator, a liar and a cheat who cared only for his own power? Bhelen must go.

Her thoughts touched on Brosca, who would not like it if Bhelen fell. Astrid quite liked Brosca, and would have to make the former Duster understand that her sister and the child would be safe even if Bhelen perished. The child—who was just as much Astrid's nephew as Brosca's— would still be an

Aeducan, and the mother—Rica—would keep her rank of petty noble. In fact, since Grey Wardens had trouble reproducing, it might be that the child would be her own heir. It mattered little to Astrid, who had never particularly longed to endure the inconveniences of pregnancy and childbearing. For that matter, the child would be better off without the influence of a tunnel snake like Bhelen.

She would have liked to continue the journey underground—and her very interesting conversation with Darion—but Bronwyn's orders were explicit. She was to travel to West Hill on the surface, while Tara's party had their own trial by fire below. There would be time enough to talk more with the scholar when they all gathered at West Hill.

Giving formal thanks to Rodyk and the Legion, Astrid led her battered Wardens to the Lake Calenhad access point. The Legion would dig in here, and await Tara and her party. Astrid hoped Tara would have better luck than her own. Catriona appeared especially saddened by Liam's death, and Astrid was gentle with her, praising the young man's courage and skill.

It was broad day when they opened the seal, and all of them reeled back, nearly blinded by the light. After the first shock, the humans and elves raced up the steps and threw themselves on the grassy earth of the surface, weeping; rejoicing at the sight of the sun and the feel of the wind on their faces. Astrid would never understand them, but it would do no good to laugh at them.

She consulted her map. "The Spoiled Princess is this way," she said. "Let's go."

Tara was not looking forward to her stint in the Deep Roads. She understood why Bronwyn felt it was important for all the Wardens to see the Deep Roads for themselves, but it was a daunting prospect, especially after Astrid's people had been so badly cut up. On the other hand, she could hardly expect them to go back and endure all the danger themselves. According to the maps, it should only be a little over two days march to the entrance near West Hill.

If the maps were correct. If there were no cave-ins. If the darkspawn did not attack in force. If.

While the three dwarves in Tara's party had plenty of experience, Darach had been in the Deep Roads once before, and only briefly. Walter and Griffith had been present on the day the Broodmothers were killed, but were part of the support troops on the surface. They had seen-and smelled-the condition of the soldiers who had seen the horrors with their own eyes, but not ventured below themselves. Now there was no choice.

At least they had a company of Legion escorting them. Shale, too. Astrid had told her that Shale was the key to victory. If the golem could stop snarking long enough, Tara imagined it would fight extremely well. Shale thought a lot of Astrid: not so much of a mage like Tara.

Of course, Tara had fought extensively in the Deep Roads herself, and journeyed to lost thaigs and Bownammar, City of the Dead. She had seen the wonders of the Anvil of the Void with her own eyes, something about which Darion Olmech, the dwarven scholar, asked her again and again.

He asked Brosca, too, who had been there as well. There was an edginess about Brosca now, and her temper was shorter. Ever since Cullen's death, something had gone sour and brittle in the duster. Darion was finding that out. Tara hoped he would stop pestering them with questions.

"Give it a rest, Darion!" Brosca's broad, good-humored face had turned hard. "It's over! Done! The Anvil was destroyed!"

The scholar was undeterred. "Do you really think a human should have taken it upon herself—"

"Branka pissed off the Boss, bonehead!" Brosca snarled. "Just like you're pissing me off right now. Branka went crazy and killed her whole house. She fucked up! Then she tried to force the Boss to get her to the Anvil. That was dumb. You don't piss off Bronwyn without consequences. You didn't see the things Branka did. Turning the women of her house into Broodmothers, trying to make enough darkspawn to force her way through to the Anvil... Letting the men be turned to ghouls! The Boss thought she needed to be stopped, and that was good enough for me! Now, if you will just get out of my *face*..."

Darion looked after her, disappointed, and then saw Tara, and

hurried in her direction.

Tara raised her hands, and tried to stem the flood of words. "What she said. I think Bronwyn was right. She thinks dwarves have a serious enough population problem without killing breeders by making golems. She thinks its morally wrong to kill people in order to make them into weapons. She thinks there's no way that such a technology would not be misused. And... well... Branka really did piss her off. Me, too, for that matter. She was so *smug*."

He huffed. "Astrid agrees with me that the Anvil should have been preserved."

"Astrid wasn't *there!*" Tara felt her face crinkling into a scowl—a scowl so tight it hurt. "Leave it alone, Darion. I don't want to fight with you about something that's done. Caridin himself begged us to destroy the Anvil. He knew he'd done wrong by inventing it. It's gone. If you want to help your people, do something for the dusters and the surfacers."

She turned on her heel and stalked away. Behind her, a frustrated Darion considered his options, and then slipped away for a quiet talk with Sigrun and Jukka, who might not be so completely under the Warden-Commander's control.

After the next march, they met another band of darkspawn, smaller than the army Astrid had faced, but still formidable. These were also traveling west on the Amgarrak Road. What followed was grim.

There was a crossroads here of sorts. Not as big or complex as Caridin's Cross, but with enough twists and turns to allow the darkspawn to hit them from two directions. The Legion had experienced this before, and drew up into a half-circle formation with the archers in the center. There was no higher ground for the ballistae, and so once the first volleys were over, the engineers were forced to draw their personal weapons and fight in formation, stabbing out at targets of opportunity. One of the Legion went down almost immediately, a darkspawn arrow in her eye.

Tara, after hearing about the problems Velanna's firestorm had caused, decided to use lightning and ice to slow and damage the darkspawn attackers. At close range she could freeze the darkspawn outright, and Shale, stamping up and down their lines, shattered them to bloody splinters. Astrid was absolutely right about Shale's value. A golem really did make all the difference.

But there were a lot of darkspawn, and Tara felt the terrible squeezing, as the double attack pushed at the half-circle. Behind her was Darach, his fair elven face taut as he loosed arrow after arrow at the darkspawn with astonishing speed.

Out of the mob of darkspawn came an ogre, bellowing, shaking his horns in challenge. It was massive and heavily armored; bigger than any ogre Tara had seen before. It shook off spells like raindrops, and arrows like pebbles. The darkspawn charged in his wake, roaring in triumph.

Tara knew she had to get closer. She slipped through the

shield wall and rushed forward, heedless of Rodyk's orders and her people's horrified shouts.

"The Little Mage is deranged!" Shale bellowed, thundering after her.

Tara shouted back, "If that ogre breaks the line, we're done!"

Arms up and shouting, she threw out a blast of winter, freezing everything in front of her within a range of thirty feet. Shale surged forward like the outraged Stone itself, smashing as it went. They ripped a breach through the darkspawn charge, and the ogre stayed frozen long enough for Shale to reach out and punch a hole through its shoulder.

The spell faded, and the monster, torn and bloody, screamed in rage and agony, lashing out at the golem. The force of its blow rocked Shale, sending him staggering back. More darkspawn rushed forward, and Tara lashed them with a chain of lightning. The darkspawn danced like grotesque puppets, while Shale recovered and slammed into the wounded ogre again.

With a start, she saw that she was not alone. Brosca was beside her, finishing off a genlock that had come at them from the left. With a grin, the dwarf girl charged the ogre, daggers flashing.

Tara managed a weak cold spell that slowed the nearest darkspawn. Shale knocked them aside, while Brosca bounded up, burying her daggers in the ogre's massive chest. It made

a futile grab at the dwarf with its one good arm, but the daggers were already withdrawn, and now twisted into nose and eyesocket. The ogre shuddered, and toppled back into the darkspawn behind it. Brosca vaulted away. With a scissors-like move, she beheaded a hurlock that had lingered too long.

"Run!" Shale bellowed at Tara. "Run, or I will grab it by its bird-like head and carry it!"

Tara needed no urging. "Brosca! Come on!" she shouted, and darted back to the shelter of the shields. She shot another defiant blast of lightning at the faltering darkspawn.

"Legion! Advance east and north!" ordered Rodyk. With the ease of long practice, the formation altered, and ranks finished off the darkspawn in one direction, while in the other—to the east—a small number of the darkspawn fled back down the dim Amgarrak Road. Brosca made a rude gesture at them.

"We win!" she declared, wiping and sheathing her daggers. "Now let's do some *looting*."

The Legion was rather impressed with Brosca and Tara. Sigurn and Jukka applauded with mock gravity. Not all the Wardens agreed. Walther was shaking from terror, fury, and a dose of darkspawn poison from an arrow wound. He vomited violently, cursing in between heaves. Griffith hovered over him, trying to wipe his mouth.

"You people are crazy!" Walther sputtered, staggering to his feet. "Crazy! There was no reason to do that."

"Yes, there was," Brosca told him, giving him a shove. "If we hadn't killed the ogre we were all going to die. Sorry you were *scared*."

Walther shoved back. Tara thought for a moment that they would come to blows. She pushed them apart, trying to be taller than she was.

"That's enough! We can't fight among ourselves. Walther, this is all part of the job. It was a lot worse in the Dead Trenches. Sometimes you have to risk yourself. Brosca and I knew what we were doing."

"You're crazy!" he muttered. "Crazy mage. Crazy dwarves!"

Tara tried to cast a healing spell, but the man knocked her hand away, cursing. Griffith put a hand on his shoulder and took him aside. The two men conversed in whispers. Walther looked over his shoulder and glared at Tara from time to time. After a little while, they joined in the looting, and she hoped Walther's little tantrum was over.

After a meal and a rest period, scouts were sent out in a number of directions. A warden volunteered for each of the scouting parties: Sigrun, Darach, and Brosca. Somewhat to Tara's surprise, Darion Olmech asked to go along with those heading due east, saying that he needed to make some annotations to his maps. Tara put him out of her mind, and set

about healing anyone she could.

West Hill was said to be haunted.

Astrid gave herself a little mental shrug, as the huge, rambling fortress crept up over the horizon, looming on a solitary hill set in a vast, flat plain by the sea. At a distance it was impressive. On closer inspection, one saw the decaying battlements and crumbling walls.

Velanna said, in an uncommonly subdued tone, "The Veil is thin here. Thousands were slaughtered on this plain."

Astrid knew that, of course. There had been a great battle here, during the Fereldan's war against the Orlesian occupation. The Fereldans did not like to talk about it much, but Astrid had read about it in the Shaperate, back in her days as a princess. Young Maric and his army had been thoroughly trounced by the Orlesians; apparently betrayed by a spy feeding them false intelligence. The Fereldans had been nearly annihilated, and Maric had fled the field, protected by Rowan, his future queen, and by his friend Loghain. Desperate, the three of them escaped into the Deep Roads entrance hard by the crumbling old fortress, and from there had made an epic journey to Gwaren in the southeast. Astrid was glad not to have any such prospect before her.

While their two day surface journey had been uneventful, Astrid had remained uneasy. She hoped Tara and her party would not suffer in the Deep Roads as had Astrid and her own

people. They had needed their rest at the Spoiled Princess, and they rested again at the village of Three Points.

The village was indeed located at a three pointed crossroads, where the Imperial Highway ended and the Fereldan North Road began, and both were joined by the Lake Road. It was not surprising that they saw many travelers there. What Aeron had drawn attention to was the very large proportion of Templars among them. The Templars largely ignored them, other than to give Velanna—the only mage among the Wardens—filthy looks.

As a rule, Astrid ignored the human Chantry-folk as irrelevant. She knew that the mages hated them, and that the feeling was mutual. Why the humans had problems with something as useful as magic Astrid put down to the sort of self-destructive quirks all civilizations had. Humans continued to pour a huge amount of resources into their Chantry, even though the Templars did not fight the darkspawn, and even seemed to find the idea inappropriate: almost insulting. Astrid did not know how many Templars were in Ferelden, but she suspected there were enough to make a sizable force to aid against the Blight. Bronwyn should find a way to put pressure on them.

Dwarves were no better, of course. They wasted a good tenth—at a conservative estimate—of their shrinking population. The castes would rather have a group they could look down on and despise rather than put the casteless to useful labor. In this way, Orzammar lost great warriors like Brosca to crime or the Wardens.

The elves lived on the remnants of their vanished greatness, or on the bones thrown them by the humans. City elves preyed on each other, and the Dalish sneered at them, calling them "flat ears," though Astrid was unable to distinguish any difference whatever in the shape of their ears. Dalish arrogance was so great—and so utterly without foundation, in Astrid's opinion—that they antagonized many who might have befriended them.

Perhaps she was extrapolating from insufficient data, but Astrid was not much impressed by the Dalish with whom she had dealt closely. Danith's behavior during the werewolf affair had been a disgrace, and in Bronwyn's place Astrid would have killed her without hesitation. She well understood the political reasons for tolerating such an unreliable individual, but she still considered Danith's promotion to Senior Warden undeserved. Through the whole Zathrian affair, Astrid's sympathies had been entirely with the werewolves.

Which brought her to consider the Dalish mages. Zathrian did not seem an aberration to her. Merrill, the Dalish Keeper at Ostagar, was a powerful mage, but appeared to be half-mad. Even her own people seemed to think so, having given her reliable older warriors to watch her.

And Velanna... Astrid glanced at the mage, who was walking with Ailill, a closed, supercilious look on her face. Astrid blew out a breath.

Closer acquaintance had not improved her opinion of Velanna. Velanna was haughty and difficult; she was quick to take insult

where none was intended. She openly favored her own people. Astrid had not missed that Velanna always turned to heal Ailill first—even when he did not require it. Always. She was not as rude to Astrid and Askil as she was to the two surviving humans, but she made no attempt to mix with the dwarves or get to know them.

Then, too, she was careless with her magic. She was powerful, true, but did not much care whom her power hurt, as long as it did not hurt herself or another elf. And that loud voice and tactless manner would not help as they applied for entrance at the gate of West Hill, which were now before them.

"Grey Wardens?" the elderly seneschal gaped at them in dismay. "Nobody told me Grey Wardens were coming! You want to stay? Here?"

"I don't," Velanna muttered, sneering at one and all.

Astrid ignored her, and fixed the human with her Princess-of-Orzammar stare. "Yes, we wish to stay here. Traditional hospitality is due the Grey Wardens in time of Blight. We are patrolling in this area, and are here by order of the Warden-Commander, Bronwyn Cousland."

With that, she presented her written orders to the hapless man. He took them gingerly, as if he thought they might bite, while the servants looked on in excitement and whispered to each other about *"The Girl Warden."*

Knowing that Bronwyn loathed that foolish nickname, Astrid maintained her bland expression. It would help a great deal, of course, that the lord of this rickety old mausoleum was a vassal of the Teyrn of Highever.

"Bann Frandarel's not here, Warden," the man dithered. "Gone to Denerim for the Landsmeet, he has."

"His presence is immaterial to us," Astrid said. "Are you planning to refuse us admittance?"

"No!" the man said, frightened. "No... but the bann might not like strangers staying here behind his back, like..."

"Grentold! Let the Wardens in!" A big woman strode across the puddled courtyard, pushing her sleeves back from burly arms. Her clothes were those of a commoner and her apron was filthy, but she seemed to be of some account here.

"Myrdagh, his lordship likes to keep himself to himself..."

"No one's asking anything of *his lordship*." The woman turned, and dropped a massive curtsey to the Wardens. "You're heartfelt welcome to what we have, Wardens. His lordship locks up the wine and spices when he's gone, but there's plenty of plain food and drink, and no end of empty rooms. I'll have some of the girls put you in the Wynde Courtyard."

A series of long passages led them to an unoccupied courtyard. Leading off it were rooms that clearly had not seen use—or cleaning—in many years. They were large and

commodious, though, and out of the weather. An icy hall with a soot-blackened ceiling gradually grew warm when the servants made a great fire in a circular pit in the middle of the stone floor. There was a curious square structure in the ceiling above it, which had little openings along the sides to let out the smoke. A maze of smaller rooms surrounded the hall, and some actually had what passed for beds in them. The servants brought in blankets and sheepskins to make them up with. It was far better than camping outdoors.

"Find us a bathtub or two," Astrid instructed them. "We'll want to be clean. We can fetch our own water, if you will show us where the well is."

Myrdagh stayed long enough to make sure that they had what they needed, and Astrid warned her that seven more Wardens would be coming in a day or two, along with a company of fifty or so dwarven soldiers. The woman's eyes widened at that, but she seemed determined to rise to the challenge.

"Plenty of room, Warden!" the woman said. "West Hill is three-quarters empty."

Supper was brought in: a stew mostly composed of root vegetables. Along with it was some interesting dark-brown bread and a deep bowl of some fruit conserve. A keg of decent ale was produced. Plain, yes: but ample.

Velanna was unimpressed, "Revolting!" She examined the bread in disgust, poking at it, and then dusting off her fingers.

"It looks like a great clod of mud! And what is this?" she asked, spooning up the stew. "Salt water?" The servants hurried from the big empty room, whispering indignantly among themselves.

"If you don't want it," Falkor said, gesturing at the elf's bowl of stew, "I'll have yours. I would have killed for that in Dust Town."

"It smells a lot better than what we had in the army," Catriona murmured to Aeron.

Velanna shrugged. "Poor, sad shemlen."

Astrid spoke up. "Velanna. I think you meant to have a look at Aeron's wounds *before* we ate. Wasn't that right? You must have forgotten."

With an enormous, put-upon sigh, Velanna strolled over to the minstrel, and set about changing the bandages. Aeron tried to roll his eyes at Astrid, and then winced in pain. Astrid longed for some time alone... before she started stabbing people.

A long walk around the fortress— mostly up on the battlements—restored her self-command. Astrid admired the twinkling stars above, studying the curious way the wisps of cloud obscured them. That was the aesthetic part of her explorations. When no one was looking, she did a bit of reconnaissance as well.

Much of the fortress appeared to be empty, as the housekeeper had indicated. The Bann and his servitors apparently used only one wing, with the bann's private apartments occupying a corner tower. Other parts of the fortress were used mainly for storage. From her readings she had gleaned that there had been a village nearby, in the days before the Orlesian invasion. For some reason, it had never been rebuilt.

Astrid poked into rooms and peered through windows. Like most dwarves, she had good low-light vision. She regretted that she did not have the ability to pick locks, and vowed to cultivate the skill. This was a remarkable fortress, and if properly repaired, could prove a barrier even to the darkspawn horde, should it come this way. There were foodstuffs enough here to feed the entire army at Ostagar. Below the curtain walls were eroded fortifications: ditches and works on a grand scale. A moat had once surrounded the fortress. A shame that all of it had fallen to ruin.

"A cold night for a walk."

It was Askil, his breath white puffs in the chilly air. A fellow dwarf was a welcome companion in this strange place, even a Duster turned Legionnaire turned Warden. Askil was shorter than she, with a big mashed nose and a bold brand tattoo that covered the left side of his face. He stamped his feet and rubbed his hands together, unused to such low temperatures.

"Cold, indeed," Astrid agreed. "What brought you away from the fire?"

"I got tired of the tension: humans on one side, elves on the other. That Velanna can't resist a chance to needle anyone in sight. It's crazy. You'd think we'd get on better after that fight in the Deep Roads, but we don't. Ailill's not so bad, though. It's Velanna who's making trouble."

"I'll talk to her again."

"Good luck. Here." Askil gave her a flask, and Astrid drank and swallowed, enjoying the brief fire in her throat.

"That's good."

"It's the last. Stone knows where we'll get more." Askill looked down at the flat plains stretching out from the fortress. "We're a long way from home."

Astrid smiled. "It's really just under our feet, if you think of it the right way."

A snort. "A long way down." A silence, and then Askil, more quietly, asked, "Why are we here, Lady Aeducan?"

She laughed, incredulous, and then saw he was serious. "Because we're Grey Wardens, and have a mission. What else do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "that we're still dwarves, after all. So we've promised assistance to the Grey Wardens. Why? What do the dwarves of Orzammar get out of it? Do the Wardens intend to help us in return? I never heard of it."

This was a matter that Astrid had given thought to herself, and she had no good answers.

"In a sense, Grey Wardens already help Orzammar. When our Calling comes, we go into the Deep Roads and kill all the darkspawn we can find."

"Wardens go one at a time, and kill a handful at most. How does that compare with the entire dwarven army—plus the Legion of the Dead—marching to save the surfacers? During the time between Blights, the Wardens should all come to the Deep Roads to fight beside the dwarves. I don't understand this treaty. It's hard to believe that dwarves would agree to anything that gives us so little."

She shook her head. "I've seen the treaty with my own eyes. In it, the King of Orzammar gives his oath to support the Grey Wardens in time of Blight. There are no mutual defense clauses."

"In other words," he said slowly. "Orzammar is on its own."

"More or less. There are some golems at the Shaperate for a final defense. And Shale, I think, would stand with us. If we had an army of Shales, we'd have no need of humans or elves."

Askil's chuckle was rueful. "Even with the attitude, that golem is worth its weight in gold. I wish we had a way to replicate it."

Astrid hesitated, and then decided to confide in him. "Don't speak of this to anyone else... but... what if there *is* a way? Darion Olmech believes that he can find Amgarrak Thaig. They were researching golems there. They might have left notes at least, but he and I cannot go there alone. It is not far from here, and Bronwyn did order us to explore the Deep Roads near West Hill."

"That's the best idea I've heard...ever," Askil told her. "You can count me in. Let's tell Falkor. You can trust him."

After two more skirmishes, Tara was unspeakably relieved when they arrived at the West Hill access point. The Legion might have mixed feelings about ascending to the surface again, but everyone else was pleased. The wounded were helped up the winding stairs, and under an enormous grey sky, the party stumbled out, resealed the entrance, and formed up to march for West Hill. A gentle snow was falling, which alarmed and baffled most of the dwarves.

"What is that?" Sigrun wondered. "It's pretty, but... *weird*."

"Snow," Shale said. "Frozen water crystals. It falls from the sky in cold weather. The crystals melt at even low room temperature, so they are useless for purposes of adornment. You will notice, on close inspection, that they are all six-sided. Crystals, but ephemeral."

For that matter, Tara had not seen snow that she could remember, though she had heard about it. It was pretty. She

tried catching the snowflakes on her tongue. Brosca stared at her.

"It's fun," Tara said. "They're cold, but they're just water, after all."

"Frozen water crystals," Brosca muttered. "Now I've seen everything."

Captain Rodyk made a face at the landscape.

"I didn't know the surface could be so... white and flat," he said. "It's... disturbing."

"It is very flat indeed," agreed Shale. "There is going to be a actual *hill* somewhere in this West Hill place, isn't there?"

"I really don't know, but the map says we'll be there soon," Tara told the golem. She cast a worried look at the Wardens. Walther was still not speaking to anyone but Griffith, and Griffith had taken a fairly scary neck wound during the last fight. Tara had given his healing her best effort, but it would still scar badly. The dwarves were in far better spirits, perhaps due to the comforting presence of the Legion. Darach, as always, was dependable, since he insisted on regarding her as his Keeper. At least he wasn't disoriented by the snow. In fact, he bent down, scooped up a loose handful, and showed the Legion how to make snowballs. The dwarves attempted to follow suit, and agreed amongst themselves that 'snowballs' would be more effective as weapons if they were formed around some sort of metal core.

The march was not long, and soon they caught sight of the big fortress. The dwarves found it interesting, and critiqued the defenses at length. Tara had hardly got the words, "We're Grey Wardens" out of her mouth before the doors were flung wide. There were stares at the imposing sight of Shale, but no outright terror. Their friends were awaiting them... or more properly, their fellow Wardens. Velanna's sneer reminded her that not everyone was a friend. Tara caught sight of Aeron, and was pleased to see that his scalp seemed to be healing. There was something to be said for the regenerative powers of the Grey Wardens.

"Astrid!" Brosca shouted, waving. "Not dead yet, I see."

"Brosca, it's good to see you! Tara, Rodyk." Astrid nodded to them, relieved to see that all seven Wardens were accounted for. "And Shale! Still in one big stony piece. We arrived three days ago. The place is rambling and mostly empty. Rodyk, I've arranged quarters for you and your men. That fellow coming to greet you is the seneschal Grentold. The real power is the housekeeper Mydaugh, though, and you'll find her cooperative. Bann Frandarel is not in residence, so we have it all our own way. Don't worry about supplies. I've looked around, and the place is packed with foodstuffs."

The seneschal had actually confronted Astrid the day before about supplies and costs and proper requisitioning protocols. Astrid had fobbed him off with a promissory note and verbal assurances that the Grey Wardens would pay for what the Bann of West Hill could not afford to give those defending *his own lands*.

Tara said, "We'll need to rest for a day or two. That sound all right, Rodyk?"

The captain nodded. "My people would be better for food and sleep. Let's talk about plans tomorrow."

The seneschal arrived to lead the Legion down a long, freshly-scrubbed hall to their own quarters. Darion trailed behind, and caught Astrid's eye.

"Just a minute, Tara..." she murmured. She caught up with Darion, and her heart leaped at the gleam of triumph in his eye. "You found it?" she guessed. "You've found the way to Amgarrak Thaig?"

"Yes," he murmured. Glorious discovery or not, he knew how to be discreet. "I'm sure of it. If there is anywhere we're likely to hear about the subsequent golem experiments, it's there. Your friends Tara and Brosca are not sympathetic, by the way."

"It doesn't matter," she murmured back. Smiling radiantly, she clapped him on the shoulder. "We have orders to explore this portion of the Deep Roads. No need to bring up exactly what we're looking for. We'll talk tomorrow."

Tara made a face at Darion's back. As soon as Astrid had returned to the group of Wardens, she said, "Darion nearly talked my ear off about the Anvil. He thinks Bronwyn should have let Branka make more golems."

Astrid made a show of indifference. "He's a scholar and loves to hash over the dead past. Arguments about 'what might have been' are his meat and drink. Speaking of which, I suspect you're all starving."

"No lie," Brosca agreed. She spoke low, letting the general conversation cover her words. "We had some trouble on the way. A big party hit us, and the Legion lost a few. Walther and Griffith were wounded, and they didn't like it at all."

Tara agreed. "I think the Deep Roads really scared them. I'm glad they'll have some rest before we go back."

"And something hot to eat," said Brosca. "They'll feel better after that. Me, too."

In the morning, Walther and Griffith were gone, along with their gear and loot. Aeron, who shared a room with them, was the first to notice their absence, and notified Astrid and Tara at once. When questioned, the West Hill servants could not tell them much.

"They said they had to go out on patrol, Warden," said a trembling kitchenmaid. "They left before sunrise. They said they'd be gone at least a week and needed some food for the journey, so I packed up some good rations for them. Did I do wrong?"

"No," Astrid said instantly, shaking her head just the least bit at Tara. "You did right. I didn't expect them to leave so early."

She stalked away, Tara following. Once they were out of earshot, she relieved her anger. "Those useless cowards! Listen to me, Tara: we're not going to tell anyone outside the Wardens that they bolted. It would make us look weak. We'd lose face before the Legion. We'll have to tell our own people, but no one else until we report to Bronwyn."

"Where could they have gone?"

"What difference does it make?" Astrid snarled, tugging her hair in rage. "They're gone. At least they had the sense not to take what wasn't theirs. They knew we'd come after them for that. But now? With the weather gone cold and bits of frozen water coming out of the skies? Let them freeze, for all I care. They're no good to us anyway."

Tara was bitterly disapproving, and distressed that the deserters were from her own little command. "You can't desert from the Wardens. You can't stop being a Warden. They'll see."

A Warden council was called, and the news—that Griffith and Walther had deserted—was shared. Shale was present, but showed uncommon delicacy of feeling—and sound good sense—by not baiting the Wardens were they were feeling betrayed and very, very angry.

"I always knew they were no good!" Brosca shouted, stamping a foot. "How those two ever made it through the Joining is a mystery to me!"

"I didn't think Griffith was so bad," said Sigrun, more mild in her judgement. "Maybe he was just led astray."

"Where could they go?" Catriona wondered, ashamed that the deserters were human. "The harbors are freezing in, and the Frostback passes will be hip-deep in snow."

"Maybe they went to Orzammar!" Falkor suggested. "There's a Warden hostel there. Should we tell the King to detain them?"

"No." Astrid was not going to ask anything of Bhelen—especially something that reflected so poorly on her own leadership. She could imagine his smug, smirking face all too well.

"Deserters! Among the Grey Wardens?"

"No," she repeated. "It would only make the Order look bad."

"I don't think they'd go to Orzammar, anyway," said Askil. "I don't think it would occur to them. They like the surface."

Aeron worried at his bandages until Tara glared at him. He said, "There are some ships still crossing the waking Sea. Maybe they're hoping to get a ship in Highever or Amaranthine that will take them to the Free Marches. They're likely on the North Road by now. If we had horses, we could ride them down."

"But we don't," Catriona pointed out glumly.

"There are plenty of Wardens across the Waking Sea," said Astrid. "They might not have come to our aid, but they are *there*, and they'd surely sense two stray Wardens. We should go ahead with our mission. We'll notify Bronwyn when we can, and what she does is up to her."

"I hope they die!" snarled Brosca, taking a long swig of brandy despite the early hour. "I hope they freeze in the frozen water crystals! I hope they drown in the sea! Dirty cowards!"

Tara heartily agreed, feeling like a complete failure as a leader. "We're better off without them."

A swordsman and an archer traveling together excited no interest anywhere in Ferelden. Soldiers of the realm and mercenaries alike were on the march throughout the kingdom. Walther and Griffith buried their Warden tunics in a pile of snow under an oak tree, and took the North Road east to Crosby Fell, where Griffith knew a good inn. While it was snowing, it was not bitter cold, and the men had thick warm cloaks and good boots, courtesy of the Grey Wardens. They had their Satinalia pay as well, and plenty of loot.

They considered going north to Highever, and then dismissed the notion. The Warden-Commander's brother was Teyrn there, and after all that had happened, the Teyrn's men would be suspicious of strange warriors. Amaranthine was a better choice. In the little village of Knotwood, Walther had cousins that the Wardens could not possibly know about. They could

stay there for a few days, and then go up the Coast Road to the city and get a ship that would get them away; far from the Wardens, the Blight, and being bossed by stuck-up dwarves and crazy knife-eared mages.

There were inns and farmholds all along the North Road. The weather befriended them. They made it to Knotwood without even so much as a frostbitten nose. Walther's family welcomed them kindly, pitying their wounds and horrified at their tales of being forced into the Deep Roads. The two men were well-supplied with food and drink and good wishes, and told to be wary of the Teyrn's patrols on the North Road. Another cousin in the city of Amaranthine would put them up while they looked for a ship to take them to Ostwick or Kirkwall.

Thus, not far from Vigil's Keep, they disappeared into the trees at the first, distant sounds of hoofbeats. An observer would have expected them to reappear after the horsemen galloped past, but that observer would have waited in vain. Their footprints in the light snow went in one direction only, and gradually melted away under the noonday sun, leaving no trace of the two deserters.

Thanks to my reviewers: Chandagnac, Psyche Sinclair, EmbertoInferno, EpitomyofShyness, Doom-N-GloomGal, Zute, Mike3207, darksky01, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Girl-chama, Robbie the Phoenix, chocolatebrownie12, JackOfBladesX, KnightOfHolyLight, karinfan123, sizuka2,

Rexiselic, Nemrut, Guest, Phygmalion, Shakespeira, Wizco, Enaid Aderyn, Juliafied, Blinded in a bolthole, SkaterGirl246, Herebedragons66, Tsu Doh Nimh, mille libri, Costin, anon, Have Socks. Will Travel, sleepyowlet, and Josie Lange.

78. Golems of Amgarrak

This is an interpretation of the Amgarrak adventure, not a literal rendering of the DLC, which I think rather boring and unconvincing. Besides, the DLC deals with the Warden checking out the fate of a previous expedition to Amgarrak. This story is about a scouting patrol that rediscovers the thaig. Obviously, the events will be quite different.

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 78: Golems of Amgarrak

"How do you expect me to trust someone who set my head on fire?" Aeron asked.

Tara tried not to squirm. Aeron was not being unreasonable, but his request to change units would ultimately cause future problems.

Aeron and Catriona had asked for a private talk with the Senior Wardens. The cheerful minstrel's head was still wrapped in bandages, and his good humor was being sadly tested by constant pain. Catriona was still grieving for Liam, and her face was no longer quite so youthful under her grey-streaked hair. What they wanted was to get away from

Velanna. Astrid occasionally wanted that herself, but there was no chance of it. Velanna was here, a Warden, and a very useful and powerful mage. They were all going to have to find a way to get along.

"Accidents happen in battle," Astrid said, her voice steady. "It was a hard fight, and not all of us made it. Velanna's firestorm helped us survive. If she misjudged her aim, it's no more than many archers have."

Catriona slouched in her chair and studied the toes of her boots. She had not struck either of the Senior Wardens as a trouble-maker, but she was here with Aeron, equally unhappy.

The human archer said, "We can't trust her. She'd just as soon see us dead as lift a finger. I'm not blaming you, Astrid. You were in front, fighting toe-to-toe with the 'spawn, so there was no way you could see everything. I was up with the ballistae, and I saw plenty. Velanna didn't even try to bespell the creatures when they pulled Liam down. Didn't even try! She won't back up a human. She didn't care what happened to Aeron. Since I'm an archer, I'm not in the same kind of danger as Aeron, because I can tell you I am never going turn my back on that bitch. I'll position myself behind her, and we'll all hope that I don't misjudge *my* aim—"

"Catriona!" Astrid scowled. "We're all Wardens! We can't dissolve into little cliques. That's no way to fight. We need everybody's skills and talents."

"We *know* that, Senior Warden," Aeron said smoothly. "It's

not clear to us that Velanna does."

Astrid, irritated, tugged at her braid. It was not so simple. Proving that Velanna was deliberately withholding support from her fellow Wardens was impossible. It was not like an open refusal to follow orders, or like the kind of treachery Danith had once displayed to Bronwyn. This was subtle and insidious, and it would ruin this expedition if it were not dealt with.

"For now," Astrid said, "you're in no shape to fight anyway, Aeron. I want you to stay here at West Hill and concentrate on getting better. Act as our liaison with the seneschal, and see that we're supplied with everything we need. Chat up the castle servants and get a feel for what's going on in the countryside."

"I can do that," he agreed.

"Catriona," said Astrid, turning to the archer, "do you have a problem with Ailill?"

The woman shrugged. "He's all right. He doesn't have much to say to me, but he's a sound archer and he does his job. He's pretty close to Velanna and they stick together, but he's never insulted me to my face."

"Then we are going to work through this together," Astrid said. She glanced at Tara, and the elf gave a slight nod of assent.

"We'll talk to Velanna...right away," said the elf mage. "Astrid and I. We'll tell her she can't play favorites or take out her anger at humans on Warden comrades. Then we'll keep an eye on her."

"So will I," said Catriona. "Maybe both, when I don't need them to shoot."

Nothing was to be gained by delay, so they called in Velanna immediately after. It was not a very pleasant conversation.

"If you're going to take the part of whining shemlens," she said, sneering, "I don't see what we have to say to each other."

Tara drew a quick, hissing breath of outrage. Astrid stared at the Dalish mage for quite some time. After a bit of this, Velanna looked away and bridled indignantly.

"What I have to say is this..." Astrid began, her voice ominously slow. "It was interesting to me that our party's death and worst injury were both human."

"I'm not blame for their incompetence!"

"Keep digging, Velanna," Tara muttered. "The hole just gets deeper and deeper."

Astrid maintained her most intimidating stare. "I was in the same fight, and I saw no sign of 'incompetence' in either of them. Rather, I saw a willingness to risk themselves to protect

others...even you, Velanna. I also saw a mage who was rather careless with her magic, and harmed friend and foe alike. That stops now. As a matter of *competence*," she continued, with heavy sarcasm, "perhaps your aim needs practice. You are expected to help protect all your fellow Wardens, as they are expected to protect you. You are also expected to use your healing skills without having to be ordered or cajoled...and on the worst hurt *first*. Favoring friends is not acceptable, especially when they have taken no wound. / saw that, and it stops now."

Tara was getting angrier as time wore on; as she looked at Velanna's closed, stubborn face.

"I shouldn't have to take up the slack for you! You hurt Aeron, so now you heal him. It's as simple as that."

"That's what all this is about, isn't it?" Velanna hissed. "The shemlens complained, and now you pander to them!"

"That is *not* what this is all about," Astrid said with the calm of a nascent storm. "This is about you doing your duty and obeying the orders of your superior officers."

Tara quoted Bronwyn: *"Refusal to obey a direct order will be considered insubordination. Insubordination is also conduct contrary to a superior's officer's clear purpose. Such an infraction will be punished. The first occurrence will be met with loss of pay, the amount depending on the seriousness of the offense. Further infractions will be punished by*

confinement to quarters, flogging, or execution, in that order. A combination of punishments may also be imposed." She gave Velanna a big smile. "You're making me so angry that I'm starting to look forward to you actually thinking you can get away with this kind of behavior."

"There is nothing wrong with my behavior!" Velanna shrieked. "After all the shemlen have done to us—"

Tara jumped to her feet and shot a stinging spark at Velanna. "—which is nothing compared to what the *darkspawn* will do to us if we don't pull together and fight them!" She glared at the shocked Velanna. "What is the matter with you? Do we have to drag you out there and tell all the Wardens that you don't want to pull your weight? Should we tell Merrill and all the rest of the Dalish at Ostagar that Velanna is a failure as a Warden?" When the Dalish elf drew breath to protest, Tara shouted at her. "—Because that's what it comes down to! If you can't do your duty, then you're no better than those two idiots who ran away!"

Feeling that Tara had actually done some good, Astrid decided to play the part of the reasonable officer. She gently pulled Tara back to her chair and faced Velanna.

"This is not open to discussion. You have your orders. We expect you to obey them. The darkspawn are the enemy of all life on Thedas. Your people will be just as dead as everyone else if we fail. Now rejoin your comrades in the common room and attempt to speak civilly to them all."

Tara was still furious. Her fingers switched, longing to cast. Blue sparks danced over the back of her small white hands.

"Go," she said. "Now."

Velanna did not exactly slam the door, but she closed it rather hard. Tara blew out a breath and let her head loll back. Astrid looked over at the elf, and then smiled, rather grimly.

"For all the good that will do."

"I hope it helps," Tara said. "Really. Bronwyn's been really bold, recruiting from different races; recruiting a lot of females; recruiting people that a lot of humans would spit on in the street. It's not standard procedure. From what I heard from Alistair, Commander Duncan's Wardens were all human. Maybe he felt they would work better together that way, but honestly, we really didn't have much trouble except for..." Her voice trailed away.

"Danith and Velanna. Two particularly haughty and hostile Dalish females."

"Danith's been better lately. It's probably a huge adjustment to be around anyone but your clan, but she's changing. Velanna goes around looking for a fight."

"She's going to get it, if she's not careful. But enough of her. I had some ideas about our mission. There's a lost thaig not far from here that might be worth looking into. Amgarrak Thaig. They did research there. I was thinking it might be worth

checking out. There might be some old records there or maybe even weapons. It's the closest known thaig, certainly."

"Then we should have a look. If nothing else, the darkspawn might be nesting there."

"All right. It's up the Amgarrak Road to the east. We shouldn't all go. Why don't I take some of my people and maybe fifteen Legion and scout a bit first?"

"And Shale."

Astrid smiled, and granted the little elf a nod. "And Shale. Always."

With the exception of Aeron, Astrid took her usual unit: Velanna, Ailill, Falkor, Askil, and Catriona. The human archer was not thrilled when the mission was announced. Rodyk, his leg stiff with an arrow wound, detailed fifteen of his best soldiers to the Wardens and told them that the Grey Warden was their commander for the duration of the patrol.

Tara wanted to scout the surface around the West Hill area, but she and Astrid agreed that that could wait. If a message came requesting back-up, Tara wanted to be available. For now, Astrid would check out the old thaig, see how heavily it was invested with darkspawn, and then they could decide where to go from there.

And it was not unpleasant, rattling around the old fortress, or

at least their corner of it, with plenty to eat and the occasional hot bath. Tara had found some long-forgotten books in their quarters, and time to rest and read sounded good to her.

"If we come across anything we can't handle," Astrid said, as the Wardens saw the scouting party to the front gate, "we'll run like deepstalkers. I should be back in three days."

Shale said, "I cannot quite see me running like those disgusting bird-like creatures, but I can move swiftly enough when necessary."

Astrid could hardly conceal how excited she was about this venture. It was always depressing, finding a thaig despoiled and Tainted by the darkspawn, but it was also exciting to retrieve lost treasures. Who knew what Amgarrak Thaig had in store for them? If she could find the secret of making golems, it would be the greatest achievement of her life. Orzammar might have cast her out, but she, Astrid, would protect it.

Darion was as excited as Astrid, and stumbled a little on the winding staircase as they left the surface behind. He clutched his map case close, pale eyes glowing in eagerness. Falkor and Askil looked at each other and then at Astrid. Askil gave her a discreet wink.

Darion consulted his map again, and said, "The tunnel to the thaig is only four leagues to the east. Look to the left. There's a roadmarker there, but it's fallen forward."

This section of the Amgarrak Road was broad and well lit. They moved along it with cautious haste, eyes peering into crude holes bored into the walls here and there. Astrid stretched her Warden senses to the limit, but picked up little hint of active darkspawn. Tara's fight the day before yesterday must have cleared out most of the nearby population. They pushed on ahead and found the battle site, marching over rotting darkspawn and crackling bones. Further on, a little spring fountained from the Stone, pure and clear, and they paused there, filling their canteens.

"I passed this when I was scouting," Darion told Astrid. "This is it! The way to the thaig is just ahead."

They found the fallen marker and then the tunnel entrance. Much of the fine, ancient stonework remained. Someone must have found some high quality greenstone here, and had made handsome use of it. A golden glow reflected up on the rocks, revealing a lava stream below: a rich source of geothermal power. The bridge over it was still in sound shape.

"This was a fine place, once," Astrid murmured.

"I confess myself relieved," Shale declared. "The tunnel ceiling was made comfortably high, even for someone as imposing as me."

Darion shot Astrid a quick, triumphant glance. Of course the ceiling would be high, if one expected the traffic here to include golems.

Some Legionnaires were detailed to keep watch at the tunnel's junction, and were told to send word of any darkspawn movement. No one wanted to be trapped in an isolated, abandoned thaig, with no way out. Astrid looked her party over and was satisfied that she had some good people here. Catriona had positioned herself well behind Velanna, but there was nothing unreasonable about that.

"All right, follow me."

The tunnel descended on a gentle grade, and the surrounding stonework became more elaborate. A flight of broad, handsome steps, and the tunnel opened out into a natural grotto, glittering with crystals. Astrid cast an admiring eye about her. A lot of mineral wealth here. High-grade quartz of all colors. A lot of amethyst. Surfacers loved amethysts. The original masons here had left quite of bit of this cavern in its natural state; a tribute to their good taste. Before them, mist had collected, and lay heavily along the stone floor.

"Is this the thaig?" asked Velanna. "I thought thaigs were settlements. This is only a big cave!"

Her voice was a little too loud in the stillness. Dwarven armor clanked as Legionnaires shifted restlessly. Astrid grimaced, and answered, in a voice so soft that she hoped Velanna would take the hint.

"This is not the thaig proper. This is only an entrance hall."

Darion added, "The actual entrance should be...there."

He pointed into the mist. The swirling whiteness was quite impenetrable. Astrid felt a faint tickle of danger and then stopped moving.

Very quietly, she said, "Darkspawn ahead. Not a lot, but enough. They're in the mist. Let's see if we can lure them out. Follow me and spread out in a loose formation. Archers—stay up on those lower steps. I'll try speaking loudly once we're ready, and we'll see what's hiding here."

Their deployment was swift and efficient. By the time Astrid temptingly strode back and forth on the edges of the fog, everyone was in place, awaiting the attack. Still, there was that brief moment of alarm when the shrieks came loping out of the fog, hooning. Arrows thudded into them, and they screeched in pain and rage. Velanna caught the biggest with a paralysis spell, and the axemen waded in, hacking at Tainted flesh.

A poisonous burst of green splashed over Falkor. The dwarf groaned and swayed, his sword drooping.

"Get that emissary!" Astrid ordered. "Shoot at the spell source!"

Instantly, a half-dozen arrows targeted the shrouded darkspawn. A outraged scream told Astrid that at least some of them had found their mark. The emissary cast again and Astrid plunged into the fog, her shield raised to smash the creature. She connected, a little off-center, but hard enough to knock the beast down. It flopped, gobbling, as she thrust

her sword into its rotten heart.

"Forward!" Astrid shouted. "Keep your formation and advance! We'll get them all!"

A slow, inexorable march caught two more darkspawn: short genlocks trying to find an advantage in the mist. They were dispatched by the time the party had reached the far side of the grotto.

There were two more areas to secure, and these were above the fog level. One was a deep alcove that might be an old workshop of some sort. The other turned a corner and might well be the actual entrance to the thaig. Not wanting to miss anything, Astrid led her people to the workshop first. It was proved to be much more than that. There were stone workbenches and shelves. Some carved chests and cupboards held minor treasures and fine tools.

"Astrid!" yelled Falkor. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Eww," Shale uttered, voice dripping with disgust. "A control rod. Happily, it is not mine."

Filled with hope, Astrid pushed deeper into the chamber, and around a corner, her hopes were rewarded.

A silence.

"That's a big 'un," a Legionnaire said reverently.

"Fancy, too," said another.

Shale was offended. "Well, if you are going to judge quality strictly on the basis of looks—"

"No one is comparing it to you," Astrid interrupted. "That would be impossible. This obviously is not in possession of a full—a *very* full—set of wits. It's only a tool, but a useful one... if this is the right control rod."

She kept her smile unseen. Who would have thought that Shale might be *jealous* of another golem?

Darion stepped close to inspect the still metal figure.

"This is one of Caridin's golems, from the markings, but... modified. They must have experimented on existing golems here. Maybe they even learned the secret to making new ones."

Astrid shrugged. "Maybe we'll find out more further in."

She was more impressed that she let on, and fumbled anxiously at the dusty control rod, remembering the sequence of runes she had learned in the Shaperate. With a groan of disuse, the golem shivered into life once more. Astrid was briefly grateful that its former operator had not locked it to respond only to a secret voice code.

It was quite magnificent: a steel golem incised cunningly with runes. Bigger than Shale, it loomed impressively in its dim alcove. Astrid flicked the control rod.

"Raise your arms."

Dust sifted down as the golem lifted massive, armored arms.

"Walk toward me and stop a shield's width away."

With only a slight lurch at the beginning, it walked toward her, and then stopped at what appeared to be precisely the width of Astrid's shield.

"A working golem!" one of the Legionnaires said. "That alone makes the trip worthwhile!"

"Absolutely," Astrid agreed. "We are looking for research notes and journals here. If you see anything with writing on it, bring it to Darion for inspection. For that matter, even ordinary loot should be given a once-over. It might be part of a mechanism."

They found no more golems there, though they poked into every nook and cranny. They found some scattered armor and weapons, but clearly nothing else of importance had been left outside the thaig. Astrid sent a party ahead to see what was on the other end of the grotto, while she practiced using the control rod and making concise commands. It was a problem, she decided: did using a control rod mean that she could not fight? Did operating one golem require one dwarf? Or could a dwarf operate more than one at once? Perhaps the golem could learn to operate efficiently on voice command alone. Surely that was so. Even in its slave-days, Shale had been able to interpret very broad commands. Perhaps it might

be a good idea to have Darion operate the golem, but she hated the idea of surrendering the control rod to anyone else. This was *her* golem.

"Feeling powerful, are we?" Shale murmured. "Going to order it to carry you when you're tired? Going to tell it to squish things for you?"

"The latter, certainly!" Astrid laughed, only a little embarrassed. "You've certainly shown us how expert golems are a squishing darkspawn!"

"There is that," Shale said smugly.

"Do you think we should give it a name?" Astrid asked. "I know you felt that simply being called 'Golem!' was rude. I agree. Perhaps we could call this golem 'Rune.' What do you think?"

"'Rune' is admirably concise, I suppose. We could also call it 'Forgotten Lump of Fancy Metal,' or perhaps 'Style over Substance.'"

"'Rune' is shorter."

"As you say. 'Rune' it is."

A shout caught her attention.

"Warden! Over here! It's the thaig's barrier door!" The scout's grin was visible, even across the chamber. "And it looks like it's intact!"

The darkspawn had apparently made no effort to get into the thaig. That was puzzling. Darion activated the runic sequence and the doors slid open with a low rumble. The dwarves stepped back cautiously, but no rush of stale air issued from the thaig.

"The circulation pumps must still be working," said Darion, a little surprised. "That's very good news."

Astrid shrugged. "They should work forever unless dwarves or darkspawn tamper with them. My guess is that this thaig was empty before the darkspawn reached it. I sense no darkspawn in this place... at all."

"I, of course," said Shale, "continue to function whether the air is breathable or not. So, for that matter, does my silent friend Rune here. If you have any question about the air, it would probably be the thing to send us in first."

"Very sensible of you."

"I live to serve."

The scouting party descended a long staircase and stood in the midst of a large and imposing chamber. The thaig, like most dwarven structures, was built irregularly, allowing for the variations in stone density. It was a big place, but echoingly empty.

"Do we know how it's laid out, Warden?" asked a Legionnaire.

Astird shook her head. "Darion couldn't find a map of the thaig. It's been deserted a long time. We'll have to chart as we go."

She suspected that the thaig was not a very large one, but the visible number of doors, passageways, and bridges suggested that it was complex in design. It was an intact dwarven thaig, whether large or small, with an intact, usable barrier door. If nothing else, dwarves could live and work here. Orzammar was dismally overcrowded. Aeducan Thaig had been largely cleared by the efforts of Bronwyn and her original party, but it would not be livable without considerable investment in coin and labor. This thaig only needed supplies... and perhaps a good dusting. This discovery, plus that the golem, might... *might* be enough to make her a Paragon. She should start writing letters to possible allies in the Assembly. Plenty of people disliked Bhelen.

Catriona looked about her, impressed. "What's the story of Amgarrak?"

Darion answered. "'Amgarrak' means 'victory' in the old dwarven tongue. It is written that before Queen Getha was deposed, she delivered the only remaining fragments of Caridin's research to House Dolvish. Legends say that House Dolvish bankrupted itself by establishing a secret research laboratory in the Deep Roads. I believe it was located here, in Amgarrak Thaig. Fedrik, the last scion of House Dolvish, promised the Assembly a new golem fresh from Amgarrak, knowing it would raise the Dolvish clan again to prominence. But when no golem materialized, Fedrik was ruined. He died

years later, and with his death, House Dolvish was no more."

"Did dwarves live here?" asked Ailill, "or was this just a place for making things?"

"Oh, quite a few lived here, but they were mostly all involved in the research and production of weapons," said Darion. "At some point the thaig was deserted, though the records in the Shaperate are unclear as to why. I presumed it was because of the darkspawn, but since the barrier door is still intact, there may be some other reason."

"Caridin," Catriona repeated thoughtfully. "I've heard that name. Didn't the Commander meet someone named Caridin? Wasn't he the one who made the golems?"

"Yes," Astrid said, "that's the one. He was a great inventor and acclaimed a Paragon by the Assembly."

She did not elaborate further on Caridin's later history, and his ultimate rejection of his greatest feat. No one here knew much of that story.

Velanna's shrill voice was uncommonly silent. Astrid glanced over at the mage, and looked again. Velanna seemed ill at ease.

"What's wrong?" Astrid asked in an undertone.

Velanna pressed her lips together, looking annoyed. "Nothing," she said. "At first I thought that there must be some sort of

disturbance in the Veil. It is an odd sensation. That cannot be, since you *durgen'len* have no access to the Beyond." Her mouth twisted. "Or the Fade, as the shemlen call it."

"Wardens do," Astrid replied stiffly. "I have some experience with the Fade."

She still found dreaming a deeply disturbing thing. Humans and elves had told her that not all dreams were as ghastly as their darkpsawn visions, but as those were the only dreams the Astrid could remember, it was a wonder to her that humans and elves were not all driven mad by their enforced time in the Fade when asleep. "So..." she added. "You think the Veil is thin here? Damaged? Isn't that a sign that we might come across demons or spirits of the dead?"

"I had not thought to find such in the Deep Roads, but yes. It is... possible. Usually it is caused by a great deal of violent death. Sometimes it is caused by immense magical energies being expended."

That was certainly something to ponder. Magical energies? In a dwarven thaig?

Further exploration disclosed a smallish chamber containing four more golems: not as large or imposing as Rune, but still golems. For some reason they were welded immobile, and it looked like some work would be required to free them. Perhaps they had been used for research templates. Their control rods were stored nearby. While Astrid would have liked nothing more than to march back to West Hill with a long

string of golems behind her, that was obviously something for a future visit. Her prospects were looking better and better. Why was this thairg deserted? It was well built; it had rich supplies of trade goods in its greenstone and amethyst. It had good water and geothermal power. How strange that no one should live here.

Their next surprise was on entering a side chamber and finding it provided with an large, unusual, and elaborate mechanism. An odd tang drifted on the air, at once heady and metallic. A spiked and gleaming blue sphere, a wide as two dwarves in diameter, was suspended over a deep circular shaft. Everyone leaned over the edge, but no one could see to the bottom. This was a fantastically valuable device, and members of the smith caste would be clamoring for a change to live here and use it.

"A lyrium well!" Darion marveled. "I've read about them. They must have good lyrium veins here. They were doing more here than simply incising lyrium runes."

"Could they have been doing something involving magic?" Astrid wondered aloud.

"Hardly," Darion said. "Everyone knows that dwarves have no magical abilities."

"They *might*," Astrid pointed out, an edge to her voice, "have hired someone who *did*."

Large switchplates were set into the floor. Usually these were

triggers for traps or secret hiding places, but that did not seem to be the case here. When Rune was sent to step onto one such, the atmosphere shifted, almost as if the light had changed. Objects blurred slickly at the edges. Astrid experienced a sudden disorientation, not sure for a moment if her feet were set firmly on Stone.

Velanna spoke up, her quick voice fearful. "Get that golem away! Somehow that device is affecting the Beyond!"

"Step away, Rune," said Astrid. Another moment of nauseating confusion rocked her. She found herself sprawled on the floor, and was briefly relieved she had not fallen into the open shaft. She staggered to her feet, clutching at a stone railing for support. Behind her, Wardens and Legions were pulling themselves together, shocked at the bizarre experience.

"We were in the Beyond," whispered Velanna.

"That's... interesting," she said, after the world had dizzyingly settled back to normal. "Someone was doing research that required the addition of magic."

Darion nodded, thinking hard. "They surely left something in writing."

"All right," Astrid agreed, raising her voice. "Everyone spread out and look for parchment-even scraps. We'll search this chamber thoroughly before we move on. Stay away from that switch plate and anything that resembles it."

Velanna seemed of two minds before she spoke, but finally said to Astrid. "We might also wish to search the room when the switch is activated. Someone might have left notes in the Beyond. It is risky, but I must raise the possibility now that I have thought of it."

"Could we bring the notes back to the real world?"

"No. You cannot bring objects out of the Beyond, but someone could read the notes there."

"Then we'll try that next."

Nothing turned up in the first search. Astrid sent everyone out of the room but Darion, Velanna and the two golems. Curiously, the constructs did not seem to be adversely affected by the shift in reality. She stayed herself, and Rune stepped on the plate again. This time the shift was not quite so disturbing. Walking was a bit more difficult than normal, since her depth perception seemed affected. She looked toward the door, There was an misty blue barrier, behind which vague figures shifted.

Peculiar as she felt, she and Darion made a thorough circuit of the room's perimeter, while Velanna examined the benches and tables. The room was bare. Disappointed, she had Rune step away, and endured the shift once more. She picked herself up off the floor, and slapped away the dust. Darion was wild-eyed. Velanna, accustomed to the Fade, was more concerned with her soiled robes.

"Astrid!" cried Falkor from the doorway. "You all looked *dead!*"

"We're fine," she assured everyone. "It was disorienting. In my opinion, this Fade or Beyond or whatever is a kind of alternate reality, not some sort of mystical land of the gods. It clearly has its own rules. We found nothing, however. Take a break, eat something, and then we'll move on."

In another chamber they found dwarven bones. These were not the untidy little heaps of those who had died in battle. Instead, the bones were neatly stored and arranged on shelves: skulls with skulls, spines with spines, clavicles with clavicles. It was a curious sort of storage, or even a bizarre sort of burial. Another lyrium well was discovered, and a nasty residue remained in the shaft.

"That's organic matter, Warden," said a Legionnaire. "Not mineral. Maybe somebody had a bad accident, but there's a lot of it. The lyrium sort of mummified it, over time."

"Lovely," muttered Catriona. "I knew a fellow who fell into a rendering works once. He didn't look so good when they fished him out."

Ailill did not understand what she meant, and Catriona briefly explained some of the uses of the domestic pig, and the great demand for its fat, called lard, in cooking and soap-making, amongst other things.

"I do not see how rubbing oneself with pig fat would cause

one to be clean," said the elf. "The Dalish use soapwort. The leaves create a delicate lather."

Catriona nodded. "I used to pick soapwort back home, but there's just not enough of it for all the people in the cities. Soap made from lard isn't like pig fat once they get done with it, but it's a lot harsher than soapwort."

Directly across the bridge was another chamber with another lyrium well. Another switchplate, too, glowing green. The chamber was searched without result, and most of the party was sent back to the main hall, while Astrid, Darion, Velanna, and the golems ventured into this version of the Fade. Shale stepped onto the trigger plate.

They had not expected a fight.

Phantoms of dwarves charged them: furious, lethal, their faces set killing mode. Shale was rocked by a heavy crossbow bolt, shot by a mighty archer. That was their only warning before the battle was engaged. It was made all the more eerie by the absolute silence of their opponents.

An axeman hewed at Rune, heedless of the fact that his blade was bouncing off the golem's massive armor. Velanna paralyzed him long enough for Astrid to move in and hack the... spirit? ... ghost? ... revenant? ... to pieces.

Pieces that did not bleed. Dispatched, the emanation vanished. Darion was already dodging another bolt from the slow-loading crossbowman. Astrid held her shield before her,

and rushed the attacker.

There were four of the spirits in all. Fortunately, they were incapable of working together, else their prowess and resistance to damage might have won the day. Instead, Astrid could direct the attacks against each, and take them out separately. The last, an angry swordsman, fetched a nasty blow against her helmet that knocked her down briefly. Shale slammed the phantom, and Rune crushed him against the wall. The warrior evaporated like the rest.

Darion was trembling, panting, clutching at his side. Velanna's eyes were wide, and her right arm was bleeding. She stared at a moment, as if surprised, and then cast a healing spell on herself. After a moment, she took a deep breath, and then healed first Darion, and then Astrid herself.

"Thank you," Astrid said, and meant it. "That was a headache I did not need."

Very cautiously, they checked the chamber for any notes and came up with nothing. The switch was pressed, and they returned to their comrades.

"Are you all right?" Catriona asked. "You look like you've been fighting."

"We were attacked in the Fade," Astrid told her. She held up a hand for silence. "Spirits of dead dwarves fought us, but they are gone. There is nothing for you to be alarmed about. They cannot escape the Fade. We cannot see them unless

we use those plate mechanisms. We will not do that again."

The Legion's sergeant, Gorling, stepped up smartly. He was holding a sheaf of old parchment in a huge and dirty hand. "You wouldn't have to anyway, Warden. Maybe these are what you're looking for. We found them on a worktable in a little room nearby."

The notes were filthy. The parchment stank of mold and was dark with age, but some of the writing could still be deciphered. Astrid took them from the man, and gave him a nod of thanks.

He led them to the little chamber, while the rest of the party crowded outside the door, full of curiosity. Astrid waved them away, and pulled up a bench to the huge stone table. Darion sat down beside her, eyes eager. There was more parchment here: a lot more.

Astrid gave crisp orders. "Askil, continue the exploration of the thaig." With grimace of reluctance, she gave Rune's control rod to him. "Take Shale and Rune with you. Do not allow anyone to trip one of those Fade switches or play with any of the mechanisms. I want to have a look at these notes."

The notes should have been locked away in a stone box to preserve them, but had been left in a series of cubbyholes in the work table, each labeled with dates.

"Where were these, Sergeant?" asked Astrid.

"These lot here were just lying on top, Warden. I didn't want to disturb the rest."

"Good man."

Five new golems. A pristine thaig ripe for repopulation. That alone could well make her a Paragon. And now golem research notes...

Darion's research about the time period had been spot-on. There was no hint of the writer's identity, but he—or she—had much to say of great interest to Astrid. Among the earliest records that she could make out, she read this:

"Very little remains of Caridin's writings. The memories say the Paragon destroyed much of his own research. What madness would drive him to do such a thing? King Valtor preserved what he could; thanks to him we have something to work from. Nereda, my mage colleague, believes lyrium is the key."

"The writer must have been the overseer of the research," Darion reasoned.

Astrid nodded, flipping over the parchment to see if she could read any more. No. Rust and time had obscured the rest. "He was working with a mage. Nereda. That could be a Tevinter name. I suspect that would have been expensive."

"We know that House Dolvish spent their last copper on this. Besides, in those days, the only really accomplished mages

would have been Tevinter. This was in the days before Andraste and the Circles of Magi."

"True." Astrid wished that Tara was here. Her knowledge of magical history was vastly superior to Velanna's; unsurprising, considering how parochial the Dalish elf was. "An accomplished Tevinter mage, for I'm sure House Dolvish spared no expense. So they had the last of Caridin's research, just as you believed. And this research was supported at the highest levels."

They sorted through more of the parchment. Darion swore in vexation and part of a sheet crumbled in his hands. Very gingerly, he glanced over it, shrugged and picked up the next, and then the next.

"Here's something." Darion read, halting over some of the blotted words.

"I have ordered more iron from the Miner's Guild. The shaft-rats will deny this request, citing our "waste" of good iron, but I've prepared for this eventuality. I've come up with an alternative: the casteless. No-one will miss them, and it's far better for them to die in the service of this great experiment than to continue living their worthless lives. Nereda seems reluctant, but she is from the surface and doesn't understand. No matter, she wants the research to continue as much as I do, and will eventually come around."

The scholar looked briefly ill. "You don't think... *flesh* golems? They wouldn't really have tried that, would they?"

"I don't know."

Astrid felt uneasy herself. From everything she had ever heard of King Valtor, she suspected that he would have approved this, and more. The original golems had been formed with casings of stone or metal. If they could not get metal, then why had they not used stone? It was a puzzlement.

She was deeply, deeply glad that Brosca was not here. Astrid had once been as contemptuous of the dusters as anyone else of noble birth, but she knew now that now and then a jewel lay in the dust of Dust Town. The process they were speaking of was unclear. Had they meant to make the golems of flesh? to kill dusters and make use of them for their bodies? Or did they mean to use Caridin's method, only pressing the casteless into service as the cores? From what she had gathered about Caridin, it seemed that the original golems had been volunteers: giving their lives as dwarven men and women for the defense of Orzammar. That was a noble thing. To condemn the casteless to a horrible death... that... *that* was not so noble.

They looked through the parchments in careful order, refiling the illegible ones. There were techniques known to the Shaperate that would bring up faded ink. Reading the notes found on the table—surely the last ones—Astrid found words that leaped out at her like lyrium runes.

"A breakthrough! Nereda bound a Fade spirit to a construct of flesh and bone, and it moved! We'll have something

concrete to show to the nobles and the Shaperate, once we put it back together. Someone must have overlooked a missing seam. When the construct came alive, the head tore itself from the body, and... scrambled off. Nereda says it's nothing to worry about. She's out looking for it now. In fact, that scratching at my door is probably her."

Astrid's voice faltered. She was still a moment, and then swore. The bones in the workroom... *"No one would miss them..."*

"By the Stone! They killed dwarves for their flesh and summoned a Fade spirit? Isn't that another term for 'demon?' Who thought *that* was a good idea?"

As if in answer, screams rang out from down the corridor. Darion gasped, and gave her a look of wild, terrified surmise. Astrid did not have time for him.

Instead, she was up in an instant, her sword out, her shield snatched up; and she pelted toward the noise of frantic combat. Down a staircase, around a corner, through a narrowing passage. The noise grew louder. Curses, grunts, bellowed orders told her that something had gone disastrously wrong. Behind her was Darion, trying to keep up, sensibly not trying to ask questions.

She raced over a stone bridge, and halted suddenly, skidding on a slick spot, her eyes not quite taking in what was before her. It took only an instant to realize she had slipped on blood.

A towering mass of obscene flesh loomed over everything else in the room. Legs like pillars upheld it, massive arms lifted boulder-like fists in challenge. Another, scrawnier pair of arms, dangled down over the thing's vast chest. A tiny, grotesque head was mounted directly on its shoulder. Disgustingly, a long tongue hung drooling from the hideous mouth. Astrid halted briefly, appalled.

The golems pounded at it, and perhaps were the only things making much of an impression. At least five bodies littered the room. Some were gutted, their intestines dangling like strings of sausages into the shaft of a lyrium well. The head of one, the sergeant, had been pulled completely around, so that his dead eyes looked behind him. One dwarf was unrecognizable, his head crushed to bone-splintered pulp. Legionnaires milled around the monster, looking for an opening,

Blood painted the walls and rippled over the floor. Astrid looked desperately for her own people. Falkor was lying in a corner, stirring feebly. Not dead at least. Velanna was casting futile spells that the creature did not even bother to shrug off.

Aillill was frantically releasing arrow after arrow, but Catriona had cast her bow aside in despair. Arrows stuck from the creature's swollen torso, but obviously had no effect. The woman threw an axe instead; and well, too. The axe embedded itself in the monster's head. It roared and slashed at its attackers; then the tiny, secondary arms scrabbled at the axe handle and worried the blade out of its head. Catriona went for another fallen weapon and threw that, too, sensibly keeping her distance.

Shale reared back for a mighty blow. It landed, but it was clearly like trying to punch a bag of wet sand. The sheer amount of flesh protected the creature's vulnerable parts as well as any armor. With everyone milling about at such close quarters, a bomb or grenade was more likely to harm an ally. Well, what about its legs, then?

"Hack at its legs!" Astrid bellowed. "Bring it down! Bring it down!"

She glimpsed Askil briefly. He was on the far side of the creature, trying doggedly to saw through unnaturally tough leg bones. What had that Tevinter mage *done* to make the creature this damage resistant? Astrid plunged into the battle, slashing at tough tendons.

Darion darted past her, blade raised. He stabbed the creature in the groin. Any normal being would have suffered an agonizing wound to the bladder. It did not penetrate deeply enough here. A gigantic hand grabbed Darion's arm, sword and all, and flung the dwarf away, with a ghastly snapping of bones. Darion's shrieks cut above the shouts and curses. The flesh-golem, not finished with him, lumbered after him. It raised its foot above the writhing dwarf, and stamped him into the floor.

One of the Legionnaires wielded a big maul. He ran up behind the flesh-golem and swung a crushing blow at the thing's knee. The joint popped forward, and the creature stumbled, surprised. Shale smashed down, and the monster's spine crunched ominously. Rune advanced with astonishing speed

and rammed a metal arm through the creature's body, withdrawing it with a horrid squelching sound and a sluggish flow of dark blood. The monster trembled.

An immense, shuddering fall. The stones shook with the impact. One of the dead dwarves was lost beneath the creature, but no survivors had been hurt. Almost sobbing with relief, Astrid pulled herself up and staggered to the dead thing, rage and bitter disappointment consuming her. Not three yards away, Darion lay dead, a red smear on the polished floor. The monster twitched, and lay still.

This was the secret of Amgarrak? *This* was the brilliant idea for which House Dolvish had beggared itself? *This* was going to be the salvation of Orzammar?

"Stupid!" she croaked, kicking at the dead flesh. "Worthless!"

No. Not quite dead. The flesh-golem's eyes blinked, and the unbelievable happened. The horrible tongue flapped, and with a quick, chuffing snarl, the head detached itself from the massive torso and ran across it on tiny legs. Legionnaires screamed and stumbled back.

"Kill it!" Astrid roared. "Don't let it get away!"

It was fast, the unnatural thing. Very fast. With its scrawny arms, it grabbed a legionnaire by the head and gnawed at his face. With a twist and a snap, the dwarf's neck was broken, and he was thrown aside, a bloody ruin. Astrid stabbed at the squirming little monster. With horrible agility, it turn back on

itself and leaped at her.

Everything seemed very slow. She was flying backwards through the air, and suddenly met the stone floor with a impact that knocked the breath from her body. A misshapen head, alive, animate was in her face. She slammed at it with the edge of her shield. Her sword was too long; she cast it aside and grabbed at her eating knife, drawing and slashing in a single movement. Clawed hands snatched the shield away, and then the mouth was gobbling at her, biting at her hand, biting, biting, up to her wrist. White-hot agony exploded. Jaws clamped down with a squeal of satisfaction, and the the head shook from side to side, worrying at her. With a grate of bone, something parted in her arm, and her vision was rimmed in smears of white and gray.

"Bastard!" she shrieked. "Die!" The pain burst all limits to her strength, she stabbed out with her knife, burying it to the hilt between the creature's eyes.

The creature released her, with a high, unbelievably loud ululation that tortured hearing. Astrid gritted her teeth and stabbed again. With a bound, the creature tried to escape. An axe, and then another fell, The creature's wails stopped.

Astrid was not conscious to watch. Shock and loss of blood overcame her, and she fell back, limp.

Murmuring voices awakened her. She was lying on a stone bed, on ancient and dusty bedding. She was obviously thus

still in Amgarrak Thaig.

She was aware of burning pain in her left arm. She lay, eyes, closed, trying to control her breathing, not wanting to look. The voices were coming closer. She sensed someone looming over her, probably looking sympathetic and concerned. Astrid hated pity. She forced her eyes open. The lights were dim, and the ceiling overheard very elaborate.

"I'm all right," she gruffly told Askil.

"No, you're not," he contradicted her. "But you're alive."

"That...thing..." she managed. "It *is* dead, isn't it?"

"It's dead, all right," he agreed. "And it took quite a few with it. Darion's dead, and seven of the Legion with him. Falkor's got a busted skull, and everyone's bruised and cut. Velanna's got her work cut out for her. What do you want done with the thing's corpse? Is it of any use to you?"

"Burn it," she ordered, her voice dim in her own ears. "Burn every trace of it. It must be completely destroyed and the ashes scattered outside. Then clean this place up. We'll give our people to the Stone at the lava stream."

Velanna must have dosed her with some sort of potion. Whatever it was made everything seem distant and hazy. "Clean it up," she repeated. "This is my thaig. I'm going to give it to the Assembly. Hope they like it."

She shut her eyes and pretended to sleep. After a moment, she heard his footsteps fade. It was time to face what had happened. Opening her her eyes to the impressive ceiling, she took a deep breath, and then looked down at her arm, trying not to whimper, her eyes not quite accepting when the forearm stopped and the bandages began. She might well be named a Paragon, but at price she would not have chosen to pay.

No one would hear her cry. Her pride would not permit it; but the tears ran hot all the same.

Thanks to my reviewers: EmbertoInferno, Robbie the Phoenix, KnightOfHolyLight, RakeeshJ4, Jyggilag, Girlchama, Doom-N-GloomGal, Mike3207, Zute, Anime-StarWards-fan-zach, JackOfBladesX, darksky01, Cjonwalrus, Notnahtanha, Aquarious-Otter, Raxiselic, Phygmalion, Jennate, almostinsane, Nemrut, Josie Lange, mille libri, Costin, Shakespeira, Oleaner's One, Have Socks. Will Travel, icyheadsh0t, mememoll, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

Soapwort is real.

Yes, I know the monster is called the Harvester, but the characters don't know that. To them, it's just a Thing.

79. The Mornings After

Victory at Ostagar:

Chapter 79: The Mornings After

Other couples might take honeymoons, traveling to some remote hunting lodge or city. Some might retreat to their bedchambers for a week, learning each other's every secret.

Not so Bronwyn and Loghain. The most they could manage was an extra two hours the morning after their wedding, and an intimate breakfast served in Bronwyn's study. Then it was time to get back to work.

Loghain's mind was fixed on the western border. Gherlen's Halt really needed his attention. It drove Loghain mad that the political situation in Denerim made such a journey impossible. He could not risk getting snowed in on the North Road and missing the Landsmeet. Word had come that the snowfalls out west were heavy; perhaps he could trust to them to discourage the Orlesians from making any further incursions this year—at least by land. He had sent out significant supplies to shore up the garrison at the Halt, and secretly thanked Rendon Howe for this one thing: that his vicious machinations had caused Sir Norrel Haglin to be the right place at just the right time.

He brooded into his tea until Bronwyn broke the silence.

"I know Anora will want to see us before midday, but I've got to get down to the Compound and finish plans for the expedition to Soldier's Peak. If they're going to be on their way the day after tomorrow, I have places to go and people to see."

They walked together downstairs, where Loghain turned off toward his own office. Bronwyn felt terribly self-conscious, but kept her head high. The expressions of the servants seemed particularly curious today, which put her out of humor. She was even annoyed to have to step outside and walk around to the Wardens' courtyard today. Surely it was time to reopen the access from the Palace. Now that Loghain was actually married to the Warden-Commander, it was to be hoped he no longer felt the need to guard against a possible attack by the Grey Wardens. Knowing Loghain, perhaps that was overly optimistic.

Slipping through the Warden's entry felt like coming home. The servants here were staring at her, too, but their expressions were amused and kind. Mistress Rannelly bustled up from the kitchen to greet her.

"Well! Hail to the Teyrna of Gwaren!" The woman dropped her a curtsy, and then came close to look her over. "You don't seem to have taken any harm from it. Everything all right, Warden-Commander dear?"

Bronwyn gave her a hug, and together they walked down the

corridor to the Wardens' Hall. "I'm wonderfully well, Rannelly. Everyone nursing a hangover?"

The housekeeper laughed. "Some of them are, indeed! Some of them have not left their beds, the slugs. Breakfast is on the table. You'll need your strength, with all your new duties."

Anders was closest to the doorway, and overheard. He snorted a laugh.

"So? How were the new duties? Onerous?"

She punched his shoulder lightly, and grinned. Annoyingly, she felt her face grow hot. She hoped the blush was not visible.

"Hush, Anders!" reproved Leliana. "We all wish the very best in your marriage, Bronwyn."

"Indeed we do, Noble One," Zevran said. There was gruff agreement from some and kind smiles from others. Morrigan merely raised a brow. Bronwyn gave her a wink, feeling generous.

"Tea! Lovely." She poured herself a mug and looked over her people. "Where are Aveline and Idunn?"

Carver looked up from feeding Magister treats to answer. "Already sparring up in the practice room. An example to us all, I suppose."

Bronwyn said, "Finish your breakfast, and then I'd like to talk to everyone here. Toliver, fetch Aveline and Idunn. Quinn,

rouse anyone who's still abed. Danith, I need to discuss something with you. Let's go into the study while everyone gathers."

Danith followed her into the study, wondering what was on Bronwyn's mind so early in the morning after her marriage. It was laudable, certainly, that she did not seem to have forgotten her duty amidst all the celebrations.

When the door was closed, Bronwyn said at once. "I know that you and your Wardens have hardly had a chance to catch your breath, but I wondered if you would be up to accompanying the Soldier's Peak party tomorrow."

Danith frowned in thought. "I do not see why we could not. The halla will have rested. Nuala and Steren are used to frequent travel. Quinn and the dwarves are hardy, and Maeve and Niall have become stronger with exercise."

"Good." Bronwyn sat on the edge of the desk, and leaned forward, speaking quietly. "I did not tell everyone all the details of what we discovered there. Anders and Jowan know, but this is a very important matter that should be restricted to only a few. We did indeed find an old Warden mage living at Soldier's Peak. He survived the battle two hundred years ago with the King's forces and has lived at the Peak ever since. Yes—it's astonishing. He has created a Joining potion superior to the one we know: one that makes the Wardens stronger and renders them no longer vulnerable to the Calling—" She saw the spark of hope and interest in the Dalish girl's face, and smiled in response.

"Yes, and that's not all. Avernus—the mage's name—believes his potion will also prevent the infertility that has been the Warden's lot."

"That will be happy news for Nuala and Steren," Danith said instantly. She could not but feel flattered that Bronwyn was confiding in her. And this discovery would indeed much improve all their lives.

"And for others," Bronwyn agreed. "Jowan took this potion when we were at the Peak, and has suffered no ill effects. Indeed, it seems to have given him greater power. Jowan will study with Avernus. It is important that we learn all the old sage has to teach. I have given orders to take our stored darkspawn blood up to the Peak and there brew enough of this improved potion for all of us. Avernus also has some Archdemon blood, which will enable us to recruit yet more Wardens. I want Jowan, Leliana, Hakan, and Soren, to remain up at the Peak through the beginning of next year. There will be much work for them. However, I want the improved potion brought back to the Compound as soon as possible. Besides, once there, your comrades will probably think of additional supplies they need."

"You are the best choice to lead the return party. Furthermore, it would be good to have the aravel so you can transport the potion safely. How long you would stay is up to your discretion. I don't know how long it takes to brew the potion. You might also want to wait until Leliana and the dwarves have done a preliminary survey of the situation."

Danith thought it sounded extremely interesting. Such a journey would be more to her taste than loafing in the fleshpots of Denerim.

"We can be ready by tomorrow, Commander. I would not need all the party that came with me to Denerim. Let Ketil and Idunn rest here, and Maeve also. She has spoken of wishing to visit shops. Nuala, Steren, Quinn, and Niall would be sufficient."

"I think you're right. We're already sending a very large party as it is: Jowan, Leliana, Hakan, and Soren, and the Dryden and Wolf families. That will amount to a caravan of six wagons, plus the aravel. I'll tell everyone the plan. After our meeting, you'll want to get your aravel stocked and your people equipped."

The council was conscientiously polite and friendly when Bronwyn and Loghain joined them. The Queen actually blushed when she greeted them. Fergus came close, his arm about Bronwyn's shoulder, peering at her to see if she was well and happy. Bronwyn blushed in her turn, and then gave Fergus a grin. He gave her arm a squeeze, and then a pat, as he relinquished her to Loghain.

"I'm *fine*, Fergus," Bronwyn whispered.

As usual, there was much to discuss. Fergus had reports from Ser Adam Hawke and the merchant guilds of Amaranthine. The city was settling down, and a serious smuggling problem

had been dealt with. Ser Adam had discovered an underground tunnel leading from a tavern to a hideout past the city walls. He had slain or imprisoned the gang operating out of it. The guilds were pleased with the outcome, not wanting the competition of cheap foreign goods. Ser Adam had also much improved the discipline and efficiency of the City Guard. Amaranthine's taxes would be paid to the Crown in a timely fashion.

"Sounds like he's doing all right up there," Wulffe remarked.

"Very well indeed," agreed Bryland, pleased that Leandra's son should be such a credit to her. He hoped that Corbus and Lothar would be just such fine young men as Adam and Carver when they grew up. As for Habren...

Due to the loyalty of an faithful servant, he had been able to prevent her from slipping into Kane Kendalls bedchamber last night. Talking to her did no good at all, of course.

"But we're practically married!" Habren had whined.

Explaining the difference between 'practically' and 'officially' was useless. Bryland set his own people to watch her, and then talked quietly with Kane himself. That young man, at least, had the sense to understand the importance of not betraying Bryland's trust in him.

"Nothing happened, my lord. I would never take advantage of her like that!"

With other couples, such enthusiasm might be indulged. Bryland, however, had no confidence in Habren's discretion or good sense. He occasionally wondered what Kane actually thought of Habren. The handsome young man was always polite and attentive to her, but now and then Bryland had thought he could see his patience fraying. And, understandably, Kane was very protective of his sisters. Habren really should moderate her tone with them. Corbus and Lothar were used to her, and understood that that was just her way; those nice little girls, however, might be hurt by some of the things Habren said to them.

The council moved on to reports from the Bannorn. The harvest was finally tallied, and had not been at all bad, despite the labor shortage. Requisitions for the army had met with a bit of resistance. Trying to feed an army of the current size for another year might prove problematic, unless the Crown started paying market prices for the grain. Granting furlough to some of the militiamen had been a popular move. Those men were not eager to go back south, however.

Fergus sighed. "It all depends on whether we're fighting darkspawn next year, or not."

Bronwyn felt the eyes turning her way, but had no predictions for them. "It's beginning to seem like we won't be fighting them at Ostagar, at least."

The talk turned to the fishing fleet, which around the kingdom had had an excellent year. The army would be eating a great deal of fish: smoked, dried, and salted. That seemed no great

hardship to Bronwyn, but Wulffe pointed out that many inland folks would find it trying. After awhile, Bronwyn's mind drifted a bit from the details of cod, herring, smelt, sardines, corry, and shieldfins.

She had not yet had the opportunity to really look at her wedding presents. They had been transported to the Palace, and locked in a chamber near her own apartments. She must write her thanks to everyone as soon as possible, but secretly she looked forward to just clutching her hoard to herself, like a greedy dragon. Loghain was uninterested in the details, and had left it all to her. She had spotted an Antivan silk carpet in the pile, and wanted to pull it out and see if it were really as gorgeous as she hoped. Who had sent it to her? Right after the midday meal, she would go there with Fionn, and start listing and disposing of her wedding loot. It should be great fun.

The following day, amidst farewell kisses, cheerful insults, and best wishes, the expedition to Soldier's Peak assembled in the courtyard outside the Wardens' Compound. Bronwyn was rather concerned about it. Snow had fallen again, though lightly. If the weather turned bad, the whole party could be stuck in some dismal inn or at Vigil's Keep for the indefinite future. She did not like the idea of that group of individuals forced into close proximity for any length of time.

Those chosen for the expedition were eager to go, however, and all the supplies were ready and the wagons loaded. Chickens clucked in coops, protected by the canvas wagon

tops. Resigned cows were tied behind the wagons. It was a very well-equipped expedition.

Levi Dryden was as proud as any patriarch should be. He was leading a train of three wagons, two small carts, and thirteen members of his family. More would be joining them in the spring.

"A grand day, Warden-Commander!" he called. "A grand day!"

The Wolfs had two wagons of their own. Having quite a lot of coin left from the treasure Bronwyn had given them, they had taken care to prepare themselves well for their new home. They had been warned to be very discreet about their origins, and they had been, throughout their residence at Highever House. Before they left, Bronwyn reinforced the warning, since Danith was going with the expedition. As Bronwyn passed their lead wagon, Dirk Wolf gave her respectful greetings, and one of the little boys shrilled out his thanks for his Satinalia toy. Bronwyn gave them a smile and a wave.

"Oh! This is so exciting!" cried Leliana, kissing Bronwyn again. "An adventure of my very own! You won't recognize Soldier's Peak when next you see it."

"I hope not!" Bronwyn hugged her back, laughing. Leliana grinned, and vaulted easily into her saddle. Bronwyn wanted at least two horses up at the Peak, so Quinn would ride the other, and then walk back to Denerim with Danith. Besides, riders with the caravan would make it even more intimidating to bandits.

Jowan was riding in the Wardens' wagon, on the front seat with the driver, one of the Dryden nephews. The mage was huddled in a hooded cloak, holding his small black puppy on his lap.

"Good luck, Jowan," Bronwyn said, reaching up to shake his hand. "I'm counting on you."

"You won't be disappointed, Bronwyn. I promise."

Bronwyn walked down the wagon to the back, when Hakan and Soren were playing cards. She wished them good luck, and was glad that they seemed in good spirits about the change of duty.

The aravel was ready too, and a number of Palace servants had gathered around it and the halla, curious and some of them even admiring.

"The halla are glad to be traveling today, Commander!" said Steren.

"I hope you like Soldier's Peak. The way up to the castle is something of a climb, but the highlands are quite beautiful."

Danith said goodbye to Cathair and Zevran, and approached, herself in good spirits at the prospect of the march. "I have never been in that part of the Coast Mountains. It will be interesting."

Bronwyn nodded, almost sorry she was not going herself. "It's

very secluded; very wild. It's hard to tell at this time of year, but it looks like good grazing land."

They both turned to stare at Niall, who had found himself some new light armor in the stores, and looked...not much like a mage. He had also sensibly provided himself with a good cloak and some fine, fur-lined boots. He blushed and grinned.

"You look very nice!" Maeve called to him. "Have fun storming the castle!"

"You're not sorry to be staying?" Bronwyn asked her.

"I'd like to see the place someday, Commander, but maybe after Leliana fixes it up. I've never had the chance to see the shops in Denerim before, and I love the Compound. Mistress Rannelly's letting me help with the knitting. It's so relaxing."

She ran after Quinn, interrogating him about the number of clean socks in his saddlebag. Bronwyn smiled, once again struck by how different people could be. Nan had tried to teach her to knit, and Bronwyn had hated it so much that she had hid under the kitchen table whenever Nan pulled out her work bag.

Danith gave her a slight bow. "*Dareth'n arla*, Commander."

"A safe journey to you, Danith."

Bronwyn was pleased by the civility of their parting and worked on recalling the words Danith had said to her. She

moved over to Cathair, who was a little melancholy to bid farewell so soon to his fellow Dalish, and asked him what they meant.

"Dwell in safety,' Commander. It is a courteous farewell. The correct reply is '*Dareth shiral*,' which means "Safe journey."

"Really?" Bronwyn asked, pleased that she and Danith had at last said the right things to each other. It gave her quite a bit of hope for the future. "*Dareth'n arla*," she repeated. "If it is convenient for you at some time, Cathair, I would very much appreciate it if you could teach me more Dalish. Especially the courtesies."

"That would please me as well."

So the party ventured forth together: a long line of horsemen, carts, and wagons, made exotic by the presence of a Dalish aravel pulled by delicate-looking halla. People crowded at the gates to see them, wondering at the sight. Those remaining at the Compound waved until the gates closed, and then returned to the tasks at hand.

"We're the lucky ones," Ketil told Toliver. "there's nothing like the Pearl up at the Peak!"

Once the expedition to Soldier's Peak was gone, life took on a different aspect. Bronwyn had to struggle to insert her sword practice into her day. Like Loghain, she found the only way to do it was to get up quite early in the morning before most

other nobles were stirring. So it was down to the Compound at the crack of dawn, a hearty breakfast and then practice. And then, the rest of the world awaited her.

There were some consolations. Sleeping with Loghain was very pleasant—in addition to the activities that preceded and succeeded said sleep. He was quite tolerant of her occasional nightmares. Proximity had led to him being more forthcoming about his ideas and plans. She, in turn, confided her own.

"If you want to play Lady Patroness with the Alienage, you want to be quiet about it," he advised. "The Arl of Denerim won't like his toes stepped on—especially a new Arl, unsure in his holding. Start with what can be done, and don't talk people's ears off."

He was right, of course. Pushing too hard would cement resistance, especially from those who liked keeping elves in what they considered their places. On the other hand, there were things that were well within her power.

She now had from Valendrian the list of property holders of the Alienage buildings, and thus knew which were royal properties, and which belonged to the Arling of Denerim. Other owners were listed, and that was revealing: the Bannorn of South Docks was a large owner, of course, but a number of owners were under assumed names or were business or guild associations. No other major noble owned property there. She had brought up the squalor of the Alienage in a casual way with Kane Kendalls, but in his bland smiles she had sensed no real interest. It would be the royal

holdings, or nothing. She was pleased to find that the derelict orphanage was a royal holding, currently generating no income at all. She should go have a look at it. Possibly it could be renovated. Possibly it should simply be knocked down, and something else constructed in its place. Perhaps a decent apartment building... She arranged a time to go to the Alienage with Zevran and Cathair to look things over... and to look in again at little Amethyne and hear how she liked her lessons. Yes. there were practical things she could do to improve Alienage life when she was Queen.

Anora cornered her about a pet plan of her own that she hoped to interest Bronwyn in.

"A university?" Bronwyn asked. "Oh! I believe I know what you mean. That place for scholars in Orlais that the Chantry is so unhappy about."

"Ferelden needs to take its place among the civilized nations of Thedas," Anora declared. "A library and a university would attract the best minds... and keep our own best at home."

Bronwyn could see the value of such an institution—in theory, but was not sure how it would be paid for. It would generate no income, and would require heavy investment. It would offend the Chantry. On the other hand, she had no desire to offend Anora, either.

"I don't know anything about the University of Orlais," she confessed. "I need to understand more: how they operate, what they learn, how the funds are arranged."

Anora beamed, and promised to send her a prospectus and an armful of scholarly treatises. Bronwyn forbore to groan with horror. The promise was kept, and Bronwyn glanced through the works on higher mathematics, astronomy and the history of Tevinter bridge-building when she had a free moment or two. She did not want to refuse Anora outright, but this would clearly have to wait until the Blight was over and won.

"I knew I would be busy when I married," she confessed laughingly to Anders, one morning at the Wardens' Compound. "But not this busy! And it's mostly fluff: dinners and dances with the nobles; chats with the Queen. Important fluff, of course, but one longs for more substance."

"You only have to get through the Landsmeet," he consoled her. "Once you're safely Queen, you can grind them—and us—under your bootheel."

"The officer of the day found quarters for them in Fort Drakon, ser. They were pretty worn out from travel."

Loghain was pleased to hear that the mages he had summoned from Ostagar had arrived at last. From the soldier's report, the weather had been unpleasant, and the oxcarts had moved slowly up the West Road. The Templars had made some difficulties, too. The soldier produced the regular dispatch from Cauthrien for Loghain and a letter for Bronwyn from Alistair. That was a thick packet that probably contained more than one message.

Loghain instructed the man to tell Uldred that he and his second were to report to the commander's office at the fort after their noonday meal, and then dismissed the fellow with his thanks.

He opened Cauthrien's letter at once. Good news, mostly. The darkspawn continued to diminish in strength. Patrols continued and swept out ever farther. The darkspawn they found were inferior sorts, and no darkspawn mages had been seen in nearly a month. The Wardens and dwarves had explored the tunnels underneath the area, and confirmed the darkspawn retreat. Only pockets remained. There was debate among the dwarves about the feasibility of collapsing the big openings that the horde had issued from. Some felt that barrier doors in the Deep Roads might be the answer, but the closest choke point would be northeast of Ostagar, near the entrance at Lake Belennas. The general consensus was that the horde had moved north. There had been no significant casualties since last she wrote, and no deaths at all.

There had been some confrontations between mages and Chantry at Ostagar. Mainly, the mages felt that Templars were arrogant and superfluous: they risked nothing, as they did not themselves fight against the darkspawn; but they tried to use their authority to control the comings and goings of the mages. There had been an ugly incident involving a Templar and a female Tranquil. It had roused the mages to real anger. The Chantry had done its best to quash the matter, and the Tranquil had been returned to the Circle. The Templars and priests, on the other hand, were angry about the growing

fraternization between soldiers and mages. A soldier and a mage had asked permission to marry, and the priests had refused to perform the ceremony. There was an attempt to send the mage back to the Circle, but Cauthrien had intervened, since the mage was serving with the army. She had sent the mage to Denerim with Uldred's band, since otherwise there was a real chance that she and her sweetheart might desert together.

The dwarves were getting bored, which was not a good thing. Warden Alistair had proposed an exploration of the Deep Roads from Ostagar to the Lake Belennas access point. It seemed a good scheme to Cauthrien, and would be put into action within the next three days. If that was successful, the dwarves would return to Ostagar and attempt a similar probe of the Deep Roads route to Gwaren.

The elves were not exactly bored, but were unhappy with the cold of Ostagar. Their leaders wished to withdraw at least a portion of their forces north into the Brecilian Forest. They were not leaving the war, they said, but it looked like the war was leaving them.

Loghain considered Cauthrien's letter, and then decided that Bronwyn should be at the meeting with the newly-arrived mages. She, too, had mages under her command, and might have insights to share. Besides, the mages were technically Warden allies, rather than allies of the kingdom of Ferelden. As soon as the Queen's Council finished for the day, he gave her the news, along with Alistair's letter. She tucked it away, promising herself the pleasure of reading it later.

"We can get a bit to eat at the Fort," he told her. "Let's go there now."

Bronwyn had a fairly good idea what he had planned for these mages and was glad enough to be included. She fell into step beside him on the chilly walk to the looming fortress, rather pleased at the outing.

"Anders doesn't much care for Uldred," she remarked.

"It was my impression that he didn't much care for anything about the Circle."

"He had some good friends there. Still does, I gather. Uldred's a bit older, and in his student days Anders found him haughty and unhelpful."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing they won't be working together. Uldred's a powerful mage. He proved useful during the Redcliffe affair, and he certainly didn't shrink from a fight."

"I remember the first time I saw him. He was making a perfectly reasonable suggestion when Revered Mother Clarine put her oar in. Sister Justine sent word that she's back in Denerim, and angry as a scalded cat at being replaced. Horrible woman."

"I agree. The Grand Cleric would do well to keep her muzzled. Send her to a cloister perhaps."

Bronwyn had never visited Fort Drakon. It was very much the

citadel of the Fereldan Army, and she was not part of that at all. Even on her visits to Denerim as a child this had not been part of the tour—not hers, anyway: she knew that Fergus had gone there with Father on a number of occasions, and of course he had been there often since. She hoped there would be time for a proper tour of the place.

The guards showed off their best drill for the General of the Army, and goggled discreetly at the General's new wife.

The commander of the fortress greeted them, of course: a business-like professional soldier. Loghain treated him with the ease of established confidence and mutual respect. They joined the officers' mess—decent, plain food—and Bronwyn could see that it was not Loghain's presence, but her own, that inhibited some of them. To them, she was here as "Teyrna Bronwyn" rather than as the Warden-Commander of the Grey. It seemed best to play the former part to some degree, and she was friendly and civil, rather than forcing them to accept her as one of them. The meal broke up with some general talk. Loghain clearly knew all these men and women quite well, and their families, too. A soldier entered and whispered in the commander's ear.

"The mages are awaiting you in the parlor, my lord," the commander said. While they headed in that direction, Loghain quickly gave Bronwyn a brief summary of Cauthrien's news.

Bronwyn remembered Gwyneth, the pale blonde woman with Uldred. She was one of the mages that Bronwyn had recruited at the Circle. The woman remembered her, too, and

her face relaxed into a slight but genuine smile. Both mages looked exhausted. Uldred, however, was his usual ingratiating self.

"Teyrn Loghain," he bowed. Turning to Bronwyn, he bowed again, "And Teyrna Bronwyn. May I offer my felicitations?"

"You may." Bronwyn granted him a smile. "It is good to see both of you. We heard your journey was difficult." With that, she retreated to let Loghain take the lead. She wondered how much the mages knew about the recent events in Denerim: the poisoning of the Queen; her healing by a mage; the ransacking of the Chantry and its current lack of influence. Knowing how mages gossiped, she suspected they knew quite a bit.

Loghain wanted their report about the situation in Ostagar and the south of the country. The mages were pointed to chairs, and could tell an interesting, coherent story. It largely agreed with Cauthrien's report.

Darkspawn sightings in the vicinity of Ostagar and Wilds had continued to decline in frequency. Soldiers, Wardens, and mages continued to patrol, and it was the consensus that the horde was no longer in the area. No one thought the Blight was over, but they hoped and prayed it had gone somewhere else. Loghain asked about specific locations and numbers, and elicited quite a bit of useful intelligence.

"And how would you describe morale at Ostagar, Senior Enchanter?" Loghain asked.

Uldred and Gwyneth glanced at each other. Gwyneth looked like she wanted to talk, but subsided at Uldred's frown. With a positively oily smile, the Senior Enchanter said. "I am happy to report that that relations within the army and its allies are for the most part very good. Soldiers think well of those who stand with them and heal their wounds."

"Of course," Loghain agreed.

Thus encouraged, Uldred went on. "Elves and dwarves have no problems with mages at all. Quite the contrary. Some of the elven mages of the Circle have made good friends among the Dalish Keepers, and both groups are enjoying a very fruitful exchange of knowledge and lore."

Loghain grunted noncommittally.

"—In fact," Uldred paused. "In fact, the only significant differences involve the Chantry's continued attempts to control every aspect of our existence. The Templars find their safe and easy existence in camp rather dull, and enliven it with abusing those in their power."

"All of them?" Bronwyn asked.

"No," Uldred said, with a judicious show of fairness. "Not all. However, even one rotten apple can make life very difficult for those of us in the barrel with him. The Tranquil cannot protect themselves from predators. They are not capable of refusing even the most depraved demands. There was an egregious episode, and the Templar is still in our midst."

Loghain raised his brows. "I am glad to hear that you mages have shown restraint."

Gwyneth burst out, "And not just that! Poor Vivien had to be sent north with us for her own protection! Just because she wanted to get married!" She blushed, and ducked her head. "Sorry, my lord... my lady. And we heard that Wynne was dead."

Loghain glanced at Bronwyn, knowing how upset that always made her. Uldred also took notice of Bronwyn's expression.

"No doubt you will find some of the recent events here in Denerim extremely interesting," Loghain said, his face impassive. "You may also have heard that a young apostate was given her freedom from Chantry control due to her signal services to the kingdom. That is not going to figure in our conversation today. You are here because you have proved your worth. If the soldiers at Ostagar can learn to live with mages, so too can the rest of the army, and the city of Denerim as well."

Uldred was practically on the edge of his seat.

Loghain said, "You and I have discussed more freedom for Fereldan's mages in the past. I am not precisely offering you freedom at this point. What I can offer is a much longer leash. As the Blight continues, it might be that the mages' situation will evolve."

Uldred's brows went up. Past Blights had lasted for decades.

If they could accustom those in power to accepting mages, then who knew...

Loghain interrupted his thoughts. "Make no mistake: this is conditional. If mages abuse their new positions... if we have demons and abominations running rampant, then the mages will be shut back up in the Circle, and the key thrown away."

"My lord, I can assure you—"

Loghain put up his hand for silence. "You will act as liaison with your mages, and help in placing them in various companies. A mage will receive pay equivalent to that of a sub-lieutenant, and will be under the orders of his or her company commander. No Templars will be permitted to interfere. Choose a particularly good Healer to be assigned to permanent duty here at Fort Drakon. Our soldiers deserve the best."

Uldred was looking almost giddy. "My lord! I will do everything you—"

"You will serve in my personal guard, and will be paid a captain's wages. As officers, you mages will all be expected to conduct yourself appropriately. You will obey the orders of your superior officers and perform your duties to the fullest extents of your powers. It would also be extremely prudent to do nothing to provoke the Chantry further."

Bronwyn said, "Some of my Warden mages have chosen to wear armor when on duty, rather than robes. You might

consider it."

Gwyneth blinked large blue eyes, and told her, "The Templars don't allow us to wear anything other than robes. And we've no coin of our own."

Loghain was nodding. "Wearing armor is actually quite a good idea. Give some consideration to the matter, Senior Enchanter. Robes offer little protection when in combat against darkspawn... or anything else. We have large stores of various kinds of armor here in the fortress."

After more talk, the mages were dismissed, clearly excited about their prospects. Bronwyn could no longer wait to read her letter from Alistair.

"I've just got to," she told Loghain, and used her belt knife to pop the seal of the parchment packet. A number of folded notes tumbled out.

"Here's a letter from Adaia to the Alienage hahren and a bit of money... for her father. It looks like Alistair wrote it for her. I'll have to get that delivered. A letter from Emrys to his uncle Stronar. That's sealed, of course. A letter from Petra to Anders... Here's Alistair's letter to me. Want to hear it?"

"Does he have anything pertinent to say about the military situation?"

She made a face at him, and began reading:

Dear Bronwyn—

How are you? I am fine. The weather here is really, really cold. Adaia's been nice about mending my socks. And shirts. And pants."

Loghain rolled his eyes. Bronwyn cleared her throat.

"Things are pretty good, considering. We find fewer and fewer darkspawn all the time. Yesterday I was all over that part of the Wilds west of Flemeth's hut, and you'd hardly guess that the darkspawn had ever been there. Petra wonders if freezing the Taint doesn't work just as well as burning it. She's doing some experiments with it. That could be good down here in the south, where the ground freezes hard. Maybe next spring won't be so bad after all. I wish I knew more about how recovery from a Blight works. Petra asks me all sorts of questions, and sometimes I feel like a complete idiot. I wish there was a Grey Warden Manual somewhere. "The Compleat Grey Warden." Ha-ha. I could use it. Really. Not kidding."

"I know exactly how he feels," Bronwyn said, a little bitterly.

Loghain cocked his head. "Interesting idea about hard frost. Other Blights were farther north, and of course it never freezes in the Deep Roads. We'll hope there's something in that."

Bronwyn went on:

"I had an idea, and some people didn't think it's ridiculous. We—I mean Wardens and the dwarves—are going to see how far we can get going up the Deep Roads from here in Ostagar toward Lake Belannas. I promise that if things get hairy, we'll turn back. We might also check out the Gwaren Road. That way, when you come back, you can walk all the way to your new teyrnir and never get rained on! Admit it, I am a true friend. Hello to Teyrn Loghain, by the way. And I mean that really, really respectfully."

Bronwyn smiled archly at Loghain, who grunted in response.

"Everybody's doing great here. Pretty much. Sten has never been so cold before, but of course he's all stern-faced and stoic about it. When we don't have darkspawn to fight, sometimes we go to the workshop and make bombs. Master Dworkin has come up with some pretty weird stuff. Then we take them out away from the camp and see what they do."

"What a pack of children," scoffed Loghain.

"Speaking of weird stuff, Oghren found a barrel of apples and used them to make something he called ale. It was strong enough to kill the Archdemon. People paid him for it."

Our new Wardens are working out great. Emrys is really smart and friendly. He's something like you but with a deeper voice, naturally. Nevin never loses his temper about anything. Siofranni's made good friends with Adaia, and the dwarf girls help Petra boss me around all the time. All the

time. I am surrounded by women who boss me, including Ser Cauthrien, who is pretty scary.

That made Loghain smile a little. He had helped raise Cauthrien, after all.

We've heard some wild stuff out of Denerim. I hope the Queen is all right.

If I get rid of all the darkspawn around Ostagar, can I come back to the Compound? Please? That would be great.

Your friend and brother,

Alistair

"Poor boy," Bronwyn said. "Really, Loghain, it looks like we'll have to wrap up operations in Ostagar eventually. A garrison should stay, but not the force we have there now. At least I could furlough my Wardens, a few at a time. Alistair deserves a rest."

"After the Landsmeet, perhaps," said Loghain. "Now, what about seeing Denerim from the top of Fort Drakon?"

On the the twenty-fourth, the soon-to-be-official Arl of Redcliffe finally made his appearance. The prospect of meeting Teagan Guerrin, a person whom she suspected would prove a political opponent, filled Bronwyn with a certain unease. Word was brought to them that morning, in the

course of the Queen's council. From the quick glances in the room, she could tell that she was not the only one who looked upon Teagan's arrival as a harbinger of challenge and dissent. Arl Wulffe instantly took the initiative and invited everyone on the council to join him for their midday meal. A message as sent to the Arl of Redcliffe's estate, urging the Arl and Arlessa to join them. When they had a moment alone, Bronwyn unburdened herself to Loghain.

"So Teagan has finally made his dramatic entrance," Bronwyn said acidly. "Clever of him to time it just after our wedding, lest he seem to give tacit approval by his presence."

"He'll be coming to the council tomorrow," Loghain said, shrugging. "We'll see what he has to say. I was wondering if he meant to put off his arrival until the night before the Landsmeet, though that would hardly have been politic. If he wants his own marriage recognized, he has to recognized those of others."

"Even my cousin Leonas' wedding," Bronwyn said primly. "So shocking! A woman who gave birth to a *mage*. Hardly something any proper Guerrin would countenance." She saw Loghain's expression, and laughed lightly. "Don't worry! I won't throw his late sister-in-law in his face, though I'll be tempted if he gives trouble."

"I would think," Loghain said grimly, "that your sympathy for the mages would cause you not to mention the events at Redcliffe at all. That was exactly the sort of thing that proves the Chantry's point. A mage outside the Circle went berserk,

became an abomination, and slaughtered half a village. Killed his own mother, too. Doesn't help you make the case for mage independence."

Bronwyn made a face, but had to agree. "I suppose not. Though Arlessa Isolde's hypocrisy and and secrecy are largely to blame. She's the one most at fault, in my opinion."

"Of course she is," Loghain said, "but she's *dead*."

"Very well," Bronwyn sighed. "I shall try quite another tactic. I shall be sickeningly nice to Arlessa Kaitlyn—who really seems quite a sweet girl—and also to her little brother, thus making a flank attack on Guerrin family unity."

"Sounds good to me."

The Guerrins accepted Wulffe's invitation. Bronwyn's flank attack appeared to work well. Either Arlessa Kaitlyn was a brilliant actress and accomplished schemer, or Teagan did not confide his political views to her. Bronwyn tended to think the latter, though she did not dismiss the idea of the girl, even as young as she was, being a dissembler. For now, at least, she would try friendship.

Teagan himself treated her with bland courtesy, saying all the proper things. She could not but sense his deep suspicion and disapproval of her. He did not mention Alistair to her.

Loghain's puppy was a pleasant topic of conversation, and the talk, while guarded, was not hostile. Talking about dogs

always brought out the best in Fereldans. For that matter. Bronwyn was a little amused at her new husband's high standards of behavior for little Amber, but she was his dog, and seemed to thrive on his measured doses of affection and discipline. Had he tried that with Anora? Unlikely. From what she could gather, Loghain had had little hand in raising his daughter—at least in her early childhood.

They rode back to the Palace, and discovered that they could steal a hour or so for themselves. It was rather pleasant to slip out of their finery and then into bed, for love and some quiet talk together while they lay in each other's arms. Bronwyn loved these times. There was something to be said for conversing with a naked man, even if the man tended to talk mostly of the kingdom's affairs.

"I should be out at Gherlen's Halt, seeing what the Orlesians are up to. No help for it. Teagan didn't show his hand today. I wonder what he has planned for the Landsmeet?"

"I don't see how he can really plan much. He has to be confirmed himself and have his marriage recognized. He's not in a very good position to make trouble. I confess I was afraid he'd go to Ostagar and demand that Alistair come to Denerim with him. That doesn't seem to have happened though. Poor Alistair. All he wants is to be a Warden. I hope Teagan leaves him alone."

Loghain grunted agreement. "Listen here. If the vote goes our way—and I have no reason to suspect it won't—let's have the coronation right away. You don't have to have some sort of

fancy new gown, do you? Wear your wedding dress or that thing Teagan gave you. That's nice."

"I had thought..." Her voice trailed away, and then she smiled. All things considered, there was absolutely no way she was wearing a gown given to her by Teagan Guerrin to her coronation. He would likely take it as a smug slap in the face.

"Loghain, why don't we both wear armor? You in your River Dane plate and I in my Flemeth suit. We're at war, and that should be acknowledged. Let's just show up at the Landsmeet in armor, but with no helmets. They can crown us in armor, and then we can get on with the rest of the Landsmeet."

He mulled that over, liking the idea more and more. "You're sure you wouldn't mind?"

"Absolutely! My armor is spiffier than any gown. Do let's be crowned in armor, Loghain."

"All right! We'll just have the seneschal put out both thrones in the Landsmeet chamber, and then have the ceremony there. Think you can put up with the sneers of the Orlesians?"

That made her laugh. "As if I care what they think! Actually, there will plenty of Fereldan ladies who'll think I'm unwomanly. Too bad for them. At least in armor it's harder for the ladies to stare at my stomach, trying to see if I'm pregnant."

He sputtered. "After—what? Ten days? Not even Habren Bryland could be that silly."

"How little you know women. Especially women like Habren Bryland. Being silly is what she does best."

Someone knocked at the door. Bronwyn thought it must be Fionn, though it was harder than usual. The voice accompanying it, however, was not Fionn's.

"Your Grace! There's trouble at the Warden Compound. Warden Danith is back and her party was attacked. She says she needs to speak to you right away!"

"Is she with you?"

"Yes, Your Grace. She was sure you'd want to hear the news at once."

"Steady on. Let me get up and throw on a robe." She pushed the curtains aside. What had Danith seen? She snatched up her scarlet robe and tied it securely, and then tossed Loghain's through the curtains. A sinewy hand reached out and caught it deftly.

"Of course," he pointed out, "there's probably no need for me to dress. I could quietly eavesdrop from within the bed."

"You don't get off so easily, and you can't eavesdrop on Wardens' business," she said flatly. "It would be bad for morale."

"Not for mine."

"Besides," Bronwyn hissed, "She can undoubtedly hear your

voice, if not understand your words. Therefore she knows you're here, unless you wish her to believe that I talk to myself like a lunatic, and in two different voices, at that."

"I'm up, I'm up. And out, if need be."

She let him get up, and even let him put on his sheepskin-lined house shoes before calling "Enter."

The door opened, and Danith came in. After so many days living the luxurious life of a Fereldan teyrna, Bronwyn instantly caught the reek of travel and battle. Danith's face was bruised, and there was a fresh cut on one fine cheekbone.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Come in and sit down." She raised her voice to the servant. "Bring us all some tea. And something to eat, for Maker's sake."

"Should I leave?" Loghain asked. "Does this involve Warden secrets?"

Danith blushed and looked away, away that she had stared at the imposing sight of Loghain in a dressing gown and bare ankles for a little too long.

"No.... no... Teyrn Loghain," she added conscientiously. "You must hear this as well. We were attacked today on our way through the Wending Wood. By darkspawn."

The news that darkspawn were half a day from Denerim was

shocking enough. What Danith had to report about them was even more disturbing.

"We were on our way back from Soldier's Peak. We spent the night at Vigil's Keep, and the seneschal was most civil. He had something of concern to report to us. Had we not been ordered to return as soon as soon as possible, we would have stayed to investigate his claim that his men had discovered a connection to the Deep Roads with his dungeons."

Bronwyn blinked. "That's not good. We'll have to tell Nathaniel right away. Go on."

"I have traveled through that forest before without harm, so it alarmed me that it was so still. As the road curved past the entrance of an old mine, I sensed darkspawn. Almost immediately we were set upon. The darkspawn leader..." Danith hesitated. "Talked."

"Spoke actual words?" Bronwyn asked, appalled. "It really was a darkspawn? What did he say?"

"His voice was hoarse and unnatural, but I am sure he said. 'Take the Grey Wardens! The Architect commands it!' Niall heard him, too. Actually," she admitted with a touch of embarrassment, "I did not know that word, 'Architect.' Niall told me what it meant. Then a strong warband fell upon us: seven with the talking one, who was a mighty warrior. If Niall—and Quinn—had not been with us, we would have been killed or taken."

"Were any of your people hurt?"

"Nuala was badly wounded. The darkspawn wanted to take her alive—take us all alive. It seemed that their plan was for us to vanish, and for no one to know what became of us. It is good that we had the aravel. The darkspawn misjudged our numbers, for Quinn and Niall were riding in it. It is a marvel that Quinn was not killed. He fought most bravely, and... saved my life."

"He's a good lad," Bronwyn agreed, her mind racing with the story. The Architect? Hadn't she heard of someone called the Architect?

"Tell us the rest," said Loghain, eyes fixed on the elf.

"The darkspawn we slew. Other than the speaker, the darkspawn were very ordinary. We dispatched them easily. The one who spoke was cunning and dangerous. Niall froze him repeatedly and leached away at his power as we struck our blows. Finally, Quinn hewed off his head. Before that, the creature told us he was called "The Disciple," and that we were fools to defy the Architect. I could sense more darkspawn in the wood—not a large party—but enough, but we were too weakened to linger. I thought it best to report this at once, instead."

"You did absolutely right!" Bronwyn explained. "I'm glad to see you alive." She turned to Loghain and saw that he was frowning, lost in thought.

"The Architect..." he murmured. "The Architect..."

Bronwyn had a most uneasy feeling. Was this the same Architect that featured in Fiona's story? How much did Loghain know about it? "Have you heard of such a being before? Seen it?"

"No, not seen it, but I overheard Duncan and Maric on occasion..." He thought quickly, and decided that truth was best. He had put this out of his mind years ago, but who knew how long darkspawn could live?

"About twenty years ago, as you know, the Grey Wardens came back to Ferelden. The Warden-Commander, Genevieve, had lost her brother in the Deep Roads. Originally, they asked me to help, because I'd been in Ortan Thaig during the rebellion. I refused, and then Maric decided it would be a lark to go. He ran off, without telling me—without even saying good bye to his little son. Duncan was in the party; a young Warden then."

He snorted. "It was all a ruse by the Orlesians, of course. Maric ended up being taken prisoner at the Circle and was nearly killed. I had to haul his chestnuts out of the fire. As *usual*. When I found him, there was this strange darkspawn that begged us to kill it."

"It *spoke*? In actual words?"

"Yes. And Maric allowed it to be killed. I wanted to question the bloody thing."

"It mentioned a being called the Architect?"

"Yes! It's been a long time, but I recall it talking about something called the Architect, who was apparently an intelligent, talking darkspawn. It was trying to recruit Grey Wardens for some purpose of its own. Maric said that the darkspawn I saw was the remains of the Warden that Commander Genevieve was searching for. This Architect creature had tainted him further, and the Warden now looked entirely like a darkspawn. Maric was a fool to get involved with the business at all."

He saw the stricken looks on the two women's faces, and said gruffly. "The affair was over. Maric was saved, the Orlesian plot thwarted, and Genevieve and her brother were dead. Maric didn't tell me anything else, citing 'Warden secrets,' but Duncan stayed in Ferelden afterwards as Commander. I know they had private little chats, but they volunteered nothing else to me. I suppose I thought that whatever this Architect was, it was dead, too."

It was all coming back now. Riordan and Fiona, months ago at the Joinings in the Frostbacks, had told her their own version of this story. It had never occurred to Bronwyn that she might actually come across this Architect being herself. The details involved Grey Warden secrets, and she preferred not to share them with Loghain, who would be angry that she had kept them from him earlier. She had already told him enough.

Calmly, she said, "I must confess that any hint of talking

darkspawn is news to me. Worrying news, at that. I'll gather my people and we'll head up the Pilgrim's Path immediately."

"Not alone," he said. "I'll go with you."

Obviously, the Queen and her council must be informed. There was general consternation at the news.

"Do you think that the Archdemon is upon us?" Bryland asked, face drawn.

"I do not," Bronwyn assured them all. "I would sense the presence of the Archdemon. This Architect being is in some sense a renegade, commanding a small band of his own. Somehow, he is not subject to the song of the Archdemon. The reason I think that he has only a small band is that he would not wish to attract the attention and enmity of the Archdemon. That is why he withdrew so far away from where the horde was seen. That does not mean he is not dangerous. He must be dealt with swiftly, and without hesitation."

Nathaniel was horrified to learn that there were darkspawn in his arling, and vowed to stand with the Wardens. Fergus, too, could raise a substantial force on short notice. Loghain, of course, would take the companies of Maric's Shield here in the capital, each with their own mage. And Uldred, of course, would accompany him.

"Darkspawn like to hide in caves or tunnels," Bronwyn said.

"Danith said they passed a large mine. Nathaniel, do you

know of any place along the Pilgrim's Path that fits that description?"

"There are a number of mines in the general area. In the part of Wending Wood where your people were attacked?" He thought a moment, and then gave a quick nod. "Yes! There's a big silverite mine not far from there."

Loghain rolled out a map of Amaranthine, and Nathaniel found the spot, "There. It's been closed a few years. The owner lost everything in a business venture gone wrong. Father was thinking about taking it over. It goes deep, from all accounts."

Then Brownyn had to give him the disturbing news that Varel had discovered a link between the dungeons of Vigil's Keep and the Deep Roads. She had brought her own maps of the Deep Roads and pencilled in a dotted line. The maps of eastern Ferelden she had found in the Shaperate were old and smudged. However, the Amgarrak Road clearly connected old Kal'Hirol with the rest of the dwarven empire. They knew of the access point near the Dragonbone Wastes. Kal'Hirol was not far at all from Vigil's Keep. That there was a branch of the Deep Roads, or at least a connecting tunnel, was not surprising.

"This Architect," she said, "this master darkspawn, would not be traveling overland. If he is in the Wending Woods, he got there underground. If we attack him at the mine entrance, he will flee below and then our chance of catching him will be compromised. If, however, we can divert his attention while preparing an attack from the rear, we might deal with him

quickly. I shall take a party and leave tonight, and we don't want the Architect to see us. Instead, I propose that my party goes west to the East Hafter Road, and then follow the river north to Vigil's Keep. From there we will travel the Deep Roads to the mine. I'll have dwarves in the party, and their stone-sense will guide us."

"And I," said Loghain, "will take the main force tomorrow and march up to the entrance to the mine and dig in there. We'll not be in any hurry, but we'll be in position by mid-morning. The creatures won't be able to escape. I'll order a general advance at noon."

Nathaniel had an idea of his own. "I'll go with you to Vigil's Keep, Bronwyn. And better than riding all the way, we can commandeer a couple of the river barges on the East Hafter. That will give your people a chance to rest. We'll be at Vigil's Keep by dawn."

Plans were made and troops rallied. Bronwyn gave some thought to who she would take with her. Loghain must have some Wardens, too. Anders had healed the worst of Nuala's wounds, and the rest must be left to time and the care of Steren. Those two, then, would remain at the Compound. Everyone else was going north.

Danith must obviously go with Loghain, and direct him to the exact spot where the attack took place. He would send out additional scouts to hunt down any darkspawn haunting the Wending Wood. With her would go Niall, Quinn, and Maeve. They were used to working together. though Quinn was less

interested by their battle in the Woods than he was in babbling about the wonders of Soldier's Peak to Maeve and anyone else who would listen.

There was only a moment to take Danith aside.

"Did Avernus succeed in brewing the potion?"

Danith actually smiled. "He did. We all drank it, with no ill affects. Indeed, I believe our success against the strange darkspawn was largely due to our greater powers. Nuala would be dead without it. The creature underestimated not only our numbers, but also our skills."

Very pleased and relieved, Bronwyn put a hand on Danith's forearm. "You've done very well. I'll call the Wardens in before we leave for their own doses. It's too good an advantage to forego."

A brief conference was called in the study. The door was locked, and the potion distributed to every one of them: Anders and Aveline; Carver and Cathair; Idunn, Ketil, Toliver, and Maeve. Bronwyn downed her dose with the rest.

A brief, intense pain; a sudden burst of life and energy; a new understanding. Bronwyn straightened up and looked at her Wardens, they looked back, astonished and grinning.

"That," Anders declared, "is good stuff. That is the real thing. If feel like I could run all the way to Vigil's Keep without boots."

Bronwyn said, "Avernus has been working on improving the Joining formula for years. Jowan tried it first, and it seemed to do him good. Not only does Avernus believe that this frees us from the the Calling, but that we will no longer be infertile. For that reason, I suggest everyone be *prudent*. He thinks we'll have increased strength, stamina, and dexterity. Our current adventure will be the test of that."

"Damn," muttered Idunn, "Guess I'll have to brew that stinking contraceptive tea again. Not turning into a ghoul is good, though."

"Damn straight it is," grunted Ketil. "This gives a fellow a real boost."

They had enough time to arm and armor themselves, while the staff packed them each some rations. Those Wardens such as Idunn and Ketil, who did not know how to ride, sat behind those who did. Little baskets was arranged for Magister and the other puppy, so they could ride with Carver. Within the hour, the Wardens and the Arl of Amaranthine and his men were in the saddle and on the move, galloping on the West Road and then up the connecting lane to the nearest boat landing, at the tiny village of Upperhafter.

It took all of Nathaniel's authority to rouse the boatmen and get a pair of barges moving. The moon was bright enough for navigation, and once they understood who they were conveying, the boatmen did their best to make their passengers comfortable. Bronwyn accepted their hospitality in the spirit it was offered, and knew herself lucky to catch four

hours sleep in a cramped little cabin. Late as the hour was, Bronwyn fell asleep quickly, even in full armor, lulled by the slow gurgle of the water as they floated downstream to Vigil's Keep.

Thanks to my reviewers: Adventfather, Robbie the Phoenix, Girl-chama, KnightOfHolyLight, Embertoinferno, Chandagnac, Notnahtanha, Oleander's One, Phygmalion, Verpine, Jyggilag, Raxiselic, Mike3207, Guest, almostinsane, MsBarrows, Zute, JackOfBladesX, darksky01, Have Socks. Will Travel, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Juliafied, Tirion, Nightbrainzz, Psyche Sinclair, Patchworker, Jenna53, anon, Costin, EpitomyofShyness, Shakespira, Josie Lange, Nemrut, Yamilian, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

Thinking more about the golem controversy, I recently did a dwarf noble playthrough in which the Warden chose Harrowmont and supported Branka. The outcome, long-term, is pretty horrible. Yes, the DN gets to be a paragon, but Harrowmont follows the most traditional and isolationist policies: crushing the casteless, cutting Orzammar off from most contact with the surface; reinforcing the privileges of the upper castes. As for Branka, when Harrowmont refuses to give her more dwarves to make golems, she starts raiding the surface, abducting humans and elves to create yet more golems. Hideous outcome, and it does not bode well for the long term health and survival of the dwarven people.

That said, that outcome is not easily predicted, especially by

someone personally concerned with dwarven survival, which is why I believe that Bronwyn and Astrid, two intelligent warrior-aristocrats, would see the question very differently.

80. Architect of Nightmares

I had to revise the previous chapter somewhat. Darksy01 pointed out to me that Bronwyn had heard of the Architect back in Chapter 25. However, Bronwyn heard the story once when she had a lot on her mind. She never thought of it afterward, and so it took a bit for "The Architect" to ring any bells. Furthermore, she doesn't want to reveal any more Grey Warden secrets to Loghain. However, since she has heard the story, and Fiona's conjecture that the Architect may have actually started the Blight, her views about anything he says will be colored accordingly.

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 80: Architect of Nightmares

"We are here."

Morrigan's voice had never sounded more soothing and melodious. The boat was swaying, tied up at the river docks at Vigil's Keep. Bronwyn blinked awake to see the witch already dressed and leaning over her. Idunn was sprawled, still fast asleep, at the foot of Bronwyn's little cot. Just past the curtained doorway, she could hear Aveline and Carver, conversing in whispers. Outside the filthy little window, dawn

was pink and pearly in the heavens.

She felt... alive. No, not merely that, but nearly bursting with life and strength. Would she always feel like this? That would be... marvelous.

"I'm awake. Where's Scout?"

"Already ashore, and about his business. Your devoted arl, too, has dashed off, rousing his castle folk to give us breakfast. 'Tis a delay, but not an unwelcome one, perhaps."

"Not at all. I'm starving. And Nathaniel is not *my* arl."

Morrigan only chuckled. "Anders slept uncommonly peacefully. I noticed that in the rest of you. The secret medicament is a success, then?"

Bronwyn could have wished Anders to the Void for his blabbing tongue. She raised an ironic brow Morrigan's way, and the witch laughed outright.

"I dreamed," Bronwyn said, "but it was nothing I could not master."

"Well, 'tis to be hoped that is your motto in all your endeavors. Come, the arl longs to impress you."

It was all very nice: porridge and eggs and bacon; hot fragrant tea or small beer for those who preferred it; quickbread with plenty of honey. Adria, with her dog Topaz, promised to take care of the two puppies. Nathaniel gave

Bronwyn the place of honor at his right, while he tried to persuade her that he should accompany her.

"It's not safe, Nathaniel!" she said. "You and your men could be Tainted. We should show you what it looks like down there, just so you'll know not to touch it. Any signs of Taint need to be burned away. And wear heavy gloves, for Maker's sake! But don't think of coming with me. It's just too dangerous."

"It's not too dangerous for *you!*" he shot back, his voice urgent. "It sickens me, what you've had to bear while most of the nobles pamper themselves in Denerim! Why should you be the one to suffer all this alone? Let me help you!"

Men and their pride, she sighed to herself. At that, he was right. He was trying to do his duty, which did not surprise her at all. Seeing him now, sitting so close to her at breakfast, reminded her sadly of what might have been. She did not regret marrying Loghain for a moment; but Nathaniel had once had her love, and it was pleasing to see that she had not chosen poorly, even when very young.

"I need to speak privately with my people before we leave," she said. "May we have the use of a room?"

"Of course."

Not everyone was eager to be dragged from the breakfast table, but after thinking it over, Bronwyn decided they needed to know what she could remember about the Architect. Could

she include Morrigan and Zevran? Perhaps she should. King Maric had known it, and so could they. They knew so much already...

They gathered in a small parlor, some still munching, some with steaming mugs in their hands.

"Shut the door. This is private, and not to be discussed with anyone else. *Ever*," she emphasized. "I am including Morrigan and Zevran, because if we actually meet this Architect creature, they need to understand the kind of threat we're facing. I'll tell the other Wardens later. There was no time last night, and to be honest, I needed time to put my thoughts in order."

"So he's a talking darkspawn?" Carver blurted out. "is that even possible?"

"It seems so. A talking darkspawn *mage*." She paced a little, trying to remember details of a story she was told several months ago, in a time of high stress and distractions. Loghain's version had recalled some details to her.

"Save your comments until I finish," she said. "The fact is that I was told about the Architect the night that two Orlesian Wardens came to our assistance and arranged the Joining for you, Anders, and the others who joined with you. Senior Wardens Riordan and Fiona had secretly come the border to help us," she told the others. "That, too, cannot be revealed, or it could cost them their lives. Morrigan... Zevran... I am entrusting you with Warden secrets. Don't look scornful,

Morrigan. This is *dangerous information*. We don't want the Weisshaupt Wardens coming in force to hunt you and Zevran down. Believe me, it could come to that, if anyone else found out that you know what I'm about to tell you."

She saw the solemn faces before her, and went on. "All right. It was a hectic night. The two of them were trying to tell me—and Alistair, too—everything that we needed to know about the Wardens in an hour or two. Our duties, how to kill the Archdemon and what it meant to the Warden who did it, The Calling, the daily physical needs of Wardens... all that loomed larger than the story Fiona told, but now that story is in our faces, and has to be dealt with. It goes back twenty years, to the time the Wardens were first readmitted to Ferelden. Loghain knows part of this story, but only the bits that affected King Maric. He doesn't know the darkest, most disturbing parts."

She took a deep breath. "King Maric went on an expedition to the Deep Roads with the newly readmitted Grey Wardens early in Dragon 9:10. Senior Warden Fiona was one of the party, and could tell me all the details. Duncan, a young recruit in those days, was there, too. The Orlesian Warden-Commander, Bregan, had heard the Calling, had departed for the Deep Roads, and was captured... by a talking, thinking darkspawn emissary, who called himself the Architect. His sister, Genevieve, newly-appointed Commander of the Grey in Ferelden, was determined to rescue her brother. She originally asked Loghain to go, since he had Deep Roads experience in the place where Bregan was last seen, but he

refused. King Maric, however, was eager for the adventure.

"So the Wardens, along with King Maric, descended into the Deep Roads, and eventually found the lost Warden. This Architect creature had at least temporarily won Bregan's trust. Bregan told the Architect some of the most guarded secrets of the order: among them the various locations of the sleeping Old Gods."

This stopped the show. Even Morrigan's eyes grew wide. Then they narrowed, no doubt wondering how to get hold of this information.

Ketill stood up and bellowed. "The Wardens KNOW where the Old Gods are! Why the bleeding Stone don't we just go get 'em?"

"Quiet!" Bronwyn shouted. The angry, frightened, or bewildered shouts subsided. "Let's not give the rest of Vigil's Keep something to talk about. No, obviously I don't know such things. After the fiasco I'm describing, I doubt that the information is given to Warden-Commanders any longer. Bregan was taken in by the Architect, who claimed to have a scheme that would end the Blights forever. It was nothing less than a plan to meld the darkspawn with the other races of Thedas by forcing the Joining on every human, dwarf, and elf. If the darkspawn took us for other darkspawn, the Architect thought we'd no longer have any reason to fight."

A deep silence. "That," said Cathair, "is the silliest, ugliest, most impractical idea I have ever heard."

"It would kill at least two-thirds of the population," Idunn pointed out. "And sterilize the rest. Yeah, brilliant, if you mean to give the darkspawn the world."

"And what about the Qunari?" asked Toliver. "I mean... are they part of the deal, or not?"

"How were you supposed to get people to take the Joining, anyway?" wondered Carver. "With fancy talk and a big punchbowl? What about children? It'd kill them!"

Bronwyn put up her hand. "Did I say I thought it a good idea? It's not my idea, and I'm giving it to you fourth-hand anyway. I don't think this Architect really understands anything about us. Fiona said he was an immensely powerful darkspawn emissary who could talk and reason. That doesn't mean he has practical knowledge about how the races of Thedas live and think. Imagine a scholar, living alone, building castles in the air... or creating pure theories with no basis in fact. However, in Bregan's state of deterioration, it might have seemed a beautiful dream. At any rate, he knew the location of the Old Gods, and told the Architect. Fiona thinks it possible that the Architect actually *began* the current Blight with a misguided attempt to free the Old God Urthemiel. Obviously, things did not go according to plan."

"Or maybe they *did* go according to plan," Aveline pointed out shrewdly. "The Architect may not realize how subject he is to the Old Gods' call himself."

"Or perhaps," Morrigan suggested, "he imagined that he

would somehow be allowed to share in the Archdemon's power. And was quickly disabused of the notion. Hence the hiding on the other side of Ferelden. I see no reason to take anything the Architect said at face value."

"I agree," Bronwyn said. "I think that if we are confronted by this creature, we should be wary of its promises. Bregan, once his sister was also captured by the Architect, repented of his collaboration, and both he and she were killed. By the time Loghain saw Bregan, the Architect had done things to him that made him look completely like a darkspawn. Some of the other Wardens were also drawn in by the Architect. It ended at the the Fereldan Circle of Magi. The Architect had been in contact the the Orlesian First Enchanter there, one Remille. Remille cared nothing for the Architect's grand schemes, but saw a chance to murder King Maric and destroy Ferelden—"

"I *heard* about this!" shouted Anders. "I wasn't there when it happened, but Niall was, and he told me about the Orlesians attacking King Maric at the Circle. A lot of good mages were killed trying to fight Remille, who was a complete snake. Teyrn Loghain turned up just in time to save the King. I never heard about any darkspawn, though."

"They feared to create a panic," said Zevran, thinking it over. "And the Wardens, too, would want to keep the scandal quiet, since one of their own was so grievously at fault."

Bronwyn thought that more than likely. "Loghain saw the transformed Bregan, and wished to question him, but the man

begged to be put to death, and Maric allowed it. Apparently the Architect made his escape—"

Anders' face was white. "—which means that there is a link between the dungeons of Kinloch Hold and the Deep Roads!"

"These sodding darkspawn buggers are *everywhere*," grunted Ketil.

It had not occurred to Bronwyn to make that deduction, but of course Anders was right. Another thing they would have to check out. "Possibly," she suggested, hoping to calm him, "the Architect made use of a tunnel known only to himself. Perhaps he devised it, long ago. Very likely he closed it off, when he made his escape, in order to prevent pursuit. No one has seen any sign of darkspawn there."

"But what it also might mean," Zevran pointed out, "is that this Architect is a cunning fellow who always has an escape route planned. It would be wise to watch him carefully, if we meet."

"An excellent point," Bronwyn said. "If we cross his path, we won't let him get away. But that's enough story-telling. It's time to hunt him down. Follow me outside. The entrance to the dungeons is in a building just outside the Inner Keep."

"You mean the entrance to the dungeons isn't inside the castle?" asked Aveline. "That's... peculiar."

"It is," Bronwyn agreed. "It's one of the quirks of Vigil's Keep. Of course, over the thousands of years that a fortress has

stood on this spot. there have been many Vigil's Keeps. Probably some of them *were* over the dungeons and crypt."

Off they went, out the main entrance, across the inner courtyard to the place where Nathaniel and his twenty picked men were waiting. Then they descended ramps and staircases that took them deep into the earth. Bronwyn would have to rely on Idunn and Ketil's stone-sense to keep track of time and direction. Nathaniel was a quiet presence at her side. He was not wrong to support them, of course. She had no idea how powerful this Architect being was. If he got past the Wardens, someone else would have to stop him.

Nathaniel smiled at her as they passed an iron-bound door. "Do you remember that?"

She laughed. "The entrance to the family crypt. Your mother didn't want us playing there. Did you disobey her?"

With a shrug, he admitted. "Now and then. I got in a few times, but only to the first level. Mostly I explored the dungeons. I never went very deep, but I did go past the cells and storerooms. I never saw any connecting tunnel to the Deep Roads."

Varel's map, however, was accurate. The Arling of Amaranthine was a land of caves and mines. Deep below the surface, in the lowest and most ancient of the dungeons, they found where a rockfall had collapsed a wall of stone. Beyond it they found a system of minor caverns: no large chambers, but tunnels large enough for getting about.

"These are mines, Commander," said Ketil, his fingers running over the chipped stones. "Ancient mines. I guess they dug for iron here. Probably this was originally worked out of Kal'Hirol. The humans didn't know the dwarves were here, and the dwarves didn't know...or at least didn't care...about the humans. When Kal'Hirol fell, these tunnels were left to the darkspawn."

Yes, darkspawn had been here. They found foul black patches of Taint. Bronwyn pointed them out to Nathaniel and his men.

"Don't touch this with your bare hands. It has to be destroyed by fire. If your armor comes in contact with it, wash it with strong liquor."

After a very long walk, Bronwyn sensed darkspawn. Scout stiffened, his ears pricked up. Moments later, a gibbering band of hurlocks rushed at them from a side-tunnel. Nathaniel's bow twanged in Bronwyn's ear before she could turn to face them. Between their archers and their mages, the darkspawn were down and dead before they could cross blades with them.

There were other dangers: cave-spiders and deepstalkers. Nathaniel's men found the spiders more immediately alarming, but soon learned not to underestimate the nasty little deepstalkers with their clawed hind legs.

"Are these things edible?" a soldier asked, holding up a brace of limp bird-like bodies.

"I've eaten them," Bronwyn replied, "but they're not my favorite."

"Deepstalkers can be tasty," Idunn disagreed. "You need to marinate them in ale for a long time. Then you roast them quick over a really hot fire."

Zevran laughed. "We could have used your cooking tips in Ortan Thaig!"

Anders agreed. "Someday you could write *'The Grey Warden Cookbook.'* You'd be famous."

The laughter died as the Wardens sensed more darkspawn at a distance. Wherever they were going, it must be the right direction. They stopped for food and water, and refilled their lanterns. Then they trudged on, now and then puzzling over the direction. Not often, though. Their path was marked by Taint. Ketil examined the stone walls with a critical air.

"Did you see that layer, Idunn?" he whispered. "Silverite!"

The mining tunnels were opening out here and there. They came to a large cavern with signs of recent darkspawn visitation.

"How close are we?" Nathaniel asked.

Ketil eyed his map. "It's hard to say, my lord. Another hour like this to the mine entrance, but we're bound to hit the mine itself before them. I'd say we'll want to stay sharp."

Bronwyn had paused, and put up a hand. She pointed before her and a little to her left. "Darkspawn that way," she said quietly.

This proved a much larger band than the last: at least twenty mixed hurlocks and genlocks. Two powerful alphas led them, and roared as they charged the Wardens. Nathaniel's men held, but they were not enjoying themselves.

...Until after it was over, and they could congratulate themselves for being genuine darkspawn slayers. Bronwyn called another break, and some of the men talked quietly amongst themselves, with an occasional sharp, nervous laugh. They moved on once more.

The air was changing, becoming better circulated, less stuffy. There was a new smell in it, too; an elusive odor that Bronwyn could not quite catch past the reek of darkspawn. Darkspawn spoor and the relics of ancient mining led them on.

Bronwyn sniffed the air again. She *knew* that smell: musty, fusty, a little like the thousands of gull nests along the Cliffs of Conobar. Something else there, too: blood... and...

Dragons. It smells like the place where the cultists bred their dragons. How can that be?

Clambering up a slope, they found themselves in the mine workings proper.

"This is a rich mine," was the opinion of Ketil. He produced a

small rock hammer from his belt and tested a crystal. "And in prime condition. You get some good miners in here, my lord," he said to Nathaniel, "and in no time you'd be bringing in profits from silverite, malachite, and copper. A fine place. I wouldn't mind settling down here myself. There's some lyrium here, too, though your Chantry might go after you if you tried to sell it to anyone but them."

"Very likely," Nathaniel agreed dryly.

Bronwyn put up her hand for silence. The smell of dragon was very strong, and the sensation of darkspawn as well. How could darkspawn breed dragons? And for what purpose?

For the same purpose that the cultists had bred them, of course: to make themselves more powerful from the ingestion of dragon blood. If this Architect were truly intelligent, it might well have learned something about that old lore. This was very alarming. Drinking dragon's blood might account for the very powerful warrior Danith and her party had fallen afoul of. Scout growled softly, at the very edge of hearing.

She whispered. "There might be dragons ahead, or dragon young, at least. They are bigger than mabaris, and vicious. Be on your guard."

Zevran's nostrils dilated as he sniffed. "I, too, smell dragons. After the dragon cultists, I cannot be mistaken."

Nathaniel's men look worried, but they followed her, all the same. As for Nathaniel himself, his grey eyes narrowed in

determination.

The tunnel took a sharp turn to the left, toward the dragon stench. Being attacked from behind by dragons would be an extremely bad situation. Better to face them now. Ahead was more light: a lot more.

Beyond the sharp turn, someone had dug through a masonry wall, leaving a large hole. Bronwyn stepped through it onto a splendid high gallery. Below her was a vast chamber. The ceiling was almost lost in shadows, but the lighting hinted that it was magnificent, vaulted and carved in low relief. Above her head were decorative window embrasures, admitting patterns on slanting sunlight into the space. Traces of paint remained, and exquisite old lamps hung on long chains. This did not look like dwarven construction, but like Tevinter work. In fact, it resembled some of the ancient halls of Fort Drakon. Perhaps the mine had first been delved in Tevinter days. A small spiral staircase at the side led down to the main floor.

"Stay up here with the archers, Nathaniel," Bronwyn murmured. "You'll have a clear vantage. Cathair, you too. I think something unpleasant is close by. At least it can't be a High Dragon. We'd see it by now."

Deep in the shadows, there was a ominous rumble. "When it shows itself," Bronwyn whispered to Anders and Morrigan. "We'll hit it with some bombs. Then freeze it. Do everything you can to immobilize it or slow it down."

A shadow unfurled itself from the rest, and glided to the

floor. A dragon, young and active. It glared at them, stretched its long, long neck, and then uttered a bellowing challenge. Nathaniel ordered the archers to loose, and in seconds the dragon was feathered with poisoned shafts. It shuddered and clawed at itself, trying to dislodge them. Aveline, Carver, and Toliver, who had the best throwing arms, threw Dworkin's blasting grenades at the creature's feet. Three quick flashes and explosions sounded almost as one. The dragon flinched, screaming, its hide perforated and its muzzle bloody. Working in brilliant concert, Anders and Morrigan ran out and caught the creature in with intersecting arcs of frigid air. The dragon halted, temporarily turned to ice.

"Stop shooting!" Nathaniel ordered. "We don't want to hit the Wardens!"

"Follow me!" Bronwyn shouted. A rush and a scramble. There was not a moment to lose. Within moments the dragon would shake off the hex, and lash out fiercely. They knew to go for the vulnerable spots: joints, eyes, mouth, the softer hide under the legs and behind the wings; the wings themselves. Carver's greatsword tore through a wingsail, grounding the beast permanently. Ketil's axe hacked at the tendons of a hind leg, crippling it. Scout darted in front, distracting the dragon's attention so completely that it had no idea which enemy to fight first. They were doing well—really well; right up to the time the second dragon alighted behind them. In the noise of battle, Bronwyn did not hear Nathaniel's cry of warning.

She heard the roar, though, and looked over her shoulder, into the other dragon's menacing stare. It snapped at her, and she

cuffed at it with the hilt of her sword. Morrigan saw it, wide-eyed, and shot a paralysis spell at it, which the dragon shrugged off.

Nathaniel ordered the archers to follow him. The only way they could be of further use was to shoot at close range. They rushed forward, bows drawn. Nathaniel put an arrow in the dragon's eye. It screeched, and turned his way, inhaling deep to roast these foolish upstarts.

"Oh, no, you will *not* ignore me!" Bronwyn muttered. Dancing in front of the dragon, she grabbed at its neck with her arm, and stabbed it in the throat with her dagger, twisting the blade. The dragon flapped its wings, knocking her aside like a toy. It withdrew with a hoarse squawk to the ceiling. The archers tracked it even after it was no longer visible. Nathaniel loosed an arrow and smiled grimly at the answering squeal.

"Finish this one!" Aveline bellowed, stabbing at the first, wounded beast. "Finish it!"

Before they could manage the killing blow, the other dragon dropped down on them again, spewing flame.

The injuries would have been worse without helmets. Scout squealed, his fur sizzling. Morrigan was burned, too, and instantly shape-shifted to a hawk. She took wing, creeling, seeking the safety of the vaulting. The dragon hesitated, intrigued by the flying prey, but also eager to avenge its nestmate, now in its last throes. It shot an inaccurate, half-heated blast of fire in Morrigan's general direction, and then

its head swiveled to confront the warriors before it. The hole Bronwyn had dug in its neck glistened wetly.

Morrigan alighted on the high gallery and resumed human form, casting a constricting hex at the dragon that slowed and weakened it. It shrieked its outrage, the noise echoing from the stones. While its head was up and its wing out, trembling for balance, Bronwyn vaulted over its shoulder, and leaped onto its back as she would a horse's, wrapping her legs around the neck and hacking at it with her blades. Morrigan ran down the spiral staircase, waving her staff, utterly appalled.

"Bronwyn, are you crazy?" Idunn bawled out. Scout barked wildly.

The dragon, torn with pain, gathered itself and its wings beat down, knocking Carver to his knees. Even with the added weight, it managed to get airborne. Enraged, sluggish, it sought to free itself from its burden, but Bronwyn clung on, digging her dagger in for stability, while she sawed at the neck. It was an awkward angle, and she longed for one of the clever dragon-hunting spears she had commissioned from Master Wade. Never again would she leave Denerim without one!

It was wild, delirious, *thrilling* to fly through the air, looking down at her friends below; soaring up within feet of the ceiling. The dragon veered close to the wall, trying to scrape her off, but flinched away when Bronwyn stabbed it again, this time on the other side of the neck. For a moment, Bronwyn

imagined what it must have been like to be a Warden of old, mounted on the back of a griffon, flying to meet its mortal enemy in midair.

Nathaniel gritted his teeth, his bow taut in his hands, shaft still on the string. He dared not loose the arrow, and like everyone else on the floor, he watched Bronwyn's mad dragon ride with in wretched suspense. The creature was weakening, but if it fell, it would injure or possibly kill Bronwyn with it. At last, it squalled horribly, with impotent, sluggish flappings. It skimmed along the wall and then scabbled with its claws at an overhang. With a curious whine, it slowed and then convulsed. Bronwyn's legs lost their grip. She dropped her sword and clung to the bloody neck with both arms, while the rest of the party scrambled out of its way as the sword clanged on the floor. A last feeble downbeat, and the dragon came to rest on the gallery where she had entered. Bronwyn rolled away, groping for her belt knife. The dragon raised its head for one last protest and then collapsed, dead.

A ragged cheer rose from the chamber floor. Bronwyn was still frozen with shock, hand clutching the hilt of her knife. The dragon lay still, with her dagger sticking out of its neck. Still dazed from the sensation of flying through the air, she cautiously groped for the dagger, hardly aware when her friends rushed up the little staircase to see to her. Scout squirmed through the press and nearly knocked her down.

"Let me through!" Anders shouted. "I'm a Healer!"

Morrigan reached her next, however, and grabbed her by the

shoulders. She gave her a furious shake, and then stalked away.

"Madness! Absolute madness!"

But the rest were laughing and cheering, patting her on the back, giving her hugs. In the shoving and crowding, Nathaniel found himself in front of her, and instinctively took her in his arms. It was a brief embrace, for all the other Wardens were grabbing at her, hauling her away, while Anders shouted at them to give him room.

"I'm fine!" Bronwyn insisted. "Oh, poor Scout! Anders! heal those burns!"

It took more than a few minutes for the shock and elation of killing two dragons to die down. Actually, she felt very well. Her cuts and bruises were already healing, and she was not in the least tired. Bronwyn had everyone eat something, walked around the dragons to admire their size, retrieved and cleaned her weapons, and tried to decide which way to go. A quick glance down the corridors told them that one was a small door that led outside to the Wending Wood. It was a back door, of sorts, shrouded by vines. Knowing about both this and the Deep Roads entrance gave her some confidence that the Architect would not easily slip away from her. The other corridor led down, toward the darkspawn she could faintly sense. That decision made, she ordered them to get moving. She hoped Loghain was moving into position by now, but it was as important as ever to find the Architect.

Loghain traveled with the vanguard. The Wardens were with him, along with Uldred and the three mages he had chosen to serve in the three companies of Maric's Shield that were participating in the action. Fergus had been upset at Loghain's insistence that he stay in the capital, but they could not strip Denerim of all its defenses. His job was to guard Anora and make certain that no foreign assassins staged another surprise. By now the Empress must know that her attacks had failed. She very likely had heard that Bronwyn and Loghain planned to marry, and she would understand instantly what that meant. No, someone reliable must stay in Denerim with a strong force.

Loghain hoped that Bronwyn had found her way through the dark of the Deep Roads to join him, but whether she had or not, he was going through this mine from end to end. He would prefer to catch and kill the Architect. However, he might have to settle for destroying his base and his supporters.

"So this is the Pilgrim's Path," said Quinn. "It's famous, innit?"

Maeve gave him an absent nod, watching the trees on either side of the road. "It's the most heavily traveled road in Ferelden. That's one of the reasons why it's got to be made safe as quickly as possible."

Ordinarily Danith hated asking questions, feeling it diminished her dignity. However, these were friends.

"How did it get its name, this Pilgrim's Path?"

"The Chantry says," Maeve told her, "that this is the way Andraste marched from Denerim to take ship when she and Maferath invaded the Tevinter Imperium. It was on the current site of the Chantry of Our Lady Redeemer in the city of Amaranthine that Andraste first revealed the Chant of Light to the world. Then she sailed across the Waking Sea, and swept the Imperium with fire and sword."

Danith certainly could not argue with anyone who fought the Tevinters. The Tevinters were the worst of all shemlen: even worse than the Chantry and their Templars that had conquered the Dales. The Tevinters had destroyed Arlathan; they had destroyed the culture of the elvhen. To this day the elves had recovered only fragments. It was also well known among the Dalish that the woman Andraste had had at least one close elven friend: the hero Thane Shartan. Andraste had not founded the Chantry after all. That had been done long after her death, by others making use of her name and deeds. Danith knew for a fact that Bronwyn and many of her fellow nobles were no great friends of the priest-folk.

"Warden!" called Loghain. "Is this the place where you were attacked?"

"Near here, Teyrn Loghain. A little past that next curve in the road, and uphill a bit. We shall soon be there."

"As soon as you sense darkspawn," Loghain said, with a grim smile, "we'll set about giving them a surprise."

Down Bronwyn went: along magnificent staircase, only a little defaced by time; down elegant Tevinter corridors, complete with elaborately carved pillars and fine stonework; through yet more splendid bronze-and-lyrium double doors. Bronwyn sensed darkspawn ever more strongly.

A side door admitted them into a bedchamber.

"Don't touch anything if you are not a Warden!" Bronwyn hissed. "it's all Tainted."

"Was the man who lived here killed by darkspawn, do you suppose?" Carver asked.

Morrigan chuckled darkly. "Not at all. 'Tis clear that this room is *inhabited* by a darkspawn. Who then, but our mysterious friend the Architect himself?"

"She's right," Bronwyn said, studying a piece of parchment. Written on it were instructions to someone named Utha: a dwarven name.

Utha—

I know this has tested your patience. You first gave your blood years ago to further our common dream. I know at times it seems we're going nowhere. Trust me, Utha, I echo your frustration. The Blight has been a setback, but it will not last forever. I intend to keep my promise to you.

Perhaps you should venture above ground. The greenery

and fresh air would do your spirit good.

This was horrible. The Architect had supporters, and not just among the darkspawn. Who was this Utha? One of the Wardens who had traveled with Fiona and Duncan?

Nathaniel was repulsed. "A darkspawn that sleeps in a *bed*?" he asked, pointed to that large and grubby furnishing.

"Maybe," suggested Anders, "He likes to pretend he's not really a darkspawn."

There was quite a bit in the Architect's quarters to ponder. It was very neatly kept. Three tall bookcases contained works on magic, history, geography, and healing. Poetry and novels lay in a stack on a little table. A bottle of fine Antivan wine and a pewter mug had been left by an open volume of *The Dragons of Tevinter*. By the bed was a little wooden horse on wheels. Bronwyn wondered if her head would explode before she vomited, or vice versa.

Neither, thankfully. She kept her countenance.

"Come on. Let's go."

They climbed through a hole in the rocks, and abruptly found themselves in the mining tunnels again. These were unoccupied, but Bronwyn sensed darkspawn beyond another set of double doors.

"Beyond these doors," she whispered. "I feel it strongly.

Based on the placement, I believe the next chamber is large. Nathaniel: it would be best that your archers position themselves just inside the door. It will give the rest of us room to fight whatever is next."

A drake flamed at them as they entered the chamber. Beside him a powerful darkspawn mage cast nauseating hexes. For a moment Bronwyn thought they had found the Architect, but this was a strong but ordinary genlock emissary and his supporting minions. No words were exchanged.

Having only vestigial wings, the drake could not escape into the air, and the cavern ceiling was too low to permit flight, anyway. Once immobilized, it was not that hard to hack the drake to pieces. The mages concentrated on the genlock emissary, and after a few exchanges, it was down. Looking around after the fight was over, it was clear that they were back in the mines. Ketil scraped something shiny from the wall, and raised his brows, impressed.

Further on, they were drawn by the distinctive cries of dragons. They bore to the right, and were confronted by a powerful darkspawn wielding a maul. Dragonlings scampered past him, rushing at the Wardens.

"I'd say we've found the nest!" Bronwyn called to Nathaniel.

The big hurlock was dangerous. So too were the aggressive, squeaking young. Bringing up the rear was a furious drake, ready to defend his nest. Everyone ducked the first blast of dragonfire. Morrigan slipped past the maul's deadly arc, and

managed to freeze the drake. Idunn was not so lucky, and was struck a glancing blow that knocked her against the wall, winded and bruised. The archers moved in and shot the dragonlings at close range.

Dying hard, the hurlock lost his maul and resorted to grabbing at his enemies, trying to bite them with savage brown teeth. Even with a cracked skull, he fought on. A pair of dragonlings, seeing him down, rushed to him with piteous squeals. The Wardens turned on them, chopping, chopping, until they stopped moving. The drake, helpless and spellbound, was beheaded very messily.

At the back of the cavern were the nests: heaps of straw. One had eggs in it. Bronwyn put her hand on one, and then flinched away as she felt movement within. Carver pulled her away as Ketil's axe crashed down, killing the embryo. The dwarf kept hacking, shattering eggshell and splashing viscous fluid on them all. For some reason, Bronwyn found the sight of the unhatched dragons disturbing— infants who would never know the world—and walked away from the triumphant shouts.

"Enough of this," she said, pulling at her friends. "No, really. Let's go. We still have the Architect to find."

Nathaniel called his men to order. Two of them had been badly burned, and Anders was busy healing them. The burns would scar, but not enough to cripple them.

The tunnels forked again. It was impossible to guess which

was the best choice, since Bronwyn sensed darkspawn in both directions.

"Which way?" wondered Nathaniel.

It was essentially a coin toss. "We'll go through those impressive doors," said Bronwyn, "but we can't risk an attack from the rear or the Architect escaping. Nathaniel, stay here with your men and keep watch. I think that the way we came through was the only way to the Deep Roads, but we can't be sure. We'll leave the doors open behind us. If we come across something that's too much for us—" she gestured to the dragon horn on her belt "—I'll sound the call."

Nathaniel disliked the idea of staying behind, but the fork in the tunnel was worrying. He agreed, rather than fight about it. Bronwyn smiled, and touched his arm, and then led the Wardens through the doors.

They were abruptly back in ancient Tevinter work: finely fitted stone and the remains of polished floors. The lighting was of dwarven design, and excellent. At a turn they found a place where the wall seemed to be deteriorating.

"There's a false wall here," Zevran said. Bronwyn, concerned about yet another hidden exit, had her people pull out the masonry so she could see what lay behind it. Afterwards she wished she had not.

They peered in to see bones. Something had died here, walled in. Part of the remaining inside wall were scarred by

repeated, futile blows by a broken dagger. A misshapen human skeleton was propped up against the wall.

"It had two heads," Anders said. "Lovely."

For some reason, a treasure chest had been walled in with the wretched creature. Golden cups and bowls of antique make, fine jewels, and faded manuscripts were heaped there. It was all very much worth taking with them.

"This is a mystery that antedates the Architect," said Bronwyn. "We have no time to unravel it now. I sense more darkspawn this way."

"Take the Wardens!"

The hoarse shout came from a big hurlock in the van of the darkspawn. A group of them poured out of the front entrance to the mine. The huge and heavy doors stood wide open. An ogre emerged over the threshold, massive horned head down, tiny eyes blinking at the sunlight.

Maeve danced and waved, while Niall grinned and tossed a rock at them. Danith thought the mage threw like a little girl, and tossed a better-aimed rock herself.

"Obey me, the Seeker!" the darkspawn urged his minions. "Take them, and do not kill!"

"Oi!" yelled Quinn. "You! You there, big and stupid! Come on

and get us!"

With an indignant snort, the ogre thundered past, pounding up the path to the Wardens on the hill. Squawking genlocks and hurlocks swarmed after him.

"No! No!" bellowed the Seeker. "Do not kill! The Architect wants them alive!"

Distracted by the Wardens, the darkspawn never noticed the soldiers who slipped through the underbrush from the sides. The doors were open and would stay open.

And then the archers stood up from cover.

"Loose!" roared Loghain.

Only the ogre and the Seeker survived that volley. The Ogre was caught in Niall's ice spell and turned into a porcupine. A hammer-like blow of energy struck full on and the ogre blew apart.

Uldred, more subtle and even more powerful, targeted the Seeker, catching it in a web of magical energy that slowly constricted, choking the creature. The other mages joined in. The Seeker briefly broke free, but was caught again, and was miserably, magically suffocated. He crumpled to his knees and then fell on his face. A final desperate tremor, and the Seeker lay dead.

"Don't touch the creatures!" Loghain ordered. "First company,

secure the doors. Wardens, with me!"

The next set of doors Bronwyn went through led to a large chamber in which a grand staircase was blocked by an enormous tangle of tree roots. A handful of darkspawn burst out of a side tunnel, and the fight was on. The room was large, but the number of combatants made for close work. They were nothing beyond the norm, and were down in short order.

A voice, mellifluous as thick, dark oil, sounded above their heads. By the stone rail of the vine-choked staircase, a creature eyed them with serene curiosity.

"So you are the commander of the Grey Wardens."

This then, must be the Architect: more human-like than any darkspawn they had ever before seen, yet bizarrely attenuated. Its body was long and scrawny; its arms sinewy and tipped with claws. Across its face was a mask-like headdress of gold and lyrium. Its clothing was at once fanciful and ragged, with tall open work pauldrons of stiff metal ribbons. Rib-like bands protected its chest.

Behind him was a dwarven female: a warrior, and long-tainted, from her glazed eyes and dark-blotched skin. She drew her sword, and fell into a fighting crouch without a word.

"No, Utha," the Architect murmured. "That is not how this must begin."

The Architect opened his arms wide, and floated down to them. It was an impressive display of magic. Scout whined and backed away a little. Bronwyn had heard that the Architect was a powerful darkspawn emissary. It made him a far more dangerous opponent.

"I sent my disciple to contact your people in order to begin a useful dialogue and to seek your help. I should have anticipated that you would perceive this as an attack. I am rarely able to judge how your kind will react. It is most unfortunate."

"Help?" Bronwyn repeated, baffled and alarmed. "What do you mean?"

"My kind has ever been driven to seek out the Old Gods. This is our nature. When we find one, a Blight begins. We do not attack you because we crave power and destruction. We obey the call of the Old Gods, without choice. Each time we attack your surface lands, and you fight back until we are defeated. Hundreds of thousands of my brethren are slain. To break this cycle, my brethren must be freed of this compulsion. For this, I need Grey Warden blood. Things have not gone as I planned. I only wish that you hear me out. Should you still wish to slay me afterwards, you may try."

"How would Grey Warden blood help free the darkspawn?"

"In order to become what you are, you drink the blood of my kind—to transform. Similarly, we must transform. I have created a version of your Joining that uses the blood of Grey

Wardens. You take the Taint into yourself. What we take is your resistance. That is how my brethren are freed. In your blood lies the key to their immunity to the call of the Old Gods."

Anders remarked, "I like my blood where it is. In my veins."

Aveline shot back, "If we could stop the Blights, wouldn't a little blood be worth it?"

Bronwyn suspected there was far more to the story than this. Clearly, this creature could not be trusted. The dwarven woman, Utha, had joined them, coming down through the side tunnel. She had not sheathed her sword, and watched them intently with her filmy eyes.

Warily, Bronwyn asked, "And how do the darkspawn change afterward?"

"Once they are freed, the darkspawn think for themselves. They speak; they act."

Idunn burst out, "That doesn't make me feel any safer! Why would *smart* darkspawn be a good thing? You think we'd all be *friends*? They'd likely still want to claim the Deep Roads for themselves! Let's kill this creature before it makes more like itself!"

"Are you crazy?" countered Toliver. "We can't pass up the opportunity to have an ally among the darkspawn!"

"An ally?" Bronwyn wondered. She was inclined to agree with Idunn. Would it be possible to ally with a darkspawn in any real sense? Ending the Blights would be a great thing. Allowing intelligent darkspawn to multiply—creatures who might swarm up onto the surface for reasons of their own—that did *not* seem like a wise choice. And it would further endanger the dwarves, their long-time allies. "Would you aid us against the Archdemon?"

"No, but when the Blight is over, I will urge my kind to go far below, and no longer trouble the surface. I will go with them, and continue my work. I do not seek to rule my brethren. I only seek to release them from their chains."

"And how did *you* become free?" asked Carver.

"I was born as I am, an outsider amongst my kind. Why? I do not know. Why do some of your kind become Grey Wardens?" Why do some of you possess magic? I have no answers."

Bronwyn thought it likely that it really did not. That did not exactly inspire confidence. The creature said it did not wish to rule its kind. It spoke of urging them to go below. Presumably, it could not promise obedience. What was to prevent the darkspawn from staying on the surface, spreading Blight disease, tainting the landscape?

She said, "I find the idea of giving my blood for this purpose perverse and revolting."

The Architect was only mildly surprised. "Why? I had thought it was no different than your order's use of darkspawn blood in your Joinings. We both do what we must in response to the Blight. The first blood came from Utha, freely given."

Silently, the dwarven woman made a formal bow.

The Architect said, "She was a Grey Warden, as you are, and joined us many years ago. Will you accept me as an ally?"

Anders broke in, "What if he's wrong? What if this doesn't stop the Blight, but makes everything worse?"

"This could change the world," Aveline breathed. "A world without Blights? Think of the lives saved."

"You are a fool," sneered Morrigan. "Why should we believe anything this creature says? This ghoul," she gestured at Utha, "might have allied with him, but others did not, and most were slain at his orders. And ask him how he proposes to make more 'of his kind?' Will he next expect a regular tribute of females to swell his numbers? A regular harvest of Warden blood?"

"The witch is right," Ketil grunted. "This thing promises to get rid of your Blights. Maybe he can and maybe he can't. He certainly can't end the Blight we're in now. Anyway, getting rid of the Blights is fine and dandy for you surfacers, but it means shit to us dwarves. We've stood with you against your troubles: it's only fair that you stand with the dwarves against ours. I say kill him now."

Bronwyn paused, really and truly on the horns of a dilemma. Ending the Blights would be a glorious gift to all Thedas—at least on the surface— but could this creature actually achieve that? And the dwarves' position must be considered. And then, based on Fiona's conjectures...

"It is curious," Bronwyn said slowly. "Very curious... that twenty years after you obtained the location of the Old Gods, we have a Blight. Did it take that long to dig through to Urthemiel? And why Urthemiel, anyway? You won't deny, will you, that you located the Old God?"

"Urthemiel was the most accessible," said the Architect, perfectly calm. "I sought only to free the Old God, but it reacted... poorly."

Morrigan looked smug. "You mean," she said, sharp and shrewish, "that in your bumbling you or one of your minions touched it and thus Tainted it? And then, oh, dear, dear... you had an Archdemon on your hands."

Carver shook his head. There were different reactions around the room. Zevran's hands had never left his weapons. Bronwyn had already made her decision, but she explained it, not for the Architect's benefit, but to help her people understand and support her.

"And I daresay you will try again, hoping for a better outcome," she said. "I think you've done quite enough. I don't think you can really deliver on your promise to end the Blights, because I see no way you could actually dose all the

darkspawn in Thedas with Grey Warden blood. Is there even enough Grey Warden blood to do it? I don't know how many darkspawn there are. The dwarves, too, have right on their side. How do we know that that thinking darkspawn would no longer be their enemies and rivals for the Deep Roads? And then there is your history of impractical, unacceptable plans: what became of turning all humans, elves, and dwarves, into Wardens? We know that was impossible. I suspect your idea of dosing all darkspawn is likewise absurd. So... no. I think the time for talk is at an end."

The Architect opened his mouth to speak, but with a triumphant shout, Morrigan cast her strongest freezing curse at him. Cathair, too, had been ready, and shot a poisoned arrow into the Architect's unprotected throat. Others threw themselves into combat, focused on downing this extraordinarily dangerous opponent. Scout moved at the same moment Bronwyn did: head down, teeth bared.

But the Architect was ready, too. Only frozen for a few seconds, he broke free and lashed out instantly, with a firestorm that left them singed and gasping. Bronwyn's mages fought fire with ice. The cold patches gave the warriors a path of attack, and a way to cool the magical burns. The dwarf Utha fell on them with her longsword, knocking Toliver down.

"Carver!" Bronwyn shouted. "You and Aveline deal with that ghoul!"

Cathair had already shot an arrow in that direction. Utha yanked the shaft from her jaw, oblivious to pain. Bronwyn had

too much to do at the moment to follow that fight. Her sword was slathered with the vilest poisons brewed in the Ostagar workshop. While Anders' curse distracted the Architect, Bronwyn lunged at him.

The Architect flung up his arms, and a blast of magical energy scattered his enemies like dry straw. Some struck the stone walls head first. Even the thickest helmet could not cushion the impact completely. Scout, lower to the ground, missed most of the blast, and skidded into a corner, fairly unharmed. Bronwyn hit the stones so hard she saw stars. The Architect was gathering up for another spell. Bronwyn limped toward him, sword raised, when the creature's casting was interrupted by Zevran's thrown dagger in his face. The Architect plucked it out and dropped it, resuming its chanting.

There was a scuffle behind her. With any luck, Utha was down.

Anders, wiping blood from a split lip, raised his staff to cast. The Architect instantly paralyzed him. Furious, Bronwyn lunged again, plunging her sword into the Architect's belly. Whether it was the substance of the robes or the Architect's unnaturally tough hide, there was real resistance before the point penetrated. Bronwyn was knocked down again, her sword still stuck in the Architect.

It was a grueling fight. Some of her people were still unconscious or worse, and Architect was a fast and powerful spellcaster. He used the blasting hex again—though it was less powerful this time—and Bronwyn staggered back, feeling

as if she had been hit by a hammer. The Architect still had her sword, so she stumbled forward, determined to get it back. Morrigan, her energy flagging, tried to freeze the Architect again. It gave Bronwyn just enough time to grab her sword hilt. Instead of pulling, she pushed with all her strength, screaming in the Architect's face. With a horrible scrape, the point emerged from the creature's back.

The Architect howled, his voice so longer languid and compelling. It was a dreadful sustained roar that pressed like cruel fingers at her ear bones. Bronwyn screamed again and sawed at him with the Keening Blade, only pausing when she was caught briefly in the wash of a paralysis hex. It was growing noisy in the chamber. People were crowding her. Scout had the Architect's wrist, worrying it like a favorite toy. Nathaniel had unaccountably appeared, and was trying to coax Bronwyn to pull out her sword. Bronwyn realized that the Architect's roaring had stopped. When the paralysis hex dissipated, the Architect fell to the floor, blood gushing from his gutted belly. Bronwyn looked around, puzzled. Morrigan was slumped against the wall, pale with exhaustion. Anders was tottering between injured soldiers, trying to heal what he could. Who had cast that paralysis hex? Oh, here were Danith and her people.

"Hold still, Bronwyn," Niall said softly, sounding like he was underwater. "Those burns must hurt." Cool blue light washed over her in a soothing ripple. Was she burned?

Bronwyn looked at Niall in surprise, not expecting him to be here. Everyone was, though. Nathaniel was talking to Carver,

who seemed to have lost his eyebrows. Now Nathaniel turned to her.

"I thought you were going to call me if you needed help!"

"Er..." She swayed. It was very difficult to speak. "I guess we were caught up in the moment. Hello, Maeve. Wait til you see the dragons!"

Scout was whimpering nearby. Niall should have a look at him. And there was Uldred, looking very smug. Someone was pulling Bronwyn away from Niall's grasp into his own.

It was Loghain. Bronwyn had a little trouble focusing on him, but she was pretty sure from the light blue eyes looking her over that it was Loghain. That and the big hands gripping her upper arms.

Bronwyn tried to smile, but her mouth hurt. "We won," she croaked. "Did you see the dragons? I rode one of them. It went up really high!"

Loghain's voice was slow and slurred. Or was there something wrong with her hearing?

"What's the matter with her? Did she crack her skull?"

Niall had her helmet off, and was feeling her head. "Not fractured, but she got hit pretty hard." Another healing spell, and his voice began to sound normal. "You're going to need some rest," Niall said to her. He turned to Loghain, and said,

"She shouldn't ride back to Denerim. Have her rest in one of the wagons."

"Did you take care of Scout?" she managed to ask. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine, Bronwyn," Niall assured her. "I already healed him. He'll just have some strange hairless patches for awhile."

"She really did ride that dragon," Carver told everyone, adrenalin still pumping. "All the way up to the ceiling! You should have seen it!"

"I did see it," Nathaniel said, rather testily. "I was *there*."

"How did you get here?" Bronwyn asked Loghain. "Where—"

"We came through the front door," Loghain said briefly, reaching down to pat Scout. "We met up with Howe and his men, and then followed the dead darkspawn."

Nathaniel added, "The other tunnel at the fork led to the surface."

"Ah," Bronwyn nodded, trying to picture it. She supposed she could. Danith was offering her canteen to Idunn. Bronwyn waved at her wearily.

"Glad to see you all safe and accounted for!"

Danith gave her a brisk nod.

"We swept the woods for darkspawn. We killed many, including the speaking one called the Seeker."

"Well done."

Maeve and Quinn were helping Ketil with his armor. Some of the straps had snapped, and it was hanging on him crazily. Cathair was trying to retrieve his arrows. Or any usable arrows.

Anders reeked of lyrium already, but he downed another flask. Giving Bronwyn a manic grin, he said, "How about a nice rejuvenation spell?"

"Yes, please," Bronwyn said. "I'm not done here."

Zevran was burned too, and was lying down, eyes shut. Toliver was bleeding and looked distraught. He was holding Aveline's hand. Furiously, he snarled up at Bronwyn, "We shouldn't have fought him! We should have taken his deal!"

Aveline was unconscious. Two of the army mages were working on her. From what Bronwyn could gather, her skull was fractured and she had a spinal injury as well. There was more to be done for her before the mages felt she could even be safely loaded into the wagon.

Bronwyn put her hand on Toliver's shoulder. "We were never going to take his deal. He was a liar."

"Deal?" Nathaniel asked. "What deal?"

"My lords!" shouted a soldier from the doorway. "We found two dead dragons in a big chamber!"

"Yes, I know," Bronwyn said, feeling better by the minute. "We did that. We'll want to harvest them."

"One of them's the dragon Bronwyn rode!" Carver repeated, grinning, unable to get it out of his head. "It was so neat!"

Loghain and Nathaniel rolled their eyes at each other.

"Really?" Loghain asked Nathaniel in an undertone.

"Really. I thought every moment she was going to fall to her death."

Loghain shook his head, trying not to dwell on the image. To change the subject, he gestured at Utha's mangled body.

"Who's that?"

"Her name was Utha," Bronwyn told him. "A renegade..." she whispered in his ear. "...Warden. Don't you recognize her? She was in Maric's party."

Loghain grimaced. "Time...and the Taint have not been kind to her."

"Commander?" Ketil leaned out of the side tunnel. "You'll want to have a look up here."

"This is a prison," Nathaniel whispered. "That *thing* kept prisoners there."

This place smelled of Taint, death, and decay. There were a number of cells. In one they found the remains of what had been a dwarf. In another, they found... Griffith, one of Tara's Wardens.

Carver hissed. "That's him! I know it is!" He turned shocked eyes to Bronwyn. "Were they attacked? How did he end up here?"

This was terribly alarming. Bronwyn had absolutely no idea how a Warden scouting West Hill had ended up in a darkspawn cell in Amaranthine. "Get Anders."

With a little time to recover, Anders was not quite so high on lyrium when Bronwyn asked him to have a look at the body, and see if he could determine how long Griffith had been dead. The condition of his naked body bespoke horrible suffering.

Anders' cheerful mood vanished.

"He hasn't been dead more than two days, but he was drained nearly dry of blood, Bronwyn."

"One of your Wardens?" Nathaniel asked.

"Yes. One of the newest. He was scouting west of here. I'll have to send a courier to West Hill and see if the rest of the

party made it there safely." Thinking a little longer, she said, "Anders. Go get Toliver. I want him to see what the Architect really had in mind for us."

She could not tell them every detail, but Loghain would plague her until she gave him something, and Nathaniel had stood by her.

"The Architect must have realized he was trapped. He tried to talk his way out of it by offering us a grand promise to end all Blights—or at least the Blights after this one— if we'd let him go. Except even that wasn't enough. He wanted to do blood magic using Grey Wardens in order to create more talking darkspawn."

"How did he come to be... intelligent?" Nathaniel asked.

"He claimed to have no idea. A pity we couldn't question him longer, but he was a liar, and just too dangerous." Bronwyn's head was clearing, and it was time to take charge. "Hear me! If you are not a Grey Warden, do not touch the bodies or the artifacts in these rooms. They are Tainted. We will take charge of them and uncover the secrets."

"We heard a darkspawn talk!" yelled one voice from behind a knot of soldiers.

"Yes, you did!" Bronwyn said calmly. "That creature downstairs called itself the Architect. It claimed not to know why it was different from other darkspawn. It was trying to teach other darkspawn to speak and think. But it's dead, and

so are its disciples."

Further exploration discovered a workroom near the cells, filled with notebooks and incomprehensible equipment. There was a large metal tank that contained preserved blood. Morrigan said it was human blood.

"Do not ask me how I know. I just do."

Actually, it was part workroom, part torture chamber. A bloody rack was placed near a neatly kept writing desk. On the rack was a flayed human body. Or at least they thought it was human. It was quite unrecognizable. A notebook kept track of events in an eccentric but legible hand.

Anders picked it up and glanced through it. He paled.

"This is bad, Bronwyn," he said softly. Bronwyn took the notebook from him and read:

...The Seeker has collected two Grey Warden specimens, both male and human. They exhibit fear and anger and claim that they have left the Grey Wardens, and are thus no longer what we want. One has promised to lead us to a large group of Wardens, including females, if I will release them. Curious. I will question him further before moving on to the tests.

...One of the Wardens is accommodating, allowing me to take his blood for my work. Perhaps he thinks I'll release him if he cooperates.

...What happens if the Old Gods perish? Does the song die with them?

...My Disciple Acolyte reports that a large party, including Wardens passed through the Wending Woods today. Some of the Wardens were female. I shall have them keep watch in future, with orders to capture the Wardens if the party is under four in number.

...Unfortunate. The second Warden has died under questioning. I cannot always predict how hardy the specimens are. Perhaps I pressed him too hard. However, I have a general idea where the female Grey Wardens are. I will lead the Seeker and the Disciple Acolyte there. It would be interesting to see what a thinking Grey Warden Mother could contribute to our cause...

...The blood is the key. The blood is always the key.

Bronwyn thought she was going to vomit. At least she had something she could read aloud to her people, just in case they complained about not making friends with the Architect.

"Well, gentlemen," she said to Loghain and Nathaniel, with a forced smile. "We now know what the Architect really wanted. A female Warden. Perhaps Utha was too old." When they did not quite understand her, she explained. "In order to reproduce his kind. That's what darkspawn do. They steal women of all races. Apparently, the Architect thought a talking Warden Broodmother would be particularly useful." Briefly, for

Nathaniel's benefit, she recounted what she had seen in the Dead Trenches. The soldiers overhearing her—above all the women—were properly horrified.

But they were impressed, too. Bronwyn could hear them talking about her; about killing two dragons; about standing toe-to-toe with a talking darkspawn mage that seemed the soldiers that the personification of an ancient magister. Some of the Wardens joined in; telling their own tall tales.

Not everyone cared to gossip, of course. Morrigan, her hands carefully gloved, pawed through a stack of books. Some of them were ancient manuscripts, some were printed. One in particular caught Anders' eye.

"*Phylacteries: A History Written in Blood.*' Isn't that the truth?"

On a stand was a dog-eared grimoire, written in Arcanum. Morrigan clearly coveted it. Uldred was edging closer. Bronwyn hoped there wouldn't be a tacky fight over plunder.

"Niall, collect that grimoire please. We'll put all the loo...er, evidence... in a single wagon so that it can be cleaned as far as possible. We have no intention of keeping secrets that do not pertain specifically to the Grey Wardens." She muttered to Morrigan. "We'll probably have to share, but you can have first look, once it's safe."

Morrigan shrugged. "Very well." She possessed a very sharp knife, if she came upon a page or two that she wished to

keep to herself.

Loghain steered Bronwyn away from the throng, and tilted her head back, trying to see under the blood and filth. "Are you really all right?"

Bronwyn knew she must look like nothing human. "Considering what a hard day this has been, I really don't feel all that bad."

Thanks to my reviewers: Trishata96, KnightOfHolyLight, Embertoinferno, Jygilagg, Kyren, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, JackOfBladesX, Robbie the Phoenix, Psyche Sinclair, Mike3207, Tsu Doh Nimh, Zute, Pirate Ninjas, Nemrut, Darksy01, Jenna53, Phygmalion, Halm Vendrella, Doom-N-GloomGal, Girl-Chama, Herebedragons66, EpitomyofShyness, Josie Lange, and kdarnell2.

No, I didn't give the Architect time to give his "more in sorrow than in anger" parting speech, or to prepare himself further for battle. Bronwyn had already done enough talking about why she was going to kill him. There really is a rack in the Architect's workroom, as well a lot of mutilated bodies. In canon, the Architect claims that all the Wardens brought to him were already dead, but that is clearly a lie. It's not clear to me why people assume the Architect is making his offers in good faith. And no one ever seems to consider what they would mean to the dwarves.

And another thing. Anybody else have trouble with the huge

plothole here? How are the darkspawn raising healthy, untainted dragons, when their very touch taints the Old Gods, and turns them into Archdemons? Of course I can see why the Architect would be interested in such research. I just don't see why it would be successful.

Any ideas?

In canon, the Architect's bolthole is that tunnel that leads from the gallery above the big, ornate dragon chamber. In canon, the Architect blocks pursuit with a rockslide when he flees down it. The next time we see him, he is at Drake's Fall. I posit that there are connecting tunnels and remains of the Deep Roads under Amaranthine that connect the silverite mine, Vigil's Keep, Kal'Hiol, and Drake's Fall. Otherwise, somebody might notice the Architect as he's hiking through the arling.

81. Opening Gambits

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 81: Opening Gambits

Adam Hawke returned to Denerim two days before his mother's wedding. In fact, on his way he came upon his brother at Vigil's Keep. A small party of Wardens had returned to pick up the puppies and report to Varel. Carver was there, and the two brothers had a pleasant reunion. Rather than spending the night at the Keep, Hawke decided to travel with Carver. Besides, their mother's wedding was almost upon them, and Adam had much to discuss with Fergus, with Nathaniel, and with his own family, too.

Carver now had his own mabari, a cute little fellow he had unaccountably named 'Magister.' Adam's own Hunter sniffed approvingly. There was another puppy of the same litter that had not imprinted yet. Still waiting for just the right person, it seemed.

Carver introduced him to his fellow Wardens: a nice looking woman named Maeve and a big and healthy red-haired boy named Quinn. They had been chosen, apparently, because they could ride horses and make better time than the others. They told an extraordinary story. They had confronted a

talking darkspawn in a big mine in the Wending Wood, and Carver could hardly talk about anything else. The ride was enlivened by Carver's recounting of the adventure, complete with gestures and sound effects.

"And Bronwyn rode a dragon. *Zoooom!* She flew! It was the neatest thing ever! You know, since we don't have griffons anymore, maybe we should raise dragons. If darkspawn can train dragons, we can!"

Quinn liked the idea. "The Dragonriders of Thedas! I'm with you. Maybe there's room up at Soldier's Peak for them."

Adam shook his head. "Surely you've heard the rumors that crop up from time to time? The ones about the Grey Wardens worshiping demons in secret, depraved rites? If it got out that the Wardens were raising dragons, they'd have the rest of the world marching on them."

Maeve shot him a cool look. "Maybe so. Maybe if we had *dragons*, we wouldn't care. People are always finding something to criticize, even when the Wardens risk their lives every day for them. I suppose no good deed goes unpunished."

Adam changed the subject to their mother's wedding, and what Carver thought of Arl Bryland. The two of them rode a little ahead of the rest so they could talk privately.

"He's nice," Carver shrugged. "He thinks a lot of Bethany. It'll be strange to have a stepfather, but he a decent man, and it's

not like I'll be living with him. He's got two little boys, and I think he feels he needs help with them. There's that daughter, too, but she's getting married the day before Mother, and if all goes well for her at the Landsmeet, she and that pretty-boy husband of hers will be moving to the Arl of Denerim's estate."

"I've missed a lot while I was in Amaranthine," Adam said, "I never met the older brother—what's his name—and before I knew it, there was a message that he was killed in a hunting accident and his younger brother was inheriting and marrying Lady Habren Bryland instead. Her head must be spinning with all the different betrothals."

"Mother thinks she really likes this one. His name's Kane. He's all right, I suppose, but nothing much other than being really, really handsome. Bethany and Charade aren't taken in by him, though. They make faces behind his back and pretend to swoon. Mother told them to stop it, since Habren going to be our 'sister.' Step-sister, I always make a point of saying. So I guess this Kane Kendalls will be our step-brother-in-law. Oh, and Charade's got a suitor."

"Really! Who?"

"Arl Wulffe's oldest son, Rothgar. He's all right. Charade likes him."

"Does Arl Wulffe know that Charade has no dowry? Or maybe he thinks Arl Bryland will cough up the coin."

"Don't know," Carver said cheerfully, pleased this once to be

the younger brother and *not* the head of the family. "Maybe he thinks you will."

Adam blew out a breath. Maybe. A lot of things would be expected of him if he were confirmed as Bann of the City of Amaranthine. He certainly wasn't rich yet— or not as nobles usually understood it— but he had done well so far.

All it had really taken was determination and a strong sword arm. The smugglers had flourished because that bitch Esmerelle had tacitly supported them. She took a fifth of their profits, and even so they were still making far more than they could if they had been legitimate traders, paying the royal tariff and all the harbor fees. Esmerelle might have scarpered off to the Free Marches with her slaving and smuggling fortune, but Adam had found the smugglers' hideout and their treasure hoard. It had been quite a payday. It was almost a shame he had to put them out of business.

Some of it had to be turned over to the Arl, of course; but the Arl was not there to see the whole of it. Nathaniel Howe's fallen fortunes would be significantly mended by the thousand-odd sovereigns Adam had sent him, along with a load of loot and the smuggler's high-quality ship seized in their sea cave. Adam had skimmed discreetly, but skimmed he had, and he now possessed a nest egg of six hundred sovereigns, along with chests full of jewelry, fine weapons and armor, luxurious furs, rich fabrics, and silk carpets. Some of these things were on his pack horses, to be given to his family.

He felt not the least guilt about it, either. It was easy for those

born noble to tut about greed and dishonesty, but they had never wondered where their family's next meal was coming from. Mother would have a fine wedding present from him, and Bethany and Charade would have all the pretty clothes and trinkets they wanted. Carver? Maybe something for his room at the Wardens' Compound— an Antivan carpet or a set of silver cups. Carver was a Warden now, and pretty much set for life; but Adam still wanted him to share in his own good fortune. And their new stepsister, Lady Habren, must be given a notable gift, to celebrate her marriage and commemorate the union of their families. The smugglers had found just the thing for her: a double-handled loving cup of silver and rose quartz, designed for two to drink from simultaneously. It was costly and fantastical to the point of vulgarity, but Adam had heard rumors of Lady Habren's temper, but perhaps a rich present would keep her sweet.

So Mother and the girls would *not* be coming to live with him in Amaranthine. Adam felt a bit sorry about that. The City Keep was large and fine, and Esmerelle had been forced to leave most of the furniture. His own bedchamber had a broad balcony draped with long, gauzy curtains. He could he could step out there and survey the whole city below him.

Better yet, he could walk right up to the roof, where there was a lovely little garden and pleasure ground, and from there look out over the deep blue of the Amaranthine Ocean, right where it blended into the silver of the Waking Sea. He could see Fair Isle and Brandel's Reach stretching out to the north, and on a clear day he could look east, and see Alamar. The air was

fresh and clear up there, and at night the stars shone down like a great bowl of diamonds. If only Mother could see it!

Probably she and her Arl would be going to South Reach, of course. Maybe, after the Landsmeet, Bethany and Charade could come stay with him. Stay as long as they liked, for that matter. There was plenty of room, and he'd see they had a good time. Winter was coming, but Amaranthine was on the ocean, and the sea breezes so moderated the temperature that it never froze hard there.

First, of course, he had to get through the Landsmeet. Fergus would back him, and Nathaniel Howe was not in any position to oppose him. In fact, it seemed to Adam that he was getting on well with Howe, who was not at all a bad fellow. Now that Mother was marrying Bryland, he could reasonably expect support from that quarter. If Wulffe's son was interested in Charade, the canny old arl would have every reason to support Adam as well.

A teyrn and three arls, all of whom commanded the loyalty of many associated banns. Probably more than enough. Adam did not think that Teyrn Loghain was any great admirer of his—and there was no reason for him to be, since they scarcely knew each other. Bronwyn, however, had been a good friend to the Hawkes, and Bronwyn was now Teyrna of Gwaren.

The new Kendalls fellow might not even be voting until later on, but he was being sponsored by Bryland, and so it was unlikely he would oppose his father-in-law. The only wild card was the Arl of Redcliffe, and Adam could think of no reason at

all why the arl of a distant southwestern realm would care about who ruled in Amaranthine.

As far as Adam could see, the only downside to being a bann of Ferelden is that everyone would be hounding him to marry. Adam had no objection to matrimony—in *theory*. His parents had been married and very happy. No one, however, was going to strong-arm him into taking on some chinless, inbred noble wallflower. There was nothing wrong with marrying to one's advantage, but when he did marry, he would uphold the family tradition, and please himself.

Not even the Wardens could believe how quickly they recovered from their injuries. Ordinarily, Anders would have given Aveline little chance of surviving her skull fracture and damaged spine. He certainly would never have expected her to walk and talk within three days. Holding her own in battle would take more time, but Anders and Niall agreed that Aveline was disciplined enough to make it, given proper care. For now, Bronwyn employed her for an hour or two a day as an administrative aide, which gave Aveline new insights into the workings—or not-workings—of the Grey Warden order.

Bronwyn's greatest worry was for Astrid and Tara and the party they had led. She considered sending a group of Wardens to West Hill, but Loghain proposed a simpler solution.

"Frاندarel is here in town, and no doubt has a courier going back and forth to his estate. Have him take a letter."

So Bronwyn immediately composed a letter to her friends, asking for news, and telling them of finding the body of Griffith and another unidentified Warden in the cells of a darkspawn emissary in Amaranthine. She gave them some background on the Architect, with the consolation that there was no longer anything to fear from the creature.

"...Have this courier bring me a message from you as soon as possible. We can march immediately if you need our assistance..."

There were more letters to be written, as the days went by. Bronwyn wrote to her Grey Warden correspondents in Nevarra and Antiva to tell them that the Architect was dead. After further consideration, Bronwyn finally broke down and wrote to the First Warden. It was a frosty missive.

"The Architect is dead. This might be of some interest to you. I killed him in his hiding place in Amaranthine, which is an arling of Ferelden to the northeast. He had taken refuge in an abandoned mine, and was conducting experiments. His latest notion was to use a female Grey Warden for breeding. He had lately been using Grey Warden blood, originally donated by the Grey Warden Utha, to make darkspawn resistant to the call of the Old God, and thus able to speak and reason. We tracked down these "disciples" and slew them. Before his death, the Architect admitted that it was he who sought out the Old God Urthemiel and inadvertently Tainted it, thus beginning the Blight.

...it is unlikely this will ever cross your desk, as I understand you are completely controlled by your Orlesian handlers. That would certainly seem evident from the way you have consistently pandered to Orlais in your orders to me to desert Ferelden and leave it to the darkspawn. Perhaps it seems no great matter to you if a country you have never visited is destroyed, and no doubt it would give the Orlesians a great deal of spiteful satisfaction. How sweet it would be to them if a country that threw off their invasion were to fall to inhuman monsters, and how despicable the sort of minds that would find sweetness in something so vile.

That will not stand. I was told by Duncan that Grey Wardens fight the Blight wherever it may be found. It was found here, in Ferelden, and so my comrade Alistair and I saw no point in scampering away like cowards to an enemy nation that has ever worked both in open and in secret against us. Indeed, while we have fought the Blight, attempts have been made on our lives by Orlesian agents. While you may not care to hear it, the struggle against the darkspawn is actually going rather well. Furthermore, the dwarves, mages, and elves have honored their ancient treaties and are working with us to defeat the Blight.

Bronwyn Cousland MacTir

Acting Commander of the Grey in Ferelden.

Aveline raised her brows when she proofread the letter.

"That's strong language to use with the head of the order!"

"I meant it to be. It's true that he's unlikely to even see the letter. More likely it will be read and discarded by his Orlesian secretaries. Hector Pentaghast, the Warden-Commander of Nevarra, told me he is surrounded by them, and they act as gatekeepers for the information he is permitted to receive. The Antivan commander phrased it more gracefully, but it is clear that there is a great deal of dissatisfaction in the order with the conduct of the First Warden. Apparently, he is far more interested in the politics of the Anderfels than anything else. Another reason to take the supposed apolitical nature of the Wardens with more than a grain of salt."

The letter to the First Warden was enclosed with that to Hector Pentaghast. The packet was put in the diplomatic pouch for Cumberland, and put on a ship that was still braving the Waking Sea. In her letter to Pentaghast, Bronwyn had asked that he see that her letter to the First Warden was delivered. She had decided not to tell either of the men that the Archdemon apparently had withdrawn the horde from Ostagar. The Archdemon was very likely playing with them, and could return when they least expected it. Worse, it might decide to attack somewhere else: at the access point in West Hill, for all she knew.

Aveline had been one of those who had placed some hope in the Architect's good faith, so Bronwyn made a point of having the red-haired Warden read the creature's notebooks. Bronwyn admitted that the schemes and plans might well have been made in good faith. The Architect had not been a being

of pure evil. It had felt concern for the condition of his fellow darkspawn, and had wished to give them a better existence. It had not wished to slaughter the other races, but to find a way to live with them. However, its ideas still seemed hopelessly impractical to Bronwyn; impossible to put into action and with no guarantee of success. There was still the insuperable problem of attempting to be ally with the darkspawn while already being the allies of the dwarves.

"Even if all our hopes had been achieved," Bronwyn said, "Even if the darkspawn could be made rational, there was no reason why they would not fight the dwarves to the death for the control of the Deep Roads. Indeed, where else was there for them to go? We can't expect them to have been more high-minded and pacific than humans! Look at the Tevinters, or the Orlesians and the Nevarrans, with their never-ending war. For that matter, look at what the Orlesians wanted to do to Ferelden! Besides, they would still be Tainted, and thus a threat to all life on Thedas. Now if the Architect had found a way to *cure* the Taint..."

Aveline grimaced at the reference to the Orlesians. Bronwyn did not know about her Orlesian heritage, and thus did not know that Aveline was herself the daughter of an expatriate chevalier. Benoit Du Lac had fled Orlais and made his home in Ferelden after losing his patron to assassination. He had dreamed his daughter would be a knight, and raised her on a diet of adventure and derring-do. Even her name was a tribute to that image of female heroism, Ser Aveline, the Knight of Orlais.

Poor father. He was dead, and she was not a knight yet, nor likely to become one. He had sold everything he had to purchase a commission for her in King Cailan's service, but in many ways, Ferelden was not so different from Orlais. Without a patron, there was only so far one could go. Aveline, despite good service and brilliant skills, seemed likely to spend her career as a junior officer, supporting noble numbskulls with her sword arm and her experience. Rather than accepting the advances of men who had hinted that they would use their influence on her behalf with the right incentive, Aveline had chosen love, and had married a Templar with no more money or influence than herself. And now Wesley, too, was gone.

Still, she was a Grey Warden, and that was an honorable distinction. There was no greater danger than the Blight, and no greater service than combating it. And Bronwyn was noble, but hardly a numbskull.

The other major order of business was to sit down with Danith, and hear her report about the expedition to Soldier's Peak. Danith brought Niall and Maeve with her. In fact, the meeting was delayed until Maeve's later arrival.

"Niall understands more of the magic, and Maeve understands Leliana when she speaks of 'decorating.'" Danith admitted, "I sometimes do not."

Plainly the expedition had gone well, though that had been pushed to the side in the alarm caused by the Architect. Now

Soldier's Peak was once again on everyone's mind.

"The Drydens quickly set to work repairing some of the buildings in the courtyard. They seem comfortable and content," said Danith. "The head of their clan, Levi, will go to the nearby towns and villages for anything they need. The Wolfs, too, are glad to have a place to live. They chose some rooms in the lower wing of the castle and cleaned them. They cleaned ours, too. It is their intention to eventually live in outbuildings or in cottages nearby, but they felt there was much to be done in the castle, and that building or repairing anything else must wait until spring."

Bronwyn nodded. "Very sensible. That is exactly what I wished."

"They are strange folk, and keep to themselves, but they appeared to be diligent workers. It is they who began work cleaning the interior of the castle, as it is a filthy place."

Everyone laughed a little. "So true," Maeve sighed. "I could hardly stop sneezing at the dust!"

"The old mage did not like them coming into his tower, but Jowan and Niall were able to persuade him that it was necessary to maintain the place. He did not allow them to enter his private room, however, nor his workroom."

Niall snorted. "I think Avernus got up to some pretty gruesome things, though I couldn't prove it. It'll probably be up to Jowan to get the place in order, though I did what I could to help

while I was there. We'll need a glazier, and I talked to Leliana and Master Dryden about that. There's a window in the workroom that has to be fixed, and the sooner the better. At least Jowan's room is decent. The women scrubbed it out and made the bed with fresh linen and a clean mattress. Jowan brought some of his things from the Compound, so it wasn't at all bad by the time I left."

"He's living in the Tower, then?" Bronwyn asked. She was not sure she liked that.

Niall nodded. "Avernus says that the mages always lived in the tower. It was sort of a Grey Warden Circle. I told Jowan that it was important that he come to meals, and he said he would. We put a big table in the main hall downstairs. There's room for everybody. Lita Wolf needed all the space in the kitchen to cook, she said."

"We fixed it up really nice, Commander," said Maeve, her face bright with the memory. "We found all sorts of things around the castle. There was a big iron chandelier in an upstairs room and we hung that from the ceiling. We found some good chairs, too, and even some hangings that weren't too threadbare. I'm so glad the civilians are up there, too. There's a lot of work to be done, and it would have been too lonely for the four Wardens otherwise."

"I brought you this," Niall said, handing Bronwyn a very old document cylinder. "In it are the original grants made to the Grey Wardens by the local teyrns when Commander Asturian first set up shop. Avernus knew where they were, and

threatened death if I lost them. They're in Arcanum, but Jowan and I did a translation. It's a nice piece of land. The map is original, too. The Grey Wardens were given that whole lip of land that swells north. The south border is just below the entrance to the tunnels. and then east to the Coast Road. West it goes...there. Still in the mountains. Avernus says it goes all the way to the Highever border. It's as big as a bannorn. The lands changed a bit over the centuries. Depending on the how you read the map, the Wardens might be able to claim that little village on the Coast: Breaker's Cove. Avernus insists that we can. Jowan said that they'd make a point of visiting and looking the place over when they could."

Bronwyn nodded, fingering the parchments very carefully. Of course the border between Highever and Amaranthine had gone back and forth over the ages. It was annoying that there were no copies in the Royal Archives. Perhaps they had been destroyed by King Arland. They would have to match this map with an official current one. there was plenty to work with here, nonetheless. She would fight to keep the village. That could be very useful.

Maeve had lists of what Leliana said would be needed to renovate the second floor. She was very much of the opinion that it would not be prohibitively expensive to enclose the space into six sizable bedchambers. The staircase would have to be moved, but as it was a rickety wooden affair, it needed rebuilding anyway.

She loved the chapel, but decided that its third floor location

was impractical. Andraste had been moved downstairs to the far end of the east hall, just outside the library. Everyone could see her there. Levi's cousin had forged a pair of tall and lovely votive candlestands to be placed on either side of the statue. Leliana hoped Bronwyn would not mind, but Leliana had thought that the big, out-of-the way, open space might be just the place for a council chamber. The room attached, where they had found the remains of Commander Sophia, Bronwyn might perhaps want for her own bedchamber. It was a very nice room, now that there were no demons in it. It would need a bed, of course. Perhaps Bronwyn could send her some specification for the kind of furniture that should be commissioned.

In fact, Bronwyn thought those changes all very sensible, and said so. She was not sure when she would ever be actually living at the Peak, but surely she would spend some time there eventually.

Her imagination balked at showing her a picture of her there with Loghain. She simply could not visualize Loghain visiting the Peak. His jaundiced view of the Wardens was such that she would have to push merely to get the land grant recognized. That he would voluntarily be a guest of the Wardens was difficult to believe. Of course, they would be busy. Noble couples were often separated by their duties.

Danith was saying, "Hakan and Soren have also been very industrious. They believe that it will be possible to use dwarven runic devices to create a bathing room in the lower wing that will have hot water."

Bronwyn perked up quite a bit at the news. Danith continued.

"They concur that work is required on the foundations on the north side of structure. They recommend that in the spring we hire dwarven masons. They say they are needed anyway, for the castle should have stone stairs and a new floor in the front halls. They will make drawings of what is needed, and list the materials. They say it will take some time."

No doubt it would. Bronwyn was glad that the project was already underway. Hmmm. What kind of bed *would* she like in her room at Soldier's Peak?

Danith had left her meeting rather pleased with Bronwyn, and went to a late breakfast in a good mood. She and the Warden-Commander had not clashed much recently. She was not so pleased when she discovered that Bronwyn had taken charge of something—or someone—that Danith thought should be the purview of elves. She might not have known about Bronwyn's arrangements for the child Amethyne so soon, had she not overheard Cathair and Zevran discussing the matter.

"She is sending the child to a *shemlen* to learn music?"
Danith's displeasure vibrated throughout the Wardens' Hall.

Zevran attempted to soothe her. "The child loves the lessons, my halla. Bronwyn has been generous in paying for them. For that matter, Leliana was generous in taking the time to arrange it all. See the child for yourself, and you will see that

she is happy."

Cathair, who had found his visits to the Alienage interesting, said, "Music is always an honorable craft, *lethallan*, and there are none remaining in the Denerim Alienage adept enough to teach it."

Danith scowled. She often amused herself making plans for Amethyne. It gave her great pleasure to look forward to taking her to Marethari, to the clan, showing her the wonders of the natural world, far from the stink and noise of cities. She wanted to teach the child to name the flowers; to name the stars. Amethyne was an orphan. To give her a new attachment to the Alienage was not something in Danith's scheme for her.

"I do not wish the child brought up to be a plaything of the shemlens."

Nuala was enjoying her porridge. The shemlen woman who managed the housekeeping was very pleasant and friendly, and seemed not to care whether a Warden was of the shemlen, durgen'len, or elvhen. It was very unusual. The lodgings here were clean, and the food wholesome. Danith had mentioned the pretty child, and Nuala sympathized. She had felt sorry for the children in the Gwaren Alienage herself.

"Danith, you said that the hahren of the Denerim Alienage was far wiser and more understanding of the Dalish than the woman in Gwaren. Steren and I would like to visit the Denerim Alienage to see how it is the same—and different—from the

one we saw before. Let us go there today, and visit the child, and you can judge for yourself if she is being treated well, or not."

Zevran thought Nuala a very sensible young woman—and very attractive too. Of course, it was necessary to admire her from a respectful distance as she was very much spoken for.

"An excellent suggestion. Let us go this morning. I believe... yes... I am certain that today is not the day the child goes to her lesson, and thus she should be at home in the house of the hahren."

"It is a great misfortune for our cousins in the Alienages," said Steren, "that while they have hahrens, they have no Keepers. It seems... wrong."

"The priest-folk steal all those who could be Keepers away," Danith said bitterly. "Like Tara. They hate magic and those who have the power to use it. Jowan told me that the priests killed the old woman who was sent to care for the shemlen Queen. She was a healer and meant well, yet no one speaks of punishment for the murderers."

"The Templars wear helmets that conceal their entire head," Zevran pointed out. "No one can identify the killers, and the Chantry is not being forthcoming. Besides many in this city do not consider the killing of a mage to *be* murder."

"From what Adaia told us," Danith said tartly, "they do not consider the killing of an elf to be murder, either."

"Some do not. That is so," Zevran agreed. "And for that reason, prudence and preparation are vital when exploring the delights of this city. I myself shall be ready presently. Who wishes to go with me?"

All the elves did, and as soon as breakfast was over, their party set out. Danith was not so stubborn as to not to take Zevran's remarks about prudence to heart, so all the Wardens wore their griffon-embroidered tunics. Cathair, mindful of his host's slender means, took along a fruitcake, donated by the Wardens' kitchen, and a bottle of sweet wine.

Five armed elves attracted quite a bit of notice on the King's Way. The wealthy owners of the fine homes lining the wide street huffed and puffed and whispered amongst themselves. Their servants and guards were more forthright about 'uppity knife-ears.'

"Do you suppose, *lethallin*," Nuala inquired with feigned innocence, "that they are speaking of us?"

"Of course not," Steren assured her gallantly. "They would never speak so of Grey Wardens and allies against the Blight that threatens us all."

The guard at the Alienage gate eyed the bottle and parcel in Cathair's arms, licking his lips, apparently inclined to exact an entry toll. His fellow guard muttered, "Don't be stupid," and the gate was opened without further conversation.

Valendrian was welcoming as always, and very appreciative

of the gifts. They spent some time in pleasant talk, introducing Nuala and Steren.

Little Amethyne was brought forth and greeted Zevran and Cathair as old friends. It made Danith a bit wistful that the child hardly remembered her at all.

Amethyne, when asked, was charmed to tell them all about her music lessons. Mistress Zoe was wonderful, and said she was a very good singer; Mistress Zoe was teaching her to dance and to play on the mandore; Mistress Zoe was helping with her reading. Mistress Zoe had pretty things in her house: a carved screen and draperies of lavender gauze; cups of dark-blue glass; brightly colored rugs and hangings. She had a whole box of different kinds of flutes; and drums and lutes of all sorts. She had a chest full of clothes she wore to perform in. Amethyne had a green hair ribbon and green stockings she wore to her lessons, and she had a tambourine, and would they like to see it? Without waiting for a reply, the child rushed to her chest to retrieve it, and then danced about them, jangling out a stirring rhythm, twirling around the grownups with the grace of a falling leaf.

Too soon, Valendrian gently quieted her, and told her to put her tambourine away. Zevran, thinking about the gate guards, felt a little concern.

"She does not go alone to her lessons, surely."

Shianni, spoke up, full of hot indignation. "Of course not! I go with her every time, and I wait until it's time to take her home!"

Danith, very sensibly, said nothing to denigrate the child's pleasure in her lessons. Music was indeed an honorable craft. Perhaps, when Amethyne had learned all the shemlen had to teach, her curiosity might be roused by the chance to learn the music of her ancestors. The clan would be delighted by this talented little girl.

The wedding of Habren, daughter of Leonas Bryland, Arl of South Reach, and Kane Kendalls, heir-presumptive of the Arling of Denerim, was celebrated quietly, in the privacy of the family chapel at the townhouse of the bride's father. The wedding guest list was small and select: The bride, her father and brothers; the groom and his two young sisters; the father of the bride's betrothed and her sons, daughter, and niece. After that, the guest list became a little more political: the Brylands' near cousins, the Teyrn of Highever, and the Teyrna of Gwaren. Naturally, the Teyrn of Gwaren accompanied his young wife. Nor could the Teyrna of Gwaren's stepdaughter be forgotten, especially since she was Queen Dowager and current administrator of the realm.

A planning difficulty arose when Habren declared that she wanted no dogs at her wedding: no dogs at all. That was obviously a slap at little Killer and the dogs of the two Hawke lads, but Bryland was forced to point out that if she insisted on excluding them, she would offend both the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren, and he could not permit that.

For most Fereldans, a bridal party of sixteen—or twenty-one, when one did indeed include the dogs— would not be

considered a particularly small, private wedding, especially since the guests included some of the most powerful people in the kingdom. However, it was certainly not at all like Habren's first, disastrous wedding in Harvestmere. Bryland still wished he could erase that day from his daughter's memory. From his sons' and his own, for that matter.

The marriage ceremony was held in the late afternoon, followed by a sumptuous but private dinner. Bryland himself was exhausted by the end of it. Leandra had been an immeasurable help at pulling it all together, but Habren had resented every suggestion she made. Bryland had been forced to arbitrate their discussions. Leandra managed to keep her temper, under the worst sort of provocation. Bryland could only admire her for it, and swear to himself to make it up to her, once Habren had gone to her own household.

"She's so *rude*," Bethany whispered to Charade, angry for her mother's sake.

"I guess that's only natural," Charade answered, with dead-pan sarcasm, "when you're extra important."

"Mother told us to give her a chance, but she's had all the chances she's going to get from me. It's going to be horrible, living here for the next few days. I hate to leave Mother to deal with her, but I'm liking more and more Adam's suggestion to go stay with him for awhile."

"It's only five days until the Landsmeet," Charade pointed out. "I hope they vote about Denerim right away. The sooner they

go away the better. I'm sick of that smarmy nancy-boy, too."

Carver overheard them, and snorted a laugh. He absolutely did not care what Habren thought of him. She had no sort of power over him whatsoever. She might make things unpleasant for Mother, and that was rotten, but Mother could have put off her marriage to the Arl until Lady Snot was out of the house. By now, he suspected Mother wished she had.

The gifts helped... a little. Habren could hardly be got to say a word of thanks to Ser Adam, handsome and pleasant as he was. For that matter, he was the only member of the Hawke family to wring a civil word from her at all. Habren really liked the loving cup he presented to her, especially since part of it was pink, her favorite color. Unfortunately, she added a remark about how much handsomer it would have been had it been of gold, rather than silver. Ser Adam's composure was unruffled; he had his mother's good manners. Habren liked Adam's present, really. In fact, she liked it so much that she ordered it placed on the table so she and Kane could use. It harmonized nicely with her pretty pink gown.

There was no dancing. There was some pleasant music played through dinner by a lutenist and flute-player. The meal was very fine, and the three courses sufficient entertainment in themselves. With such a small number of dinner guests, the cooks could be fanciful.

Too fanciful. In honor of the recent victory in the Wending Wood, Bryland had ordered the creation of some remarkable... objects. Were they cake? Were they even

edible? They were pink and green, and very nice little statues of dragons they were: necks outstretched, wing spread as if to take flight.

Loghain stared at the offending dessert in front of him, wondering how the bloody hell he was supposed to eat it. Bite its head off first? That sounded fairly barbarous, even for him. Bronwyn rose to the occasion.

"How exquisite!" she gushed to Bryland. "Really, it's just too pretty to eat! Oh, almond paste? How clever. The wings are particularly fine. This may sound odd, but if they're almond paste they likely could last forever if one covered them with a varnish. Would you be offended if I preserved mine as a keepsake?"

"Not at all!" Bryland replied, pleased that she was pleased. "I'll have it sent on to you when its ready. Anyone else want to keep theirs?"

This offer caused some anguish in the hearts of the younger guests. All the children wanted to have little dragon models to play with, but they also wanted to eat as much marchpane as possible.

Seeing this, Bethany and Charade looked at each other, and then Charade whispered to Faline Kendalls, "Go ahead and eat yours. You can have mine and Bethany's later."

Carver was not so discreet. He said to Bryland, "Why don't you have mine treated as well, my lord?" He waggled his

brows at Lothar. "It would be just the size to fight your toy soldiers!"

Adam agreed, "That's a fine idea. Let me contribute mine to the war effort, my lord."

Bryland was pleased with how kind and generous Leandra's family was. Kane Kendalls liked anyone who paid attention to his sisters. Habren, on the other hand, made a point of slicing through the neck of her own dragon. She then daintily stuck it with her little two-pronged silver fork and ate it, humming with satisfaction.

Fergus had been on the point of offering his own dragon to the children. Now that they each had one—and Bryland or Leandra should have anticipated that wish—he desisted. The dragon was actually quite tasty, and he reflected that the one on Habren's plate was the only kind of dragon she would ever slay.

What a tangle it all was. The more he saw of Kane Kendalls, the worse he felt about the man being given the Arling of Denerim. Kane and Habren ruling Denerim? How could that be a good thing? Kane would be an Arl because of who his great-great-grandfather was. And now, because so many other issues were interdependent, Fergus could not vote against him without offending Bryland. He would just have to hold his nose, vote for Kane, and hope for the best. His eyes met Anora's, and he knew without words that she felt exactly the same.

"My lord... my lady. Let me offer my congratulations."

Leonas and Leandra offered their own, answering bows. "Thank you," said Leandra, Arlessa of South Reach. "We are so happy, Bann Warran, that you could join us today."

Leonas added, "My daughter Habren you know, of course. This is her husband Kane Kendalls, the heir of Denerim. My boys Corbus and Lothar... and I don't know if you've met my stepdaughter Bethany or our niece Charade. And here are my stepsons: Ser Adam Hawke, and the Grey Warden Carver Hawke."

More bows and compliments.

It was quite the line of well-wishers. Leonas Bryland winked at his bride. She, poor woman, was trying hard to remember the name of each and every guest. She had actually been rather good at this sort of thing, back in her youth in Kirkwall, but this was her first real test in the political fields of Ferelden. Even Habren understood the importance of seeing and being seen—and being moderately pleasant—for the success of Kane's bid for the arling of Denerim.

Habren looked radiant—blissfully happy—uncommonly pretty. Dressed in a gorgeous rose-pink gown made for the occasion, she clung to the arm of her handsome young husband, gazing adoringly at him. People were inclined to be indulgent of the newlyweds. A number of women nodded, agreeing that Habren had just needed a husband, after all. And such a husband! Most, though not all, thought him the

best-looking man in the room.

"The new arlessa's son are both very fine men," Bann Bonnam's younger sister said. "Particularly Ser Adam. Of course, I prefer dark hair to gold. And then there is Arl Nathaniel..."

"Eww," one of her friends expressed her disgust. "How can you find him attractive? That great beak of a nose! He's the son of the Wicked Arl, and probably just like him."

"Don't be stupid. The Couslands are getting on with him, and they certainly wouldn't if he were 'just like his father.' There's Teyrna Bronwyn talking to him right now. I think he's very striking in his own way, and so tall and well-formed. And he's certain to be confirmed in Amaranthine."

"Well," another young lady said, "if you want to talk about attractive, eligible men, there's Teyrn Fergus. Doesn't he have the nicest smile? So roguish."

"He's taken."

"No!"

"Of course he is. After what he did for the Queen?"

Though not on the scale of Habren's first wedding, Bryland's celebration of his own included every noble present in Denerim. To the feast, at least: he insisted on having the ceremony performed by the family priest in the family chapel.

Truth be told, Bryland was still angry and suspicious of the Chantry. It was one thing to have faith in the Maker and his Prophet. It was quite another to kowtow to a lot of Orlesian rigmarole. And it would take a great deal to wipe away the impression made by Knight-Commander Tavish and his Templars, as they trampled wedding guests in their determination to put the Grand Cleric's safety first and foremost.

Hence the only priest present was their own Mother Carenagh, a white-haired, self-effacing old lady perfectly happy to sit with the lesser noblewomen and listen to them natter about grandchildren. It was well-known that there was a great deal of frustration and teeth-gnashing in Chantry circles about being excluded from such an important political event as the Arl of South Reach's wedding; Bryland simply did not care about it.

Leandra was more nervous about such defiance. It was all very well for Leonas to declare Bethany free of the Chantry supervision and for the Queen to second it. That the Chantry felt in the least bound by secular authority seemed to her more than doubtful. In the current atmosphere, perhaps they would not pursue the matter. Leandra was quite sure, however, that they had not forgotten about Bethany Hawke.

But no one was questioning Bethany's right to be here—at least openly. A few brows had been raised. A few women had blushed and looked confused. Bethany had not had to endure anything worse than that. Even a Chantry ally like Teagan Guerrin had been spoken kindly. He was a good man,

Leandra understood, and while he might think that all mages belonged in a Circle under Templar supervision, he would not think it necessary to be rude to them if they were not.

Young Arlessa Kaitlyn needed his support, anyway. She was a sweet, shy girl, and obviously in awe of her husband. Perhaps it was the age difference. On the other hand, there was an even greater age difference between the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren, and nobody had noticed Bronwyn being particularly timid in Loghain's presence. There she was, in her signature red, laughing. Well, people were different. There seemed to be real affection between the Arl and Arlessa of Redcliffe, but Leandra thought there was a certain lack of balance, since Teagan Guerrin had bestowed wealth and a great title on her, and she had brought nothing to the marriage but her youth, beauty, and gentle nature.

Then she rebuked herself. She had no claim to such a marriage as she had made today. Leonas was bestowing everything on *her*, and she had not even youth to give him. Of course, that they were not distant in age was also a good thing. It was easier to understand one another; easier to be friends. And what a good friend he was... how kind to her children.

She looked at her own family with a great deal of joy and satisfaction. Such a good-looking family, and rising every day in prospects. The boys were so handsome, though Carver would insist on wearing gloomy black. Adam was fine as a peacock in peacock blue. She had told the girls to keep back their beautiful new gowns for today, and they were

wonderfully becoming. Adam had brought them all wonderful jewels, too; the amazing amethyst earrings she herself wore today were one of his wedding gifts to her. Bethany had a lovely sapphire necklace, and Charade one of yellow topazes that made her eyes snap.

Leonas had given her a opulent pearl necklace as well as her diamond wedding ring. Amazing jewels—the sort of jewels she would have had if she had married the Comte de Launcet, so many years ago. She was so glad she had not.

Things had been a bit touchy, a few days before the wedding. Habren had inherited most of her mother's jewels, which was only right and proper. However, the South Reach Circlet had been in the Bryland family for many generations, and was always worn by the Arlessa. Habren had fussed about it, until Leonas had promised Habren a tiara, since Habren thought the Circlet old-fashioned and 'tacky,' now that she could no longer have it.

Leandra was wearing the Circlet now: a delicate confection of gold wire, pearls and amethysts that resembled a wreath of violets. If she did not feel like a queen, it was because she felt like something even better: a woman honored by the love of a kind and generous man; a woman who now never need fear for the security of her children.

"Has the world turned upside down?" Teagan wondered to himself over breakfast.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?" Kaitlyn asked softly. "Is the porridge not to your liking? Do you have a headache?"

"No, no—I'm quite all right. Simply puzzled at all the changes since I was last in Denerim. I hardly know the place."

Kaitlyn thought Denerim the most wonderful place on earth, and the Redcliffe estate undoubtedly the loveliest house in it. She tried to say something cheerful.

"It was a nice party last night, wasn't it? I have never danced so much in my life! Everyone was so kind to me."

"Very nice," agreed Teagan, though with an edge that Kaitlyn took as a warning to say nothing more about it. Seeing her shrink away, Teagan was ashamed of himself.

"Where's Bevin? Still asleep? *He* certainly had a good time."

Kaitlyn bloomed anew. "Oh, yes! Arl Bryland's sons were such good company for him, and the darling little girls, too! I hope he can see more of them."

"I hope so, too."

He certainly did. It would entertain the lad. Teagan had learned that a bored Bevin was a diabolically mischievous Bevin. It would be unfortunate if political differences spoiled a chance at friendly companionship.

Who would have thought Bryland so anti-clerical? Teagan was deeply shocked that the wedding had not been held at the

Cathedral, with the Grand Cleric officiating. In fact, the Grand Cleric had not even been invited. Granted, he had not been in Denerim for Lady Habren's ill-fated first wedding, and he had not heard enough to be somewhat understanding of Bryland's anger at Knight-Commander Tavish. It was clear that the Templar officer, in misjudged zeal, had not risen to the occasion, and had in fact made things worse. The attack had been a horrible experience for all concerned, and Teagan completely agreed that it was probably funded by someone high in Orlesian circles. And then there were those two priests, hirelings of the Orlesians, who had tried Maker-knows-what with the Queen...

That was no reason, however, to blame the Chantry. The priests should have been turned over to the Grand Cleric for punishment, especially since Her Grace had also suffered from their treachery. And Bryland's step-daughter was openly an apostate, and countenanced by all the nobles of Ferelden! The Queen's declaration of her freedom had no standing in canon law at all. Yes, the girl seemed sweet and pretty and good-natured, but laws were laws for a reason, and it was wrong to put a single individual above them, no matter how important her stepfather was. After all, wasn't that what had caused the disaster at Redcliffe? Isolde putting Connor above the Chantry's law?

But Bryland's marriage... Teagan did not know the lady. He did not know any of this Hawke family, and had never heard of them until he arrived in Denerim. The mother was from a noble Marcher family, they said, but had married a Fereldan

commoner. Amell. Teagan had vaguely heard the name, but had no idea if the woman's claim was genuine or not. The elder son had been knighted by Cailan, and from the talk in Council, was being seriously considered for a bannorn. The younger was a Grey Warden, and Teagan suspected that was how they had got their foot in the door. The niece was being pursued by Rothgar Wulffe, who had danced with her a scandalous five times at the wedding feast last night. A very lively, spirited girl. And that left the daughter. The apostate. Both Wulffe boys had danced with her. Nathaniel *Howe* had danced with her. Twice. Had the world gone mad?

Worst of all, Teagan was chagrined to find so little debate going on as to who should next wear the crown of Calenhad. He had expected more tension in Denerim. He had expected anxiety in the Royal Council over the changes that must take place with a new, unknown monarch. He had readied his opening moves, only to find that the game was all but over. Those in the know—even those who merely claimed to know—seemed to believe that the succession was settled. Loghain Mac Tir and Bronwyn Cousland would be the next King and Queen of Ferelden. Leonas Bryland spoke of it with calm certainty. Teagan nearly fell out of his chair when he first heard the words.

Loghain Mac Tir! King Loghain! Teagan did not think of himself as one mired in tradition, but the whole concept of the son of a freeholder, not even a generation away from the farm himself—that such a man would sit on the throne of Ferelden...

Words failed him. Thought failed him. There was somehow a positively demonic alliance between the Couslands and MacTirs to seize control of the kingdom. Who could have foreseen it? Teagan certainly had not. The noblest of the nobles and the farmer? For that matter, Loghain had never even been a freeholder himself: his father had been dispossessed before his death. Eamon had had plenty to say about Loghain in private: about his mysterious, unsavory power over Maric; about his arrogance and presumption; about his origins, common as dirt.

Yes, Loghain had done a very great deal to aid King Maric in restoring the rightful line of Calenhad. For that, he certainly deserved rewards. Eamon had thought that a knighthood and a fine manor would have been sufficient for such a man. If Loghain had had the least shred of decency and modesty, he would have expected no more. Instead, he was raised to Teyrn of Gwaren, elevated above the heads of all but one of the ancient nobility, Ferelden's natural leaders. Eamon had waxed particularly wrathful that the man's daughter should be Queen of Ferelden. Teagan had not been quite able to echo him there. Anora had been brought up a nobleman's daughter, and her education and conduct had always been satisfactory in every way. Cailan had been fond of her, and personally—though Teagan did not brave his brother's anger by saying so—he preferred that Cailan marry a Fereldan girl he liked rather than some foreigner who would drag Ferelden into foreign disputes and foreign wars and foreign ways unacceptable to the majority of Fereldans. But it now seemed to him that Loghain was using his daughter's bereavement and

her status as Queen Dowager to seize that to which he had no rightful claim.

And Bronwyn Cousland! What an artful schemer she had turned out to be! No wonder she was determined to suppress Alistair's claim. When they had spoken of the matter, Teagan had presumed that she wished to see her brother on the throne. While he thought her wrong, he could at least understand it. He had thought it was natural affection that was behind her dismissal of Alistair's rights. Not so. It was her own vaulting ambition: an ambition so fierce that she was ready to set aside her duties as a Grey Warden, set aside her own brother's superior claim, set aside the blood of Calenhad, and set aside her own decency, and marry Loghain Mac Tir, a man old enough to be her father!

And what did Fergus Cousland think of being put aside like this? What did he think of his sister's degrading marriage? Teagan had tried to draw him out a bit. Fergus seemed the same open-hearted man Teagan always had believed him to be, but either that was a pose, or the man truly had no pride at all. He must have been offered something to make it worth his while, but Teagan had not yet grasped what it was. Wulffe had mentioned that Fergus was Bronwyn's heir, but what difference did that make? Bronwyn was young and presumably fertile, and would no doubt produce a half-dozen scowling, black-haired little Mac Tirs, spreading that upstart blood throughout the noble houses of the kingdom!

Teagan could have kicked himself all the way back to Rainesfere. He should have gone to Ostagar and forced

Alistair to attend the Landsmeet. Even if he could not win the crown, he should be given some sort of official recognition. Teagan had loved his brother, but now felt that Eamon had been disastrously and shamefully wrong in his treatment of King Maric's natural son. For that matter, Maric himself had been wrong. He had visited Redcliffe. He had seen the boy himself: seen his shabby clothes, seen his relegation to the stables. How could a man not value his own flesh and blood? If one was careless enough to beget bastards—and Teagan himself had always been *very* careful—one ought to provide for them decently.

It did not help that Alistair himself had written, assuring Teagan that he had not the least desire to be King. He did not *want* to attend the Landsmeet. He was happy as a Grey Warden: happier than he could make Teagan understand, because he felt that his life had meaning and purpose it might not otherwise have had. It hurt, because Teagan knew that Alistair's rejection of the Landmeet and the nobles in general had everything to do with the way that nobles had treated him. Alistair had seen their true face, and it had not been pretty.

But could he, in good conscience, swear fealty to Bronwyn and Loghain? That was a vexing question; a dire moral dilemma. He would have to seek counsel, and now that he was in Denerim, there was no better place to go than to the Grand Cleric. The Cathedral was only on the other side of the Market from the Redcliffe estate.

"My dear," he said to Kaitlyn, "I'm off to see the Grand Cleric. Then I'll be going to the Council meeting. Don't expect me at

noon. There are some men I must meet."

"But you will be back before dinner?" Kaitlyn asked anxiously. "We are invited to dine with Lady Rosalyn and her sons."

"That's right: Ceorlic the Third is back from Markham to claim his father's bannorn. We'll probably talk about him in Council. I'm glad to have a chance to meet him after all these years. His brothers, too. Don't worry, I'll be back in plenty of time."

"Would it be all right," Kaitlyn asked timidly. "If I went... out? Out to the Market?"

"It's cold," Teagan said absently. "Of course you should go if you like. Have a good time. Buy something pretty. Take Musgrove and Pasco with you—and your maid. If you take Bevin..." he snorted "...Maybe Musgrove should keep him on a leash!"

He threw on a cloak and stalked across the Market, wanting to collect his thoughts. He glanced up and saw the new window in the tower chapel. Fergus Cousland had crashed through the old one when 'rescuing' the Queen. Teagan wished he had been there, so he could gauge the actual degree of danger in which she had been. The stories being told were absolutely absurd. He found it hard to believe that those two wicked fools would have been allowed to harm her. Bann Alfstanna's brother, for that matter, a Templar of good repute, had led the opposition to the plotters.

It was not surprising that the Grand Cleric Muirin agreed to

see him at once.

"My lord... such a pleasure. You did not bring your bride with you today?"

Teagan almost blushed, somewhat taken aback. He should have... certainly... but his mind was in such a whirl...

"Perhaps tomorrow, Your Grace. I wished to speak privately, and to seek your advice on a matter that troubles me deeply."

"Then sit, my son, and tell me. I shall have some tea brought to us."

The story came out in a rush: not simply his current anxiety about the succession and the general state of the country, but twenty years of repressed worries and regrets. The story of Alistair and his wrongs loomed large in all of this.

Muirin knew perfectly well who Alistair was, of course. She had fought hard against Duncan to keep the poor boy. Alistair was not particularly devout, and certainly not a serious-minded lad. His inappropriate levity was clearly a defensive response. Still, his trainers felt he had genuine potential as a warrior, for he had picked up the skills of a Templar with remarkable ease. For him to devote his life to the service of the Chantry had seemed to Muirin a beautiful thing. It would have purged the dishonor of his birth and mitigated his father's sin. He would have had a knight's standing, and been respected and honored wherever he went. On the other hand, for an innocent, good-natured boy to be condemned to the

brief, ferocious existence of a Grey Warden, fighting Tainted monsters in the bowels of the earth— that had seemed cruel and ugly to her. The Rite of Conscription, however, was absolute. Muirin had been saddened and somewhat bewildered at the boy's manifest joy in being carried off by Duncan. Where had the Chantry failed him?

With a sigh, she understood why being relegated to the Chantry to get him out of the way would have prejudiced him against it from the first. To be sought as someone of value, as Duncan had sought him, rather than be given away as something useless to be got rid of—as Arl Eamon had ... Well, of course Alistair would be flattered by that. And Duncan had always had a way about him... swaggering, mysterious—romantic, even. Alistair had immediately fallen prey to the man's charisma. The boy had longed above all for a father, and had at last found one.

Not that Muirin had not worried about Duncan's motives, in seeking control of the King's natural son. Duncan had come from Orlais, though he claimed Highever birth. Who knew what he had in mind for the boy? However necessary the Grey Wardens were, they were definitely a necessary *evil*, in Muirin's opinion. They had clearly done great harm to Bronwyn.

Furthermore, Eamon had felt it was extremely important that Alistair not marry and beget children who could challenge the legitimate royal line. Now, of course, that was a moot point; but at the time it had made sense. What an irony that all of Eamon's efforts had resulted in the direct line of Calenhad

being cut off from the succession.

For that was Teagan's other trouble.

"I feel tricked, Your Grace," he said frankly. "I had no idea that Bronwyn Cousland was seeking the Crown for herself. She said nothing about it when she visited me some months ago. We discussed Alistair, and she gave her reasons why she thought he ought not to be considered. Most of them involved the lack of hard evidence supporting his claim. But if people only looked at him, they'd see the truth in his face! Then, too, she urged the lad's own disinclination. That, too, was Eamon's doing. He drummed into Alistair's head from the first that he must never seek the throne, or even put himself forward in any way."

"My lord," Muirin asked, "do you believe that Alistair is happy as a Grey Warden?"

"He says he is. Bronwyn says he is, and that he's doing well. I suppose if she becomes Queen, he'll eventually be made Warden-Commander. That's something."

"It is a very great thing. And he is a Grey Warden in the very time of Blight. Perhaps the Maker is His wisdom saw farther than all of us when he made his plans. Perhaps Alistair was needed as a Grey Warden just as much as he needed to *be* a Grey Warden. Can you answer me this: if you brought Alistair to Denerim, and forced him to seek the Crown, do you believe that there is any likelihood that he would gain it?"

"No. Things have gone too far. Bronwyn and Loghain have too much support. I'd have to prove them guilty of some great crime in order to undermine them. I can't understand it. Everyone seems to *want* Loghain to be King. Bronwyn at least has the royal blood of Calenhad, but... *Loghain!*"

"Remember, my lord, that Calenhad himself did not have royal blood until he was crowned. A Blight is the most terrifying of mortal dangers. At such a time it is natural that people look to a hero to save them. Whatever else you may think of Teyrn Loghain, a hero he certainly is."

"And Bronwyn. The Girl Warden. The Dragonslayer." Teagan shook his head and clasped his hands before him, not quite wringing them. "I don't gainsay that Bronwyn has done a great deal: raised armies, fought in the Deep Roads, even taken part in killing a dragon or two. That makes her a good diplomat and a mighty warrior. Will it make her a good Queen? And she's a Grey Warden herself! I am not afraid to speak my mind before the Landsmeet. I only wish I knew what my mind was!"

How could she comfort him? Bronwyn Cousland's ascension to the throne seemed inevitable to her, too. She had prayed about it, feeling that the young woman had made her share of mistakes. The marriage to Loghain, so obviously a political ploy, seemed one to Muirín; and one likely to cause Eleanor's daughter a great deal of heartache. The pursuit of the Crown was another. Her stubborn championing of the outcasts of the world, elves and mages alike, was evidence of a generous heart but not proof of sound judgement. However, Muirín could

not oppose her.

"Bronwyn Cousland," she said slowly, "is, I believe, smiled on by the Maker. Yes. I believe He regards her with favor. I cannot tell you why, for I have sworn certain oaths, but I have had seen proof that both the Maker and the Prophet have found her particularly acceptable to them. If they so regard her, then it is not for me to denounce her."

"I have heard rumors." Teagan stared at her, in suspense. "I heard rumors that she had somehow found the Urn of the Sacred Ashes. That the Queen was healed by them. Do you believe this to be true?"

"I have seen what I have seen. Personally, I wonder at Bronwyn seeking something so commonplace as an earthly crown, but perhaps she is the Queen that Ferelden needs now, in this crisis."

Bronwyn decided that today was the day to present the Warden's old claim to the Council. She had gone over it with Loghain, who did not like it, but understood. It was a good piece of land, though underpopulated these days. The only settlement was the village of Breaker's Cove, which Bronwyn insisted had always been part of the grant. Records indicated that the Wardens' lands had been made part of the Drake's Fall bannorn, which was currently vacant. Fergus had considered one of his men for it, but was unlikely to refuse his sister the old Warden lands. Ser Giles would simply receive a smaller bannorn. As he was a landless knight, and the grant

would be a surprise to him, he was not likely to be put out.

Nathaniel Howe also assented, as the grant was actually Amaranthine territory. Bronwyn's Wardens deserved whatever they could wring from the Landsmeet, in his opinion. The horror of the Architect had not made a brief impression. Comprehending the creature's plans was a nightly burden in his dreams. Anything that could be done to stop the darkspawn must and should be done.

It was a tricky legal question, Teagan pointed out. While the old grants seemed genuine, the lands had been confiscated when the Wardens were exiled. The question was, did the King have the right to confiscate lands granted to the Wardens? Or did the Warden's right supersede the power of the Crown of Ferelden? If the latter, was that a precedent they wanted to set?

"I think," said Anora, "that rather than basing the *claim* on these documents, we should simply use them as a reference to determine the *extent* of the holdings. The Wardens are in the midst of a Blight and deserve some reward for their service and sacrifice. And since the bannorn of Drake's Fall has been vacant since the Orlesian occupation, there no one to be deprived. Why not simply make a new, royal grant of the same lands?"

Loghain was proud of Anora for so neatly disposing of the matter. He added an addendum of his own: that Fereldan Warden-Commanders must be Fereldan indeed. It would not do to put such a fortress in the hands of the kingdom's

enemies.

Fergus grinned at his sister. "It looks like Soldier's Keep is yours. When do I get to see it?"

The last, frantic deals were made; the last promises, the last horse-trades. All that remained was to see if they would hold good.

The Sixth of Haring dawned at last. Snow fell on Denerim in great feathery flakes. In the Landsmeet Chamber, huge fires roared into life early in the day. The seneschal hoped that they would take some of the clammy chill from the air. If people were uncomfortable, they were more likely to quarrel.

He muttered to his assistant, "And from quarrelling it leads to fighting; and fighting leads to killing; and then Maker knows what at the end of it. On the other hand, if we keep them cozy and not too drunk...with luck, we'll have a repeat of the One-Day Landsmeet in Good King Darlan's time!"

Nobles and their families poured into the Landsmeet Chamber, eyeing each other warily, like dogs establishing precedence. For that matter, their dogs were much the same. Some nobles were confident, some were anxious, some were hopeful. All were dressed in their best: either their best doublets and gowns, or their best trappings of war. In the cold of winter, the nobility of Ferelden was a garden of garishly bright flowers, interspersed with gleaming metal.

Bronwyn and Loghain, both clad in armor, clanked into the Landsmeet, their faces stern and serene, but their minds whirling. They were not only ones prepared for battle. Bryland, too, wore his plate, and Howe and Wulffe their archers' leathers. Fergus Cousland wore his grandfather's elaborate silverite armor, the same armor his father Bryce had worn when he refused a kingdom. Teagan Guerrin was impressive in his new dragonbone mail. Kaitlyn drifted in at his side, her hand on his arm, looking about her in wonder, unaware of the admiration she excited in her ethereal blue gown and her silver-fox cloak.

The trumpets rang with the royal fanfare. Anora, dressed in magnificent but sober dark blue velvet embroidered in gold and pearls, appeared from the rear hall and made her way with great dignity to the throne.

The seneschal bawled out, "Your Graces! My lords, ladies and gentlemen! On this sixth day of Cassus, the thirtieth year of the Dragon Age, the three hundred and eighty-sixth from the founding of the kingdom, by command of Her Majesty, Queen Anora, I declare this Landsmeet in session!"

Thanks to my reviewers: sizuka2, Basani, Nightbrainzz, Chandagnac, Jyggilag, Mike3207, Sarah1281, sleepyowlet, darksky01, KnightOfHolyLight, Raxiselic, Psyche Sinclair, Doom-N-GloomGal, JackOfBladesX, Oleander's One, Adventfather, Notnahtanha, Robbie, the Phoenix, Costin, yamilian, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, glamasaurus,

Jennaa53, Shakespeira, EmbertoInferno, Zute, Phygmalion, Nemrut, Tsu doh Nimh, Have Socks. Will Travel, mille libri, anon, Khamael, and Heretherebedragons66.

The next chapter is absolutely the Landsmeet.

A mandore is a small, four-stringed lute; an ancestor of the mandolin, and also known as a mandora or a mandola (Loosely, there are variations in the instruments).

I decided that a Grand Cleric would genuinely think that being a Templar was a better thing for Alistair than being a Grey Warden.

Cassus is the formal Tevinter name for the month of Haring

82. The Game of Kings

This chapter is somewhat short. I am on a business trip to Kirkwall, City of Chains (oops: Baltimore, aka Charm City. Yes. They really call it that.), and thought you would rather I updated timely with something than left you hanging with nothing. I always thought the Landsmeet would need more than one chapter anyway.

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 82: The Game of Kings

The Landsmeet Chamber vibrated with tension. The stakes were high: lordships were in the offing, Landsmeet votes for the taking. Fates of entire families depended on the outcome today. Under their finery, nobles were sweating.

Anora stepped forward. She must begin the Landsmeet with a speech, the oration that laid out the issues and set the tone for the Landsmeet. Beautiful, grave, and no fool, she had the attention of everyone in the chamber.

"Lord and Ladies of the Landsmeet, we come together in a time of troubles. A Blight claws at our lands, foreign powers seek to stab us in the back, and we have been attacked where we thought safest. My husband, your King Cailan, is

dead, killed in battle defending this country. We meet here by his will to choose who will succeed him. Who will lead this country through this crisis? We must all choose wisely, or the power of choice might be lost forever. Personal differences and petty greed must be set aside for the good of the kingdom. Ferelden needs strong leadership— leadership from top to bottom—never more than now. We must choose a ruler, my countrymen: a ruler able to defend this kingdom!"

Sage nods, and murmurs of approval. One man in the back shouted, "Let's vote for Loghain, and get it over with!" Anora put up her hand for silence.

"Nor is our king the only loss we have borne. Many friends and relations we saw last spring are now gone forever. Friend has turned against friend, misled by great evil or malign trickery. A teyrnir, three arlings, and ten bannorns have been deprived of a strong hand to protect and guide them. We must make good these losses, and work together to defend our people and uphold order throughout Ferelden!"

A great deal of applause. Everyone was in favor of getting a land and title for themselves or a near relative. Anora paused, and spoke bluntly.

"This is no time to hide the truth behind soft words. We are in danger. The Archdemon is a threat to all life on Thedas, but it is in Ferelden where the horde first erupted.

"And while we have been engaged in fighting the Blight, our ancient enemy has taken advantage of the threat. Orlesian

assassins were sent to kill my father, Teyrn Loghain, and the Warden-Commander. They were foiled by our allies and punished, but there is no doubt who sent them. I myself was poisoned by a trusted servant—an Orlesian—who planned to make my death appear to be from natural causes. Orlesians have even infiltrated the Chantry, for a pair of priests from Orlais held me prisoner in the Cathedral until I was rescued by Teyrn Fergus Cousland—"

A cheer, growing in volume. Eyes turned Fergus' way. He grinned, and made the Queen an elaborate bow, hand on heart. Anora smiled at him, and continued her speech.

"I must speak of the ghastly events of the 7th of Harvestmere, when Lady Habren Bryland's wedding was infiltrated by Orlesian agents who murdered Arl Urien and Banns Loren, Reginalda, and Ceorlic. Many were wounded and injured in the attack, and it is clear that the agents hoped to kill many more. Thanks are due to Arl Leonas Bryland for leading the defense that drove the assassins away."

Yet more applause. Leandra turned to look at her husband, sincere admiration shining in her eyes. He waved the applause away, trying to smile, remembering the panic and horror of that day.

Anora went on. "And yet, amidst all these vicious and cowardly attacks, we have not stood alone. Our allies, bound by ancient Grey Warden treaties, have supported us in battle: the dwarves of Orzammar and the Dalish elves. Mages from Ferelden's Circle have served bravely with the army, saving

many lives. Above all, Ferelden's Grey Wardens have stood firm against the Blight, gathering all the races together against our ancient, common foe."

Bronwyn got her share of applause, but the rest was a little more problematic. Most Fereldan nobles had nothing against dwarves-especially Orzammar dwarves, conveniently out of sight. Many, however, did not care for elves, and definitely did not like Dalish elves traveling through their lands, poaching game and making trouble. Some others feared mages, and thought they should be locked away securely. This point of view was hotly contested by others, especially by nobles who had actually served in the south. Anora's clear voice carried over the gossip.

"We shall begin, as is customary, by recognizing new lordships, inheritances, marriages, and births; the strong foundation of family in which the nobility is rooted. Once the Landsmeet itself is complete, it will be our duty to choose who will lead this kingdom to victory against its enemies!"

The seneschal shouted, "Long life to Her Majesty!"

Prolonged applause for the Queen's Speech. Anora had decided to be brief, and not tease and infuriate the attendees with a long-winded peroration. People wanted to get down to business. So, for that matter, did she. She took her place on the throne, wondering if it would be the last time, while the seneschal recognized the premier noble of Ferelden-or rather his heir.

Fergus stood tall in the gallery. He would have to clarify what had happened to his family, or he would be bogged down by painful questions.

"Your Majesty... nobles of Ferelden...my friends, comrades, and countrymen! My father, Bryce Cousland, died last Cloudreach. He was not alone. My mother, my wife and son, and many of our loyal retainers died as well. A ruthless Orlesian agent and a band of foreign blood mages manipulated Arl Rendon Howe into attacking Highever. Arl Howe is dead now, having paid in blood for whatever share of the guilt was his. As my father's first-born child, and long recognized as his heir, I put myself forward to be confirmed as Teyrn of Highever."

Fergus had always been popular, The rumbles were favorable. Anora, as arbiter of the Landsmeet, said, "Is this the will of the Landsmeet? Can Fergus Cousland be accepted as Teyrn of Highever by acclamation? If not, let his opponent declare himself!"

Some mutters, mainly from people who were intrigued by the hints of scandal and conspiracy. No one, however, wanted to declare themselves in opposition, at least not now, with so many lordships to be had. Nor did anyone have the nerve to cry "Question!" Not so early in the day. Fergus' right to inherit Highever had long been recognized.

Anora smiled, "Then let us proclaim the Landsmeet's decision. Let those who recognize Teyrn Fergus Cousland say 'aye!'"

"Aye!" roared the Landsmeet.

Once recognized as teyrn, Fergus was free to transact a great deal of business. In fact, it was he who had the greatest number of lordships to fill. He had previously agreed with Nathaniel Howe that he would present the Highever banns for confirmation and Nathaniel, after his own confirmation, would present those for Amaranthine.

Fergus made clear that he was going to continue to hold the city of Highever himself; and his candidates for Darkencombe, Loren's old domain, and Greenleaf were quickly passed without comment. There had been enough preliminary talk in the month before the Landsmeet to make clear that there were no blood heirs surviving in those two bannorns. As customary, the two new banns did homage to Fergus in the sight of all, kneeling before him with their hands in his.

"I swear before the Maker and his Prophet that I will in the future be faithful to Fergus Cousland, my rightful lord, in matters of worldly honor."

Following usual precedence, Loghain spoke next, and submitted his recent marriage to Lady Bronwyn Cousland for recognition by the Landsmeet.

There was general good will toward the couple, but a call of "Question!" from Bann Babcock of White Hills.

"What is your question, my lord?" Anora asked coolly of the old man, Teagan Guerrin's vassal and relation by marriage.

"Well...damn it all... the girl's a Grey Warden. The Girl Warden! Isn't that what everyone calls her? Is it legal for a Grey Warden to marry?"

No one would have liked to have the expression on Loghain's face turned in his direction, but the old man bore it manfully enough.

"Warden-Commander," Anora called. "As the head of the order in Ferelden and the resident expert, what say you to Bann Babcock's question?"

"Your Majesty," Bronwyn said, looking down her nose , but speaking with deliberate sweetness, "there is nothing to prevent a Grey Warden marrying. We swear no oaths of celibacy or continence, as the Chantry does. In fact, I have heard of a number of Grey Wardens being wed...sometimes to one another. It is in no way proscribed."

Bryland and Wulffe exchanged discreet smirks.

"Does that answer your question, Bann Babcock?," asked Anora, with equal sweetness.

"It does, your Majesty." said the old man, and then muttered something in an undertone to his one of his sons.

Anora said, "Then may I hear the assent of this body to the marriage of Teyrn Loghain with Lady Bronwyn Cousland, that their union be legally binding and their children recognized as legitimate?"

That was done. Neither Bronwyn nor Loghain looked at Teagan, whom they suspected had arranged that little caltrop.

Next in precedence was the arling of Denerim, and here Kane Kendalls, carefully coached by Leonas Bryland, put himself forward for arl. A great many women-and even a few men-swooned at his good looks.

"...While I have no previous experience before this august body..."

Some questions were called by people trying to understand the family tree and the exact way that Kane Kendalls was related to Arl Urien. Kane had notes on the matter. Better yet, he had his father-in-law Bryland to support him and to deflect one annoying old lady's queries about the *second* son of Arl Paladoc.

"That line is extinct, Lady Gwynnyfar..."

There was a call for a recorded vote; so in order of precedence, each member of the Landsmeet had to declare his or her vote openly. It did not appear that many people wished to vote against Kane. Rather, they wanted to know where the great nobles stood on the subject, and once that was established, the rest of the Landsmeet fell into line. The recognition of Kane's marriage to Lady Habren was quickly accomplished by acclamation. Kane Kendalls was now the Arl of Denerim. Habren preened in triumph, clinging to his arm.

Nathaniel Howe was next, and there things got ugly. There

was never any real danger that he would not be confirmed. However, there were plenty of questions, some directed at the Couslands, as to how they felt about this son of a traitor. There were even more pointed questions as to how they could think of leaving the murders of their parents unavenged. The last questioner was Lady Rosalyn, the widow of Bann Ceoric. Fergus made clear that he thought such a question rude and tactless of her. Imprudent too, as he pointed out.

"No amount of blood could suffice to make me..." he sneered "...*complacent* about the deaths of my mother, my father, my wife, my son, and so many good friends. If blood could make it all not have happened, your question might have some validity. Arl Howe is dead, as are two of his innocent children. Lady Delilah above all was blameless in everything. Do you imagine that her death gave me any pleasure?" He grew angrier as he spoke. "Do you think me a *monster*?"

Lady Rosalyn reddened and stammered, and her sons closed around her, murmuring sympathetically.

Fergus had more to say. "Nathaniel is not his father, and had no part in the crimes against the Couslands. Why should I blame him, when sons of the men who murdered Queen Moira—" here he stared hard at Rosalyn and her children—"were permitted to inherit? Nathaniel and I were friends from youth. I trust him to be the arl that Amaranthine needs in this difficult time. Only days ago, he dared to defend the arling at the side of my sister, the Warden-Commander, when a party of renegade darkspawn were discovered lurking half a day from Denerim!"

A panicked babble, rising in volume. The seneschal had to call for order. Ultimately, Anora called Bronwyn to the speaker's gallery to give a quick report of the events in Amaranthine.

"...Thus, while the Architect could have been a serious threat to the kingdom as a whole, he was at the moment hiding from the Archdemon, and had not collected a large band of his own. He was most interested in capturing females for breeding purposes, but had not yet succeeded in this."

Bann Frandarel asked, "Darkspawn females?"

"No, my lord," Bronwyn replied. "Women of any race: human, elven, or dwarven. Qunari, too, for that matter. There are no darkspawn females. Soldiers in Denerim could tell you of the horror we discovered near Ostagar. As you have no doubt heard, darkspawn capture and violate women, who then grow huge and misshapen and give birth to more darkspawn."

She had thought that surely they all knew this by now... she really had... but apparently a great many noble lords and ladies had not been paying attention. A few women left the chamber, looking sick. There was quite a lot of discussion.

"Then why," Bann Frandarel challenged, "are we sending women into danger? Why do we expose women to these creatures? Why did you become a Warden, Your Grace, knowing what you do?"

Such ignorance was more than irritating. "First of all, my lord,"

Bronwyn said sharply. "I did *not* choose to be a Grey Warden. I was conscripted by Duncan, the prior commander. I was given no choice whatever. Furthermore, darkspawn must be faced and fought, and not run away from. Darkspawn don't care if women don't fight: it just makes it easy for them."

She had frightened them, she saw. More than a little. Really, how could they not have heard about this? Were they so completely occupied with hunting and dancing and gaming and wenching that they had not heard the news from the army in Ostagar? That was troubling in itself. She decided to give them an example.

"On a ride north from Ostagar, I stopped at a farmhold. The farm wife there was no warrior, and neither was her toddler daughter. That did not prevent the darkspawn from bursting from the ground in an attempt to seize them. Had I not been there, their fate would have been sealed. I admit at that time, however, that I did not know as much about the darkspawn as I do now. I had never seen or heard of a Broodmother until I was in the Dead Trenches in the Deep Roads east of Orzammar. I saw one there for the first time: pitiful, terrible, mindless. She was a dwarf woman taken prisoner by the darkspawn. People even knew the woman's name! That is the kind of monstrous enemy we must fight and defeat."

"Thank you, Your Grace," said Anora, "for your compelling words. I hope you find the answer sufficient, my lord. Let us return to the business at hand. Nathaniel Howe claims the arling of Amaranthine."

Another recorded vote, and some absentions: Teagan and a number of his banns among them. It was enough to register qualms, but not enough to prevent Nathaniel's confirmation. He was then recognized as Arl of Amaranthine, and immediately swore allegiance to Fergus in a strong and manly voice. He too had vacant bannorns.

"Amaranthine needs a number of new lords," he declared. "In consultation with my liege lord, Fergus Cousland, I hereby propose the following candidates..."

Adam Hawke's heart skipped a beat. Leandra clutched at Bryland's armor, hardly feeling the plate under her fingernails.

"For bann of the City of Amaranthine, in place of the disgraced and self-exiled Bann Esmerelle, I propose Ser Adam Hawke, whom many of you who served at Ostagar would know as the man who was knighted by our King Cailan for services on the battlefield."

Some applause, more murmurs, more talk, and an excited squeak forced from Bethany. Carver's jaw fell open. He swayed, feeling like he had been knocked silly by a bolt of lightning. Bronwyn caught his eye, wishing that Adam had prepared him for this. Perhaps she herself should have, but it had not been her secret.

Some of the young women who had admired Adam earlier took a second and even a third look at him. Others whispered behind their hands, and pointed at Bethany.

Before the vote could be taken, Anora pointed out that the current bann of the city was very much alive, though fled to the Free Marches.

"Bann Esmerelle," she said, "has proved herself a traitor to Ferelden and a criminal, selling free Fereldans for gold. I put it before you, lords and ladies: do you assent to the will of the Crown in stripping that unworthy woman of her title and lands?"

No one sought to defend her. Her allies in the Landsmeet were dead and their kin fled. The vote was passed by acclamation. The bannorn of the City of Amaranthine was declared vacant, and claimed by Ser Adam Hawke, as proposed by the Arl of Amaranthine.

Bann Oswald, an independent spirit from the Bannorn, asked baldly what many people only whispered. "Do we want the blood of mages in the Landsmeet?"

Bryland bridled, and glared at the man.

Fergus shot back, "I want a brave and capable man in the Landsmeet!"

Nathaniel, more calmly, said, "Ser Adam has been serving as castellan in the city, and has routed out a gang of smugglers that the previous bann could not. His brother Carver Hawe is also serving his nation as a Grey Warden."

Carver was luckily still too dazed to say anything of what he

was feeling.

Bryland was about to burst out in the Hawkes' defence, but Bann Alfstanna forestalled him.

"Yes, His sister Bethany Hawke, is indeed a mage. A mage who came forward, risking personal danger, to save my life and the lives of many others. Yes, I do think we want someone with that blood in the Landsmeet!"

Lady Seria Mac Coe pinched her nephew until he too spoke up. "Boskydale supports the Hawkes, Your Majesty. We are grateful for Mistress Bethany's selfless act in saving my aunt."

Oswald was not to be put down so easily, and appealed to the Grand Cleric. "Your Grace, what do you think about this?"

Muirin, who was not enjoying herself particularly that day, said quietly. "I see no impediment to Ser Adam. There is no text that excludes *relatives* of mages from the business of ruling. That would set a precedent that I believe no one would want."

"But what if his children have magic? We wouldn't like anything else like that business in Redcliffe... secret mages going mad and murdering half the countryside! And everyone admits that girl there is an apostate!"

Teagan was red with anger and sick with the memory. He was ready to vote for Ser Adam, merely to shut up Bann Oswald.

"I can speak for myself," Adam declared in his rich and resonant voice, stepping out in front of them all. "I know, better than most, the perils and power of magic. I have lived with magic all my life, and I am proud that my sister is an exemplar of one whose magic serves that which is best in her, not that which is most base." He lifted his arms in a graceful, expansive gesture. "But I am not a mage. I must rely on good steel and the strength of a my sword arm, both of which I have offered gladly to king and country. If that is not enough for the nobles here present, I shall continue as I am, a soldier of Ferelden, who serves in whatever capacity he can."

He had won them. Anora called for a vote, and Fergus, looking about with more than a hint of challenge, moved that it be a vote of acclamation. No one demurred, and thus, Adam Hawke became a bann of Ferelden.

No one had a word to oppose to the other candidates for Amaranthine, and thus Blayne Varel, Daniell Seyton, Darron Bliss, and Conn Marfarythen joined the Landsmeet. The five men swore fealty, one of the largest number to do so at once time in recent Fereldan history. Bliss had been warned that Drake's Fall has lost some territory to the Wardens, based on ancient land grants. He accepted that calmly, having never expected a holding of his own, much less a bannorn. Besides, he had heard that the ancient Tevinters had collected dragonbone there. Perhaps they had missed a few bits, here and there: perhaps enough to make a go of the place.

This act of the drama completed, people began to shift and fidget and think about their midday meals. Anora was not

about to release them., since that would be an outright affront to Teagan Guerrin, who was up next to claim the arling of Redcliffe.

He was the only possible claimant. Not even an unreasonable person could object to him, and Nathaniel Howe made a point of voting for him, which had the effect of making himself appear noble and above petty revenge—and made Teagan seem small in comparison. Teagan was exasperated, since he felt there were strong objections to Nathaniel Howe, and now wished he had gone ahead and raised questions about the young arl's activities in the Free Marches. However, due to precedence, he was unable to do so himself, and had been reluctant to use a proxy who might have suffered for his impertinence.

Nor could any reasonable person object to his new bride. Kaitlyn herself trembled, afraid that some great lord or lady would thunder disapproval of such an insignificant person. It all went by very quickly, though, and the vote passed by acclamation before Kaitlyn had quite grasped that it was happening. Teagan smiled fondly at her, and there was applause. Kaitlyn had no idea what to do, and turned very red. Her modesty did her no harm with the better-natured members of the Landsmeet.

She was so glad Bevin was playing at Bryland House. He would have started talking and asking questions, and it would have annoyed Teagan no end. She gave a great sigh to herself. She was really and truly an Arlessa! If only Mother were still here to see this! She hardly heard the next order of

business... Arl Bryland's marriage to Lady Amell... until it took a loud and unpleasant turn.

Arl Bryland was shouting, "You forget yourself, my lady!" Murmurs, titters, astonished talk was rising. The old lady, Bann Fredegunda, was unembarrassed.

"Don't tell me what I forget and don't forget, my lord!" she growled back. She was stout and white-haired, with a bit of a white beard and moustache as well, and her voice was deep, like a husky bark. "I repeat my question. My lady Leandra, do you still have your courses? Are you still able to conceive children? Your tall lads there can scowl all they like, but this *matters!*"

Carver was distracted by the unspeakable horror that was Adam Hawke, Bann of the City of Amaranthine, by his mother's distress. Bethany wished she could disappear into the floor. Adam resigned himself to a duel, while Leandra was redder than Kaitlyn Guerrin.

"Yes, Bann Fredegunda. While I think it unlikely, I am still technically able to conceive."

Uneasy looks were exchanged. Leonas Bryland took a threatening step forward. "I have a grown daughter and two sons! I *don't* see that this matters. Even if we were to have a child, the odds of having a mage are simply not that high. It was Leandra's first *husband* who was the mage!"

Leandra's blush deepened. She had never told Leonas the

story of the Amells and their own history of magic. Now and then an Amell was born that way. Such a birth had ruined her grandfather's prospects of being named Viscount of Kirkwall. Adam, Carver, Charade, and Bethany knew the truth, but were resolutely silent on the matter.

Bann Fredegunda, however, was satisfied. "Oh, the father, was it? Never mind, then."

Some deep breaths of relief, and a few sighs of disappointment. No Landsmeet was quite complete without a trial by combat. The marriage was recognized by acclamation.

Of the high nobles, only Arl Wulffe was left, and his only matter of succession-related business was to present Rothgar to the Landsmeet as his declared heir-apparent. This aroused no opposition and only a little interest. Charade felt a little self-conscious when Rothgar gave her a wink.

"With that, my lords and ladies," said Anora. "Let us adjourn for the middday meal. We shall convene again in two hours."

"Watch out!" shouted Corbus. "The axe is going to fall on your head!"

A crash of metal against of stone, followed by the delighted squeals of children and a puppy's loud barks.

Bryland House was alive with young Brylands, Kendalls, and a Merton at play. The tutor had retired to his room with a

headache. The grownups had gone to the Landsmeet, and that had left five children with a large mansion to plunder.

Bevin had the idea of playing Landsmeet. Corbus had led them to a forgotten storage room he found out how to get into, and they pulled out some of Habren's old clothes and some of the arl's clothes and armor. Dressed in somewhat oversized splendor, Faline was Queen, and Jancey, Corbus, Lothar, and Bevin her Court.

"Don't step on my train, Lothar!" Jancey complained. "Look! You tore it! Habren will kill me!"

"No, she won't," Corbus assured her. "We won't let her. She forgot about that chest, anyway. It's not with the others she's taking with her. She's outgrown all those clothes. Aunt Werberga only kept it because she always kept everything of Habren's."

"Really?" Jancey admired the pink and green gown. It made her feel like a rose. It was wicked, but she wished she could keep this dress forever and ever. She told her sister so.

"Don't be greedy," Faline rebuked her. "Nobody likes greedy girls," she whispered, "like horrible, horrible *Habren*."

She and Jancey had beautiful new dresses for tonight, and were even allowed to choose the colors they liked. Hers was light purple, because purple was her favorite color. Arlessa Leandra said she was 'sweet as a bunch of lavender' in it. Jancey's was pale yellow, and was told she was 'pretty as a

primrose.' Faline knew she would miss Bethany, Charade, and dear Arlessa Leandra when they went to live at the Arl of Denerim's estate.

Everyone was sure that Kane would be made an arl. That was a very great thing, and Faline was happy for him, but she wished he had not married Habren. Habren did not like her. She did not like Jancey, either. Kane said they had to be nice to her, no matter what, but of course Habren never looked at Kane in the mean way she did at his sisters.

"Corbus can be Arl of South Reach. Who are you, Lothar?"

"I'm the Warden-Commander of Ferelden," declared that young hero.

"You're not a girl," Jancey pointed out. "How can you be Warden-Commander?"

"The Warden-Commander doesn't have to be a girl," Lothar said. "I heard of one that wasn't. I'm the Boy Warden."

"Well, I'm Ser Bevin the Bold," Bevin said, noisily dragging a longsword strapped over his shoulder. "I have adventures. The Queen's is going to knight me for killing all the Orlesians."

The other children thought this an admirable scheme.

"All right," said the agreeable Faline. "I'll knight you, but you must swear fealty to me forever and ever,"

"On my honor, I promise to be loyal to the Queen, or may I

drop dead in my tracks, and *ROT!*" swore Bevin. The children found the oath very impressive.

"What are you, Jancey?" asked Lothar.

"I'm a mage like Bethany!" said the little girl, waving a broken chair leg found in storage.

Bevin, a little worried, said, "Mother Hannah says it's bad to be a mage."

"Huh!" scoffed Corbus. "That's all she knows. Who's going to heal us when we slay dragons and Orlesians, if we don't have a mage along?"

The meal shared by the great nobles of Ferelden with their Queen was not nearly so pleasant and carefree. One could even describe it as awkward, but it was something to get through. Bronwyn refused to let the tension affect her appetite, which was fairly prodigious after the events of the morning. And she did not have to sit by Habren, which was always a gain. With her husband to her right and Nathaniel to her left, she was happily situated. When he was not conversing with her, Nathaniel was attending with studious courtesy to young Arlessa Kaitlyn. Bronwyn smiled quietly throughout. Nathaniel had always had a talent for quietly needling people in a relentless, passive-aggressive way. Teagan's pleasant demeanour was looking a little strained.

The Grand Cleric and Knight-Commander Harrith were among

them, and Anora was diligently keeping the topics of conversation general and innocuous. The cold weather, everyone's health, the delightful prospect of tonight's ball were gone over in considerable detail. Some knew Anora's game; some were oblivious. Bronwyn realized that she could not see where Habren's hands were, but that her father, on Habren's other side, was blushing and trying to catch his son-in-law's eye.

So Habren was utterly besotted. That could be a good thing. It would certainly keep her occupied. Kane Kendalls had said nothing about serving in the army, and indeed had never been trained for it. It was better, perhaps, for him to leave it to the professionals, while he learned something about managing the city of Denerim. He certainly looked very happy, and not at all abashed at Habren's public displays of ...er... affection.

Loghain whispered, "Everything's taking longer than I anticipated. We may not get to the Crown today."

Bronwyn agreed, feeling rather glum about it. They had to get through the notoriously contentious Bannorn now, and who knew what they would want to bring up? Technically, new business was supposed to wait until the new monarch was seated, but banns often ignored that. Teagan had shown his hand a bit, wanting to bait them, wanting to display his independence, but she could see no real threat from any of that. It only meant that Anora would be Queen yet one more day.

Even after they rose from the table, they remained in the

intimate dining parlor, lingering and talking, sipping wine. Bronwyn gave Kaitlyn an encouraging smile, not realizing that it took all the young woman's nerve to smile back at the tall and terrible Warden-Commander. Kaitlyn found Bronwyn nearly as frightening as Teyrn Loghain himself.

Bronwyn was actually quite unaware of this. "My congratulations on your official status, Arlessa Kaitlyn. And how is Bevin? Does he still love stories? I hope he will be at the ball tonight."

Kaitlyn, happy to speak of Bevin, realized only belatedly that she should have congratulated Bronwyn in her turn. She stammered, trying to backtrack, and then gave it up.

"Bevin is at Bryland House today. He's been making friends with the Arl's little boys. It's such fun for him. Master... I mean... Arl Kane's sisters are there, too, of course. They're such dear little girls. They're all coming to the ball tonight, and it will be nice for them to have each other."

Kane overheard someone speaking kindly of his sisters, and smiled in Arlessa Kaitlyn's direction. Habren, her eyes fixed on him, noticed it, and dug her fingers into his arm, Kane, not at all discomposed, turned his most charming smile on her. She bloomed like a rose, and pressed indiscreetly against him. Kane smiled even more brightly.

He was an arl now. He was Arl of Denerim, and no one could take it back now. Faline and Jancey would have everything they wanted, and would never go back to that rotten school

Aron had sent them to, where the priests and sisters slapped and humiliated them. Kane had made clear to his sisters' new maid and the young governess that no one was going to lay a hand on his sisters. They were good girls, and if they gave trouble they could be sent to their rooms or be put in a corner; but no one was going to hurt them ever again.

The biggest problem, as he saw it, would be Habren. She was a spoiled bitch who hated his sisters on principle. He had seen it right away. She hated pretty much everyone but her father and Kane himself, as far as he could tell. He kept the smirk from his face. He had always heard that there were noble ladies who would do things that whores retched at, and it was certainly true of Habren. She would do anything-really, absolutely anything-that he wanted. It was good enough sport for now. As long as she kept her hands off Faline and Jancey, he would play his role of devoted young husband. If she didn't...well...he would teach her the same lesson he had taught his brother Aron. It never paid to get in Kane Kendalls' way. And no one was allowed to hurt his sisters.

The tumultuous business continued as the Landsmeet reconvened. There were other banns to be confirmed: Reginalda's daughter and Ceorlic's son. There was a great deal of trouble in the latter, because the younger brother had claims on a certain manor, and the elder brother said he did not, and it took a deal of sorting out, with neither of them satisfied at the end. Their mother, Lady Rosalyn, stood between them, anxiously looking at one and then the other,

And then the lady burst forth with business of her own. It was quite inappropriate and entirely out of order.

"I want to register a complaint," she huffed, "about the high-handed behavior of the Teyrna of Gwaren, who last Bloomingtide made off with all the horses in the stable of our manor in Lothering!"

Bronwyn felt herself blushing, not expecting to be attacked in such a place over a matter long settled. She stood forth, glaring at the bann's widow.

"Those horses," she said angrily, "were duly requisitioned in the course of an urgent mission necessary to the war against the darkspawn. They were paid for last Solace—and a handsome sum it was. Nor did I take *all* the horses, since I was especially begged not to take your daughter's pony. Furthermore," she continued, "I fail to see that the loss of the horses has discommoded you in any way, since I know for a fact that no member of your family has visited Lothering since the beginning of the Blight!"

"They were *our* horses!" Lady Rosalyn spat. "You had no right to them!"

"And yet you accepted the payment for them," Bronwyn replied coldly, "for I have the receipt for the payment. Shall I send to Wardens' Compound for it?"

Fergus, also displeased, spoke up. "I remember when you left Ostagar to enforce the treaties. We were short of horses,

and you were hoping to recruit. We were requisitioning and levying all over the kingdom. No one was exempt."

There were some mutters about that. The requisitions were not popular, but no one wanted to see anyone else let off.

"Did Bann Ceorlic receive and accept the payment, Lady Rosalyn?" asked Anora.

Lady Rosalyn's face creased with resentment. "He did, Your Majesty. But I know he didn't like it."

"If he wished to register a complaint and ask for a judgment, he should have done so at the time of payment or before," Anora said. "As he is not here, the point is moot."

The family was silenced, nursing their injuries, sulking amongst themselves.

There were a number of marriages and births, all of which required attention. Some property quarrels had to be arbitrated, including one that took over an hour, and had the rest of the Landsmeet yawning. Here and there, a lady or two began slipping away, wanting to have the time to make herself splendid for the night's feasting and dancing.

Another tiresome case of right-of-way dragged on and on. Some of the parties' close neighbors grew restive, demanding that they settle their differences, preferably by combat, so everyone could get on with the actually important business of choosing a king. The parties to the dispute, however, thought

nothing as important as the path through the lower water meadow and the offending locked gate, and stood on their ancient rights as lords of Ferelden.

At last it was settled, and an electric thrill of anticipation shivered through the Landsmeet. With all the pieces in place on the chessboard, they could at last undertake the great matter of the royal succession. Bronwyn and Loghain exchanged quick, burning glances. Fergus grinned fiercely, and those of the Cousland-Mac Tir party unconsciously readied themselves for a battle of wills and words and whatever else was necessary for victory. Grand Cleric Muirin whispered a brief prayer, hoping that all might yet be well; hoping that there was anyone listening to her.

Anora was about to begin the proceedings, when a disturbance at the door of the Landsmeet Chamber drew everyone's attention. The seneschal hurried up, and with a quick bow, whispered in Anora's ear. She did not frown, but her face grew hard as marble. She nodded, and gave the man a brief command.

"My lords and ladies," she said, admirably composed. "It appears that we have a pair of notable guests."

Wondering, puzzling, speculating, noble voices rose like chattering magpies. Who was important enough to interrupt the Landsmeet? The great double doors were flung wide. The seneschal announced the visitors.

"Your Majesty, an ambassador from Orlais is here, and with

him a Knight-Divine of the Grand Cathedral. They demand present audience before you and the Landsmeet!"

Thanks to my reviewers: Gene Dark, RakeeshJ4, Nemrut, KnightOfHolyLight, Trishata96, Oleander's One, Nightbrainzz, reality deviant, timunderwood9, anon, Girl-chama, darksky01, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, EmbertoInferno, dragonblade3200, Robbie the Phoenix, Costin, Jyggilag, JackOfBladesX, butterflygrrl, Phygmalion, brrt, Guest, Notnahtanha, Raxiselic, Shakespira, Mike3207, Yamilian, Psyche Sinclair, mille libri, Have Socks. Will Travel, Josie Lange, Herebedragons66, karinfan123, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

Unpleasant as Habren is, I've always been puzzled as to why people are sorry for her prospective husbands. It's true that a nice fellow might find marriage to her very difficult. However, she has little real power of her own. If the Arl of Denerim is a clever man, he would hold all the cards in the relationship. Even more so now, because Habren is in love with Kane.

Chess, of course, is the game of kings. Grateful appreciation to Dorothy Dunnett, and her Lymond Chronicles.

83. Pawn to Queen

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 82: Pawn to Queen

Uninvited, unwelcome, and unintimidated, the Orlesians stalked slowly through the crowds of Ferelden nobles.

"Your Majesty!" the seneschal called out. "Your Graces! My lords, ladies, and gentlemen of the Landsmeet. I present to you Duke Prosper de Montfort, Ambassador of Empress Celene of Orlais, and the Knight-Divine, Ser Chrysagon de la Crue."

Fergus scowled, and moved closer to the throne, unconsciously protective of Anora. For her part, Anora was enraged at the seneschal. How could the man be so weak-kneed as to admit these intruders? But of course, it was the presence of the Knight-Divine. Cleverly, the Orlesians had sent a figure whose religious prestige gave him entrée everywhere.

Bronwyn was not the only noble present whose first impulse was to reach for her sword, but she was one of the angriest. "How did they come here?" she whispered urgently to Loghain. "The Frostback passes are reportedly closed."

Loghain's eyes blazed the eerie hot blue of burning metal.

"What I want to know is why should we allow any Orlesian intriguer to address the Landsmeet!"

Bryland burst out in anger. "How dare they come here to interfere?"

Wulffe did not like it either, but said, "All the same, we'd better hear what they have to say and get it over with. Otherwise, they'll go behind our backs. And we've got to let the Knight-Divine in."

"Yes," Nathaniel agreed, his voice soft. The Orlesians were almost upon them. "We must hear them. Then we'll understand what we're dealing with."

Teagan was as nervous as the rest. He was a faithful son of the Chantry, but did not want to be put in the position of seeming some sort of Orlesian sympathizer. This embassy was clearly playing on people's devotion to make palatable a presence that otherwise would be unacceptable to the Crown and unlikely to be received until the Landsmeet was over.

To Muirin, the coming of the Knight-Divine was as the footsteps of doom. The Divine must have heard of the troubles in Denerim; must have heard of the sacking of the Cathedral by the angry nobles and soldiers. Who knows what else she had been told? She did not know Ser Chrysagon, not even by reputation, which made him an unknown quality. There was so going on that she was shut out from. The

Queen had mentioned Rendon Howe being enthralled by Blood Magic. Why had nobody informed her of this? Loghain would very likely not listen to her. Perhaps Bronwyn could be persuaded that the Chantry had experience with such things...that they could *help*? Her fingers sought her pocket and the tiny packet of now-familiar warmth. Reassured, she made an effort to slow her breathing.

Duke Prosper de Montfort, the ambassador, was something quite exotic indeed: the sort of sight not much seen in these parts for the last thirty years. He was a true *grand seigneur* of Orlais, magnificent as a bird of paradise—or more likely, a fighting cock. The fashionable among the Fereldan nobleman sighed enviously at the sight of the splendid wolf-skin cloak, lined with azure satin and the subtle, many-colored doublet, puffed and slashed and gusseted; cut unlike any doublet in the room. The exquisite white linen of his shirt emerged at color and cuffs like a swan in foam.

He was older than the Templar: perhaps in his fifties. He was very Orlesian in appearance, with his oiled, forked beard and his thick, sensuous, startling pink lips. An air of conscious superiority armored him like the finest dragonbone, for a faint smile curved up irrepressibly as he surveyed the Fereldan great. He leered discreetly at the Queen in what was apparently courtly admiration.

His eyes fixed next on Loghain, and a light appeared in his pale eyes that would have been excitement in a less supercilious man: perhaps it was the joy of the hunter at the sight of his prey. He looked further and saw Bronwyn. He

eyed her up and down and smiled faintly. Bronwyn could not tell if he was expressing compassion, condescension, or contempt. Perhaps a combination. When his smirk broadened at the sight of Scout at her side she wanted to cut him down where he stood.

The Knight-Divine was not so alien. Bronwyn studied the man: tall, dark, not unattractive, perhaps about forty. He was in the impressive armor of a Templar, made more impressive by decoration never seen on that of a mere Knight-Commander. Chrysagon de la Crue, for his part, looked about him with some interest, his eyes seeking the faces about him, searching for and then finding the Grand Cleric, who would have been carefully described to him.

The two men reached the throne and bowed elaborately, with foreign grace.

Anora, drawn up so straight and unyielding that she appeared taller than usual, was absolutely expressionless.

"Greetings, Duke Prosper, and to you, Knight-Divine. Your arrival is an unexpected...pleasure."

It was Duke Prosper who first replied, bowing yet again.

"It is my honor," he said, "to see with my own eyes the renowned Queen Anora, the one that my own Empress has described as a "rose amongst the brambles."

Some uncertain looks amongst the Landsmeet, as the nobles

realized that they had just been described as 'brambles.'

Anora's expression did not alter. "I thank you and your empress for such compliments. However, we are engaged in settling the internal affairs of Ferelden. Perhaps in a day or two, when we are at leisure, the Crown will have time to entertain you appropriately."

Ser Chrysagon spoke up. His Orlesian accent was thick, but not impossible to understand.

"Our business here permits of no delay."

"That is true, alas," said Duke Prosper, with a careless shrug. "Our ship labored through foul winds and hard weather, and we were almost too late to prevent our Fereldan neighbors from committing a most tragic mistake."

Loghain scowled, thinking it over. A ship. He could see how they had arrived now, with no warning at all. They had put far out to sea, away from the usual trade routes, and had come into Denerim Harbor without alerting any of the agents he had stationed along the coast. When the ship arrived, the Knight-Divine had taken the lead, and no one had had the nerve to oppose him. With a gesture, Loghain summoned a captain, and gave quick, whispered orders to find that ship and take the its company into custody, with no exceptions—not even for Templars.

Anora's blue eyes searched the Landsmeet, silencing the gossipers, seeking out those who seemed pleased at the

unexpected presence. There were not many, but there were some. More appeared intimidated and anxious. Slowly, her eyes returned to Duke Prosper, and rested there, contemplating the man.

She had heard of him as a great noble of immense wealth, close to the Empress. However, this would be viewed as a hazardous mission, since he was clearly here to threaten and insult a nation that had no reason to love Orlais. Had he fallen from favor? Or was he trusting to the ancient traditions that protected the person of an ambassador? Was this a mere adventure for him... a mission that would make amusing dinner-time small talk once safe at home? For all she knew, this Duke Prosper was a great gambler.

She let him wait for some time before she spoke. He was a good player and did not shrink or flinch. The same calm smirk was on his lips throughout. Done with him, she let her eyes rest on the Knight-Divine. He also seemed unperturbed, armored in righteousness as well as in silverite.

"You will hardly be surprised," said Anora in a cool, distant voice, "if we are wary of the intentions of Orlesians. Our most recent experiences have been... how shall I put it?... disagreeable. Assassination attempts, however clumsy and incompetent," she sneered slightly, "are hardly the way to win trust from your neighbors. Having failed in numerous schemes, it is clear that you have decided that it is time to try something different. Speak your words, and then you shall be escorted from the Landsmeet Chamber, and your comfort seen to."

"You dare to accuse us of collusion with assassins?" The Knight-Divine scoffed. "We left Orlais unsure if a brutal attack might not have slain the Grand Cleric herself! We have rushed to her assistance, determined to protect her from heretics and maleficar!"

"Grand Cleric," Anora said crisply, addressing the older woman. "Have you been in danger from the Crown of Ferelden?"

"On the contrary, Your Majesty," said Muirin. "I was in danger, as you were, from the plotting of renegade priests. Both of us were drugged, and then rescued by the same good people."

Duke Prosper was soothing and sympathetic. "We quite understand your situation, Your Grace, surrounded as you are by so many swords."

"And where are these 'renegade priests?'" demanded Ser Chrysagon. "I wish to question them."

"In due time, that may be possible," said Muirin, putting a brave face on her defiance.

"Perhaps," Anora said. "However, their crimes were not only against the Grand Cleric, but against the Crown of Ferelden. No doubt something of the disturbance was related by those murderers and bandits who were not killed on the spot during their cowardly attack on the Arl of Denerim's wedding. No doubt they had colorful tales to tell when they returned to

those who had sent them. Incomplete tales, but colorful. At least they had more to tell you than those we captured, and those who were sent to murder the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren. Their tales, alas, were shared only with us... before their executions." She smiled at the two visitors with poisonous sweetness.

"Your Majesty," Loghain growled. "We are wasting time on these... gentlemen. They know what happened, and we know that they know. If they have something to say, let them say it, and then get out." He murmured to Bronwyn, "I've sent an officer to see that the ship is impounded and the crew locked up."

"Sensibly spoken, my lord Teyrn," Anora agreed. She wished it were possible to dismiss the rest of the Landsmeet, and hear the embassy out with only the Council to witness. That could not be done. It would infuriate the Bannorn. She could well guess the Empress' game here. These men had come to threaten them. If the Fereldans were cowed, the Empress won. If the Fereldans defied her, or harmed her ambassadors, she might well still win, and have a suitable reason for war as well.

She addressed the Orlesians, not mincing words. "We expect that the two of you have had considerable time to rehearse your message. Speak then, but speak prudently...and to the point. We are not well-disposed to Orlais at the moment, and are uninterested in delaying tactics."

"Fereldans," sighed Duke Prosper to his companion. "So very

blunt. So lacking in subtlety."

"Watch your tongue, my lord Duke," Anora said coldly. "You are here on sufferance. We have more important matters at hand today than playing games with you. Speak, and we shall judge your words."

"Then I shall begin," said Ser Chrysagon, "for the needs and duties of the Chantries far outweigh those of mere mortal kings and queens. I came here as soon as I heard that the Grand Cleric was in danger. Threatened by maleficar running rampant in the streets. Is it not true that a known blood mage was seen leading the rioters in the Grand Cathedral? An apostate by the name of Jowan, a dangerous creature capable of any evil?"

At the rising murmurs from the Landsmeet, Anora flicked a quelling glance about her, and replied to the Templar.

"I know nothing of a maleficar named Jowan. A Grey Warden of that name saved my life after I was poisoned by an Orlesian bard who had infiltrated amongst my servants. Yes, my servant Erlina—sent to me by the Empress when I was first married—was poisoning me. If the Warden-Commander had not sent Warden Jowan to me, I would have died. Warden Jowan is a gentle and scholarly man, devoted to his duty and courageous in his service. He is indeed a mage, fortunately for me. Calling a mage a maleficar is, of course, a cheap and easy accusation. Do not waste my time. I'm sure you have had plenty of opportunities to fabricate all sorts of "proof" against him."

Offended, the Knight-Divine said, "Do you deny that this Jowan is an apostate?"

"Of course I do," Anora replied calmly. "He is a Grey Warden. Thus, he cannot be an apostate."

"But he is not the only mage openly defying the Chantry, I believe. There are dozens of mages among the soldiers in the army, insufficiently guarded and supervised, wandering at will through the country. The Divine is deeply alarmed at this situation."

"Teyrna Bronwyn," said Anora, "as Warden-Commander, perhaps you could best speak to this matter."

"Gladly, Your Majesty," said Bronwyn, stepping closer to the Templar.

His brows knit in surprise as he saw her eyes. The unnatural color was obviously a sign of some malevolent influence.

Bronwyn saw the expression. While it was unclear to her exactly what the man was thinking, it was certainly not approving. Was it the scar? Was she not dainty enough or painted enough to suit an Orlesian? Well, sod that.

She said, "The mages are bound by ancient treaty with the Grey Wardens to serve against the Blight. It is their duty to fight the darkspawn and heal the wounded, not to sit at their ease in a Circle Tower while good men and women perish. The mages have saved hundreds of lives. Every soldier who

has served at Ostagar knows this. Those here present who have so served—" she flung a gesture out to encompass Loghain, Bryland, Wulffe, and banns like Stronar and Hawke—"—know this. While it might suit Orlais for our soldiers to die in anguish or live crippled, it does not contribute to the security of Ferelden. However, practical concerns aside, the mages are obligated. I presented the treaty, which both the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander accepted as valid. The mages, with their Templars, then traveled to Ostagar to fulfill their obligations. Some of them have subsequently become Wardens, and all have served with honor."

"And by what authority," snarled the Knight-Divine, "did you present those treaties? The Warden-Commander of Orlais has no record of the First Warden appointing you Commander. You appointed yourself."

"I am not answerable to the Warden-Commander of Orlais," Bronwyn shot back. "And I do not intend to bandy words with you about a subject of which you are completely ignorant. We Wardens have secrets, Knight-Divine, and I am not sharing them with you."

"Fair enough," grunted Wulffe, loud enough for the Chamber to hear him. There were answering mutters of assent. Not everyone liked the Grey Wardens, but everyone knew that Chantry had no authority over them.

The Knight-Divine, understanding that this argument carried no weight with the Fereldans, changed his attack.

"This is all a questionable matter, and must be threshed out at the highest level," he granted. "Higher than you, my lady; higher than me. What is not open to question is the outrageous conduct of another Fereldan noble, who declared an apostate free of Chantry supervision. This apostate was no Grey Warden; no Circle mage serving on even the thin pretext of an antiquated, badly-translated treaty. I call this Arl Bryland of Southridge to account for his criminal protection of a female mage, purported to be his mistress! We demand that she be turned over to the Chantry for examination and disposition!"

The Chamber erupted like a volcano. Most of the nobles were outraged. A few were delighted at the scandalous nature of the accusation, especially as the mother of the mage had married the Arl only a few days before. Habren was pink with glee, until she understood clearly that it was her father who was implicated. That made the matter... awkward.

Muirin tried not to drop her head into her hands in despair. Whatever rubbish the escaped assassins had told their employers, it was inevitable that the intelligence would be either outdated or wrong. Bryland would never forgive this insult, and his fellow high nobles were likely to support him.

Bethany's face crumpled. Her mother took her in her arms. Charade put her arm around her shoulders and glared at the Knight-Divine. Hers was not the only angry face.

Leonas Bryland stepped forward, but not alone. His stepsons were on either side, as the arl stood toe to the toe with the Templar.

"I'm Bryland. Of South *Reach*. In Ferelden, a man is held accountable for his words. Sometimes one can make allowances for someone who is *drunk* or a *child*, or too *half-witted* to understand that's he's given insult. Since you're none of those things, I'll have to assume you meant to be insulting. You've defamed an honorable young girl, who happens to be my *stepdaughter*, I hope out of ignorance rather than malice. Bethany Hawke saved my son's life, the day a sneering, masked Orlesian shot him for a bit of sport. She could have stayed safe and hidden, but she came forward, asking for no reward, and used her gifts freely and without stint."

"That she did!" Lady Seria MacCoo declared, her old voice high and fluting. "Saved my life, too!"

"And mine," said Bann Alfstanna, studying the Knight-Divine with a look of grave disappointment.

"Knight-Divine," Anora said, her clear tones cutting over the rest of the noise, "I have confirmed Bethany Hawke's freedom due to her services to the kingdom. There is a precedent, established in King Maric's reign. A mage named Wilhelm was given his freedom for his services in the war against Orlais." The slight emphasis on the last word was subtle, but the implication was clear. "And as to your insulting words... they are unworthy of your office. If you cannot speak civilly, then you will be ejected from the Landsmeet."

Ser Chrysagon glared at her, eyes narrowed. "The Divine will not endure such defiance!"

Murin had had enough. "Your Majesty, may I speak?"

"Of course, Your Grace." Anora was gracious but watchful as the older women turned to the Templar.

"Knight-Divine, it is apparent that in your zeal to protect the Chantry you have come hastily, with faulty information as to what has been transpiring here in Ferelden. Perhaps it would be best if you and I were to meet privately. I can give you a true account of events since the beginning of the Blight, and a factual account of the poisoning of Queen Anora and her subsequent cure. I shall also tell you of how the priests drugged me during their foolish attempt to imprison Queen Anora. Before you offend the nobles of this kingdom beyond hope, I beg you to listen to me."

"An excellent suggestion," Anora said. "Perhaps, Knight-Divine, you should heed Her Grace."

"And then," Bryland said ominously, "My family will expect an apology."

Ser Chrysagon drew himself up, nostrils flared in contempt, but he gave the Grand Cleric a curt nod, and a slight bow to Anora.

"Your Majesty."

The faintest of smiles appeared on Loghain's lips. He caught Duke Prosper's eye, all but saying, "Check."

But Duke Prosper was not about to surrender.

"Of course we wish to hear from the Grand Cleric herself of her sufferings and difficulties. As dutiful sons of the Chantry, we will do everything possible for its greater glory. That, however, is only a part of our mission. While the Knight-Divine occupies himself with the great affairs of the spirit, I am left with mere worldly cares. The Empress, alarmed for her good friends and neighbors in Ferelden, has sent me to offer advice and support in this crucial hour. Ferelden has choices to make, and perhaps some choices are available that you have not considered."

He turned slowly to the nobles, gesturing grandly in what Loghain thought an insufferably Orlesian way.

"The Empress wishes only the best for Ferelden. Is it not a land that would have been part of her Empire, had not the valor and spirit of King Maric taken it on another path? She has heard much of the beauty of Ferelden: of its wild landscapes, of its fertile soil, of its sturdy, independent folk. It is a land of unceasing interest to her. She has met many Fereldans, and respected them for their keen minds and courageous hearts. Only a year ago, the noble Teyrn Cousland visited us, and was much admired by all at Court... even by the Empress herself! It is a particular pleasure to see his son among you today, and judge how well he measures up to his father's example."

That could mean anything—and nothing—but there were fools in the Landsmeet who were pleased by it. Fergus was not

one of them. Bryce Cousland's mission to Orlais had ultimately cost him his life. Bronwyn, reminded of Marjolaine's patronizing words, tasted bile in her mouth.

"Your father was a charming man, and not unskilled; but he played the Game, and lost."

"The Empress," said Duke Prosper, "has heard disturbing rumors. By the will of your brave, martyred young King, you must meet to choose a new ruler today. Queen Anora... so excellent, so wise... alas! ...is now only the Queen Dowager, and power must be vested in new hands. These rumors speak also of how the wind blows from Ferelden, of a new name on the throne—the name of one without royal blood. This name would prove a disaster and a disgrace to the name of Ferelden amongst the family of nations."

"And what name would the Empress prefer?" Fergus growled. "We're all eager to know to know her *favorites*."

Teagan experienced a brief thrill of horror. If Duke Prosper named him as a favorite of the Empress, he would never live down the shame; not until the day he died. Even if all the world forgot, he would still remember.

"Your unfortunate country," Duke Prosper said, voice oily with sympathy, "is poor in all but honor. It is under attack by a monstrous enemy. How can it hope to survive, with the darkspawn lurking under our very feet?"

There was a murmur of concern. Bronwyn's tale of darkspawn

in Amaranthine had frightened a great many people.

The Duke spread his hands in a gesture of open-hearted sincerity. "The Empress is merciful and compassionate. Legions of chevaliers stand ready to protect Ferelden from this ancient evil. The power and wealth of Orlais will render unnecessary your burdensome levies of men and supplies. Come, my friends, shelter yourself under the banner of the Lion of Orlais, and fear no more. Choose who you will as king... or queen," he added carelessly, "but let that choice then pay homage to the Empress as her viceroy in Ferelden! Gold will pour into this country like a river; trained warriors will take the place of hungry, frightened peasants. Retain your domains, retain your fortunes, retain your loyalty to Ferelden! Recognize the sovereignty of the Empress and free yourselves from the wearisome tasks of government. You will find that the yoke of Orlais, after all, is sweet."

Ruffled, furious, bewildered, frightened, contemptuous: there were as many responses as there were people attending the Landsmeet. The noise swirled up in a cacophony of indignation and anxiety. Duke Prosper's smirk widened at the chaos he had unleashed.

Loghain snarled at Duke Prosper, "You've delivered your message. Now get out of my country."

The Orlesian shrugged, "Ah, but it is not 'your' country yet, is it, my friend?"

Noisy as it was, Fergus made himself heard throughout the

room.

"I will *kill* anyone who moves that we offer homage to the Empress! *Anyone!*"

Anora had had enough of the disturbance. She beckoned an officer of her personal guard to her and gave orders. Then she gestured at her seneschal to call the Chamber to order.

"Peace for the Queen's word!" bellowed that leather-lunged functionary.

Other nobles added their shouts of "Peace!" to his. Reluctantly, the Landsmeet subsided into attention.

Anora said, "Duke Prosper, you are a brave man to suggest such things to our face. Our thanks for your trouble. Now, take your rest after your strenuous journey. My guards will see you—and you, Knight-Divine—to your quarters. After the business of the kingdom is settled, the Grand Cleric will have time for a meeting, and we will, in good time, compose a suitable answer for you to present to the Empress."

Enraged, the Knight-Divine's hands moved to his greatsword. "You dare to make us your prisoners?"

Bronwyn, who was closest to him, spoke softly. "Don't touch your sword. Just don't. You do not seem to understand with whom you are dealing. We are not unarmed children; neither are we terrified, starving apostates on the run. If you draw your sword here in the Queen's presence, you will die." She

gave him a quick, humorless smile. "And I may be the one to kill you. The Queen is offering you hospitality. Take it."

Duke Prosper shrugged elaborately. "As for me, I am all gratitude for the Queen's gracious care. *Allons-y*, de la Crue." He put his hand on the other Orlesian's shoulder, reminding him to bow, and the men left the Chamber, under heavy guard.

A voice from the crowd jeered at them. "And you can kiss my noble, hairy Fereldan arse!"

Laughter: some genuine, some a bit forced. Anora, wisely, chose to hear neither the gibe nor the response.

Once the doors closed behind them, Fergus turned to Anora.

"Your Majesty, I think everyone could use a drink."

She smiled at him, and ordered the seneschal to have wine served all around.

It was a welcome break, and the wine was of the best quality. Bronwyn moved to Loghain's side, wanting to vent a little at the unwelcome interruption.

"This is maddening," she hissed. "Just as our chess game is set up, these Orlesians come and knock the pieces helter-skelter!"

Loghain shrugged. "In real life, the pieces are *a/ways* knocked helter-skelter. I'm a fairly good chess player myself, but I've

never been taken in by the metaphor. A good chessplayer is neither automatically a good politician nor a good general."

"Really? Father made me play chess with him all the time. He thought it essential in teaching one to think ahead."

Loghain drank his wine slowly, considering. "I suppose it's good for that, but only just. Life is too complicated to emulate chess." He chuckled, and then explained himself more fully.

"Imagine what a game of chess would be if all the chessmen had their own agendas! If you were not only uncertain about your adversary's men, but also a little uncertain about your own; if your knight could shuffle himself on to a new square on the sly; if your cleric could wheedle your pawns out of their places; and if your pawns, hating you because they *are* pawns, could make away from their appointed squares in order to see you checkmated. You might be the most foresighted of players, and still you might be beaten by your own pawns. You'd be especially likely to be beaten, if you regarded your pieces with contempt. Does that sound hard? It would be. And yet, this imaginary chess I've described is easy compared with the game a man has to play against his fellow men with other fellow men for his instruments. Of course, I've never claimed to be any sort of politician," he admitted, "and sometimes I despair even of being a passable general."

Bronwyn drank her wine, glumly agreeing with him about the impossibility of getting people to do exactly what she wanted. She certainly had not wanted Anora to mention the Tevinter blood mages in front the Landsmeet in the Queen's Speech,

but she had. The Grand Cleric could not possibly have missed that.

Another round of wine was served, and then the nobles were called on to begin deliberations for the Crown. By this time they were feeling rather mellow, and much recovered from the Orlesians' threats.

Once again, Fergus Cousland had precedence, and ascended into the Speaker's Gallery. This presentation and those that followed had been carefully planned out in the preceding days.

"My friends, many here can boast of their share of the blood of Calenhad the Great. The Couslands are the closest kin to the Theirins, through Princess Deirdre Theirin, daughter of King Darlan, sister of King Brandel, and wife of Teyrn Aonghas Cousland. The Rebel Queen, Moira Therin and my grandfather Sarim Cousland were first cousins; King Maric and my father were second cousins. My sister Bronwyn and I are third cousins of the late King Cailan, and thus our claim to the throne is the strongest through the Theirin bloodline."

Calm, confident, he smiled, taking in the room. Everyone seemed to be following, nodding in agreement.

"I was trained from youth to be Teyrn of Highever, and Highever needs its teyrn, ravaged and wounded as it is. I cannot leave it. Instead, I propose for the Crown she whose claim is equal to my own, and who has served her country throughout its present crisis with undaunted courage and resource. Let Bronwyn Cousland the Dragonslayer rule as

Queen in Ferelden, and let her husband, the Hero of River Dane, Loghain Mac Tir, rule beside her!"

A roar of approval and relief. The lords of Highever, Amaranthine, South Reach, and West Hills were all united, which made it largely a settled matter. No one was squawking with outrage, though Teagan Guerrin was torn with guilt and uncertainty. There was his wife, Kaitlyn, dutifully applauding with the rest, and then hesitating when she saw his face. He took her hand and tried to smile reassuringly.

Kane wondered what this would mean for him. His father-in-law had spoken to him of this as something the country needed, and Kane was not secure enough in his holding to openly defy him. And why should he? Who else was claiming the throne? He would cast his two votes—one for Denerim, one of the bannorn of South Docks—for Bronwyn and Loghain. Loghain was a forbidding old wardog, but seemed to know what he was doing. His own father had always thought a lot of Loghain. Bronwyn was a good-looking girl, and had been nothing but civil to him and nice to Faline and Jancey. Habren hated her with a passion. There his wife was, mouth wrinkled like a prune at the idea of Bronwyn as Queen. He smirked. Yes. He would *definitely* be voting for Bronwyn. He would tell Habren it was out of respect for her father, Arl Bryland. That would drive her absolutely mad.

No one was declaring himself or herself in opposition. Some calls of "Question!" were heard, but that was only to be expected.

"Can Grey Wardens hold titles?"

Three different banns piled on with that one. Bryland was ready with the answer.

"While Grey Wardens are generally expected to surrender titles after offering themselves as recruits, there is no law in the entire Fereldan Codex that demands it. No law declares a Grey Warden ineligible to hold any lordship. In this special case, the need for an heir of royal blood trumps the usual traditions."

"Anybody else checked the law?" demanded Bann Fredegunda. "We don't want any mistakes."

Anora immediately called a law clerk forward, bearing a massive tome. The clerk then swore formally before the Grand Cleric that he had also searched through all the edicts, proclamations, rulings, decrees, laws, and statutes of Ferelden, and had found nothing that excluded Grey Wardens from inheriting lands or titles that were theirs by blood right.

"And what are the Grey Wardens going to say about it?" wondered old Bann Pimkin.

"Lord and Ladies of Ferelden," Bronwyn said, prepared for this, too, "the Grey Wardens beyond our borders have not come forward to fight beside us. I am in communication with some of the Grey Warden posts. Only the Warden-Commander of Nevarra has offered me any real assistance whatever, and that was limited to advice and information. His

advice was to expect no help from my brother and sister Wardens, for the First Warden has forbidden it."

A great deal of indignation was expressed. Bronwyn spoke louder.

"It is largely believed that the attack on Ferelden is a mere feint and that the *real* attack will be directed at someplace they regard as more important: namely, their own lands. The First Warden has written to me, but seems unaware that Ferelden is not a province of Orlais. I am given to understand by the Nevarran Warden-Commander that the First Warden is surrounded by Orlesian advisers and secretaries. Therefore, whatever the Grey Wardens in the rest of Ferelden may think, I feel no need to heed it. We must fight the Blight in our lands in our own way, with our own soldiers and our own allies. We can fight it more effectively if Loghain and I have clear authority to do so."

Most people thought her reasoning sound, for who indeed cared what some folk in the Anderfels thought or did? Teagan, however, thought his head would explode if he said nothing.

"And what of Alistair?" he burst out. "You do not hold yourself bound to renounce a title. Why then should Alistair be bound? Should he not also have his rights?"

"Alistair?" was the next question from the nearest banns. "Who's he?"

"Yes," echoed Bann Oswald. "Who is this 'Alistair' fellow?"

Before Teagan could answer, Bronwyn spoke first. "Alistair was told by his guardian Arl Eamon that he was King Maric's bastard. He is a fellow Grey Warden and a very fine warrior."

Loghain fumed in silence, hating that this had been brought up. It would only shame the memory of Maric and worse, of Rowan.

"Really?" Bann Stronar said, feigning surprise. He had been told all about it by Bryland one night when they were in their cups. "Maric had a bastard? It's news to me. Not that it matters. We're hardly going to put a bastard on the throne."

Adam Hawke turned to Carver, and whispered, "Alistair is *King Maric's son?*"

Carver, who had heard bits of gossip, shrugged and smirked. It was rare that he was one-up on Adam. The rest of the Landsmeet was transfixed with delight at the most thrilling piece of gossip to come out of the Landsmeet so far: even better than the bit about Bryland sleeping with his mage stepdaughter, since this appeared to be true.

"Maric didn't acknowledge him?" asked Bann Frandarel. "Why not? Loghain, did Maric tell you about this?"

"No," Loghain forced himself to say. "He never did. The boy resembles Maric. He's a fine lad—saved me from an assassin's blade. I don't believe he made up the story."

"Of course he didn't!" Teagan exploded. "Eamon told me the same thing. The boy's mother was a Redcliffe servant who died in the birthing. King Maric entrusted the boy to Eamon, who raised him."

"But he never told anyone else?" pressed Bann Frandarel.

The Grand Cleric spoke up. "Arl Eamon told me."

A silence fell. Muirin said, "Arl Eamon decided to give Alistair to the Chantry when the boy turned ten. He told me of Alistair's birth, and felt this would be the best thing for him. He did not want me to query the King about the matter, and said that he had consulted with him. Last year, Warden-Commander Duncan conscripted Alistair into the Grey Wardens, shortly before Alistair was due to take his vows as a Templar."

"This all sounds pretty dodgy, " Bann Sighard remarked. "Keeping everything such a secret...hiding the boy away...not providing for him... It's not like Maric. How old is the lad?"

"Twenty, my lord," Bronwyn said.

"Born years after the Queen died," mused Bann Alfstanna. "The King could have married again... or recognized a mistress. Why not acknowledge his son?"

"Something wrong with the mother, I expect," sniped Bann Fredegunda. "An elf, most likely. Maric fancied them. Is that it?"

Teagan could answer that honestly. "I know nothing about the mother, other than that she was a servant. Not even her name."

Nathaniel spoke up, his voice cool and rational. "What difference does it make? Warden Alistair, however satisfactory as a Grey Warden, is hardly a contender for the Crown. Or is he?" He frowned at Teagan. "Is he trying to stand on his rights? He'll need proof of a secret marriage, or a written acknowledgement at the very least."

"No, he doesn't want to be king," Teagan admitted, feeling miserable and out-manuevered. "He wrote and told me so."

"Well," Wulffe jumped in. "There you are. I've met the lad myself, and he's a fine young fellow, just as Bronwyn says. Very handy with a sword. I think we should set the matter aside for now. Once the succession is settled, the new King and Queen can decide what to do for Alistair. Grant him the name Fitzmaric or Fitzroy—give him a manor—set up a new bannorn for him somewhere—or whatever. But *later*."

And that was that. To Teagan's painful disappointment, the issue became a non-issue with a few words and a reference to the future. What had he done? What had Eamon done? His brother had wanted so much to protect Cailan—to protect the Theirin line. He had protected it so thoroughly that it had now ceased to be.

But the Landsmeet was far from over. Teagan was relieved that Bann Babcock had not lost his head, as Teagan had. The

old man called for the question that deeply concerned the Arl of Redcliffe.

"So what about the succession? What if the Girl Warden gets herself killed chasing after dragons and darkspawn?"

"Fergus is my heir-presumptive," Bronwyn said tightly.

"That's all fine and proper," Babcock replied, "But does Fergus become King at that point? Does Loghain goes back to being Teyrn of Gwaren? Don't know that there's anything like 'Queen Dowager' for men," he chuckled. "Of course, Bronwyn's just a mite younger than Loghain. Reckon it's more likely she'd be the one left."

Loghain was quite unamused.

Bryland said, "We believe that granting Loghain the Crown Matrimonial is the best solution. If either of them— Maker forbid! — should be lost, the other will continue to rule."

Teagan felt all the blood rush to his head at the words "Crown Matrimonial."

"Absolutely not!" he shouted. "The throne belongs to the blood of Calenhad! If Bronwyn died, Loghain could marry...*anybody*... and their children could inherit the throne." Desperately, he turned to Fergus, "Are you *certain* you don't want to press your claim?"

"Yes," Fergus shot back. "I am absolutely certain. Here is my

plan, and it can be made part of the succession agreement. Bronwyn and Loghain rule jointly, which can only be lawful if Loghain is granted the Crown Matrimonial. If Bronwyn and Loghain have issue, that child would be the heir-apparent. Their joint issue takes precedence. If Loghain predeceases Bronwyn, any child she bore to a subsequent husband would have to be in the line of succession after a child of both her and Loghain. If there is no child, I—with whatever heirs I ultimately may have by the time both of them are deceased—am declared the heir-presumptive of them both. If my line fails, the succession falls to Queen Anora and hers. After Queen Anora and her heirs, any child of Loghain from a subsequent marriage succeeds. If all that fails, the next closest relations are the Howes, then the Brylands. Bronwyn and Loghain can sign the pact as part of the coronation rite. Does this compromise satisfy you, my lords and ladies?"

This was complicated, and needed repetition and explication.

"Let's see," Wulffe considered. "Bronwyn and Loghain's children, followed by the children Bronwyn might have from another marriage. Then Fergus and his heirs, Then Anora and hers. Then Loghain's children from a later marriage. Then the Howes, followed by the Brylands. I think the Kendalls would be next—"

Kane Kendall perked up at these words. He was in the line of succession. That was nice to know, though putting all those people aside the way he did Aron would be biting off more than he could chew. Still, it was nice to be in the line of succession. Distinguished.

"It doesn't sound bad, Fergus," Wulffe allowed. "Not bad at all. Gives you your due. I don't think any reasonable person could object."

"I object," Teagan declared. "I don't see that Queen Anora and her heirs," he bowed in respectful apology to the dowager on the throne, "have any place in the succession at all. The point is to *preserve* the blood of Calenhad. I absolutely cannot accept that proposal as it stands."

To Anora's chagrin, she found herself knocked out of the succession with casual dispatch after an infuriatingly short debate. On the other hand, most people felt that Loghain's children from a subsequent marriage *should* be treated as heirs, because once he was legally and officially King, how could princes and princesses not have the right of inheritance?

Loghain rolled his eyes. Marrying Bronwyn was one thing: he could not imagine marrying anyone else, ever. He was irritated for Anora's sake, too. Still, all was not lost. It looked like she and Cousland were a certain thing. Cousland's rights would be hers. The sooner they married, the better; and the sooner they produced a child, the happier he would be. Removing Anora from the succession today eventually would be a moot point. Let Teagan think he had had his way in something.

The wrangling went on for some time. Loghain watched it with a jaundiced eye. Banns stood up and spoke their minds, merely to hear themselves talk, or to boast at home later of having taken part in the debate. The light in the Landsmeet

Chamber dimmed, and was supplemented with torches and candles. People grew restless, ready for the feast.

"But what about the Orlesians?" Lady Rosalyn fretted, whispering anxiously to her son, the new Bann Ceorlic. "They don't want Loghain on the throne! Will they declare war? Maybe you should abstain, darling!"

"Can't," Ceorlic the Third whispered back. "Loghain would never forgive it, and he's a lot closer and more dangerous than the Orlesians at the moment. We can send a letter later through Uncle Bresson in the Free Marches, assuring the Empress of our respect."

They were not the only people concerned about Orlais. though no one wanted to be the one to come right out and talk about it. Loghain was concerned about Orlais himself, and decided to lance that boil of anxiety by bringing up improvements to coastal defenses tomorrow.

"Hear me!" cried Anora, fighting to conceal her wounded pride. Fereldans were ungrateful creatures, but perhaps that was simply human nature. "I call for a vote! Does the Landsmeet recognize Loghain Mac Tir and Bronwyn Cousland as King and Queen of Ferelden, ruling jointly?"

"Wait!" shouted Bann Frandarel. "I'm willing to vote aye, but before they're crowned I want their signatures on the succession agreement."

A rumble of assent to that.

Loghain had had enough. "Some clerk can prepare the document and have it ready by tomorrow for the first order of business. Since people will be up late tonight, let's start proceedings at noon. We'll sign the agreement and be crowned on the spot! If you have a candidate you prefer for King, speak up! If you don't... then it's time to vote. We have work to do."

"I agree," Bronwyn declared, making herself heard. "If you're not ready to vote on the main issue now, you never will be. Will you have me? Will you have Loghain? Speak now."

"Yes!" Anora said, determined to maintain control of her last Landsmeet. "Lords and ladies of Ferelden, do you accept the Teyrn and Teyrna of Gwaren as your lawful King and Queen?"

"Aye!" shouted Fergus. Bryland, Howe, and Wulffe joined in, and a rolling thunder of acclamation rang from the floor of the Landsmeet, boiling in a crescendo to the very ceiling. The dogs stood up and barked, rather startled at the noise, though Scout and Amber thought nothing could be more natural than for the other humans to grant dominance to their people.

Carver punched his brother's shoulder. "Adam! Yell louder!" Hawke punched Carver back, grinning, but indulged him with an enthusiastic bellow. Carver still thought Adam's confirmation as bann pretty ghastly, but at least today Adam could do something useful, and vote for Bronwyn.

Reluctantly, haltingly, Teagan added his 'Aye!' to the rest, keeping his grave reservations to himself.

The voting over, the seneschal shouted, "Long life to their Majesties: King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn! Maker guide and preserve them!"

More shouts, more acclaim, plenty of happy backslapping and half-drunken cheers. Bronwyn and Loghain, hand in hand, in armor, stood before the Landsmeet and faced their subjects for the first time. Bronwyn could not decide if she had won a victory over tremendous odds by heroic ability... or simply done something extremely underhanded.

Anora forced a brilliant smile and descended from the dais to make way for her father and stepmother. She had not expected to be swept aside with such brisk dispatch. Of course she was glad for Father, and this was what the country needed, since Cailan had removed Anora herself from contention. It was hurtful, though, and awkward. Theoretically, Bronwyn had the right to toss Anora out of the Queen's apartments immediately, though Anora knew that Bronwyn would do nothing so rude and inconsiderate. Still, Anora must move out, and quickly, in order to avoid talk that she was sulky and repining. There were always the rooms she had had before she married Cailan. She had been happy there, and perhaps might be so again. And then, in two months, there was Highever House...

Loghain took in the Landsmeet with careful scrutiny, assessing who was pleased, who was not so pleased, who was biding his time, who was too dim to do anything but follow along, who would be useful, and who would not. What would Maric think of this? A betrayal? Or a grand, uproarious

joke? Only a fool could imagine the glory of kingship as anything but a burden: the heaviest, the hardest, the most challenging of all.

Within an hour, people were crowding into the Great Hall of the Palace, fighting for their places at the Opening Feast. It was beginning later than the cooks had planned, and those worthies were tearing their hair over their struggles not to burn the dinner. In the end they had waited, and waited, and still had to rush at the last minute.

The guests were a bit frantic, too, for the late session had left little time for dressing and primping. Those who had left early felt vindicated. If they had no vote to cast, why stay? Lady Myrella, Bann Stronar's wife, secure in her embroidered gown and braided hair, felt she had missed little. Loghain and Bronwyn were King and Queen, which is what everyone knew was going to happen; so Myrella felt she had missed only a lot of silly speechifying. Some lords and ladies were delayed by the children left at home who were to come to the party tonight. Some of those had not been given their dinners, their parents expecting them to be fed at the Palace; and the little ones were cranky and fussing.

Not so were the young Brylands and Kendalls, happily reunited with their friend Bevin. Corbus could always talk a servant round into allowing the two boys have a snack, but things had turned out even better than that. The Kendalls girls' governess understood their brother well enough to guess that he would not be pleased if they were made to go hungry. She

had arranged a cheerful tea party late in the afternoon to give the children enough to tide them over until the feast. The last few hours had been long, while the girls waited, dressed in their pretty new gowns, anxiously trying not to crease them. The boys, in their best doublets, had been hideously bored. At least they were not hungry.

Bevin, however, was starving. The cook at the Redcliffe estate was queen of her domain, and allowed no one to sneak in and take food without proper authorization. Nor did she hold with coddling the young—especially mere in-laws who were not even proper Guerrins. Master Bevin had been given his midday meal right enough, served in the dining parlor with the Arl and Arlessa. The cook had been informed by the seneschal that the family was dining out at the Palace, and that only a meal for the servants was needed that night. Bevin, hoping for a piece of bread and butter, was sent away smartly with choice words from the cook ringing in his ears about "greedy boys!" He was quite well-dressed, however, for Arlessa Kaitlyn had given orders to a footman to see to that, at least.

Thinking back to some dull Landsmeets in her own youth, Queen Anora had the servants arrange a special childrens' table for the nobles' sons and daughters under the age of fourteen. There were over twenty of them who were old enough to attend and who were still young enough for the childrens' table: grandly dressed young lords and ladies, some of them aping the manners of their elders with hysterical results.

Faline and Jancey were now officially Lady Faline and Lady Jancey, they discovered. Kane had come quickly to tell them the happy news that he was an arl, and that tomorrow they were all moving into the Arl of Denerim's estate. Because of that, none of them would be staying very late tonight at the feast.

"The Landsmeet starts just after noon tomorrow, with the coronation and all. I have to be there, but if we get up early in the morning, we can be moved over the estate quick as quick."

"We liked it here," Faline said, a bit sadly.

"I know you did, puss," Kane said, kissing the top of her head. "Good people, the arl and his wife. Hospitable. You'll be seeing the boys now and then. But we've got to lay hold of what's ours. You'll like your rooms. I had them fixed them up special for you."

Anora had spared the children the foolishness of the seating based on precedence that was the rule for the adults. Theirs was a low table with cheerful ribbons on the chairs. Bevin took the chair next to Corbus and snatched up a breadroll from the silver basket in front of them, wolfing it down instantly.

The plump little girl in the chair next to him stared at him in astonished disapproval.

"You're supposed to wait for the Grand Cleric's blessing!" she told him.

"I was hungry!"

"It's very wrong," she insisted. She had huge blue eyes and exceptionally white skin. Her red hair was a mass of curls, held in place by a silver circlet around her brow. "Who are you?" she asked. "I don't recollect having seen you before. Is this your first Landsmeet?"

"Yes. Never even been to Denerim before." He popped the last bit of the roll into his mouth, and remembered his manners. "I'm Bevin Merton."

The carroty brows furrowed. "Merton? I don't know that name. I," she told him grandly, "am the Lady Ethelswyth Croombley, sister of Bann Ceorlic of Lothering. My father was the bann there, too. He died. Who's your father? Which bannorn does he rule?"

"My father's dead, too. My sister married Arl Teagan of Redcliffe, so we live with him, now."

"So..." she thought about it. "You're not a *real* lord. Are you sure you're supposed to sit here? This table is for *lords and ladies*."

"Arl Teagan told me to sit here," he said, feeling uneasy and poor-relationish.

Corbus had been talking to the son of Bann Carlin, whom he hadn't seen in over a year. He overheard enough of what the girl had said to interrupt.

"Don't talk rot," he said. "Bevin's our friend, and he's an arl's brother now."

"But he's not *Lord* Bevin," Ethelswyth insisted. "If he's not a lord, he's a commoner."

"Unless he's a knight," another boy pointed out. "Knights and their families aren't commoners."

"They're not lords and ladies," Ethelswyth countered. "And he's too young to be a knight."

Annoyed, Lothar grabbed a breadroll himself and threw it at Ethelswyth. "You talk too much!"

"Don't throw food!" Faline cried, scandalized. "It's wasteful!"

Ethelswyth dodged the breadroll—she had older brothers, after all—and fixed on Faline's lovely new lavender gown. "You're the sister of the Arl of Denerim, aren't you? What accomplishments are you learning? I'm learning crewelwork and dancing and the lap harp and Orlesian."

Faline and Jancey knew this kind of talk from their days at the hated school. "I'm learning the lute and dancing and Orlesian, and I know how to do whitework and silk embroidery and... and bargello."

"But she hates it," Jancey said bluntly. "Canvas is rough and heavy. I don't know any accomplishments yet." She shrugged. "We were learning about herbs and flowers, and that wasn't

so bad, but I hate all sewing. You don't see the Girl Warden messing about with needles. I'd rather learn to ride. Kane said he'd get ponies for us."

"You'll love it!" Ethelswyth enthused. "Riding is the best thing in the world. I have a pony, but I haven't seen him in ages, poor darling. He's in Lothering, and Mother says it's not safe there."

"It'll be safe soon," Corbus said, full of assurance. "The Girl Warden's Queen now. She's our cousin, so Lothar and I know her. We get invited to the Wardens' Compound all the time. She has a suit of red armor that's made from the skin of a dragon she killed."

"I'm glad she wore a pretty dress instead of a dragon skin tonight," Faline said, looking approvingly at Bronwyn in her vivid crimson gown. "I like red. I like her headband, too. Do you think those are real rubies?"

"Of course they are," Lothar said, imagination aflame. "She found them in the dragon's hoard after she killed it. Everybody knows that rubies are drops of dragon's blood turned hard and sparkly."

"Well, I like Queen Anora," said Ethelswyth. "She's so pretty, with her golden hair. And Mother doesn't like Lady Bronwyn because she took our horses. But she left my pony Misty, so she's not all bad—Stop that!" She flailed at Bevin, who was sneaking another breadroll. "Look! There's the Grand Cleric! Once she's says the blessing, we'll get a proper dinner!"

"Yes, thank you, Fionn, put the jewelry away. I'll wear my armor tomorrow. Goodnight." The servant departed, and Bronwyn turned back to Loghain, who was lounging in his dressing gown in the chair by the fire.

The Landsmeet Opening Feast that saw her acclaimed as Queen seemed just another noisy social event to Bronwyn, blending in with all the others she had attended since she arrived in Denerim. She was glad that it was over, and she could get some rest before the strenuous day before them. Then, too, there had been a nervous undercurrent in the celebration, something like what a band of naughty children might feel after stealing sweets, wondering when their mother would notice and punish them.

Bronwyn enjoyed herself for the most part—and was very happy to see her Wardens enjoying themselves—but she was very conscious of the eyes on her and was careful to make the rounds, making clear her gratitude to her supporters, and smoothing ruffled feathers where it seemed advisable. Loghain danced no more than usual, but at least exerted himself to show decent attention to their allies and to the great nobles. It was just as well that he danced only with Bronwyn, for Arlessa Kaitlyn's terror of him was manifest, and if he had danced with any of the nobles' wives, he would have had to dance with her.

"Poor Kaitlyn! If you had claimed her for a dance, she would have fainted dead away, and then Teagan would have rushed forward demanding to know what you did to his wife,"

Bronwyn said, picturing the scene.

Loghain only grunted, rubbing his puppy's ears. Amber was growing rapidly into a fine creature, whom Loghain thought worth more than all the nobles put together. He set her on the floor, and she shook herself, trotting over to the luxurious dog bed. Scout, replete with smoked boar and roast pheasant, was dozing already.

"We won't get much work done tomorrow—" Bronwyn predicted. "We'll mostly be riding around the city, back and forth."

"It was your idea to have the coronation in the Cathedral after all," he reminded her. "Mind you, it's not a bad idea. With that Orlesian jack-in-office making trouble, it's best not to change things too much all at once. And it's true that the people of Denerim expect their puppet show."

"They do. Besides, the Grand Cleric used her little talk with me tonight as an excuse *not* to have a little talk with the Knight-Divine. I know she's not looking forward to that. She wants to know about our adventure with the Tevinter blood mages. Maybe it might not hurt to tell her something about it. It's possible that she can be made to see the difference between a decent young girl like Bethany Hawke and a gang of Tevinter slavers. That would be a gain, certainly. But I'm more concerned about the Orlesians at the moment. Where did Anora have our foreign dignitaries bestowed, anyway?"

"In the North Tower, on different floors. There's a sheer drop

from the windows and a sound guard on the doors. They won't be sneaking about. They'll have a sound guard on them tomorrow at the coronation, too. Anora thought it a good idea to let them witness it. I'm still not sure how I feel about it, but I don't object to rubbing the Orlesians' faces in a bit of Fereldan independence." He rose, and prowled restless about the room. "We'll want to keep a sharp watch tomorrow, ourselves. The guardsmen managed to round up the Orlesians on board the ship, but from all accounts some who came in on the ship slipped away into the city before they could be caught. Maker knows what they're up to."

Bronwyn clicked her tongue in vexation, but decided to put Orlais and its obnoxious people aside for the night. Between the Blight and the Orlesians, how was she to know if she would even be in the world this time next year? So she let fall her robe, and let it pool, crimson, at her feet. That was enough to catch Loghain's notice.

"You're insatiable."

"I suppose I am."

All the same, he did not resist as she took his hand and led him to her large and comfortable bed. He was King of Ferelden, whatever that meant or would mean, and perhaps a celebration was in order.

Thanks to my reviewers: Gene Dark, Juliafied, Robbie the Phoenix, reality deviant, Doom-N-GloomGal, anon,

Oleander's One, RakeeshJ4, Jyggilag, EmbertoInferno, darksky01, KnightOfHolyLight, Nemrut, rowanlobos, sizuka2, Guest, JOdel, Kyren, Mike3207, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Zute, Trishata96, Psyche Sinclair, Yamilian, mille libri, Opethia, truthrowan, JackOfBladesX, Raxiselic, vertigomunchkin, Silverscale, Koden21, Jenna53, Tsu Doh Nimh, Phygmalion, Halm Vendrella, Just Me, le-maru, Tirion, Herebedragons66, Shakespira, almostinsane, Girlchama, Lucien Grey, Chandagnac, and Ms Barrows.

Loghain's speech on chess is paraphrased — stolen, really —from George Eliot's novel Felix Holt, Radical.

In the rules of chess, if a pawn has the luck and perseverance to reach the far side of the board, she may become a Queen.

"Fitz" is a Norman patronymic used in early medieval times to indicate the father's name. Later on it was specifically used for acknowledged bastards. Fitzgerald, Fitzwilliam, Fitzpatrick, etc. Or Fitzroy ("son of the king"). In rare cases, the term indicated a more noteworthy mother: for example. Henry II of England was known as Henry Fitz Empress, since his mother Matilda had once been married to a Holy Roman Emperor; and even after marrying Geoffrey of Anjou she was always referred to as Empress Matilda.

Bargello is a type of needlepoint consisting of upright flat stitches laid in a mathematical pattern to create motifs. Traditionally, bargello was stitched in wool on canvas.

Embroidery done this way is remarkably durable. It is well suited for use on pillows, bedspreads, and upholstery, but not for clothing. The patterns are geometric and can be intricately shaded. All stitches are vertical with stitches going over two or more threads.

84. Crowning Glory

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 84: Crowning Glory

The day of the coronation dawned cold but clear. Very cold, in fact. Frost glittered on windows and icicles dripped from the roofs. The streets were slippery until the sun began to turn the slick spots into dirty puddles. That did not prevent the new Arl of Denerim from making a hasty departure from Bryland House with his wife, sisters, servants, and other impedimenta.

He had talked the seneschal of the Denerim estate into making the desired changes and preparations days before. A certain native charm, plus the strong likelihood of his confirmation made the seneschal wary of opposing or offending him.

Thus the living quarters were nicely made up, and the door to the dungeons in the arl and arlessa's bedchamber was camouflaged with a bookcase and some draperies to keep out the cold drafts from below. Kane wondered a bit about his deceased cousins. A castle had to have dungeons to lock away offenders, but why would the arl and his son want easy access for themselves? Everything he heard about them suggested they were a pair of sick bastards. There were

rumors that the arl's son was a pervert who went trolling in the Alienage for elf women, and had orgies—four or five to a bed—with the elves and his own male friends. Vaughan had been killed by the darkspawn down at Ostagar in the midst of just such an orgy, and it served him right.

The old man was no prize, either. Kane had caught the drift of some of the Council's talk, and it sounded as if Arl Urien was taking coin from the Orlesians. Coin was always a good thing, of course, but the old man was bound to be caught out eventually. He was lucky that the Orlesians got him first. Of course, that was very likely to keep him from talking. Orlesians could not be trusted to keep their end of a bargain, which was enough for Kane. Father had had plenty of stories about what the Orlesians had done to their family during the bad years.

Still, he was a bit worried. Those two high and mighty foreigners who had shown up at the Landsmeet were clearly threatening them. Kane might be new to the Landsmeet, but even he could tell that the promise to leave them alone if they swore homage to the Empress was horseshit. Once you gave the Orlesians something, they'd always want more. It was like their neighbors back at home who kept suing to change the boundary stones.

He really had to stop thinking of the freehold as home. This place was home now. He'd found a good tenant for the farm now, and would get a fifth of the profits, either in coin or in kind. It was a good farm—for those who liked farming—and the tenant should do well from the deal. His father-in-law had

advised him not to sell the farm outright. Over time, a lease like that was worth far more than anything he'd get in a lump sum. Arl Bryland's advice was sound. The man had always done right by him.

All except for saddling him with Habren. She was sulking now, wrapped up in her fabulous furs, her nose red with cold. She'd wanted to sleep late and move in later in the day. Too bad. This was his house, and he was in charge. Besides, there wouldn't be *time* later in the day, with everything going on.

"Kane?" Faline asked timidly, avoiding Habren's hostile glare. "Kane, could we go to the coronation, too? Corbus and Lothar are going."

"Of course you're going," he said. "It's a big event, and you need to be seen. And I've got a surprise for you. Wait right here while I get Habren settled in her apartments, and then I'll show you and Mistress Manda and Kyriel your new rooms." He waved at a footman. "Bring these ladies something warm to drink, quick smart!"

Escorting his bride to their quarters, he felt fierce pleasure in the possession of this place. A real palace, it was. He had found a room on the other side of the entry hall to use as an office. He needed a quiet place to meet with his officers and get his bearings. Urien had used his bedchamber and the sitting room that led into it as his own office; but Urien, of course, had been a widower for years. It looked like he had planned to stow Habren in an upstairs room and visit her when he was in the mood. Kane could not afford to have Habren

tattling to her father right away, and so Habren and he would be together in those handsome apartments on the ground floor. Habren could take charge of them and fix them any way she liked. He would only be sleeping there.

Besides closing off the dungeons, he had made other changes. A new door gave passage between those rooms and the one adjoining. That had been Vaughan's room. Kane had decided to take it over, in order to have a place to retreat to when Habren had her courses or was in a snit. When she was breeding, too, which Maker grant was as soon as possible. Maybe having a bellyful would shut her up. There she was now, going yammer, yammer, yammer...

He'd let her start her primping for the coronation, while he went back to the girls. Imagine their faces when they saw the suite he'd arranged for them, and the new dresses he'd ordered for the coronation!

Anora also moved to new quarters that morning, too; though it was done far more quietly, with little noise and no drama. She had set things in motion the evening before, with a few words to the seneschal and the head housekeeper. The old rooms she occupied before her marriage were perfectly adequate: a sitting room, a bedroom, her maid's little room, and an attached bathing room. All had been scrubbed out and dusted. The dear old bed she ordered made up with some of the embroidered yellow silk bedding and hangings Anora had bought from an Antivan merchant last spring. She was also bringing her intricately inlaid writing desk, also imported from

Antiva. The rooms would not look much like they had five years ago, once Anora was done with them.

Some things in the Queen's Apartments were Crown property and must remain there. Other things were Anora's own: her books, her jewelry, her clothes, the portrait of her mother. Those were going with her. And with them were special treasures and trifles—like Fergus' music box.

Rona, her maid, looked back at the grand rooms, now stripped of anything that said "Anora," and whimpered a little.

"Oh, Your Majesty! It's so sad."

"It's not. Don't talk so," Anora said calmly. "I am very happy at the result of the Landsmeet. I shall enjoy decorating my old rooms. They face northeast, and have a lovely view all the way to the sea. Come along now."

Bronwyn came by the Compound in the midmorning, but found no one stirring but the staff. Evidently everyone was still asleep, or hung over, or both.

"Shall I awaken them, Your Majesty dear?" asked Mistress Rannelly. She mouthed the words "Your Majesty" to herself again and again, bursting with pride.

"No! Maker, no," Bronwyn said, disappointed not to have a chance at a visit. "I'll see them later." Feeling wistful, she took a peek at her old room, and decided that if nothing went

wrong in Ostagar, she would recall Alistair as soon as possible, and make certain that this nice room was his.

What was she going to do with Alistair? He was depending on her to let him remain a Warden. Before she started taking over his life, she must talk to him and find out what he'd really like to do. If he was determined to avoid the duties of a noble, she would have to find a way to appease the Landsmeet. She could, for example, give him a bannorn of the land around the old Warden outpost, which he could will to the Wardens. On the other hand...

On the other hand, he might have had time to think over his options. Teagan was right in one regard: if she could be Queen, Alistair could hold a title, too. If no one was badgering him and humiliating him, and telling him he was nothing and nobody, perhaps he would enjoy a place of his own where he could do as he liked. He would still be expected to serve as a Warden, as Bronwyn was, but surely Wardens were entitled to furloughs and respites, like other soldiers. She had no idea what they did elsewhere. It hardly mattered. They could do things as they liked in Fereldan. Perhaps a place of his own would give Alistair some pleasure, without burdening him with an undue amount of pressure. The important thing, she decided, was that it should be *Alistair's* choice. They should be getting another report from Ostagar today or tomorrow. If things were holding there, why not let him come north and introduce him properly?

"Ha! My Queen! It is so delightful to address you thus."

Bronwyn turned, smiling, to see Zevran's exuberant bow.

"I was wondering if I'd see anyone before the coronation," Bronwyn said. "I don't know what you heard about the Landsmeet session yesterday, but we had some fairly threatening visitors."

"Yes, the bad bad Duke and the most distinguished Knight-Divine. Not all that Divine, from what I can gather."

"Unfortunately, they weren't the only arrivals. We have reason to believe that some of their ship's complement slipped away before they could be interned. Perhaps it would be best to keep our eyes open today during the procession."

"My eyes are at your service, and are always open."

The Writ of Succession was a very splendid document, once the clerks got through with it. It was inscribed in black and red ink, and illuminated with gold and silver. The seneschal read it out in a stentorian voice, slowly enough that everyone could catch the provisions. Bronwyn and Loghain signed it, and it was witnessed by all the high nobles of the kingdom, and then sealed with the royal seal. Anora currently had possession of the royal seal, and passed it on to her father, with a formal curtsy. The sealing wax was red, too, and had gold ribbons appending from it. There was quite a bit of cheering, and then everyone had to be herded outside for the procession to the Cathedral.

Though put together in haste, this was done with decent dispatch. Word had been circulated last night, and so the men-at-arms and servants had arranged the horses and carriages. Everyone moved out in due order and proper regard for precedence. Three companies of Maric's Shield marched with the procession, carefully interspersed with the nobles and their retinues. Zevran, along with some other sharp-eyed agents, watched for disturbances in the crowds lining the way and for marksmen in the upper windows. Bronwyn was glad of her sable cloak over the armor, for it was unpleasantly cold. For that matter, she liked Loghain's crimson-lined bearskin: it contrasted handsomely with the silverite of his armor.

The two Orlesians were put in a carriage with all outward forms of courtesy and kept under guard. If anyone was so stupid as to attack the procession, the guards had orders to kill the Orlesians on the spot. The Knight-Divine was indignant, and Duke Prosper suave and perfectly philosophical. They both quietly agreed that they were somewhat surprised to be alive today and afforded the chance to witness the events for themselves. It was preferable to the boredom of their comfortable prison. Indeed, Duke Prosper found his room rather primitive. The food, however, had been plain but decent: sent up from the feast. If that was the best Ferelden could offer, Prosper wondered a little at the Empress' focus on this poverty-stricken little realm. So far he had seen nothing desirable in it but a few fine women. Queen Anora was lovely and dignified: not incapable of moving in higher circles. It was a great pity that Queen Bronwyn had not been

married to Imperial Prince Florestan, according to plan. She was still young enough to be trained and molded into something better. Instead, she was the prize of that cunning, brutal peasant. A great pity, indeed.

All the knights and gentlewomen and guildsfolk were packed into the back of the Cathedral. The nobles paraded in and took possession of the front: noblemen and noblewomen, their sisters and brothers and in-laws and children and upper servants. The foreign guests were given quite a clear view. Both were manifestly unimpressed with Denerim Cathedral. Then Anora and Fergus entered together and stood at either side of the platform, since they were the highest in rank after the King and Queen.

Bronwyn tried to win a smile from Loghain, but got nothing more than a grunt. If anything, he looked sterner and grimmer than ever. The dogs were not left behind, and were wagging their tails, entranced by the infinite variety of scents. Bronwyn was surprised they could smell anything over the reek of incense. It was rising in great white clouds from the priests' censers. The smell would cling to their furs more or less permanently. The choir was beginning the coronation chant.

"That's us," Loghain said, "Come on."

"Really, Loghain!" Bronwyn whispered, biting back a grin. "We're about to be crowned, not hanged!"

He only scowled at her, so she controlled her amusement,

instead assuming a benign but dignified expression as she marched down the aisle with him, perfectly in step. At the steps of the chancel, the Grand Cleric lifted her hands and began the rite.

"My lords and ladies and honored guests, I here present unto you your undoubted King and Queen, Loghain and Bronwyn. All you who are come here this day, do you swear homage and service to them in the Maker's sight?"

"*Aye!*" was the reply, more fervent from some throats than others. Duke Prosper smiled, faintly amused, trying to get a better look at the nobles' faces, but he was awkwardly placed for that. He could see the Wardens better, and some of them did not swear homage, but as they were Dalish elves and dwarves—and *Wardens*, after all, that was understandable. There was a strikingly beautiful woman amongst them, who said something, but clearly not '*Aye.*' *Most* beautiful and splendidly dressed... the wife of one of the Wardens, he assumed: dark-haired and a bit *farouche* in her manner. The woman looked his way, and Prosper gave her a slight bow.

Muirin then administered the Coronation Oath:

"Do you, Bronwyn Cousland, and do you Loghain Mac Tir, promise and swear to govern the people of Ferelden according to the laws and customs of the kingdom?"

"I do."

"I do."

"Will you to the utmost of your power uphold Law and Justice to be executed in all your judgments?"

"I will."

"I will."

"Will you hold in your heart the Sword of Mercy, which separates true kings from tyrants. in performing Justice in the kingdom?"

Bronwyn glanced at the Grand Cleric, remembering the riddle in the Gauntlet. It had clearly made an impression on the Grand Cleric. Loghain scowled, not recalling that from Maric or Cailan's coronations. What was she on about?

"I will."

"I will."

"Then as you have promised and sworn, so must you perform. May the Maker turn his gaze upon you and uphold this kingdom."

With a nod, she indicated that it was time to kneel. Kneeling in armor was no mean feat, and they had both practiced it, kneeling simultaneously on the left knee. Loghain chuckled silently as his joints creaked a bit.

Most of the Ferelden crown jewels had been lost in the Occupation. Maric had allowed a crown to be made, which he wore only rarely. Rowan, too, had a new consort's crown, but

Loghain had seen her wear it only once. Cailan had had another, more gaudy crown made for himself for his coronation, and of course Anora had worn Rowan's crown.

Bronwyn, however, was not a Queen-Consort, but a Queen-Regnant. Very quietly, in the past month, a crown similar to Maric's had been fashioned for her, by the same discreet jeweler who had made her ruby headband. It was very simple: a plain band of gold that rose at six points to a dragonthorn leaf, a symbol of the resilience of Ferelden.

The matching crowns were presented to the Grand Cleric by Mothers Perpetua and Boann, and Bronwyn was crowned first, and then Loghain.

"Long life to the King and Queen!" shouted the herald.

"Long life to the King and Queen!" echoed the nobles, their spouses, their children, and their sister, cousins, and aunts, and everyone else in the Cathedral with the exceptions of the Orlesians, Lady Rosalyn, who feigned a cold, and Habren Bryland, who was distracted by Kane's perfect golden curls.

The crown was surprisingly heavy. Bronwyn had ordered Fionn to arrange her hair so the crown would sit securely on her head. Despite that, it tugged at stray hairs in a very uncomfortable way.

The new King and Queen took their thrones, and the Grand Cleric spoke:

"Hear now the words of the Prophet Andraste:

"Oh, my Maker, let me heed your words; for you said to me: You will be a shepherd to your people, and their captain. Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead in your light. I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, O Maker, my refuge in times of trouble."

And the choir sang another hymn. It was very pretty, but Bronwyn could not quite make out the words amidst all the flowery ornamentation. Anyway, it was pretty. She glanced over at Loghain, who was massively unmoved by everything. Amber seemed inclined to scratch, but the the slightest motion of Loghain's hand froze her in her tracks. It was very interesting, seeing the nobles and gentry from this vantage. During her wedding, she had had only a glimpse of those attending. Now she could examine them at her leisure, while the choir warbled on and on.

The knights and their ladies were behind the nobles, and they looked quite amiable: quite happy to have Loghain and the Girl Warden on the throne. She knew some of Fergus' knights, of course, and remembered some others from Ostagar. There was Ser Elric Maraigne, one of Cailan's favorites. She had heard he was in Teagan's train now. He had been very devoted to the late king, and doubtless felt some satisfaction in serving his uncle.

How adorable Kane's sisters looked! She did not want to play favorites, but was forced to let her slight smile widen just a bit for them. They looked like a pair of Firstday lilies, clad in

white and red. There were quite a few children here, the kingdom's future. She must make the effort to get to know them. Ah! There were Corbus and Lothar. She smiled at them as well.

There were her Wardens and her other friends, well-placed to the side of the western banns. No long faces, and quite a bit of curiosity. Bronwyn caught a number of eyes, and really was tempted to wink at Morrigan.

It was time for the Rite of Homage, and the nobles formed into a line by order of precedence.

Anora, as Queen Dowager, was first. She had a new gown for the occasion, one of rare changeable silk from the northern tropics, and it shone turquoise green in one light and pale purple in another. She wore pearls in her hair, and had done all she could to look as young, beautiful... and *cheerful* as possible. She had memorized the words of homage and could speak them without Sister Justine's soft prompting.

"I, Anora Mac Tir Theirin, Dowager Queen of Ferelden and Heiress of Gwaren, do become your liege woman of life, limb, and of earthly honor; and faith and truth will I bear unto you, to live and die against your enemies and the enemies of this kingdom. May the Maker witness."

She received the ritual kiss of peace on the cheek from both Bronwyn and her father, and Fergus was next.

"I, Fergus Cousland, Teyrn and Bann of Highever, do become

your liege man..."

It seemed to take forever, and was by far the longest portion of the ceremony. There were over forty lords or ladies of the rank of bann or higher who needed to swear homage. Some of them were pleasanter than others. Some of them *smelled* better than others. Kane Kendalls was very fragrant indeed. Bronwyn did not dare glance over at Loghain. She kept the same expression of pleasant dignity on her face throughout, and her lips grew sore from kissing all the stubbly—or worse, bearded—cheeks. Fergus managed to keep his beard clean: why did Bann Frandarel use that horrible oil on his? Was he trying to poison them? Bann Adam, very considerately, had shaved this morning. The Queen's favor was his.

She could not imagine what Loghain thought of it. For men to greet each other with the kiss of peace was a custom that had gone out of common usage almost two centuries before. Now it was only used for the ceremony of royal homage and by some criminal guilds.

She would not laugh. She would not laugh. Thank the Maker, Bann Alfstanna was next; her cheek clean, smooth, and smelling faintly of apple blossoms.

Once homage was paid and the nobles were back in the places with their families, it was time for the Champion's Challenge. Like Maric and Cailan before him, Loghain stood, drew his sword, and issued it himself. Bronwyn had teased him about wanting to perform this part of the ceremony instead, but knew it would not be politic to press the matter.

Besides, he looked very imposing, uttering the ancient defiance.

"If any person, of what degree soever, high or low, shall deny or gainsay us as to be the right sovereigns as King and Queen of Ferelden, then here stand I as Champion, being ready in person to combat with him; and in this quarrel will adventure my life against his, on what day soever he shall appoint."

Unsurprisingly, no one took up the challenge. They were all quiet as mice, in fact. Was Loghain smirking at the Orlesians? Bronwyn hoped not. It would be very inappropriate, though Loghain would say it was always perfectly appropriate to smirk at Orlesians, when not actually killing them.

Then the choir burst into song, and they all trotted back out of the Cathedral, to be acclaimed by the people of Denerim, which lasted some time. Loghain at length grew impatient, and they mounted their horses or climbed into their carriages or resigned themselves to a cold march, processing back to the Landsmeet Chamber. This time they went by way of the East Dock Bridge to the King's Way, and back to more work, work, work. Remembering those Orlesians currently running loose, she kept her smile in place, but her eyes wandered the crowd and the upper windows of the taller buildings, prepared for an attack. Anyone who was lying in wait on a roof would be half-frozen by now.

Nothing worse befell them than some bunches of holly and sweet pine tossed at their horses' feet; and some very silly professions of love directed at Bronwyn. Others in the crowd

were waving rolled-up parchment at them. Petitions, probably. Bronwyn knew that the Landsmeet was far from over.

Getting through the crowd near the Palace complex was even worse than the crowd by the Cathedral. Loghain was glad when all the parading and gawking and foolish ceremony were done with. The Orlesians were escorted away and locked up again, which gave him considerable satisfaction.

There were some major announcements to get out of the way. The first was the appointment of Dowager Queen Anora as Chancellor of the Realm. This raised a stir. It was an unconventional choice, and a number of people scrutinized Bronwyn narrowly, hoping to see signs of disaffection. But Bronwyn knew her part and herself said something in support of the appointment. She and Loghain were fighting a war. They would be away from Denerim a great deal of the time. They needed someone in the capital to keep the government running smoothly.

And they did have to discuss the Blight. Bronwyn gave a report about the Warden's activities.

"The darkspawn have been contained for the moment in the vicinity of Ostagar, with only minor exceptions. There have been fewer darkspawn seen in the area over the past few months, and Wardens have been patrolling all of Ferelden to find the stragglers. No darkspawn have been found east of the White River, and none have been seen in the Bannorn north of Lothering, with the exception of the renegade

incursion in Amaranthine. Those darkspawn were hunted down and annihilated. I am awaiting reports from the Wardens sent on the western patrols. As the Wardens must recruit and train heavily, the King and I, with the agreement of the Council, have returned the fortress of Soldier's Peak to Warden control."

Naturally, people wanted to know where that was. When given the location—on the north coast between Highever and Amaranthine—interested faded. No one except for Nathaniel Howe and one of the new banns was being deprived of anything, so there was nothing for anyone else to complain of.

"So if it's all going so well," Bann Frandarel asked, "are you sure it's really a Blight? Maybe it's just a minor incursion."

Every man and woman who had fought at Ostagar turned and stared blackly at him.

"Really?" Loghain glared at him. "A 'minor incursion' that killed Cailan. Is that how you would describe it? Thousands of darkspawn don't look so minor when one is actually facing them. What do you say?" he asked, turning to Bronwyn.

"Bann Frandarel, it is unquestionably a Blight. I have seen the Archdemon myself when I was traveling in the Deep Roads. It flew over our heads, in fact. A high dragon, bigger than any other I have seen, and foul with Taint. The darkspawn were obeying its commands. No, I wish I could say otherwise, but it is definitely a Blight."

"But where is it now?" asked Bann Alfstanna, confused. "How can it move so quickly through tunnels, if it's so large? How could it fly over your head? Where was it that you saw it?"

The dwarves present chuckled among themselves at a surfacers' ignorance. Bronwyn gave her Wardens a look and then answered the bann's question.

"Until one has seen the Deep Roads with one's own eyes, it is impossible to imagine their scale. Imagine the Imperial Highway—superstructure and all—under the earth. Now imagine it twice as wide and three times as high, with walls magnificently carved. Imagine huge chambers and caverns leading off from it. Yes, there are tunnels there too, like forest paths. However, I saw the Archdemon in a place called the Dead Trenches, where there was not only a huge complex of high chambers, but a vast chasm plunging to unimaginable depths. The horde was marching there, while the Archdemon bellowed on high."

Impressed, the nobles considered this image. Then Teagan asked a sensible question.

"The Archdemon doesn't have to return to Ostagar to come to the surface, does it?"

"No," Bronwyn confirmed. "It could go anywhere, but there are only certain access points that would be convenient for it. Those are the places the Wardens have been scouting. Aside from Orzammar, which no Archdemon has ever successfully stormed, there are known access points in Amaranthine, in

Gwaren, to the east of Lake Calenhad at the north and the south ends of the lake, at Ostagar, and near West Hill."

Bann Frandarel knew about the Deep Roads access at West Hill, of course. How could he not? His bannorn had been ravaged by the Occupation and the great, disastrous battle there. Everyone knew the story, but it had special meaning for him. The last thing he needed was the Archdemon popping up in his bannorn.

"So we need to be keeping special watch in those places ... is that it?"

"In some more than others," she agreed. "Since there are are so many caves and tunnels at Ostagar, creating easy egress for the Horde, we've kept a large garrison there, along with a unit of Grey Wardens. From Senior Warden Alistair's report, they've had great success in destroying the remaining darkspawn on the surface there, and they've also descended into the Deep Roads to engage them. We're working on charting where the most darkspawn are at the moment, but as I said earlier, we'll know more when the reports from the western patrols arrive."

Then Loghain took over, discussing how the levies would rotate, giving the soldiers regular furloughs. Some would be assigned to support the Warden patrols. Others would be sent north, to garrison duty there. He had a comprehensive defensive strategy he had been working on for years, and now he could make it a reality.

"You all heard that strutting Orlesian yesterday. The Orlesians are waiting for an opportunity to invade. We need to be ready come spring, which means improving our fortifications at the mountain passes and strengthening the Coastlands from the Waking Sea Bannorn to Denerim. I mention the Waking Sea Bannorn for obvious tactical reasons."

Bann Alfstanna straightened proudly, "Your Majesty, it's true. On a clear day, it's possible to see across the Waking Sea from the Virgin Rocks to the Planascene Islands near Kirkwall. No fleet could pass undetected. I can build and man a watchtower, and I shall have it done before the first of Drakonis!"

Loghain gave her a look of approval. "Well said. We will be talking to quite a few of you over the next few days. Ferelden will be ready for the Orlesians, if they dare to come. We'll meet again tomorrow afternoon. The Council," he added grimly, looking at the high nobles, "will meet at midmorning tomorrow."

It was already late, and already cold, and there was another feast awaiting them. They adjourned, and Bronwyn and Loghain marched out of the Chamber together, past the bowing nobles. They did not miss the worried faces.

Bronwyn got the note from the Grand Cleric, requesting a private audience. She smiled to herself. The poor woman was doing her best to delay the awful meeting with the Knight-Divine. Still, why not talk to her?

The Grand Cleric had not been hostile. In fact, she could have been a great deal more difficult and obstructionist had she wished to be. It was natural that she should be loyal to the Chantry and revere the Divine. It did not follow, however, that she wished Orlais to rule in Ferelden. The Chantry was not utterly a puppet of the Empress, or there would have been an Exalted March on Nevarra long ago.

The servants had moved Bronwyn's belongings to the Queen's Apartments during the Landsmeet session. Bronwyn explored them uncertainly. Some of the rooms were known to her, and some were not. This area was a labyrinth, with main corridors and back corridors. One such corridor led from her private sitting room to the Little Audience chamber. Another led to the Family Dining Parlor. She walked from room to room, here and there, moving things to make them more to her taste. Fionn was already in her new room nearby. There were two more rooms for maids or ladies-in-waiting. The bathing room was very nicely arranged, with a boiler something like the contraption at Bann Ceorlic's manor in Lothering. Bronwyn snorted at the sight. Had she known about this, she would have made herself queen earlier.

Bronwyn let Fionn unbuckle her armor, musing over the letter. The presence of the Knight-Divine suggested that the Chantry was looking for any excuse for an Exalted March. She needed to talk to the Grand Cleric in a calm, private, *rational* way, and find out exactly where she stood.

"Fionn, find one of the footmen and have them see if the Grand Cleric is still in the Landsmeet chamber. If she is,

request her presence. I shall meet with her in the Queen's"— she broke off, remember that it was hers now —"in my private sitting room. And once she is here, I wish to be undisturbed."

It would take some time to find the Grand Cleric and then bring her back, so Bronwyn indulged briefly in the bath Fionn had drawn for her, and ordered tea and sandwiches. Maker knew she needed something after all that had gone on today. She smelled like dragonbone and horse sweat, not the most attractive odors individually, and fairly repugnant in combination. Then she threw on a plain green gown and let Fionn paint her freshly clean face and attempt to do something with her hair. The crown had played havoc with it.

"Will you be wearing the crown to the feast tonight, Your Majesty?"

"That's the plan. I shall have to be careful sipping my soup, lest it slip forward and fall into the bowl," Bronwyn shuddered and grinned at the same time, imagining the scene. It would certainly enliven the evening.

She looked much better by the time the Grand Cleric's arrival was announced, and not wanting to keep her waiting, sent Fionn to fetch her tea and went out herself to greet the older woman.

"You must be exhausted after the ceremony, Your Grace," Bronwyn said, somewhat concerned. "Please sit."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I am rather... done in."

"I was about to have some tea. Do join me."

Muirin did not look well: face greyish, skin sagging, dark shadows beneath her eyes. The strain of the situation showed even in her posture.

"Please, Your Grace, tell me what troubles you?"

A faint, rueful laugh. "Your Majesty, that would take more time than you can spare before dinner. However, some specific issues do relate to you. You do understand, I hope, that the Knight-Divine is here, ready to find a pretext for an Exalted March?"

"I do. Just as Duke Prosper has all but declared war. There is little we can do to pacify the Empress, short of abdicating and abasing ourselves before her. However, I am hoping the Knight-Divine can be made to see reason. He is very exercised about poor Bethany Hawke, and yet there is indeed precedent for her status: a precedent that was accepted in the past. No one threatened us because Enchanter Wilhelm was allowed his freedom."

"That was then, and this is now. At the time of the accession of King Maric, the Chantry was very concerned that Ferelden was so antagonized by the actions of the Grand Cleric Bronach that they would break with the Chantry entirely. And frankly, Orlais was sick of war with Ferelden. We are facing a new generation. Furthermore, Wilhelm was a single case. Since the beginning of the Blight, the Knight-Divine might well see a pattern of defiance and heedless pandering to the

ages."

Bronwyn bit back the reflexive defensiveness, and thought about it objectively. "All right, let's talk about the situation in the country and the numbers we're discussing. At the time of the Bloomingtide Battle there was a grand total of seven mages with the army. I will explain in greater detail later why that simply was not enough. I recruited thirty-three more mages for the army, and conscripted two at the Circle for the Wardens. Between those recruited for the army and the Dalish I now have five Warden mages, plus one auxiliary, for it is the tradition of the Wardens to accept help where it can be found. One of them is a Dalish elf. Jowan, a former Circle mage, I came across when he was defending a group of refugees from a darkspawn attack. One of my Circle mages recognized him and conscripted him on the spot—" she laughed at the memory "—telling him that if she had to be a Warden, he did too. I don't doubt, based on her story and on that of the late Wynne, that he had committed a serious crime at the Circle, but I strongly feel it is better for him to expiate his guilt by defending this country. Of the Circle mages who went to Orzammar, three became Wardens, and five have died in battle. Wynne was killed here in Denerim..."

Here she could not help but shoot a grave look at the Grand Cleric.

"...which leaves, as I reckon it, thirty-two mages either with the human forces in the army, or in the Wardens. I do not have exact figures of the numbers of the Dalish, so let us set them aside for the moment. So, that gives up thirty-two

ages operating largely without Templar supervision. The number no doubt seems alarmingly large to you. To me it is frighteningly small."

Muirin looked at her, considering. "'Frighteningly' small?"

"Your Grace, we are not going to vanquish the Blight without the mages. *It can't be done.* I like to think of myself as a pretty impressive warrior, but I can't tell you the number of times that the mages have saved my life, or enabled me to kill an enemy. Without mages in the Wardens, I would be dead now. Anders saved my life and my face in the Dead Trenches."

"Tell me."

So Bronwyn told her the gruesome story of how she first met a Broodmother; how she had recklessly charged the monster, how she had imagined she might be able to communicate, how she had suffered for her overconfidence.

"My face was literally hanging off my skull, and I was blind. The creature's poison changed the very color of my eyes. My friends finished off the creature—with some effort—and Anders then worked wonders on me. Generally his healing does not leave noticeable scars, but you can see from this—" she leaned forward so that Muirin could get a better look at the long white scar "—how bad the original wound was. Blind as I was, I believed that I would have to order Alistair to take command, and leave me behind while he continued the mission—"

"Leave you alone?"

Bronwyn smiled ruefully at the Grand Cleric's horror. "Blind, I would have been useless, and there was no time to lose. We had to find a Paragon to break the deadlock in the dwarven Assembly. Anders talked us all into a few hours rest while his healing could work. I owe him my life. That is the most striking example of all he has done for us, but far from the only time he has saved my life. As for Tara, the other Circle mage, I will trust you with the information that she was another member of the party that found the Urn. Yes. She, too, a *mage*, was found worthy to stand before the Urn. And without her, Cullen would not have been the only one who perished in the battle against the false Andraste. We could not have killed the dragon without her. We simply could not have. Our weapons had next to no effect on the creature. I told you at the conclave of how we killed the beast. Without Tara, it would not have happened."

The tea came. Bronwyn smiled faintly, noticing that Fionn had been listening in slack-jawed awe to the story. Bronwyn poured for her guest, and urged her to take a sandwich or some of the cakes.

"It's a long time until dinner," she urged. "and I'm ravenous myself."

To her surprise, Muirin found she had an appetite, which had not been the case for several days. The tea, too, was very soothing. "You are loyal to your Wardens, Your Majesty."

"We're loyal to each other. Really, I genuinely have had no serious problems with the mages among us. I've heard some theories that what makes us Wardens makes it impossible for a mage to turn into an abomination, but I don't know if that's true or not. However, I want to get back to the need for mages. It's been a long time since mages were needed. Really, you have to go back over two hundred years, after the failures of the first Exalted Marches against the qunaris, to the time when the Divine Hortensia III unleashed the mages. They pushed the Qunaris off the continent with the exception of that one base they have left. And the last time before that, mages were used liberally in the Fourth Blight. Battlemagic saves lives. It's easy to forget it over the generations, but it genuinely makes all the difference, and I am convinced that it's what's going to make all the difference now."

Muirin sipped her tea, thinking it over. Now and then, various priests and Templars petitioned for the Rite of Tranquility to be used on all mages. Muirin had been in Val Royeaux the last time such a proposal was put forward. During the Occupation, Meghren had a mage close in his councils, and there was suspicion that that the mage had controlled him, or at least had enthralled him into his worst excesses. A number supported the idea of getting rid of the mages altogether. Revered Mother Polymnia, the Starkhaven priest who sponsored the petition, had argued for Tranquility's essential mercy.

"Your Perfection, I beseech you to imagine a world in which no Templar need slay a hapless mage. All alike, whether

voluntarily rendered or capture apostate, would be dealt with the same gentle care. No longer would they be tormented by these unnatural powers or by demons of the Fade. Instead, those so afflicted can be released into society, unable to cause harm; the more skilled of them can be given useful employment. Grant all Templars the authority to use the Rite whenever they find a mage..."

Muirin had met Mother Polymnia, and believed her absolutely sincere in her conviction that hers was the humane and loving solution to the ages-old problem. Her opponents were not always so sincere. Some had rationally pointed out that giving Templars so much independent power might lead to corruption, and innocents being made Tranquil who were not actually mages. It was hard to prove such allegations, but there were rumored instances in which inconvenient heirs or heiresses had been just so disposed of. Others thought it not kind, but cruel to deprive mages, already deprived of freedom and family, of even the power to feel love or repentance.

There were others, of course, who did not want to dismantle the Circles, as they gave employment and promotion to a large force of Templars who otherwise would be living rough as they combed Thedas for apostates. There was corruption in Circles, too: opportunities to extort coin from the anxious families of mages; opportunities to skim coin from the importation of lyrium; even opportunities to smuggle lyrium themselves. There was also an outcry from prominent families of incarcerated mages, who were horrified and repulsed by the Rite.

The actual reason, however, that the Divine would not assent to mass Tranquility was a hard-headed, practical one. As a politically-savvy Orlesian priest had finally explained to Muirin, you never knew when you were going to need the mages. Both the Blights and the Qunari invasion were cited as examples. And then as Mother Nicolette pointed out, it would be absolute madness to in effect disarm themselves with the Tevinter Imperium still in existence. It was a bastion of magical power, which would no doubt be delighted at the opportunity of enslaving Thedas all over again.

"We have to leave a few of them alive and unimpaired to keep the training going, ma chère. The best of the best. That is the point of the Harrowing, n'est-ce pas? The skilled but less magically powerful can be made Tranquil and productive. The weak—or the troublemakers—fail their Harrowings. Yes, yes. The failed Harrowings are important as examples, you see... how did the poet put it? "Pour encourager les autres.""

And so, in essence, Bronwyn was making the same argument that Mother Nicolette had, all those years ago. Mages were useful. Mages had pushed back dangerous enemies in the past, and that was exactly what Bronwyn wanted to do now. The precedents were good. It would give her something to work with, when she faced the Knight-Divine.

She was concerned, however, that Bronwyn had made so many good mage friends—like the passionately Libertarian Warden Anders— that she was unable to perceive the real

danger magic posed. That point must be addressed.

"Your Majesty, Queen Anora mentioned a blood mage coven. What can you tell me about that? Do they still present a danger? How can the Chantry help you with that?"

Bronwyn had a refusal on the tip of her tongue, and then thought that if nothing else, the late Ser Friden ought to have his name cleared of the charge of desertion.

"It was a rather unpleasant adventure. I must ask you to keep this quiet, as it could start a panic, but even more importantly, it would prevent us from capturing more of the band. The mother of a Templar, Ser Friden, approached us. Her son had disappeared after telling her that he was on the trail of a band of blood mages. After waiting in vain to hear from him, she approached his officer with the information, but he dismissed her, and told her that Ser Friden had been noted down as a suspected deserter. It seemed a sad case to me, though to be honest I didn't know what we were really going to find at the time. Some of my mages insisted that the that this 'band of blood mages' must be harmless apostates, and begged me to be merciful."

She looked longingly at another sandwich. Cucumber. Lovely. The sooner she finished the story, the sooner she could gobble it up.

"However, we found the hideaway on the ground floor of the building to which Ser Friden's mother directed us, and very shortly it became apparent that these were very dangerous

people. Leading down into the cellars we encountered a Tevinter blood mage—"

Muirin gasped in alarm, but Bronwyn gestured for her to wait. "—a Tevinter blood mage leading a unit of first-rate mercenaries: well-armed, well-fed, and well-equipped. That was only the beginning. There were at least a dozen mages with a force of three dozen mercenaries and some mabarisi. They occupied a large, well-built underground complex that extended from a warehouse in the southwestern portion of South Docks all the way to the waterfront. There were fine living quarters, storerooms, treasure chambers, a drinking hall, a kitchen, a dining hall, a council chamber," she paused, "and a vile and shocking chapel in which the Tevinters were performing what one of my mages told me were Death Magic rituals. We found remains there of men tortured and flayed. Perhaps Ser Friden was among them, but nothing was identifiable. I do think it probable that he was killed by the Tevinters."

"Maker have mercy!"

"We had a very perilous fight from room to room and corridor to corridor. There Warden Jowan saved me—and others—from a blood mage attack. We managed to take one mercenary prisoner, and also a young Tevinter mage. We discovered that the Tevinters had been operating out of the complex for fifteen years."

"How could they not be noticed?"

"We found phylacteries there. Many phylacteries. We destroyed those of living people. Some of the local priests and Templars were bespelled to look the other way, we believe. Others were phylacteries of very prominent people. Anora mentioned Arl Howe for a reason. There were others. The Tevinters found it very diverting, tricking the savages. The mercenary is still in Fort Drakon and has yielded quite a bit of information. The Tevinter mage was questioned and then executed, as he was simply too dangerous to keep alive. He had quite a tale to tell: the Tevinters for years have lured newcomers of any race to the city to the site and then either killed them to enhance their magic—or shipped them off to Tevinter for sale. The head of this coven was in league with the Tevinter who worked with Rendon Howe to enslave the Highever Alienage. It was a very large operation. We have been reading their records and letters with great interest. They've made fortunes off the Fereldan slave trade, and the dislocation due to the Blight was a windfall for them. The Tevinters send a new ship every spring and every autumn. We found their ship in the harbor, and liberated the slaves on board. They were all so pitifully enthralled that they had no real memory of what had befallen them. We gave them coin, and referred the women and children among them to the Chantry for further assistance."

Muirin set down her teacup and rubbed her face, deeply distressed. "Under our noses! Fifteen years?"

"Fifteen years. The Tevinter was very smug about telling us how profitable the investment was. He even tried to bribe

Loghain to let him go. He looked upon us as primitives... or as mere livestock. They have been collecting blood from all sorts of people in all sorts of ways, and I warned Anora about the laundry and her monthlies. The Tevinters paid servants to sell the soiled bandages to them. They may even have obtain some of the priests' blood in that way."

"I am overjoyed that such things are no longer an issue for me," Murin confessed with frank relief. "Did they... enthrall other important figures?"

"King Cailan's phylactery was incomplete. As was my father's."

"Blessed Andraste!"

Bronwyn took a moment to enjoy the cucumber sandwich, and let the Grand Cleric process the story. Of course it would be deeply alarming to her. It was still deeply alarming to Bronwyn. She poured Muirin another cup of tea.

"I was so naive when I first found myself in command of the Wardens. I thought the other nations would unite against the common threat. I thought people would understand the danger and put their selfish concerns aside. Not so. Not so at all. The Tevinters care only for the gold and power they can wring from us. The Orlesians have done nothing but take advantage of our situation and throw obstacles in our way. They are clearly intent on winning back their lost "province," whether by politics, or by default, when a ravaged, vacant territory to their east is left ripe for colonization. No other nation of Thedas has

stepped forward to assist us. As I told the Landsmeet, everyone expects the real blow to be struck elsewhere. We have only our allies by treaty: mages, Dalish, and dwarves; and the Dalish and dwarves I only won by great effort. Technically, all the mages of Thedas should be marching to our aid, but alas, we only have thirty-odd Fereldan mages."

"Teyrn Loghain seems bent on have a mage in every company in the army."

"It would be tremendously useful at any time, simply for the value of their healing skills. When fighting the darkspawn, it's beyond price. You heard at the Landsmeet of the darkspawn incursion in Amaranthine, of course."

The Grand Cleric shuddered. "Led by a *talking* darkspawn."

"Led by a talking, thinking, immensely powerful darkspawn *mage*." She gave the appalled Muirin a nod to punctuate her words. "Darkspawn have tremendous magical power. I would estimate that one out of every dozen or so darkspawn we meet is a mage of some sort."

"Really?" Muirin's eyes widened, taking in the implications. "I had no idea. That is... shocking."

"Cullen, as you can imagine, was a tremendous help in dealing with such creatures. Without him, it's left to our mages to disable the magic users. The darkspawn use crude but powerful spells. How some come to have magic is a puzzle to me, since genlocks are clearly offspring of dwarven women,

and dwarves have no connection with the Fade and no magic. Hurlocks are spawned from human women—"

"Oh, Bronwyn!" Murin cried in distress. "Those wretched, unhappy creatures! Do you truly think they no longer are aware of their plight?" She collected herself, and said, "I beg your pardon, Your Majesty..."

"Call me Bronwyn, while we're in private," Bronwyn waved that off. "It's hard to say, though at the very least, I believe they must have forgotten their prior existence. Certainly it is a great mercy to end those monstrous lives. One thing about them that puzzles me is that shrieks, or more properly sharlocks, which are the offspring of elves, do not have magic users among them. They do not even use weapons, relying on their fangs and claws and their powers of stealth. Curious. At any rate, what I am attempting to make clear, Your Grace, is that we are facing a vast and powerful enemy that wields a great deal of dangerous magic. Removing magic from the army is tantamount to disarming us. We *cannot* win without proper weapons."

"I was concerned that you did not understand the dangers of magic. Allowing mages such a great deal of freedom..." Muirin waved her hand. "I don't understand why you're doing this."

"Because I think it's time to offer the mages *something* for good behavior. *Some* sort of incentive. Now, they have nothing. When an apostate is caught, there is no reason for them not to fight to the death. No reason not to give way to the demons. Why not? If they surrender they are subject to

summary execution. If they are young enough—say under twenty-five, they are subject to imprisonment for life at the best, or to being stripped of their humanity and turned into empty tools or playthings. Or they are still executed if they are unsatisfactory in some way. Now I do believe that the Circles are certainly vital institutions of training and discipline. My late friend Wynne believed that as well. I simply think that mages who prove themselves exemplary—like Bethany, like Wynne—should be rewarded sufficiently to make other mages wish to emulate them. We've doing the same things for ages, and nothing has changed. Maybe it's time to try something different."

"You are still deeply grieved at the fate of Senior Enchanter Wynne."

Bronwyn was not going to budge on this.

"I sent her to Denerim and failed to protect her. I will always feel partly to blame. Let us imagine, Your Grace, that one day, when Mother Boann was returning from some deed of charity, she was attacked by four heavily-armed thugs. They smashed her skull and killed her. They looted her body and stripped her naked. To hide their deed they burnt her like rubbish, and then pounded the remains to a smooth powder and used it to fertilize their gardens. How exactly would you feel about those men?"

"I do not deny that there was great wrong-doing there. Abuse of power, certainly, and perhaps a cynical choice of timing."

"Cynical, certainly," Bronwyn agreed. "We've now got quite a bit out of Mother Heloise. They knew all about Wynne. They wanted to dispose of her just before the attack, and leave no time to find another Healer. They intended the deaths of many others. My point is that the Templars had the right of summary execution. Wynne—who had not committed any violent acts— had no right of appeal to some Chantry official who could have investigated her claim to be under the command of the Grey Wardens."

Muirin thought this over. "The Templars would not appreciate any limitation of their powers."

"Maybe they don't have enough to do. How many Templars are in Ferelden, anyway?"

Murin hesitated, but decided this was not an unreasonable question. "At last count, five hundred twenty-eight."

"Maker! I realize that the Templars for some unknown reason feel that the Blight is none of their concern, but can you imagine how useful even a small force of Templars would be? If they could be got to concentrate on the darkspawn mages they would be formidable indeed!" Bronwyn sighed. "I really miss Cullen. He was a wonderful young man."

Muirin took a little spice cake, and ate it thoughtfully. Bronwyn was not so hopelessly hostile to the Chantry as she had feared. There were ways—honorable, helpful ways— to win her confidence and favor. There were contributions the Chantry could make to restore their prestige. The great

obstacle was the Knight-Divine. What were his orders?

"If the Templars are to help in the struggle against the Blight, they must know where to go," she remarked. "Where is the Archdemon now?"

"Your Grace," said Bronwyn. "That is exactly what I am trying to find out." She glanced out of the darkening skies. "Look at the time! It is growing late. I am sorry to end our very interesting conversation, but I must prepare for tonight. You as well. It is too late and too cold for you to return to the Cathedral. Could I not have a servant show you to a room here for you to rest and refresh yourself in?"

"That would be very much appreciated, my dear Bronwyn." She rose carefully to her feet, still rather weary. "Perhaps we can speak again soon, after I have my interview with Ser Chrysagon."

"I believe we must," agreed Bronwyn rising herself. She was about to ring for Fionn when the Grand Cleric asked a final question. It had plagued her ever since the conclave.

"My dear Bronwyn, when you were in the Temple of Andraste, what did the shade of your father say to you?"

The memory, as always, was vivid. Bronwyn bit her lip, knocked off-balance by the direct question.

"I have never told anyone," she said. "I do not know whether what I saw was my father or some other Sending." She was

seized with a painful longing to tell the story to this old friend of her mother—someone she had known since childhood. Simply talking about her father was a comfort. In fact, there was no one else she *could* tell.

"This must be under the seal of the confessional," she said.

The Grand Cleric was suddenly concerned, almost wishing she had not asked. "Of course. On my vows as a priest."

Bronwyn swallowed. "The being looked and sounded exactly like my father. He spoke... lovingly."

Muirin nodded, encouraging her to go on.

"But he also was concerned for me. He said, '*I must warn you, my child: you reach for an earthly crown, but the kingdom you must conquer is the kingdom within. That is the one realm that will be yours in eternity.*'"

"Bronwyn!" cried the Grand Cleric. She reached for Bronwyn's hand and clutched it in her own aged one. "What have you done?"

"What was necessary," Bronwyn shot back. "The country needs Loghain as its King. It was the only way."

"No!" Muirin contradicted her fiercely. "It was the *easy* way! Oh, my dear..."

"What's done cannot be undone," Bronwyn told her. "And you

must never divulge this."

"Nor shall I. But I shall pray for you."

Thanks to my reviewers: EmbertoInferno, reality deviant, KnightOfHolyLight, Herebedragons66, Nemrut, Gene Dark, Josie Lange, Trishata96, Verpine, Costin, Sizuka2, Teutonic Knight 92, darksky01, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Mike3207, Kyren, Reyvatiel Songstress, MsBarrows, RajkeeshJ4, Oleander's One, Robbie the Phoenix, JackOfBladesX, Kodan21, Phygmalion, Spoit0, Jenna53, Halm Vendrella, almostinsane, Silverscale, Kempe, Shakespira, Zute, AD Lewis, mille libri, Have Socks. Will Travel, ricca, Psyche Sinclair, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

In Voltaire's satire Candide, for failing to successfully engage the enemy, an admiral is executed "to encourage the others" (Fr. "pour encourager les autres"). Of course, this is ironic: the intention is actually to terrorize the man's peers.

In a conversation with Sebastian Vael in DA2, we learn there is indeed a Rite of Confession in the Chantry, and that brothers and sisters as well as priests are empowered to take confession. Nothing is said about Templars, so I presume they cannot.

85. Winter Dreams

Victory at Ostagar:

Chapter 85: Winter Dreams

Bronwyn could not leave the coronation feast as early as she would have liked. She had just been crowned Queen of Ferelden, and was expected to celebrate. Indeed, she needed to celebrate for two, since Loghain was at his sardonic worst. Nobody expected anything else of him, however. It was Bronwyn who had to attempt to be charming and gracious; who had to dance with the nobles and chat with the noblewomen. All things considered, she would rather round up her Wardens and go back to the Compound.

But her Wardens were apparently having a wonderful time: dancing, drinking, flirting, talking. The elves stuck together but were not entirely segregated, since most of the other Wardens were perfectly friendly with them. Maeve was trying to teach Cathair to dance, and Toliver had actually persuaded Danith to dance with him. There were a few guests who clutched their pearls and their purses as if expecting the elves to rob them at knife-point, but they were mostly older. Bronwyn made a point of staring hard at those who had a problem with her Wardens.

While her conversation with the Grand Cleric had been fruitful, she regretted her impulsive revelation. Now the Grand Cleric believed that Bronwyn had disobeyed a command straight from the Maker not to pursue the throne, but to take heed instead to her own spiritual welfare. Apparently, while Bronwyn was favored by the Maker, there was only so much favor she could count on, and she might have lost future protection by her rebelliousness. Personally, Bronwyn found it hard to believe that the Maker cared. Perhaps Andraste did—a little—but that too was doubtful. The Prophet had left her mark on the place where her Ashes were kept, but was that her living will, or simply a last footprint before she departed for the Maker's side? Bronwyn knew she was vain, but she was not so vain as to expect the Maker to step in and save so much as a cat from the darkspawn, much less Bronwyn herself.

The Grand Cleric also apparently believed that Bronwyn had been manipulated into a loveless political union. Bronwyn's personal feelings for Loghain were none of the Grand Cleric's business. Besides, half the time Bronwyn herself hardly knew what those feelings were. Loghain could be magnificent one moment and completely impossible the next.

There were Anders and Morrigan, in their finery, dancing the Nevarran. They certainly made a handsome couple. Quinn was hanging back shyly, his eyes huge at the splendor of the scene. Carver was dancing with his cousin Charade, and Niall was dancing with Aveline. She was as tall as he was, and pretended to dislike dancing, but was quite good at it, really.

Aveline had surprised them all by wearing a gown to the Landsmeet feasts: a becoming gown of brown velvet and yellow brocade. The Compound's storeroom had been short of fine clothing for women, but Bronwyn had commissioned Rannelly to remedy that.

Where was Zevran? Not dancing. There he was, prowling the edges of the hall, a predatory smile on his lips, apparently unarmed but actually carrying at least a dozen weapons. He was taking threats to her safety seriously.

The dogs were happily socializing with one another. There was an occasional scrap over treats, but no one questioned Scout's authority. The mabari puppies were romping adorably, chasing after someone's lapdog.

Her crown was so heavy. No heavier than a helmet, of course, but it did not fit as well, and the weight was pressing into her temples. Taking it off would be considered a terrible omen, so that was out of the question.

She hoped that the Grand Cleric would speak with the Knight-Divine soon. They would then know whether he was a honorable man of the clergy, capable of understanding rational arguments; or if he was a well-briefed political operative with a set agenda. If the latter, then it would be wise to keep him here as long as possible, so that their enemies had less time to plan. Not that his absence would stop them. They would undoubtedly arrange two or three contingency plans. However, not even the Orlesian Empire had the resources to ready an army and a fleet for an invasion

unless they were planning to launch it. For all the Empress knew, the Landsmeet was sending her their submission as of this moment. Besides, Orlais was already embroiled in a war with Nevarra. Could the Orlesians really handle a two-front war?

Could Ferelden? That hit closer to home. If the darkspawn and the Orlesians attacked simultaneously, it was doubtful that Ferelden could withstand them, unless Ferelden was very, very clever and very, very lucky.

"Your Majesty, may I have the honor?"

Nathaniel was before her, bowing. The minstrels were playing the introduction to a contredanse called Osen's Lament. Why not? Loghain was in deep conversation with Bann Frandarel, sketching out a map on the tablecloth with a knife and spilled wine. She smiled, gave Nathaniel her hand, and let him lead to the top of the set: twenty couples, men facing the women. The slow drumbeat signaled the dance proper, and they began.

Dancing brought a genuine smile to her lips: especially dancing with Nathaniel, who danced so well and whose height made him a far better partner for her than most. They came forward, right palms touching, and circled each other. Maintaining eye contact at this point was demanded by etiquette. At the next measure, they broke apart and ducked under the raised arms of the other couples, weaving in and out, the rest of the lines following.

The tune was old and melancholy, but very beautiful for all that. Bronwyn glimpsed Morrigan, further down the set, being taught the steps by Niall. Bronwyn wondered if she realized that the song was the plaint of Osen, grieving over the loss of his beloved Flemeth, as he waited on the shore for Bann Conobar's men, whom he knew were coming to kill him.

The line of dancers swayed with the drumbeat: their garments crimson and azure, viridian and gold; velvet and satin and the finest white linen. Bronwyn swayed with it, caught up in the delight of the moment, happy to be dancing and not planning to kill monsters or outwit foreigners. Bethany Hawke, lovely in velvet and pearls, was gazing at Nathaniel, her mild dark eyes slipping away from her own partner. The girl saw Bronwyn notice her, and she blushed and looked elsewhere. Bronwyn smiled archly. Nathaniel clearly had an admirer.

They made their twisting way back the top of the set, and circled each other once more. Nathaniel said, "You seem to dance none the worse for the weight of a crown, Your Majesty."

If he could be formal, so could she. "I'm glad you think so, *Arl* Nathaniel. It's actually quite the struggle to keep it on my head."

He granted her a wry laugh. "And after less than day! That hardly bodes well."

She laughed, too, and was about to answer him, when a blare of trumpets drowned her words.

The minstrels broke off their playing in a ragged discord. The dancers murmured and grumbled.

The seneschal bellowed, "My lords, ladies, and gentlemen! I have been advised that the temperature is dropping dangerously, and that the streets are icing over. For your safety, the King has ordered the suspension of festivities for the evening!"

A buzz of disappointment rose up, punctuated by some alarm. Families drew together, and there were calls for servants and cloaks.

Some of the servants had gone to Anora, who was directing them to spread out strips of carpeting on the palace steps going down to the inner courtyard. Bronwyn felt a moment's vexation that they had not come to her first. Of course Anora had been queen here for five years and knew all the procedures. And Bronwyn had been dancing.

Loghain had his hand out, a peremptory gesture for her to join him. Bronwyn gave Nathaniel a smile and a shrug.

"Duty calls, my lord."

"Always, it would seem," he agreed, rather grimly.

Bronwyn took her place beside Loghain, and the disgruntled guests bowed to them. Then they left the hall together, once again in perfect step.

"The party's over, Ketil!" shouted Idunn.

"Speak for yourself!" her fellow Warden shot back, moving among the emptying tables to finish off anything left in wine goblets or ale tankards. The dwarf stuffed some sugar cakes into his pockets, and snatched up a meaty muttonbone like a mace, gnawing at it between gulps of liquor.

The nobleman dancing with Aveline was not ready to go home either. "What a stormcrow our new King is! I thought marriage would have mellowed him!"

"It's just possible," Aveline suggested, "that the weather really has turned bad. It would be a shame if horses—and people—broke their legs on the ice."

"True, I suppose... but Loghain's a gloomy sort all the same. My thanks for your company, Lady Warden. A pleasure."

The parties of the Arls of South Reach and of Denerim collected by the doors. Adam and Carver, concerned for their family, joined them there.

Habren shrieked in horror at Kane's suggestion that they simply walk to the estate—which was practically next door. Carver and Adam caught each other's eye, knowing that they must not wince visibly. They were in complete agreement about their new stepsister, the Arlessa of Denerim.

"My shoes! My gown!" Habren shrilled. "You can walk if you like, but I simply can't! I can't!"

"The ladies aren't shod for this weather," Bryland remarked to his son-in-law, not unreasonably. "Loghain's right to send us home. I had a look outside. It's getting bad. The servants are having to help the older people down the steps."

"Don't worry, Mother," Adam soothed. "We'll get you into your carriage."

"If it's really bad," Kane said, thinking it over, "perhaps you and your party should spend the night with us. The King will expect us early tomorrow, anyway."

"That's kindly thought of, but I think we'll manage. Women like to sleep in their own beds. And I believe Bann Adam is riding back to Highever House with Teyrn Fergus."

Kane caught the brief looks of horror on the faces of Arlessa Leandra, her daughter, and her niece at the idea of spending a night under Habren's roof. The days before the move had been hard on them. Or rather, Habren had.

Really, he could hardly wait himself to sleep in his own bed, for that matter. The place was his...all his. And the girls would be safe up in their nice little nest.

"Come on, then. Jancey, hold tight to me..."

Tipsy and laughing, the Wardens held their own procession through the palace, on their way to the side door that led to the little courtyard facing the Wardens' Compound. Ketil was

not the only one to gather up some treats "for later."

"Where's Carver?" asked Quinn, looking around.

"Helping his mother and sister," said Aveline. "He'll be along later."

The guard at the door wanted to talk to them, "One of the servants came looking for your earlier, Wardens, but there were orders not to let anyone but royal messengers into the Hall during the feast. I tried to back the girl up, but my officer wasn't having it. The girl said there was a Warden come from the west, and not in the best shape, either."

Anders blinked, trying to force back the fog of wine. "Well, then, I'd better have a look at...him? Her?"

"Dunno, Warden. The girl went back without saying much more. You might want a word with the Queen when you can. I warned old Gowan she wouldn't be best pleased, but he said the King's orders were the ones he's following."

Morrigan smirked, hoping she would see Bronwyn's face when she heard of this. If her friend imagined she was on some sort of equal footing with that masterful Loghain, she was manifestly mistaken. Morrigan had tried to warn her, but she had not listened.

The guard opened the door for them, and the bitter wind rushed down the corridor, blowing up under the skirts of those women who had worn them. Aveline sighed, accepting it as

the price of vanity.

"Ooo!" Maeve squealed. "Bloody cold, that wind! Move it, Anders!"

A faint mist was drizzling down, half ice, half water, and it froze on contact with the cobblestones of the courtyard. Idunn, pushing impatiently past the rest, felt her legs shoot out from under her, and she was promptly sitting on the ice, her skirts over her head. Ketil bawled with laughter, pointing at her, Maeve, indignant on Idunn's behalf, shoved him, and he slid out as if on skates before sprawling face-down. The mutton-bone skittered away into the shadows, and Ketil wailed his bereavement.

More laughter. The Wardens tried to cling to the stone wall for balance, but that, too, was iced over. Aveline, not tipsy like the others, was making slow, dogged progress. Quinn drew his boot knives, and dug them into the wall, one hand, and then the other.

"It's like climbing a mountain," he said cheerfully. "Only sideways."

The elves, more sure-footed, fared better. Danith moved gracefully into the lead, glad she had not worn foolish shemlen skirts. Zevran smirked as he caught up with her, shifting his balance from one soft boot to the other. It was actually rather diverting.

The door to the Compound opened, spilling light onto the

courtyard. It shone like a mirror, the filth concealed by a layer of crystal.

"There you are, at last," cried Mistress Rannelly, popping out to scold them. "And not before time! Come along now, and no nonsense!"

Morrigan fumed, wishing she could shape-shift. She could, but it would force her to leave her splendid gown behind her. She must find some sort of way to enchant her new clothes in the same way as her battle robes. And the shutters to her room were probably fastened. It was the courtyard, or nothing.

Niall was faring better than some, digging the end of his staff into the ice and then sliding along. At least he did until he tried to help Idunn up, and they both went down. Ketil did not even try to get up, but scrambled along on his hands and knees, cursing.

The servants poured boiling water on the steps to the Compound and melted some of the ice. The Wardens were hauled up by eager hands from within.

"Such a night!" Rannelly fretted. "Go inside and get some hot cider in you. You, too, Warden Anders dear, and then we need you to look to poor Aeron. He's in a bad way, but I'm sure you can fix him up in a trice."

"I'll come, too," Niall promised, slipping on the threshold. "Here, Idunn. Did you bruise your knee?"

"It's nothing," that sturdy warrior insisted. "Where's the cider?"

Rannelly, concerned about Aeron, and feeling he would need some quiet, had put him to bed in one of the empty rooms in the Tower, rather than in the Junior Wardens' quarters.

Anders and Niall hardly recognized him. Nor did Danith. As the Senior Warden by rank present, she felt she ought to find out what had brought him here and how he had been hurt.

She paused at the sight. His nose was black with frostbite, and he was bald, his scalp scarred pink and angry.

Anders did not say what he thought on seeing him. He had already slipped into his Healer's demeanor.

"Let's have a look at you. Not the weather I'd choose for trying to head-butt the walls of Denerim. Yes, I can save your nose. Let's have a look at your feet and fingers..."

Lights glowed blue from the mages' hands, and Aeron began to look at least a little more human.

"Your Majesty, Warden Anders says you need to come, and if you don't he'll come get you himself!" Fionn declared, scandalized and excited. "Warden Danith, too!"

Loghain glanced up under his eyebrows. "Did someone not make it back to the Wardens' lair in one piece?"

"No, Your Majesty, it's a Warden who came all the way from

West Hill. He's had a fearsome time, and he's froze near to death!"

Bronwyn began pulling on her boots. "Who is it?"

"I don't know him, Your Majesty. The name's something like Ayrón or Iron. Nobody I've met, but he's a Warden, sure enough."

"Aeron," Bronwyn said to Loghain. "He was in Astrid's unit."

Loghain turned to the maid. "Tell the footmen and stablemen to spread cinders on the path to the Wardens' Compound. We'll be going back and forth quite a bit, it seems. Carpet, wood chips... anything. Go now."

Fionn disappeared. Bronwyn looked at him, in the process of throwing on her plain green gown and her sable cloak. Loghain was reaching for a leather doublet.

"We?"

"Of course. I promise to put my hands over my ears if I think I might overhear any Warden *secrets*."

It was a nastily cold walk, though the cinders gave them purchase on the ice. The dogs cheerfully trotted along, charmed at the prospect of a walk. A detail of six guardsmen escorted them, clanking in front and in back, and then up into the Warden's Compound. For a moment, Bronwyn wished she still lived there. It smelled wonderful: all spiced cider and well-

soaped woodwork. Danith met them at the door, gave Loghain a slight look askance, and then started talking. Up they circled; up the spiral staircase inside the tower. The guards were left to wait in the warm kitchen.

"He brought a letter from Tara," Danith told them. "He passed your courier to her on his way, but decided to let the man continue with your letter, with his message that they had met and exchanged words. By that time he was on foot. He was sent alone because they could buy but one horse, and he could ride well. Anders and Niall have been doing their best to heal his injuries."

The tower was quiet. Danith lowered her voice. "Anders grew impatient with all of us crowding around him, and ordered anyone who could be not be of use to go to bed."

Anders looked up as they entered, his face grim. Niall, washing his hands, turned , gave Bronwyn a hesitant smile, and then blushed and bowed at the sight of Loghain. Maeve, sitting on the other side of the bed with a bowl of broth in her hands, did not try to get up, but nodded with nervous respect. Loghain gestured, and the dogs found a corner and sat quietly. Amber whimpered in sympathy, sensing that the human in the bed was badly hurt.

Aeron's head and hands were swathed in bandages. The sharp scent of healing herbs lay on the air like a warm and heavy hand. The wounded Warden was propped up on pillows, and rolled his head to greet the new arrivals. He managed a weak smile.

"Commander... Teyrn Loghain. I'll try to lie at attention."

Anders scowled at them, clearly worried that they were going to make a childish scene because a wounded man did not know their current titles. Loghain rolled his eyes at the mage. Anders was not daunted.

"Frostbite, exhaustion, two neglected wounds, and some badly-healed burns. I wanted him to get some sleep, but he insisted that he needed to make his report to you."

Niall found a chair and set it beside the bed. He looked around for something for Loghain, who waved the mage's fussing aside, shaking his head.

"I'll stand back here out of the way." He leaned back against the wall and folded his arms, watching and listening.

Bronwyn sat, trying not to show how appalled she was by Aeron's appearance. She recalled a thick head of black hair, but in between the bandages she saw only pink skin. The blankets were rolled up to give access to his feet. His face, too, was scarred, and he seemed to have taken a bad wound across his chest and shoulder.

Bronwyn softened her voice to the appropriate tone for a sick room. "Aeron, I'm glad to see you alive and in such good hands. How are your companions? Are Tara and Astrid all right?"

His eyes glittered in the candlelight. Clearly, he wanted to

unburden himself before he could settle down for the rest he desperately needed.

"Tara's fine, last I saw her. There's a letter for you on the chest over there. Sorry there's blood on it, but you should be able to read most of it. Astrid took a bad wound, but she was doing better the day I left. That was the twenty-fifth. Maybe she's able to fight again."

"What happened?" That did not sound good at all.

"I'd better tell you in order. Tara's got a lot of the story in the letter, and the places we saw darkspawn marked on the map. We came up alongside the Lake and met some darkspawn here and there. Nothing much on the surface. We joined up with the Legion at Lake Belannas. I was in Astrid's party, so we went below. A little south of the northern access point we had a nasty fight with a big force of darkspawn. We lost Liam there, and I got my head set ablaze." He snorted, a little bitterly. "'Friendly fire,' I guess you'd call it. Velanna's aim wasn't exactly perfect. Anyway it was bad, and we needed some rest afterward. We met up with Tara and her people at that little inn by the lake, and then they went down to the Deep Roads for their turn. They came across more darkspawn. All heading west, Tara said to say. Bad fight. Shook up some our people." He paused, chuckling.

"Oh! Forgot to tell you. We've got some golems now. Bloody useful in a scrap. One of them can talk. Found it south of Lake Calenhad. Goes by the name of Shale."

Bronwyn glanced at Anders, wondering if Aeron's mind was wandering. Anders shrugged.

Maeve gave Aeron another spoonful of broth, and the man went on, eager to have his say.

"So we made it to West Hill and they put us up in the old fortress. It's better than the Deep Roads, I can tell you! I was a bit out of it... still in a lot of pain, so I slept until Tara's people and the Legion arrived. I heard about that fight later... Anyway, the next morning, we found that Walther and Griffith had bailed on us. Gone."

"They *deserted*?" Bronwyn hissed. "*Deserted*?"

"I don't know what else to call it." Aeron glanced uneasily at Loghain. "Sigrun told me that those fights in the Deep Roads scared them shitless. Tara and Astrid said to keep it quiet..."

"I won't say a word," Loghain muttered, meanly pleased to know that even the mighty Grey Wardens sometimes had feet of clay.

"Astrid said that if they ran, they weren't fit to be Wardens anyway, and Brosca hoped they'd freeze. Tara felt bad, though. They were her own men, and they ran out on her like that. Bastards. We don't know where they went."

"We do," grunted Anders. "Griffith, anyway. He got as far as Amaranthine and was killed by the darkspawn."

"Walther, too, probably," Bronwyn considered, remembering the flayed, unidentifiable body on the Architect's rack, and the compassion she had wasted on it.

"Serves them right," Aeron snarled. "Bastards. Anyway, we put some feelers out in the Deep Roads around there. Astrid wanted to go east and look into some old thaigs she'd heard of. I wasn't fit to go—bloody lucky for me!—but Astrid took some Wardens and the Legion and was really chuffed at first to find a thaig untouched by the darkspawn... locked barrier door and all. Nobody had been there in ages. Except it wasn't quite empty. First they found some golems. Then they found out that some inventors were doing experiments back in the day, and they made a flesh golem out of casteless dwarves. It woke up and went crazy. Killed a bunch of the Legion and the scholar that Astrid was friends with. She killed the thing, but then the head came loose, ran around on these little legs, and jumped Astrid. And then..." he grimaced. "It bit her hand off."

"*Maker!*" The word burst, in unison, from every human in the room. Danith winced in sympathy.

"She survived, though," Bronwyn said anxiously.

Anders was making furious grimaces, as if it were his fault that he could not be in two places at once. Niall blew out a breath. Maeve dabbed up the broth that had spilled onto her lap. Loghain stood motionless, back in the shadows. The man seemed to have his wits about him, wounded and sick or not. It was still a lot to take in.

"Yeah," Aeron agreed. "She's a tough one. She's having the Legion smith forge her some things for her left hand... it was the left hand she lost. They can make her some weapons that she can strap on to the stump. Can make a sort of hand, too, for everyday. She's been out of it for the fighting or exploring, though, you can imagine. Tara wanted to send a letter and they didn't have any horses at the fort, believe it or not. Said the Bann took them with him to Denerim. Couldn't find any at the freeholds, either. Tara went all up and down the coast. Said she thought people were lying to her, hiding their stock. Maybe so. Saw some other things, too. And then we had a bad storm and couldn't go anywhere for days..."

His eyelids drooped briefly. "Had a chess tournament... nearly killed that bitch Velanna..." He roused himself. "Right. Then the weather broke and a farmer sold us a nag and I set off. Tara couldn't leave with Astrid in the shape she was, and anyway she says she can only ride if somebody's riding with her. Catriona and I were the only candidates, and I got the short straw. No use telling you about the road, except that I didn't run into any darkspawn. Thank the Maker. And I fucking killed the bandits that shot my horse. Tobe the chandler found me in the snow and let me ride in his wagon. He'll sit at the right hand of the Maker someday." His face went slack, and he swallowed. "That's all, I guess."

Anders said, "Maeve, spoon him up a bit more broth, and then I'll give him a sleeping potion. He's done enough talking for tonight." He whispered to Bronwyn, "When he's slept himself out, I think a dose of the improved Joining potion will be just

the thing for him."

Bronwyn leaned over the wounded man, and put a gentle hand on his arm. "You've done brilliantly. Sleep now."

She took Tara's thick letter from the chest, gave a quick nod to her Wardens, and left the room with Loghain.

"I've got to read the letter now," she murmured to him, as they descended the stairs. "Maybe she needs help."

Loghain was fixed on the bits of useful intelligence he had gleaned from the rambling report. Most of all, he wanted to get his hands on the elf's map and focus on the places where darkspawn had been seen on the surface. A very good thought, that. Tara was a sensible little girl—just the sort of mage Ferelden needed. Golems? He remembered a golem from the Rebellion that belonged to the mage named Wilhelm. A very useful tool.

Rannelly brought them more candles, and they sat together at the long table in the Wardens' Hall. Bronwyn popped the seal and carefully opened the parchment. The dark-brown bloodstains had not soaked all the way through, fortunately. She pulled the map out and smoothed it carefully, laying it on the table. Loghain drew a candlestick closer and scowled over the markings. There were circles with numbers in them, carefully marked in red ink. There were annotations along the side of the parchment, giving more dates and details.

Bronwyn took up the letter. Most of it was legible.

Dear Bronwyn,

Is that too informal? I don't know how to write military-style.

Greetings, Commander:

Is that better? Anyway, we've made it to West Hill, and it's a complete dump. The seneschal didn't even want to let Astrid in, but she told him off. The housekeeper is nice, though.

I'm writing this for both Astrid and me. Astrid got hurt a few days ago, but she's doing better. She's determined to be back fighting the darkspawn. I wish I could do more for her. I hate being such a pathetic Healer. The next time I see Wynne, I going to beg for remedial lessons!

Bronwyn sighed. Of course Tara could not know that Wynne was dead... murdered by Templars.

You'll see from the map that we went due west when we left Ostagar. We trailed some darkspawn for quite a ways, and we found them where it's marked on the map. We turned north then, because we were worried about meeting the dwarves on time. As it was, we were a little late. Anyway, it worked out. Do you remember that golem control rod I bought at disgusting Sulcher Village? I found the golem! There's a lot to tell about that, but I'd rather tell you in person than put it in a letter. So anyway, I found the golem and it worked! Better yet, Shale isn't just a thing. It can think and fight on its own. It agrees that the darkspawn need to be

killed, and so it said that it had nothing better to do than to come along with us. And it doesn't eat anything and never needs to sleep, so it's a terrific guard on watch at night! I think it likes Astrid better than me, because it's very snarky and calls me "the Cute Little Mage," but it always calls Astrid "the Warden."

Shale's made all the difference against the darkspawn...

"That's interesting," Bronwyn said to Loghain. "She says that the golem they found can think and act on its own and joined them voluntarily. I've never heard of such a thing. Incredibly useful, though."

She read on, through the awkward misunderstanding at Redcliffe; through the march upcountry. Tara was very precise about the darkspawn seen by both parties. Here and there were sentences that sounded more like Astrid, and which Bronwyn suspected were dictated by her. More details emerged about their battles, and Bronwyn pointed out the sites on the map. Loghain grew impatient with her, and asked that she read aloud. Liam's death, their difficulties with Velanna, their curiosity about the condition of the fortress were recounted. Tara told of the desertions and apologized for her shortcomings as a leader.

It never occurred to me that anyone would desert. They know they can't stop being Wardens just because it's hard and scary. We decided that our mission here was more important than chasing a pair of cowards, but I don't know if you'll

agree. We don't know where they went, though Catriona thought they might go east, since the passes west are blocked. There's a fishing village not far from West Hill, but nobody admitted to seeing Walther or Griffith, and nobody said they'd hired a boat. In good weather, it's not hard to sail to Kirkwall, I'm told, but a lot of the boats are in dry dock for the winter.

Then came the horrific events at Amgarrak Thaig.

"They'd been lucky up to that point," Loghain commented, after hearing the full story. "And if the dwarves get a clean, uncontested thaig out it, they'll consider the losses justified. The golems, too, are quite the prize."

Bronwyn did not think it was lucky to lose three Wardens, but continued reading without bothering to argue with him.

Astrid is determined not to let the loss of a hand slow her down. While the smith forged her prosthetics, I took some parties out, partly to look for some horses, and partly just to scout. I went up and down the coast and I noticed quite a few Templars traveling on the Imperial Highway. That made me curious. When weather permits I'll do a little more looking into where they're going.

Astrid wants to explore the Amgarrak Road farther in each direction. She wants to know if it's possible to get to a thaig called Kal'Hirol to the east. It's probably under Amaranthine. It was very important to the smith caste. She also wants to

know if it's possible to make it to Orzammar by the Deep Roads from here in West Hill. We thought we should let you know what we discovered so far. You may want us to join you in Denerim. Astrid thinks it would be great if we could get there—or as close as possible—by the Deep Roads, because then we wouldn't have to worry about the weather!

So that's what we've been up to. We're sad about Liam and about Astrid's hand, and mad about the desertions. We hope things have been going better for you. We heard that the Queen was cured, so that's all good.

The next few words were scratched out, but they appeared to say

"Well, take care of yourself,

Love,

Tara,"

Bronwyn grinned, imagining Astrid telling Tara that she could not close an official report with the word "Love." Underneath the scratching was

"Respectfully submitted this twenty-fifth of Umbralis.

Senior Warden Astrid Aeducan

Senior Mage Warden Tara Surana"

Loghain was still thinking over the possibility of traveling by way of the Deep Roads. He had done it himself years before. Would it be possible to enter them—perhaps at that mine, perhaps at Vigil's Keep, and find this Kal'Hirof? His imagination was fired by the idea of a secret way under the surface, safe from Orlesian spies, impervious to weather. If he could get troops and supplies all the way to Orzammar this winter, it was not at all far that to Gherlen's Halt. It might be a way to foil the potential invasion. How populated with darkspawn was this Amgarrak Road?

"You have a map of the Deep Roads, of course," he remarked to Bronwyn

"Several. You're referring to the Deep Roads under Ferelden, I daresay. It would be something if we could clear out the darkspawn from here to West Hill."

"Or farther."

"I think," Tara said, "that we've discovered the site of the Aeonar Prison. Right there up on that bluff."

They were south of West Hill, walking along the shores of the Bay of Dane. Rocky islets dotted the grey sea. Further north on the horizon, purple smudges hinted at the larger islands of the Waking Sea Bannorn. In sheltered places, the tidewater was frozen. They were not far north of where the Imperial Highway blended into the somewhat cruder Fereldan North Road. It was cold, but not as cold as the past few days,

and Tara had wanted for some time to have another look at this place. Six Wardens could deal with anything aside from the cold. Astrid had taken the golems with her on her own mission in the Deep Roads, since Tara had hoped to be somewhat inconspicuous while she prowled this strip of coastline.

"Really?" Brosca asked. "The Aeonar Prison? What's that?"

Surprised at the blank faces, Tara realized that there was no reason for dwarves or Dalish to know anything about it. Catriona frowned, drawing out a thread of memory.

"It's a prison for mages, isn't it?"

"Clever girl," Tara praised her. "That's the story, anyway. It's what they threaten bad little mage boys and girls with, along with Tranquility and summary execution. I was expecting a tower, but maybe this makes more sense."

Gesturing at the crumbling, squat stone structure only visible from the shore, she told them what she knew.

"Back in the bad old days of the Tevinter Imperium, the Tevinters occupied what's now Ferelden, just like they occupied everywhere else. They had two sites dedicated to magical experimentation at the extreme ends of the Imperial Highway. The southern one was the fortress of Ostagar, which looks out over the Kocari Wilds. That was the farthest reach of the Imperium, and the fortress was there to hold back the southern barbarians. At the other end of the Imperial

Highway, so the story went, was the Aeonar, though the exact location is supposedly a secret known only to a handful of Templars. Not long after the death of Andraste, some of her disciples stormed the Aeonar and slaughtered all the magisters there. According to legend, it was an eerily silent massacre, for the invaders burst in while all but one of the mages was in the Fade. The attack permanently damaged the Veil and left the place haunted, so eventually the Chantry decided to use it as a prison. They say they hold accused and maleficarum and apostates there, but it doesn't look all that big to me."

Brosca nodded, sizing up the remains of the little fortress. A pillar slanted over an entryway thick with sere and frozen weeds. To a casual observer, it looked like a ruin, but the road leading up to it seemed to be in good condition. Not far from it was a sturdy stone cottage and a good-sized stable and barn.

"It's set into a pretty big hill, so probably the prison bits are underground. Maybe it's a lot bigger than it looks from outside. Why a prison? I thought your Templars just killed mages they didn't like."

"So they do. But I think it wasn't always that way. From what I can gather, the Templars' powers and authority have grown over time. I don't know who they keep there now. The only person I've ever heard of who was sent there wasn't a mage at all."

They were still curious, and she wondered if Jowan would

forgive her if she tattled, but then decided that Jowan could get stuffed. She was the one who had suffered the most from his crazy attempt at romance.

"Jowan—yes, *our* Jowan—and I were at the Circle together, and one day he takes me aside and tells me he's fallen madly in love. That wouldn't be so bad, but the girl he's fallen for is a Chantry initiate..."

Catriona gasped. The rest still looked blank. Irritated, Tara explained.

"That's like an apprentice priest. Her family gave her to the Chantry, and that meant that once she took her vows she could never marry or... do anything else like that...especially with a mage."

"No sex?" Brosca squawked. "That's... unhealthy!"

"It is unnatural and spiritually harmful to repress such urges," agreed Darach.

"That's what the Chantry says, though. No sex ever," Tara confirmed. "If Jowan had gone looking for the worst girl in all Thedas to fall in love with, he couldn't have done better. And then he introduced me to her, and it seemed that she felt the same about him, though I don't know if she was sincere, or if she was just looking for a man to rescue her from the Chantry. Anyhow, that's when Jowan got his brilliant idea about escaping the Circle. Lily told him that the Knight-Commander was planning to make him Tranquil. To this day, I

don't know if that was true, or something Lily made up to give him a push."

Sigrun looked at her shrewdly. "He wanted you to help them bust out of there."

"What else?"

"This is really interesting and all," grumbled Jukka, "but it's Stone-sodding cold out here. Maybe the people in that house or hut or whatever—" he pointed at the stone cottage "—maybe they'll let us sit by the fire."

Tara grinned, hugging her cloak tighter. Going into that particular cottage was just what she wanted to do. If this place really was the Aeonar, then there would be lookouts and guards posted at the cottage.

"Sure. Come on. Anyway the long and short of it was that we didn't take enough time to plan well, because Jowan thought they were coming for him the next day. We got caught and only Jowan managed to get away. The Knight-Commander told Lily she was going to the Aeonar, and I got locked up in the dungeons. Why didn't they send *me* to the Aeonar?" She shuddered, and not only because of the wind. "But that's a story I prefer not to share. I wondered about Lily, though. I suppose they'd make her serve out her novitiate at the Aeonar, and make sure she couldn't get away. It's probably not a very nice place."

As they approached the cottage, Tara took a good look at the

fort. It appeared to be built into a good-sized hill that rose up in back of the building, and loomed over it. How had the Tevinters managed that? Magic? Or maybe that hill was a later addition, with the intent of camouflaging the structure. No one would notice anything about it from the Imperial Highway, other than the side road diverting toward the sea and the cottage. The locals had told her that the soil here was particularly rocky and unwelcoming, and that the water hereabouts were treacherous, and full of submerged rocks. Fishermen would not risk these waters, with so many safer and better places to ply their trade. Smugglers would find it too dangerous to be profitable. No wonder it was wild and desolate, with no neighbors in sight.

"A stable!" muttered Catriona. "We should see if they have any decent horses."

Tara smirked. "I expect they do. Really good horses. Great big war horses."

It took some loud knocking and tough talking even to be admitted to the cottage by the four tall men inside. They were dressed like simple countryfolk, but neither Tara nor even Catriona was fooled for a second. Simple countrymen did not carry themselves as these men did. There were no Templars insignias in sight, nor large pieces of plate armor, but there was a large shrine to Andraste, complete with candles.

"We're just Grey Wardens," Tara said, smiling innocently. "We're patrolling for darkspawn. Can we warm up at your fire?"

"Grey Wardens?" said the one who was obviously the leader, a strapping fellow with dark hair in a short military cut, his beard perfectly groomed. "We heard that the darkspawn were all in the south."

"Nothing to worry about," Tara said, not meeting the man's eye. "Just a routine patrol." It sounded like the biggest, fattest, lying cover-up in the world. Tara smiled to herself, hoping they never slept easy in their beds again.

"Got anything to drink?" Brosca asked, shamelessly out for what she could get.

"I'll make tea," offered a handsome young six-footer.

"Tea," Sigrun grumbled, rolling her eyes at Jukka.

"We noticed your stable," Tara remarked. "We're looking for horses."

"We have no horses for sale, Warden," the leader said, his face wooden.

"Really?" Tara pressed. "We'd pay top price. Three... even five sovereigns!"

Catriona whistled, as if impressed by Tara's munificence.

"Wow," said Sigrun, awed. "*Five sovereigns!* I bet poor farmers could live out here for a year on that."

"There's not much I wouldn't sell for five sovereigns," agreed

Jukka. "Including me." He leered at Sigrun, who punched his arm.

"We need our horses for farming," the leader told her haughtily.

"What farming?" Catriona shot back. "I didn't see any fields around here."

"Don't lie to us," Tara growled. "You're bandits, aren't you?"

"Or Orlesian spies!" Catriona hissed.

"We're not spies!" protested the boy with the teakettle. "Or bandits either!"

"And don't even think," snarled Tara, seeing one of the men's hands moving toward his belt knife, "of pulling weapons on us. Either we'll kill you, or you'll kill us, and then our fellow Wardens, who know where we are today, will hunt you down and kill you anyway. Killing Grey Wardens during a Blight is just about the worst crime you can commit. And if you ran off, Bronwyn the Dragonslayer would find you, and then slaughter you and your families and burn your house down. It's a thing she does."

She actually considered killing them, swept by the surge of bitter anger that Templars always roused in her. They did not grasp, since she was wearing Spellweaver, that she was really a mage. The dwarves would not care, and Darach would probably rather kill them than not. Catriona would be

scandalized, though, and Tara liked Catriona. If they gave her an excuse, though...

The leader glared at her. "We're not bandits."

"Or spies!" repeated the boy.

"Shut up, Desmond," the leader ground out.

"Shut up, Desmond," Sigrun chirped.

"We're just teasing you," Tara said genially. "We totally know you're Templars."

Four expressions of gormless shock on four handsome, square-jawed faces. Tara explained her reasoning.

"You're too well-groomed to be bandits, and Orlesian spies would be taunting us with silly accents."

"Not if they were really *good* spies," whispered Catriona.

Brosca snorted. "I don't think these guys are really good spies."

"Stop it!" shouted Desmond. "We're not spies at all!"

"Shut up, Desmond," Tara admonished him. "Where's the tea? You want to know how we know you're Templars? We know you're Templars because you're dicking us around when we've been out freezing our arses to protect you and the rest of the world from monsters. If you were really farmers you

would have offered us something to eat, and invited us to come sit by the fire. You didn't. Ergo, Templars."

"Warden," the leader said to Catriona, "you should control your people."

The tension ratcheted up a notch.

"Excuse me?" Tara said, "You are presuming that because Catriona is human, she's in charge. Grey Wardens aren't bigoted, unlike nearly every other institution in Thedas. Actually, *I* am the Senior Warden here."

Five cups of tea were nervously poured and silently consumed.

Tara set down her cup—it actually was quite good tea, and warmed her up quite a bit.

"That old ruin..." she began, with false casualness. "Have you seen any activity there? It's just the sort of place that darkspawn love to hide out in."

The Templars practically seized up. The leader huffed, "We know that there are no darkspawn there, Warden."

"Really? Are you sure? It would be really bad for you if you were mistaken. We could check it out for you. No problem at all."

"That is unnecessary. We use it for storage, and we have never seen anything strange there."

"If you say so. Thanks for the tea, gentlemen."

Bracing themselves against the cold, the Wardens left the door wide open as they departed. A little way down the bluff, their muffled sniggers burst into outright laughter.

"Why are Templars always so handsome?" Brosca complained. "What a waste."

Perhaps a hand had been worth it, after all.

Astrid's spirits overflowed with grim jubilation. The mission was a blazing success. With Amgarrak as a base, she had led the Legion and the golems through minimal resistance to the prize of prizes: she had found Kal'Hirol.

It was a haunted place, but with the touch of living dwarves, the phantoms were already fading. Before they disappeared completely, Astrid's troops saw the last stand of the casteless here: deserted by the rest of the inhabitants; giving their lives so that the uncaring and ungrateful could escape to safety. They passed a pitiful ghost of a frightened child bidding farewell to her mother; they witnessed more ghosts forever girding themselves to endure hopeless battle. Above all, they met the shade of Dairon, the warrior who had rallied the casteless. In a vast hall, he gave a stirring speech to his unlikely soldiers; in a small alcove, he died, trampled by an ogre. A legion scout found a tablet there, hastily inscribed by Dairon, with the names of the casteless who took up arms to protect their fellow dwarves. Astrid promised them that she

would do all in her power to see that the tablet was taken to Orzammar and delivered to the Shaperate. Such sacrifices should never be forgotten.

Blighted and foul as the ancient smith thaig was, much of its greatness remained. It had been magnificent, once, with its mighty halls, its vast trade quarter, its murals of polished stone. Myriad dusty corners were heaped with plunder; the wealth of the mines was fabulous. Among the rest of the booty, they were hauling out a tub of lyrium that would supply the Wardens for generations to come. That was the least Astrid could do for the order, which had given her a second chance at life and glory.

While the Legion, accompanied by Shale, spread out to map the thaig, and while Velanna and Ailill slept, Astrid led Falkor and Askil on the search for the lost treasury. When they reached the first of the huge, sealed stone vaults, Astrid lashed out with the sharp edge of the hook that was her new left hand, and cut through the lead seal with a stroke.

It was... intact. And richer than any dragon's hoard. Gems, armor, gold, works of exquisite artifice were exactly where the last lord of the thaig had left them. This was not going to the Wardens. It was the property of the dwarven people, and Astrid would administer it in such a way that it would give them a leader better than Bhelen. It was divided and sorted, and the best of it placed in a trunk that was loaded onto one of the golems. Falkor and Askil were given generous shares of their own. The entry to the treasury was then carefully concealed. On the return journey, they had hidden some of

the treasures in a secret place Astrid had discovered in Amgarrak. Some lined her pockets, and would smooth her way.

Their return march was smooth and unopposed. If there were darkspawn, they were far away in twisting side tunnels. In due course, they reached the West Hill access point.

"We'll leave the wagon here, Warden?" asked Rodyk.

"Yes," Astrid said. "We'll want it for taking more supplies in to Amgarrak."

"That's right," snarked Shale, "you have the golems to fetch and carry for you now."

"Not you, my friend," Astrid laughed. "We must leave you free to squish the unwary!"

She had slipped into command of this unit of the Legion almost imperceptibly. Rodyk was an excellent officer, but seemed instinctively to defer to her. It would not be difficult to bring him into her circle of supporters. She thought about Amgarrak a little more.

"Soon we'll want to stock it with tame nugs and deepstalkers, but we'll need a garrison there permanently to look after the creatures. Let's see what we can scrounge from the Daces." She smiled to herself. "I found the controls to the hydroponics operation and switched them on. By the time we return, we should have harvestable lichen. By then, of course, we'll also

want someone overseeing it."

"Good thinking, Warden!"

The cold above was a shock. The Legion, to a man, groaned aloud at the prospect of the march to the fortress. The golems—or at least Shale—were smugly indifferent to the temperature. Astrid paused to raise the dwarves' spirits.

"Legion! Stone knows how the cloudheads put up with this, but if they can do it, so can we! In a few days, with any luck, we'll be back down here again, and there will be proper dwarven food in plenty in Amgarrak Thaig. So suck it up, and let's go drink up the surfacers' ale!"

The cheering died down as they marched away. The snow had drifted in places, but West Hill rose up, guiding them. Astrid felt the thump of the shield on her back beat a going-home sort of rhythm. The smiths had done a brilliant job for her, both with her hook-like appendage, and in fashioning her shield in such a way that she could catch hold of it and fit her hooked forearm into the custom-designed grip. When she was fighting, she hardly felt the lack of a left hand at all. Her right hand, dexterous as ever, found its way into a pocket, and played with the jingling gold.

As they drew closer, Astrid could make out the tiny figure of Tara up on the battlements, waving at them like mad.

"Astrid! Come on! We've got a letter from Bronwyn!"

"Sit down, Warden," said Ser Cauthrien. She was not sitting herself, but wrapped in a heavy soldier's cloak and gazing out the window at the ravens dancing in the snow. She looked back at Alistair. He was watching her, apparently waiting for the axe—whether real or metaphorical—to fall. Rumor said he was the bastard son of King Maric. She had no trouble believing it. She had known the late king well, and as time went on she could see the resemblance between the young man and Maric more and more clearly. And he *acted* like King Maric: the self-deprecating humor, the cheerful courage... She could see why Loghain had taken Alistair under his wing. Even more clearly, she could see why he had kept the boy away from the Landsmeet.

"I've had a letter from the Teyrn," she told him. "Based on the intelligence we've been sending him, he thinks we should wrap up operations here at Ostagar. We haven't seen darkspawn on the surface since the middle of last month. For that matter, you Wardens haven't seen darkspawn in the Deep Roads without traveling for two days on the Helmclever Road. You haven't found darkspawn on the Gwaren Road at all."

Alistair grinned, and pointed out, "We haven't gone all the way to Gwaren yet. On the other hand, in Bronwyn's last letter, she told me how far Danith's group made it coming on the Gwaren Road coming west. Between us we've nearly gone the full length of it. They didn't find anything either. I sort of promised Bronwyn that she'd be able to walk from Ostagar to Gwaren without getting her feet wet."

Cauthrien snorted. "We have other problems to deal with.

With the Orlesian attacks, it's clear that the Empress is getting ready to make her move. What about the Archdemon?"

"Can't help you there." Alistair's smile faded. "It can't be anywhere close. Either we've killed all the darkspawn... I *wish*... or the Archdemon's taken them somewhere else."

"Do the Deep Roads lead south of Ostagar?"

Alistair frowned. He had never even thought of that possibility. "Not in any of the maps we've seen. I can ask Kardol."

"Do. Loghain wants the army to start a withdrawal north when the weather permits, starting on the tenth of Haring. Wardens, dwarves, elves, mages, and all. He's sent the wagons on their way to us. We'll leave supplies for a small garrison and courier station, but that's it."

She had already spoken to the dwarves. Based on the Warden's scouting efforts, they were planning on going up the Helmclever Road. If things were too hot there, they felt they could make it as far as the Belannas access point, and then travel on the surface along the Lake Road. Otherwise, they intended to continue their march north, engaging the darkspawn all the way to the access point at the north end of Lake Calenhad. She had suggested that they go on to West Hill, a fortress large enough to give them shelter and a mustering place. There was, after all, no reason to persuade them to go to Denerim.

Some of the elves would head north with the army, and then turn east into the Brecilian Forest, looking for the ancient elven temple that Bronwyn had found. Many, surprisingly, had elected to winter over at Ostagar, watching the Blightmouth.

"Well, you see..." Merrill had explained in her sweet, lilting way. *"We're actually quite comfortable here. The Wardens have been so very nice about freezing out the Taint in the forest that the game is coming back. The old towers and barracks give us shelter and the halla safe stabling. Keepers have no problem melting the snow so the hallas can get at the dry grass. As for me, I'm bound for Denerim, with some of my people. I have no doubt that Bronwyn will make the other shemlen keep King Cailan's word to us, but perhaps it would be a good idea to tell her what we'd actually like."*

Cauthrien turned her attention back to Alistair, who seemed rather excited at the prospect of leaving Ostagar.

"I'm expecting a letter from Bronwyn any day," he said.

Cauthrien, her face carefully stoic, passed him a griffon-sealed parchment. "This was in the courier's bag."

"Thanks!" He broke the seal, and looked up at the knight with a sheepish grin. "Mind if I look at it now?"

"Go ahead."

Denerim, Haring 1, Dragon 9:30

Dear Alistair:

Yes, you can come back to the Compound. You've been a very good boy indeed.

Seriously, the news from Ostagar is wonderful. You've done a splendid job clearing the lands of darkspawn. Give my regards to each member of your team as well: they've earned recognition and rewards.

So bring them home with the rest of the army—or at least that portion of the army that is going to Denerim. Not all of it is, but that is Cauthrien's concern. What I want your people to help with is getting our clever dwarven engineers back safely with you, along with the contents of their workshops. This is your primary mission, after taking care of the Wardens, of course. We will make certain that the Glavonaks have the best facilities to continue their researches. I've even given thought to Sten having a properly proportioned bed!

Adaia, of course, will be glad to see her family again. Vaughan Kendalls and his father are no more; and I believe the cousin in line to inherit the title cares nothing for them. None the less, I want Adaia to make a habit of wearing her Grey Warden regalia. In fact, I want all of you to wear it. It is your best protection against impudent fools. Obviously, I am most concerned for Adaia and Siofranni— and Petra, too. When Petra comes to Denerim, we shall look into having a staff made for her that can be taken for a sword or some other sort of non-magical weapon. And we'll buy some armor

that she finds comfortable.

It's hard to tell where the darkspawn will strike next. I've just returned from Amaranthine, where there was a serious darkspawn attack. It was led by an emissary who could talk. No. I'm not joking, unfortunately. It called itself the Architect, and it was trying to make the rest of the darkspawn into thinking, talking creatures as well. Luckily, we found it and killed it, along with all its minions. It had even enthralled dragons! Altogether it was very alarming. The Landsmeet looks to me to tell them where the Archdemon is, and of course, I have no idea. I've heard from some of the other Wardens of Thedas. They don't know either, but everyone thinks the blow will fall within their own lands. I think we've got to be prepared for the horde to pop out anywhere.

However, from your account, the Deep Roads are clean around Ostagar for long distances. Therefore, we've going to have to keep patrolling everywhere else. Danith found nothing in Gwaren or east of the White river. I haven't heard from Tara or Astrid yet. However, I want to patrol more in the north myself. If nothing else, we'll send a party back to Ostagar in the early spring, but there's no reason for you to have to winter there.

I do have some wonderful news. We have laid claim to the old Grey Warden fortress on the Coast, called Soldier's Peak. It's been deserted since the days the Wardens were banished, but we found it in surprisingly good condition. I

have no doubt I can persuade the Landsmeet to renew our grant. In fact, I'm so sure of it, I've sent Leliana, Jowan, Hakan, and Soren to work on the place over the winter. Leliana has wonderful ideas for making it a comfortable home for the Wardens. A summer home, at least. I have much more to tell you about it when you return to Denerim.

I wish you could have been here for my wedding. We had a wonderful feast and lots of entertainment at Highever House. Try to get here before First Day, and we'll have another feast, especially for the Wardens!

Loghain is sending a lot of empty wagons along with the supplies, so you can pack up all the things you've collected in the past few months. He's also sending sledges to mount on the wagons if the snow is too bad. Wrap up warmly and be sure to wear your mittens!

Along with the letter, I've sent a package of treats for you all. They were to be delivered to the Wardens' Quarters, so hie thee off there as soon as you can, before they're all gobbled up!

Your sister,

Bronwyn

Glowing with joy, he looked up at the not-unsympathetic Cauthrien. She, too, was eager to return to Denerim, and be once again at Loghain's side, where she belonged.

Alistair said, "Bronwyn writes that the Wardens are to take care to get all of the Glavonak's things to Denerim safely. Adaia will be glad that she won't be out of a job!"

"Yes... those are useful weapons against any enemy. I'll make certain that you have all the wagons you need for that, Warden. Nothing must prevent them arriving in Denerim. You're dismissed. Why don't you tell your people the good news?"

He beamed, and went his smiling way, running up the circling staircases of the Tower of Ishal to find his friends and the intriguing package. Bursting into the Wardens' quarters, he gave a yell.

"We're going home!"

Asa and Ulfa were there, absorbed in a chess game. Oghren was the only other occupant, slumped in a ale-fueled haze. He squinted at Alistair.

"We're goin' to Orzammar?"

"Um... no. Denerim."

"Huh."

Alistair reddened. The Wardens' Compound in Denerim was the closest thing to home he could claim. Denerim was Adaia's home. Anybody else's... not so much.

"When are we going?" Ulfa asked, her eyes fixed on her

Queen's knight.

"In a few days, when the wagons arrive and the weather seems good enough." He prowled the room and then grinned at the sight of a large crate, marked with a griffon. "Bronwyn sent this for all of us. I guess I should wait until everybody's here." He thought a bit more. "In fact, why wait? Let's call everybody in. We'll want to start packing."

"Packing the loot, anyway," Ulfa agreed, with a wolfish smile that Asa returned. They had done very, very well from their explorations of the Deep Roads.

They were busy playing chess, so Alistair picked on the idler in the room.

"Oghren—find Sten, Emrys, and Nevin. They're sparring in the practice room upstairs. I'll go get Adaia and Siofranni. I've got to talk to the Glavonaks, too. We Wardens are in charge of helping them move their workshop."

Asa snarked, "I look forward to being blown sky-high."

Alistair did not, but asked, "Does anybody know where Petra is?"

"Visiting her mage buddies, I reckon," rumbled Oghren.

"Taking tea. Plotting to turn us all into nugs."

"I'll find her on the way. Don't anybody touch this box."

Excitement bubbled up again. He raced down the stairs,

wanting to see Adaia's face when she heard the news.

Thanks to my reviewers: EmbertoInferno, KrystlSky, Eva Galana, Mike3207, Nemrut, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, KnightOfHolyLight, Enaid Aderyn, Robbie the Phoenix, darksky01, le-maru, timunderwood9, SkaterGirl246, Herebedragons66, Psyche Sinclair, kdarnell2, Phygmalion, Tsu Doh Nimh, Jenna53, Gene Dark, almostinsane, JackOfBladesX, TSLi, Zikarn Kraiss, Guest, Bob, Have Socks. Will Travel, lemonjay, RakeeshJ4, Shakespira, mille libri, Guardian1165, Zute, and Josie Lange.

I'm getting some genuinely fascinating ideas and insights from you. I really appreciate your interest, even if I don't make corrections very fast.

Umbralis is Firstfall in common usage (November).

I'd like to point out that we never ever hear in canon of a mage being sent to the Aeonar, "the mages' prison." So what's up with that? Maybe it's something else now, though the old story still works as a threat. It might be used as a Templar base to the northwest of Ferelden, close to the sea (though not close enough to a good anchorage to attract the attention of smugglers or fishermen), and not far from the Orlesian border.

I received an unsigned review that I found particularly interesting:

*Bob: One of the things that bothered me in DA2 was that we are presented with the Seekers who are supposed to be a check on corruption in the Chantry and the Templars, but they aren't. At all. If they were doing what was allegedly their jobs they would have stomped down ** the leadership of the Kirkwall Templars after the first time they assassinated the Viceroy of Kirkwall to install a puppet. The message, "We'll kill you if we don't like how you are ruling your city-state and you can't do jack about it because we're the Church, so suck it," is the sort of thing that starts religious wars.*

Me: Not going to get any argument from me. I don't think the developers have done particularly well in differentiating the Seekers from the Templars, or demonstrating that the Seekers are effective. And now we know that the next game is "Inquisition," which means we have to put up with yet more of the Chantry, front and center. I'm much more interested in the continuing struggle against the darkspawn.

86. Curious Forms of Torture

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 86: Curious Forms of Torture

He was not understanding her very well. Or perhaps he did not want to understand her. Grand Cleric Muirin was having a difficult— an excruciatingly unpleasant— conversation with Ser Chrysagon de la Crue, Knight-Divine of the Grand Cathedral. An 'honor' guard had escorted him to her private study, and was waiting outside to escort him back to his quarters in the Palace.

"The rebellious priests are under the jurisdiction of the Chantry," he insisted. "They should be tried before a clerical court under canon law, and then punished as you see fit: consigned to the Aeonar, or committed to the discretion of the Divine. It is an outrage that they are being held by the secular authorities."

"Their crimes were not solely against me," Muirin replied. "They also harmed the Queen of Ferelden, drugging her and holding her against her will."

"Why?" the Templar demanded. "What was the reason? Did they think her to be enthralled? If so, they were within their

rights to examine her."

Muirin looked him in the eye. "No one could have seriously imagined the Queen to be enthralled. Their motivation appears to have been not spiritual, but crass political ambition. They wished to deprive Ferelden of its head of state."

"You cannot prove that!"

"I have their confessions right here, Knight-Divine. Feel free to read them. They implicate a number of highly placed priests and Templars."

"Lies. No doubt obtained under torture."

"They have not been tortured. I visited them myself, though that was distasteful to me. It is not agreeable to confront those one thought of friends, only to discover that they wished to set one aside for their own purposes." She narrowed her eyes, trying to read from his how much he knew of this plot.

"You are playing a dangerous game, Your Grace," the Templar said, his voice ice cold. "You are reckless to accuse holy women, high in the councils of Her Perfection herself. This could be looked upon as a signal lack of faith and obedience."

"I am not accusing anyone," she replied. "I am telling you what is in the confessions. Read them yourself, if you like."

"I would not sully myself with such filth. Ferelden has become

a cesspool of heresy. Mages have been unleashed on the land, unsupervised by the Templar order; mages are allowed to mingle with the innocent populace; a mage girl has insinuated herself into a noble family... I see a pattern of perverse disregard for the Prophet's commands. This Warden Bronwyn... this Girl Warden, has made herself Queen, and she favors mages."

"Perhaps she has been made to be Queen. There was great popular support for the ascension of King Loghain." She refused to respond in any way to the Templar's exclamation of disgust. "Her blood gives legitimacy to his rule. I have talked with the young Queen. I know her well. Her mother, the late, noble Teyrna of Highever was my good friend. Abusing Queen Bronwyn is perhaps not a wise course on your part, Knight-Divine. Queen Bronwyn has mages among her Wardens, it is true. That is no new thing. There have always been Grey Warden mages. There are Grey Warden mages in Montsimmard. However, I also have good reason to believe that the young queen understands the dangers of magic, but believes it to be the lesser of two evils, given the current situation in Ferelden."

"You mean the Blight."

"I do indeed. After a lengthy discussion, she explained to me her reasons for needing mages. I had no idea how magically powerful the darkspawn are. Queen Bronwyn informed me that out of a dozen darkspawn, at least one is a mage. Their magic is strong, and she believes that without magic to counter this danger, the Blight cannot be overcome. It is clear

that the King is entirely of her mind in this matter. He, too, has fought the darkspawn."

The Knight-Divine pursed his lips, and sat back against his embroidered cushion.

"There is another way," he said, after some thought. "They could put themselves under the command of the Chantry, and commanded by the Knight-Vigilant, the Templars could lead them to victory."

"There is no precedent for that," Muirin pointed out. "The Templars have never taken an active role in the leadership against the Blights. The Wardens would not tolerate it; and only Wardens can end the Blight."

"Myths and legends!"

"I think not, Knight-Divine. The Divine herself has commanded that Wardens are not to be interfered with. I do not think we want to set ourselves against the Wardens. The Wardens of Montsimmard might have little use for the Girl Warden, but they will not appreciate any precedent that abrogates their authority." She tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. "However, your idea of including the Templars in the effort against the darkspawn has merit. If a large number of them were discreetly introduced into the army, they could maintain a watch over the mages, as well as demonstrating their prowess in foiling the darkspawn's spells."

"Never!" Ser Chrysagon's wrath overflowed. "Never will a

Templar submit to mere secular authority, much less submit to the command of that rebellious peasant, Loghain Mac Tir."

"If I may remind you, Knight-Divine," Murin said, her patience tight in her chest and fingers, "that Fereldans feel very differently about the events of the Orlesian Occupation than you do. Most found the experience extremely unpleasant. Loghain Mac Tir is not viewed as a rebel in this kingdom, but as a hero and patriot. The Chantry is above such political name-calling."

Brought up short, the Knight-Divine subsided for a moment. He was accustomed to the rhetoric of Val Royeaux, which took as received wisdom that Ferelden was a rebellious province that needed another—*stronger*—taste of the whip to bring it to heel. It surprised him that a Grand Cleric of the Holy Chantry could think otherwise. Clearly, this woman's loyalties were questionable. He finally said, "He is a peasant, all the same."

Muirin wondered what the Knight-Divine knew of her own humble origins. Everything, she imagined. She did not allow herself to appear offended. Instead, she decided to make clear her support for one Fereldan monarch, at least.

"Queen Bronwyn is quite able to discern between mages serving loyally under her direction and those who are beyond the pale. Only recently the Queen routed out a band of Tevinter blood mages here in Denerim. They were slavers, preying on a nation at war. They were executed, and the phylacteries with which they attempted their spells were

destroyed. Nor is Queen Bronwyn an enemy of your order. One of her Wardens was a Templar who was commanded by his superior to join the order. He died in battle a few months ago, and his death is deeply regretted by the Queen."

Ser Chrysagon looked at her, his face expressionless, trying to gauge the meaning beneath her words. That the Grand Cleric favored the daughter of the late Prince Cousland was clear to him. Her own opinion of the usurper Loghain was not so clear. He sensed a divided loyalty there. Perhaps she, too, felt an instinctive disgust at the marriage of a young woman of high birth to an aging soldier-of-fortune sprung from the dirt of this barbarian land.

Taken all in all, the Empress would not object to Bronwyn Cousland—unmarried to Loghain— as a subject queen, acknowledging the suzerainty of the Empress. That she was a Warden was awkward, and a very bad precedent. However, the Theirin line, save for a single unacknowledged bastard, was at an end, and the other Cousland had deferred to his sister. Her claim was unquestionably superior to anyone else's.

In the course of their voyage to Ferelden, Ser Chrysagon had gone over the Theirin genealogy with Duke Prosper at very great length, looking for likely puppets. Emperor Florian had grossly erred, when he placed his mad cousin on the throne here. All could have been secured, had he also forced Meghren into a marriage with a daughter of Ferelden. Instead of fighting the Fereldans in open battle, they should have seized the Arl of Redcliffe's daughter by stealth. Lady Rowan

would have been Meghren's queen, and that might well have been enough to pacify the barbarians. So many opportunities lost; so many mistakes that glared forth, seen in hindsight.

Was it possible to separate the young woman from Loghain? Sooner or later, he would have to go. All the assassination attempts had failed thus far. The man was absurdly hard to kill. Prosper's own original preference was for the Cousland girl to be married to an Imperial Prince. Chrysagon had suggested a marriage instead to the bastard. However, the Duke had learned, through a Warden cousin, that Grey Wardens were infertile, especially two Grey Wardens together. Now that they had met the headstrong Girl Warden, it was clear that that she would not do. The bastard might be more tractable. There was no possibility that the Empress would marry such a person, but there were her cousin's three daughters, now in comfortable, remote, but implacable imprisonment in the Chateau Solidor. The older ones were almost beyond the limits of the marriageable by now, but the youngest might be grateful enough for her release to marry with good grace a barbarian bastard and do as she was told thereafter. What was her name? Eponine? Celandine? No, Eglantine.

He gave the Grand Cleric a mirthless little smile. All these possibilities lay in the future. For now he must make a polite pretense to accept the throne's current occupants. "It is a relief to me that the Queen has some degree of regard for the Templar order. How unfortunate that this individual died in battle. It was not... how shall I say... a deliberate accident?"

"It was nothing of the sort," Murin said, nettled by his tone. "I have had the story both from the Queen and from a former lay sister who is also a Grey Warden and who was present."

"A lay sister?" Ser Chrysagon considered that. The Queen did not object to the religious among her Wardens. It might thus be possible to infiltrate her people. He knew of some good men— and at least one good woman— who would appear to her to be promising candidates. "Very interesting. However, there is much going on that must be set right. I am told that there is an absurd story that the queen located the tomb of the Prophet and sent the Sacred Ashes to Denerim, where they were used to raise Queen Anora from the dead!"

"Queen Anora was not dead," Murin said, "but she was certainly healed by the Ashes."

A pause, and a certain change in the atmosphere. In the course of the conversation, Ser Chrysagon had begun to believe that the current Grand Cleric was someone he could work with. Not so, apparently. He hardly knew whether to laugh in her face or admonish her.

"You believe this ridiculous story?" he asked, with exquisite skepticism

"While I was unconscious during the healing of the Queen, I was quite awake when Queen Bronwyn used the remainder of the Ashes to heal a child in my presence, and that of a conclave of priests and Templars." She reached over to the table beside her armchair. "Here is a copy of the report of the

conclave. It is yours. It is a faithful account of the..." She paused at the edge of the abyss, and then took the plunge. "...the miracle. Bronwyn put the Ashes in the mouth of a child dying of a growth in her brain. No mage could cure her. In moments after the Ashes were administered, the child was entirely cured: walking, talking, and asking questions. Included in the report is the Queen's account of how they found the shrine in the Frostback Mountains. The conclusion of the conclave was unanimous. I urge you to read it, and then we should speak again."

Either she was mad, or she was using this false miracle for political ends. He had not suspected that Grand Cleric Muirin had become some sort of Fereldan zealot. With a smile and a bow of perfect courtesy, he took the report, and then, after receiving the requested blessing, he took his leave. He did enjoy a good piece of fiction, now and then.

"I think we should all go," Tara said, bouncing a little in her chair. "I think we should all go together. If we meet something nasty, then we can fight it off better. We should load up some supplies and then get try to get to Denerim as soon as we can! Won't Bronwyn be surprised?"

Astrid did not agree. "We're not finished with our explorations. I need to go west and see if we can complete the link with Orzammar. They should be kept apprised of the darkspawn movements, even if there's no reason to visit the city. I can send a message by one of the Legion when we're close enough. Why don't I take half of the Legion and the Wardens

and go west, and you take the rest and head to Denerim? You can have a pair of my scouts who were with me at Kal'Hiol. Look." She pushed the map over. "Here is the tunnel that apparently leads out and turns east. The next step is to see where it goes. Based on Bronwyn's letter, it must pass close under this Vigil's Keep. Her map shows how the tunnels there connect with the mine. That would be an excellent place for the Legion to bivouac. From there, from her our account, it's only a half-day's march to Denerim. If you choose your weather wisely, you should make it safely." She added, "I am glad that Aeron survived."

They were both weary of West Hill, but had very different goals in view. Tara wanted to see her friends again, and sleep once again at the Wardens' Compound, the most agreeable place she had ever known.

Astrid, on the other hand, had news to share with former friends and allies in Orzammar. With luck those people would once again be friends and allies. She had won two thaigs and had found six golems. She had gold to finance her return. It was a curious form of torture to be racked by hope and possibility after all she had endured—and considering what she must still endure to reach the shining, distant goal.

She must start small, and must manipulate the news in the way most favorable to her. She might not wish to enter Orzammar right away, but she must get close enough that her messengers would transmit the correct information. Furthermore, she must punch her way through to the Deep Roads near Orzammar, thereby proving that she had cleared

the Amgarrak Road. That was a spectacular achievement, and would spread her fame throughout the dwarven realm.

And why would Bronwyn object? Astrid could think of all sorts of reasons why having an underground route across Ferelden to Orzammar would please her. The humans might be accustomed to winter, but none of them particularly enjoyed it. If there was a way to move from east to west in comparative comfort, it would be a tremendous tactical advantage.

The one person she must not take with her was Brosca. She must not even let Tara and Brosca realize her ultimate objectives. Tara would tell Brosca, and Brosca, devoted to her noble-hunting sister and her little nephew, was a loyal supporter of Bhelen. Astrid liked Brosca quite well, and did not want to fight a duel with her unless it was absolutely necessary. If Brosca was kept far enough away, the likelihood diminished to nothing. Better to present her with an accomplished fact, and the proof that her loved ones were safe and cared for. Little Endrin was still an Aeducan, after all. For that matter, Brosca and her sisters were Aeducans by adoption. Astrid wished them no harm, indeed. Her vengeance would fall on Bhelen, and Bhelen alone.

And some of his toadies, she amended in her thoughts. Vartag Gavorn had to go. A few others. Of course, if she were declared a Paragon, she might not even have to kill anyone. It might even be possible to leave Bhelen on his throne, as long as he was firmly under her thumb.

Probably not, though, she reconsidered. After all, King Valtor

had not hesitated to turn on a Paragon, and had ordered Caridin to be made a golem. Bhelen was a tricky little swine, as she had every reason to know.

"I'm going to write a letter to Bronwyn," she finally told Tara. "I want you to take it to her. I want to explain exactly what it is I'm trying to do. I think she'll be pleased. I know the Legion will, if they're able to fight through to Orzammar and get resupplied there. You take half and I'll take half. Take that big tub of lyrium we found. Take Catriona with you to make up your numbers. It really works better to keep her away from Velanna."

"Are you going to take all the golems?" asked Tara, rather unhappy at the prospect. "I know it sounds like my end of the road will be all cleared out, but something might happen..."

Astrid really did want to take them all. If she did enter Orzammar, her entrance must be memorable. However, perhaps five might be enough.

"Perhaps it would be best if Shale traveled with you," she suggested. "I'm not sure that Orzammar is ready for a talking golem."

The Shaperate might try to claim the golems or at least claim jurisdiction over them. It was all very well for Rune, and for Tom, Dick, Harry, and Valtor—as Tara had named them. Shale, however, might not be best pleased to be treated as a possession. And Shale did have a way of expressing itself very frankly. Astrid was going to have to be tactful if she

wanted to be accepted once more as a dwarf among dwarves.

"Shale!" Tara squealed, delighted. It was so much nicer to talk to a companion instead of talking to a control rod. "Where's Brosca? I've got to tell her! And I've got to tell Shale!"

Brosca was unsurprised at the news, and very pleased to be going with Tara to Denerim, especially since Astrid seemed to want to reach Orzammar, but not actually *enter* Orzammar. Bhelen would be tremendously pleased if the whole road was opened up again, and would probably throw a party for the Wardens if they visited.

No. He wouldn't. Not if Astrid were there. Brosca kept forgetting that Astrid was Bhelen's sister. Sure, there was bad blood between them, but why not make up now? Bhelen was King, and Astrid was a Senior Grey Warden. That was really important, too. Besides, didn't Astrid want to see their mutual nephew, little Endrin?

Thinking of Rica and Endrin almost made her ask to travel with Astrid. The little guy must be growing. Rica must be prettier than ever, and covered in silk and jewels. Even Ma might have mellowed a little, with regular meals and all the drink she wanted. Humans talked sometimes about being homesick, and Brosca wondered if that was what she was feeling. Of course, she had no home in Orzammar, unless the Grey Warden hostel there counted. She would never fit in at the Palace. But Astrid would.

Surfacers didn't care that Brosca was a Duster. Most didn't even know what 'Duster' meant. Sod Orzammar! It would be good to see the Boss again and stay at the Wardens' Compound. Astrid had told her it was a fine place, better even than the hostel in the Diamond Quarter. Brosca would have a private room, though the idea struck Brosca as odd and uncomfortable. She had never slept in a room by herself in her life. She hoped that someday she could find someone who'd share the space with her. That person wouldn't be Cullen—no one would be, no one ever *could* be—but she wouldn't be so completely alone.

They moved out the next day, each laden with supplies purchased from the storerooms of West Hill. Tara gave handsome gratuities to those who had made their stay agreeable, mostly notably the housekeeper. The golems pulled the wagons, and some of the West Hill servants went with them, to return one of the wagons to the castle. The other was dismantled, and lowered into the depths of the Deep Roads. The wagon that Astrid had used on her last journey was waiting, untouched, exactly where she had left it.

Each of them would now have a wagon full of supplies to help them on their way. Each had a map, though both maps were more than a little vague in places. Astrid told Tara where she would find the supplies left at Amgarrak Thaig —though not the location of the treasure caches either there or at Kal'Hiroi.

"Take care of yourself, Duster," Astrid said, bumping a fist against Brosca's.

"Yeah. You, too, Your Ladyship."

"You should be safe in you *do* enter Orzammar," Tara said anxiously to Astrid. "You should be safe because you're a Grey Warden. You've got the five golems, and we cleared out a lot of darkspawn. If King Bhelen causes trouble, you come right back to us, right?"

"Of course, " Astrid assured her. "I don't intend to get into fights I can't win against fellow dwarves. I can always have Rodyk there take a message into Orzammar. Or send another Warden, like Falkor."

Falkor, indeed, was the messenger she intended to send to her old friends in the Assembly. He was from a respectable warrior-caste family, and his status as a Grey Warden would raise his status even higher. If she could win her way through the Deep Roads to Orzammar, Astrid had a very good chance at turning the game in her favor.

There were hugs and backslaps, both among the Wardens and the Legion. A lot of friends had been made during their expedition. Some regretted the path where duty lay, and some were immensely pleased.

One of them was Catriona, who was fairly dancing at the prospect of a journey to Denerim. Not only that, but a journey far from the odious Velanna.

Velanna, seeing the backs of the other party, as they trudged east, proclaimed her satisfaction to her friend Ailill.

"We may be out of sight of sun and sky, but at least we no longer have to look at a shemlen face!"

Shale's hearing was quite keen, and the golem heard the remark. Curious that elves should be so exclusive. Elves and humans were all equally squishy in Shale's estimation.

Tara had no great love for the Deep Roads. It was a misery to be in them, remembering all the horrible things that could happen. Some of the most frightening moments of her life had been spent underground: most notably the time she had thought Bronwyn had been mortally wounded. This time, though, it was really not so bad. She had Brosca with her, which always gave her confidence, and Sigrun, Jukka, Darach, and Catriona as well. They were all good friends by now. It was a remarkably congenial team.

And Shale. Shale might be the Mighty Golem King of Snark—and Tara took great pleasure in calling the golem that—but having a companion of solid rock as big as an ogre and just as strong was a great comfort.

The warriors of the Legion with her were solid support, too. Their sergeant, Byerolf, was Jukka's good friend, and by extension, friendly with them all. They were moving along with the ease of long practice.

They had a good night's safe sleep in clean and empty Amgarrak Thaig. Byerolf had been there on the last expedition, and could show them around. They saw the

growing lichen, the big workrooms, the sheltered sleeping chambers... even the now-operational bathing rooms. There were also the more unusual sights: the lyrium well and the Fade switches. Tara had read the ancient research notes through carefully when Astrid was out of action, and was quite sure that nothing would induce her to play with things so utterly, pointlessly dangerous. The Tevinter mage they had hired... Nereda... had been some sort of charlatan. A vicious lunatic. To murder dozen of casteless dwarves and then to meld their preserved flesh together into that...*thing!* Proper words failed her. Proper thought failed her. The Chantry was full of lies and propaganda, but it was possible that some Tevinter mages were just as bad as the stories made them out to be. Especially Tevinter mages who were clearly out for all the coin they could make, like the slavers in the Alienage.

Anyway, she had been completely crazy. Tara could see all sorts of other directions they could have taken the experiments. If they couldn't afford iron, they could have used rock. And to use a Fade spirit to animate the thing! That was criminally stupid. No wonder Nereda was reduced to working for the dwarves on an impossible project. She was probably too incompetent to make it in Tevinter.

Those chambers were locked back up after she saw them. Really, someone should figure out a way to dismantle them, but that would take some serious work and study, and Tara could not spare it at the moment. Someday, perhaps.

But they had a good night's sleep and a hearty meal, thanks to the provisions in the wagon that Shale drew along without

visible effort. Everyone lent a hand when the poor condition of the road demanded it, but it was still far better than trying to carry the food on their own backs.

Best of all, they had seen no darkspawn. None. Tara was not even sensing any. There was still Taint to watch for, of course, and Tara shot blasts of flame on big clumps from time to time, cleaning the worst bits. No darkspawn, though. It was important not to become over-confident, but there really seemed to be no darkspawn at all.

They were on the march again, and Brosca marched cheerfully beside her, humming a little tune to herself.

"What do you think about finding that Soldier's Peak place?" she said, apropos of nothing. "The Boss sounded pretty excited about it."

"It would take us a bit out of our way," Tara replied, with a bit of regret. She, too, was quite excited at the idea of a whole castle to themselves; and she would have liked to have seen Jowan. On the other hand, Zevran was in Denerim. "Maybe we should go another time, when it's just Wardens and our special friends. I don't know if Jowan and Leliana can feed a unit of the Legion."

"Maybe not," Brosca shrugged. "I suppose I'd like to see this Denerim place first. I've never seen a human city. Is it much like Orzammar?"

Tara thought that over. "Not much. There are a lot of people:

humans, elves, and dwarves, but a lot of it is made of wood and there's the big sky above. It's spread out more, and doesn't have different levels, unless you're inside individual buildings. Some things are the same, of course: there are rich people and poor people and shops and all. I liked it. I liked the Wardens' Compound, too, so I'm looking forward to that. And I'm going to visit my relatives in the Alienage, too."

At least what's left of them, she thought to herself. By now, if they lived at all, her sister and her parents had been herded into the vast slave market of Minrathous, the largest market of any kind in the world. It was too much to hope that they could stay together, as a family. More likely, they would be sold to different masters, and would never see one another again in life. It was a shame that Arl Howe was already dead.

Bronwyn dropped by the Wardens' Compound early the next morning, before the Council meeting. It was there that a testy Anders told her about the delay in receiving the message. Loghain had ordered only royal messengers to be permitted into the feast, thus cutting Bronwyn off from contact with her own people. Bronwyn said little, but her lips thinned.

"Thank you, Anders," she said. "I'll deal with the matter. How is Aeron?"

"He'll live to fight again, but he'll never look quite the same. He'll sleep most of the day. I thought Velanna was a better Healer than that. Burns are tricky, though. At least Aeron's frostbite won't deprive him of any essential bits. Maybe he'll

be one of the sort who looks better bald. It'll give him that air of danger. I'm told women like that."

Bronwyn laughed a little, a bit embarrassed. She wasn't sure about the attractions of baldness herself; but the air of danger... well, perhaps so.

Speaking of dangerous men... she taxed Loghain with the miscommunication issue as soon as she saw him issuing from the King's apartments in his plain black doublet.

"If my Wardens need to talk to me, or if someone's injured—like Aeron— I can't have palace functionaries causing any delays."

"I'll pass the word on," Loghain said, his mind on the upcoming Council.

Bronwyn stiffened. "I think," she said her voice sharp, "that it should be sufficient that I have made such an order. From what I can gather, this officer sent the servant away, believing that your orders took precedence over mine."

Loghain caught the edge in her voice. Young women were so bloody touchy.

"You had actually given no orders at all," he pointed out. "I, however, *had*. The officer was doing his best. We will make clear that Warden business is a priority, and we will do it together. Come into the study here, and I'll summon the Captain of the Guard."

Silenced, but rather offended, Bronwyn stalked along beside him, her scarlet skirts swishing with every step. It was so difficult to anticipate every eventuality, and no one seemed to be helping her. Only this morning, she had faced some resistance about the housekeeping schedules from women who told her that "Queen Anora had done thus and so," and "Queen Anora preferred the meals served at this or that time." There was even a bit of difficulty about the size of the portions... a difficulty that Fionn had previously kept from her by simply sending to the Compound for food. The privilege of serving the King and Queen when they were residing in the Palace, however, was a prerogative accorded to the Royal Cook and his staff, and the seneschal had advised Bronwyn not to offend those individuals by indicating what might be construed as distrust. He promised to see that the food was sufficient for the Queen's appetite in future.

It had been very annoying... that implication that everyone thought her greedy and gluttonous. Well, too bad. A half-sandwich and a cookie for tea were simply not adequate. Anora was not a Grey Warden, and even warriors who were not Grey Wardens needed more food than a soft-handed lady whose only exercise was fine embroidery. Bronwyn could not even use the excuse of feeding Loghain, who never took afternoon tea himself, thinking it silly and effeminate. He, however, had a bowl of fruit and nuts in his quarters that his servants saw was kept well-stocked. Perhaps she should do the same. Yes, she must definitely do that.

The Captain of the Guard arrived, and Loghain gave the man

the amended orders, to be passed down the chain of command.

"Wardens and messages from Wardens are to be delivered to the Queen immediately. They are to be treated as royal couriers for the foreseeable future. Is that understood?"

"It is, Your Majesty."

There. Done. They could move on to the Council, and Loghain took the lead, pausing to let Bronwyn catch up with him. She looked vexed at having the words taken out of her mouth, but better to get it done without any recriminations or confusion. For his part, Loghain was sorry that Bronwyn was in a temper, but it was not his fault. It was no one's fault, really. These things happened, and they happened most often when there was a change of administration. Very soon everything would be in a regular train. He had troubles of his own. At least yesterday's headache had subsided. It would return soon enough, inevitably, when he once again had to wear the crown at the afternoon Landsmeet session. It was a good thing that he had long practice at suffering pain without revealing it. He must never rub his temples or show the least discomfort at the weight of the crown, which would give the secretly hostile among the nobles something to gloat over.

Above all, he hated—absolutely hated—moving into the King's Apartments. He would have preferred to have kept his own familiar rooms, but appearances were everything right now. He already knew the King's Apartments perfectly well, naturally, and every stick and stone spoke of Cailan and

Maric. Being there—even to shave and dress—depressed him. The idea of sleeping in them repulsed him. Luckily, he had a desirable young wife, and could sleep in her bed. That was odd, too, since his daughter had been the last occupant, but while it was odd, it was not revolting as sleeping in the bed of two men he had failed so wretchedly. For that matter, sleeping in the bed that Cailan had shared with his mistresses would have put him off even had the boy's end not been so miserable.

Some of those women were making noises, too. The seneschal had passed on the word that private petitions were likely to be lodged, based on promises made by the King to his various women. Thank the Maker, not one of them had a bastard to show for her efforts—or at least not one that could attributed to Cailan. One of the women, indeed had given birth two months ago, but the child was obviously an elf.

Cailan had made lots of promises to lots of people, and Loghain would have to decide which promises would be honored. Obviously, the promise to the Dalish was a political issue, and would require careful handling. The Dalish had served honorably and deserved rewards. On the other hand, most of the Landsmeet loathed the Dalish, and would hate seeing the elves receive so much as a clod of dirt, even if it was dirt none of the nobles wanted for themselves. Bronwyn was likely to take most of the opprobrium for her generosity to the elves, but Loghain reckoned that she could afford it. She was generally popular otherwise.

They entered the Council Chamber together, and took the

throne-like seats of the King and Queen. Anora took the Chancellor's seat, that had been for so long Loghain's own. This 'new normal' was something of a wrench. The table was long, and Bronwyn sat on the end opposite Loghain. There was a great deal of business to be got through before the Landsmeet session in the afternoon.

First, there were appointments to the royal offices. Loghain and Anora had notes about these, and intended to confirm most of the current appointees. Some of Cailan's old friends, however, would be replaced. Bronwyn felt her lack of knowledge and experience here keenly. She had heard of most of the offices, but knew few of the people involved. Fergus knew far more than she did. Teagan, too, knew them, and fought for some of the individuals; considering them loyal vassals of the last king: men who deserved better than to lose their places. The discussion was brief but spirited. Loghain and Anora were canny enough to let Teagan have his way with some of the lesser offices.

The Master of the Mint—also kept in office— had sent a note, asking when it would be convenient for the new king and queen to have their images made for a new coinage. Loghain, so disdainful of courtly nonsense, knew that this mattered, and sent back a reply to have the artist sent to them tomorrow morning.

"You need to have a coronation portrait painted as well," Anora reminded her father. "The sooner, the better."

"Have that man you used before see me. We'll get it done."

Fergus then proposed something for which Loghain was quite unprepared.

"I think that in light of the threat that both the darkspawn and the Orlesians pose, we should be looking for allies outside our borders."

"Ferelden can stand on its own," Loghain growled, his eyes glinting.

"Perhaps so, but why not reach out to other nations whose interests are in line with ours?" the young teyrn reasoned. "The Nevarrans hate Orlais as much as we do, and they are at war with them even now. They have a great deal to lose were Orlais to gain possession of the Bannorn. I think we should send an envoy to the Nevarran king with offers of friendship and alliance."

"Not the Free Marches?" asked Teagan, frowning. "That was Maric's idea."

"With all due respect to King Maric," said Fergus, "Our situation is very different than it was five years ago. I think Nevarra can do a great deal more to harm Orlais than any of the Marcher cities. Nevarra shares a border with Orlais, after all: a border that is shifting with the tides of war. Nevarra is rich, and might be willing to spend good coin in ways that would further weaken its enemy. And there is but one king in Nevarra, whereas dealing with the Free Marches involves negotiations with a dozen princelings. Nevarra, also, is a trading partner rather than a trade rival, unlike Kirkwall and

Ostwick. It loses nothing no matter how strong and prosperous Ferelden grows. In fact, the stronger we grow, the more likely we are to produce grain surpluses that can be sold abroad—and Nevarra is always an eager customer."

Loghain listened with surprised approval. Young Cousland was making good sense. Loghain dreaded foreign entanglements as a general rule: Ferelden had no business fighting someone else's wars in someone's else's lands for someone else's reasons. However, it was true that the enemy of one's enemy could be a useful friend... at times.

"It's out of the question that either the Queen or I would go abroad and sue for alliance," he said. "We've surely learned that lesson."

"I agree," Fergus said, without hesitation. "A monarch ought not to travel to a foreign land on such an errand, especially when our kingdom is so unsettled. Someone else—someone of sufficient prestige— should go. I would be willing, but if you can discover another more suited to the purpose, then send him."

"Fergus!" Bronwyn murmured, distressed at the idea. Nor did she miss the look on Anora's face. The Dowager Queen was positively horrified. "Not in this weather, surely!"

"If the Orlesians can travel," Fergus snorted, "so can I. The sooner, the better. I've given it some thought."

"I could go," Nathaniel said, rousing from a somber silence. "I,

too, have traveled in the northern lands. I know quite a few Nevarran nobles. I don't think the Teyrn of Highever should risk himself, but I could go. I *should* go."

Teagan sighed to himself. Should he, Teagan, volunteer? Could they trust Howe? It would be a wrench, leaving Kaitlyn, for he would certainly not risk her by taking her along. He decided to wait a bit, and see if his services would be required.

Bryland, also recently married, nearly grinned with relief at Nathaniel's offer. Going abroad... leaving Leandra and the boys... enduring the dangers of travel by sea in winter... dealing with a foreign court... What an escape! If young Howe had said nothing, Bryland felt it would have been incumbent on him to volunteer, but Howe had volunteered, and it seemed perfectly suitable to him. Kane might have the status now, but obviously knew nothing about diplomacy. Besides, Habren would hate it, and for that matter... well... Habren, he had to admit, could not possibly be sent on a diplomatic mission. Unless they *wanted* to provoke a war. He might be her father, but he was hardly blind. Or deaf.

Wulffe would not have volunteered to go in anyone's place. He had never in his life been out of Ferelden and was not about to start now. Better no Nevarrans than to go himself.

Kane was completely oblivious to the call of duty. He had no idea where Nevarra was, actually. Apparently, it was on the other side of Orlais. How would anybody get there? Would the Orlesians just let someone walk through their lands?

Would Howe have to go in disguise?

"It's not necessary," Fergus said to Nathaniel, with careful civility. "I'm not a novice at diplomacy."

"I know you're not," agreed Nathaniel. "But you are also currently the heir-presumptive to the throne. If you go to the Court of Nevarra, the king will presume you wish to cement the alliance by a marriage of state. He will expect it, and I see no way you will avoid it if you wish his favor. He has two young daughters and a number of nieces. Do we want to entertain the possibility of a foreign Queen of Ferelden: one with strong ties to a powerful kingdom that may involve us in further obligations?"

His words caused something of a stir. Loghain blinked, impressed by the young man's acumen. He had been wrong-footed by Cousland's proposal, and at first had been ready to reject it out of hand on general principles. This, however, was an objection that had not occurred to him. Ferelden had not had a foreign queen in nearly two hundred years, and she had been ... what? Right, from Ostwick. A Nevarran queen could create unimaginable complications.

Fergus' jaw dropped a bit, and he shut it with a snap. A hot flush rose up, happily hidden by his beard for the most part. How could he have overlooked that? It was, in fact, pretty much what had happened ten years ago when he and Father went to Antiva looking for trade agreements. At least then he was able to sidestep the first girl they tried to foist on him, and succeeded in carrying off a prize like Oriana instead.

"They might expect it, anyway," Wulffe pointed out. "They're bound to ask questions about the heir—about everyone. It might not be a bad idea, at that. A Nevarran princess might bring a thumping huge dowry with her, and if she comes here young enough, we can train her up our way. And very likely Fergus won't inherit anyway." He grinned at Bronwyn, who turned as red as her gown, but could not bring herself to be angry at the bluff old Arl. He was a good man.

"I'm not making any such marriage," Fergus said, his voice somewhat higher than usual. "I am not at liberty to contract marriage with a foreign princess. My faith is pledged elsewhere."

Another blush at the table, this time Anora's. The arls were not looking at her, however, but at Fergus. Each one of them was thrilling with either curiosity or amusement, according to what he knew of the matter.

"Well?" Bryland urged him, grinning ever more broadly. "Don't keep us in suspense! Who is the lady? When can we wish you joy?"

Fergus' face tightened into mabari stubbornness. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"My dear lad!" Wulffe burst out. "Don't tell us she's impossible! You haven't got yourself tied down to some fortune-hunter, have you?"

Loghain gave Bronwyn a dark, sardonic smile that made her

positively hate him for a brief instant. She glared back at him, and then her eyes flicked to Anora, willing her stepdaughter to *say something*.

She did not. At length, Bronwyn broke the suspense. "My lord brother's choice is unexceptionable, but it is too early to make it public."

"Oh." Bryland gave Anora a discreet and courteous nod. "I see. Very well."

Wulffe, who only appeared to be simple, had rather enjoyed teasing Fergus... and secretly, Anora herself. "You should make it public soon, though. Better not to raise false hopes elsewhere."

Kane presumed that Fergus really was keeping it quiet for his own reasons. Maybe the girl wasn't of age. For a wild, ecstatic moment, he hoped the Teyrn was speaking of Faline. Surely, he would have come to him first. Or maybe he was biding his time. It would be something for Faline to be a teyrna! But no. He'd had no hints. Fergus said he'd made promises. Disappointed, Kane shrugged off the rest of the conversation.

Howe wondered briefly if Fergus was speaking... surely not!... of the Dowager Queen. She looked a little flushed. He had noticed them dancing and talking together. The Queen had been widowed less than two months... and... oh. That would certainly explain why they had made no public announcement. Otherwise, he might be speaking of those Hawke girls who

had spent so much time at Highever House. No. He had never seen Fergus single them out for special attention. Bethany Hawke was lovely, but Fergus' eyes always turned in another direction. Anora, then. It made sense. Perhaps Loghain and Bronwyn had made a secret agreement before their marriage.

Teagan began to have a horrible, sneaking sensation about it all. Either the girl was too young or she was a recent widow. Had he noticed Fergus paying court to anyone? He was so wrapped up in Kaitlyn he really had not noticed. The ghastly suspicion grew, but Teagan mastered his horror and astonishment. It was a struggle to keep his face a perfect blank. He should have known! Of all the dastardly, slimy gambits! Cailan's ashes were hardly cold, and that ice-hearted commoner was after another crown! If the Mac Tirs could not keep Ferelden one way, they would another.

Wanting to spare her brother any more speculation and embarrassment, Bronwyn said, "The Nevarran Wardens have been the most helpful and informative of all the Warden posts. If an embassy is sent, I would like to send one of my own Wardens along. He might be able to obtain intelligence there that the Warden-Commander would not care to trust to parchment. Would you object to that, Nathaniel?"

"Not at all."

There was more conversation: what they would ask of the Nevarrans—hard coin, not to put too fine a point on it—and what they could give in return — wheat shipments and some distractions on Orlais' eastern border. Nathaniel would go,

and with a sufficiently impressive retinue to uphold Fereldan honor.

"You must have a noble companion. Think about taking Adam Hawke with you," Fergus suggested, "he's a resourceful fellow, and good for fighting or talking."

Nathaniel considered that. "If I take Adam Hawke, perhaps I could take the Warden brother as well."

"Carver?" Bronwyn considered. "That's an excellent idea. But the weather really is forbidding."

Loghain, on the other hand, was becoming more and more pleased with the idea. The Nevarrans had never given Ferelden any trouble. They had, on the contrary, given the Orlesians a very *great* deal of trouble, and had taken a number of their cities. Maybe there was something in this diplomacy business... just as long as the envoy understood that Fergus Cousland was not on the marriage market.

"Here's my idea," Fergus said, rolling out a map of Nevarra and the western Marches. "Go incognito, and take a fishing boat from the village of Kilda, up at the Virgin Rocks in Waking Sea Bannorn. They have some good-sized vessels there. If you wait for fair weather, it's only six hours to Kirkwall."

The members of the Royal Council leaned closer, watching Fergus trace the route. The candles guttered a little, as a cold wind whistled through the shutters.

"Buy horses on the other side of the Waking Sea. From Kirkwall, take the road through the Vimmark Pass and strike out west. North of the mountains the weather should be much milder. Head for the Imperial Highway. Here," he said, pointing to a fork in the red line, "you take the road at the city of Barbastra on to the capital. At this time of year, the king will be in residence. I think trying to sail all the way to Cumberland is far too risky in this season. You're also far more likely to come across an Orlesian warship. There must be a few out, even in the month of Haring! I think with reasonable luck, you could be in the city of Nevarra within eight days of your arrival in Kirkwall."

"And with *unreasonable* luck," Wulffe said grimly, "you might not get there at all. I know, I know. If you go that way, you're not as likely to freeze or drown. Still, Kirkwall's a dodgy place. You'd want to keep your tongue behind your teeth, because I'll warrant that the City of Chains is crawling with Orlesian agents."

"A good point... and that's not the only place, either. Let us agree," Loghain said, looking at each Council member in turn, "that *nothing* is to be said about this mission. If word got out, our envoy would be the target of Orlesian assassins, bent on preventing his arrival in Nevarra. We want him to get out of Ferelden without exciting comment until he's already on the other side of the Waking Sea. I have some ideas on the matter."

The look he sent her gave Bronwyn the essential hint that her maps of the Deep Roads would figure largely in Loghain's

'ideas.'

The afternoon Landsmeet session was slow and boring: nearly entirely devoted to a wrangle over a dowry for marriage that had been solemnized years ago. It had not been presented earlier because the plaintiff thought Loghain would be more sympathetic to his case than Anora. As it happened, Loghain was no more in favor of cheating a young woman than his daughter would have been.

Bronwyn was bored and restless and her stupid crown was once again giving her a headache. It was a curious form of torture that she must not let anyone watching her know it. Facing her were scores of beady, scrutinizing eyes, looking for weaknesses, looking for something to turn to their advantage, even simply looking for something to gossip about. Even though it was all she could do to stay awake, she must look bright-eyed and interested and perfectly pleased with everything going on about her.

Her throne was hard and uncomfortable, and she noticed that the gilding was tarnished along the arm rests. She amused herself by fixing her thoughts on Nathaniel's projected mission to Nevarra, but then, by degrees, she began thinking about her own plans for the Alienage. She had mentioned her construction project to Loghain, who had brusquely told her to please herself, if she wanted to spend her own coin that way. Not the most encouraging of responses, but she did have coin, and did intend to demolish the vacant and crumbling orphanage and put up a sturdy tenement that would provide

decent housing for at least twenty elven families. It would provide the Alienage, in addition, with a meeting hall on the ground floor. She had the name of a reputable builder, and she was meeting with him in the next few days to commission a design from him. Nothing could be built until spring, of course. She had asked a clerk to review the laws pertaining to the Alienage. She suspected some of the harsh restrictions placed upon them were not actual laws, but customs or extra-legal whims of past arls. It was best that Kane understand from the first that Fereldan law would protect all Fereldans.

As soon as the Landsmeet was over, she would summon the child Amethyne to the palace, along with her teacher, to see and hear what progress she had made. The teacher was Nevarran, she remembered. She should talk to the woman... ask some idle questions. And there was the library. Jowan had mentioned there was quite a bit about Nevarra to be found there.

Thus, her thoughts made another revolution back to Nathaniel and the Nevarran scheme. What could she do to help him? Too long had she been in Denerim, dancing attendance on the Landsmeet. She longed to do something strong and adventurous; something to stir her spirit and lift her heart.

She longed for it more than ever, when she noticed Loghain whispering with Anora, talking over the case, back and forth. As Chancellor, Anora had a small seat of her own, down a step and to the right of the King's. Loghain always asked Anora her opinion of such things, and never Bronwyn herself. She would not be so bored if Loghain ever consulted her. She

could hardly make a scene here in front of the Landsmeet, and so turned her thoughts back to her own affairs. How odd. She had not fought anyone yet this month. She had not killed an enemy in the past ten days. She thought of the words of the poet:

"How dull it is to pause, to make an end;

To rest unburnish'd, not to shine in use!"

She had had quite enough of this. She had not imagined that being Queen could be so beastly *dull*. If her wandering Wardens were not here by the time the Landsmeet ended, Bronwyn would go looking for them.

Thanks to my reviewers: Chandagnac, Phygmalion, Kyren, KrystylSky, anon, Sizuka2, JackOfBladesX, Girl-chama, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Nemrut, KnightOfHolyLight, Mike3207, Trishata96, Reyvatiel Songstress, mille libri, darksky01, Jyggilag, Robbie the Phoenix, Tsu Doh Nimh, Bob, Calliope Sol, EpitomyofShyness, Tirion, Jenna53, Gene Dark, almostinsane, jnybot, MsBarrows, Have Socks. Will Travel, Guest, Blinded in a bolthole, Juliafied, guardian1165, Eviloply Joberns, Zute, Eva Galana, and Josie Lange.

I once commented that there were no signs of textile production in the game. That is untrue. I have since found two small hand looms in the game: one is behind the bar of the Crown and Lion in Amaranthine (?), and the other is in

the general untidiness on the second floor of Soldier's Peak, up against the wall by the summoning circles. Go figure. Still no spindles or spinning wheels. No sewing boxes, either. It also bugs me that the protagonist can buy heaps of armor, but no pretty clothes. You have to kill the right people for those or pretend to be in a circus. And for that matter Hawke's noble garb in DA2 is hideous, especially female Hawke's.

Yes, I'm making up towns. The map of Thedas is absurdly sparse. I presume the map must be showing only the very largest settlements (which shows how underpopulated Ferelden is, if Lothering is considered a major town!)

Bronwyn quotes Tennyson's Ulysses, one of my favorite poems.

87. What Dreams May Come

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 87: What Dreams May Come

"So... my little sister is at home in the Queen's Apartments. Mother and Father would be so proud. You looked splendid today, pup."

"I still feel rather like an intruder, but I'm settling in. Have another sandwich."

"Thanks. These are good."

Fergus munched, eyeing his sister thoughtfully. They had not had a private conversation in some time. He had been in the Queen's sitting room before, of course, when Anora lived here. Bronwyn's changes were already apparent, especially in the color scheme. Bronwyn had always liked green. Tapestry-work cushions with images of deer and mabari were scattered over the wooden chairs and the window seat. She had found some drapes the color of dark fir trees that hung from ceiling to floor, and on the floor was a beautiful carpet that resembled a grassy meadow starred with colorful flowers. The armor and weapon stands were new as well. The bookcase held only a few volumes, but a large collection

of curious treasures, most notably the amazing shallow bowl of hammered gold that had been used to administer the Ashes to Anora. The red dragon armor, crowned with the winged helmet, was as striking as any piece of statuary. It was not at all like her old room at home, and yet it already bore his sister's mark.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

Bronwyn laughed. "Plenty! Your Nevarran scheme has me in a whirl. What a splendid idea... and what an adventure. I'm rather devastated that I can't go myself. How I'd love to see the lands across the Waking Sea!"

Fergus grimaced, feeling his own disappointment. "I had every intention of going myself, but Nate is right: the the Nevarran king would write a marriage into any treaty. As it is, I'll have to tell Nate outright about my own plans before he goes. By the time he's at the Nevarran Court, everyone here will know about my betrothal to Anora. By the time he's back in Ferelden, we'll likely be married."

That was startling. "You won't wait until next Kingsway?"

"Ha!" The laugh rang out, waking Scout from his doze by the fire. The mabari padded over to Fergus, looking for a share in the sandwiches and an ear rub.

"Give him the mutton, Fergus," Bronwyn said, "Not the cheese."

Fergus chuckled, petting the dog. He looked up at her under his brows, just as he had as a teenager, and said. "No. We're not waiting for Kingsway. We're thinking Guardian. We'll make a public announcement next month." He saw her trying to discreetly count on her fingers. "Guardian is good enough. Even if we strike lucky and I get Anora with child right away, it wouldn't be born until next Firstfall. No chance of Cailan getting credit for *my* seed. Even if it's born scandalously early —"

"Will it be?" Bronwyn asked, eyes wide.

"No," he assured her, grinning. "We are being very, very proper indeed. As I say, an early birth might happen in Harvestmere. Still beyond the limit. Guardian is fine. Neither of us has a year to waste. I need an heir. Anora needs an heir. We're not children, and we won't be bullied by the old women and the finger-waggers. Guardian. Obviously, we'll have a quiet wedding, and then have it recognized at the spring Landsmeet."

"Another Landsmeet!" groaned Bronwyn. "Maker knows we needed this one, but one a year seems more than enough to me!"

"We don't want to make winter Landsmeets a regular thing," Fergus shrugged. "The ice storm was pretty in sunshine, but a cursed awkward thing to try to get out in. I think you know that quite a few poor souls were found frozen to death. Some huddled in the streets or against walls. A sad thing, that."

Bronwyn soberly agreed, a little ashamed of her warm fire and her warm bed. Most of the very poor were allowed to take shelter in the Cathedral on the coldest nights, but some were not able to get about, and some were elves, who did not always feel welcome. A few might be mages, afraid to go near such a place. Loghain might be so greedy as to want all the mages in the army, but Bronwyn had her own plan, which was to take that tucked-away warehouse in the Market District and turn it into a free clinic. It would give employment to a staff of... what? ...five mages, perhaps. If the Templars had an assigned role in supervision, perhaps the Grand Cleric could be made to agree. Healing should not be something to which only the wealthy and noble had access. She was working on a plan, and wanted to show it to Anders for his advice. It needed a bit of polishing, first. Now that she had seen the suffering of the people in winter, she had a new idea. On very cold nights, people would be allowed to go there to be warm. That meant that the building would need a new, modern-built fireplace with a proper chimney. And a fireproof slate roof. Oh, dear, it would not be cheap...

She turned her attention back to her brother. "Well, if you and Anora are determined to defy convention, you'll have my support, obviously. Let me know what you'd like for a wedding present."

He smirked at her. "A cousin for my child."

She threw a cushion at him. Scout barked cheerfully, wanting to play, too.

"All right," she grumbled, summoning Scout to her side, "let's talk of something serious. After I have another sandwich. Maker, I'm starving. All that sitting and ... *not* talking... is such a tiresome bore. Let's get back to the Nevarran mission. We'll have to think of something to call it... a code word. 'Coastal Improvements,' or something equally innocuous. One never know who might be hiding behind the curtains! There are heaps of books about Navarra in the Royal Library, but I don't want to tip our hand by having them lying about. I shall go there to read them and I'll shelve them myself."

"That's certainly an improvement from your feckless youth. Perhaps you won't dog-ear the pages anymore, either."

"Certainly not," she replied, very haughty. "We are above such untidiness, now that we have risen to glory."

He threw the cushion back at her.

"The first big hurdle," he said, "is to find a way to get our people to their ship without the whole of Ferelden knowing about it."

"There might be a way," Bronwyn said, "Or at least, part of a way. The Deep Roads in the north seem to be comparatively empty. That's what my Wardens are reporting, anyway. If Nate and his men could go part of the way underground, there would be no fear of prying eyes. And they'd be sheltered from the weather. It's never cold in the Deep Roads.. pleasantly cool, actually."

"Empty?" Fergus frowned. "Where in the Maker are the creatures?"

"Tara said they went west. There were some bad skirmishes, but no darkspawn behind the initial forces they met. I'm planning on heading west myself, as soon as the Landsmeet is over. We should be ready to move out then. Everyone will be traveling, and there will be nothing odd about Nathaniel leaving with the rest."

"Fair enough. I had another idea. What ships are not in dry dock are heading north. I've had dealings with a Rivainni captain before—the one I sent to Antiva. Clever, and stays loyal as long as she's properly paid. She's back in Denerim now, and I'm inclined to hire her, rather than to hope for an adequate fishing boat. The *Siren's Call* is shallow-drafted enough to get into the little coves up at the Virgin Rocks. We can make arrangements for her to get out of Denerim with a cargo of rare timber, and make for Kirkwall. That harbor never ices in. We'll set a date for her to come to Kilda—allowing for the weather—and Nate and Adam can go in style in Captain Isabela's ship. She'll wait for them there until they return, and that way they can get home without a fuss."

"I like that idea!" Bronwyn nibbled her sandwich, feeling more and more pleased. "But let's keep it a secret from the rest of the Council. They don't have to know all the details. We'll want to meet with Nate and the Hawkes. Maker! I'll have to talk to Carver about it... What will their mother say?"

"We'll distract her with her niece's betrothal. Rothgar told me

he's ready to make his move. We'll have to tell Loghain and Anora about it, too."

"Eventually," Bronwyn said. "But I don't want them taking everything over."

Fergus gave her a quick, shrewd look.

"Anora's been Loghain's daughter all her life, after all," he remarked.

"And I'm supposedly his wife! How does it look, when he confers with her, on and on, back and forth, and I'm sitting there like a dressed-up doll?"

"Oh... the Mac Korval dowry debacle. Did you have an interest in the case?"

"Not in the least."

"Did you have an opinion about it? Did you study the background of the complaints?"

Reluctantly, she admitted. "I knew nothing about it, other than the gossip."

"Well then..." He gave her another look, which heightened his resemblance to their father so much that Bronwyn's breath caught. "If you want your voice to be heard, you have to have something to say. No one expects you to know everything about everything. Become an expert in the things that interest you. That's a good place to start... like this whole Nevarran...I

mean "Coastal Improvements" plan. Maker knows we know little enough about the country. If you're the expert, Loghain will turn to you for advice. Don't sulk, pup," he said, firmly and kindly. "Make yourself indispensable. That's what Anora's done, but Anora's no warrior and has never been out of Ferelden. You've only been to Ostwick yourself, of course, but..."

"Not true," Bronwyn declared. "I have journeyed to Orlais... if only to the Roc du Chevalier. But I have been in Orlais, long enough to have a conversation in the language and drink an entire goblet of wine; and I have explored extensively *under* Orlais by way of the Deep Roads, so I feel myself quite the experienced traveler. Now, fortified by my sandwiches, I shall venture even into the Royal Library, and take you up on your excellent suggestion."

"Bann Bonnam has a very pretty sister, darling," Leandra reminded her son. "You danced with her last night. Very pretty and quite nice. A very nice man himself. It's a way of cementing friendships."

"Mother," Adam said, trying to be patient. "You didn't marry my father to cement any *friendships*. In fact, as I recall, your marriage to my father resulted—"

"I *loved* him!" Leandra cried, exasperated. "But you're not in love with *anybody*, Adam! You never *are*! If you were in love with someone I could understand it! We could try to make it work, no matter who she was!"

Hawke glanced nervously at the door to the parlor. Someone was going to hear her. He hoped it wouldn't be the Arl.

"Mother. Calm down. Give me time. I've just been confirmed, for Maker's sake! There's plenty of time for me to look about, now that I have something decent to offer a woman. The Landsmeet won't be over for a few days. I promise to look about *tonight*, for that matter. I'll dance every dance, and have a careful look at all the virgin sacrifices—"

Leandra dropped her head into a weary hand. "I just want grandchildren. Yes, I want grandchildren. Is that so much to ask? Carver is a Grey Warden... and who will marry Bethany?" She turned blue, pleading eyes up to her son. "You're my only hope."

She was quieter now, at least. Hawke went down on one knee and took his mother's other hand.

"I won't let you down, Mother. I promise. Just give me a bit of time. You'll have a daughter-in-law. You'll have grandchildren. Look at how far we've come in just a few months. Look at how we're living. Just calm down. You have to look your best for the feast tonight."

"Oh, yes," she fluttered, dabbing at her eyes with a dainty handkerchief. "Blessed Andraste! I have to see to the boys. The children are having their own party tonight, you know, in the Yellow Parlor at the Palace. Such a charming idea of the Dowager Queen's. Dancing and games. I must look in on them later during the feast."

Hawke nodded, and backed away cautiously, hearing soft sounds outside the door. Someone eavesdropping. He reached the door and flung it open.

Bethany was disappearing into her own room, just the train of her dress trailing away. The door shut. Hawke hoped she had not heard much of the conversation, but since she had run away, he supposed she had, including the bit about nobody wanting to marry her. He fought down useless anger at his mother. She was an Arlessa now! Couldn't she be satisfied with *that* until the end of the month?

"I'll let you get ready, then," he said, his voice mild. "I might as well have a word with the girls before I go."

Charade did not want to let him into the room she shared with Bethany. Instead she stood outside in the hall and spoke to him in whispers.

"She's crying. She doesn't want to talk to you right now."

"I've always been able to make her feel better. Give me a chance."

"I don't know what she heard, but it upset her. A lot."

"Mother didn't mean for her to hear it." He took his cousin gently by the shoulders and moved her aside. "She'll feel better after we talk it over. Why don't you send for some tea?"

Charade made a face at him. "I can make tea *myself*. Come on."

It was true. She had a grate and a tea kettle and even a toasting fork. The girls' room was really charming.

Bryland House was a good sized mansion, but even a mansion does not have an unlimited number of fine bedchambers. The Arl had his rooms, the Arlessa hers; the boys had their schoolroom and the room they insisted was no longer the nursery. Habren's room was exactly as she had left it—aside from the things she had taken with her—because the the Arl had muttered something about 'You never know with Habren,' and Mother had not argued with him. Bethany and Charade shared the room that had once been Lady Werberga's. Apparently there was a lot more room at the castle in South Reach, but very likely they would want to share there, too. Adam was pleased at so much family affection, but found it a little hard to understand. He had shared a room — or a loft— with Carver from childhood until the beginning of this year, and proximity had not exactly improved their relationship.

But this was really a pleasant room, or would be when the inhabitants were not so unhappy. Bethany was curled up on the big bed, crying, while Charade raised her brows and set about making tea. Hawke sat down on the bed by his sister and smoothed the dark hair away from her flushed, wet face.

"You know how she gets. Everything has to be done today, or we're doomed."

"It's true. Everyone knows I'm a mage. No one will have me, especially after the foul things that Orlesian Templar said about me."

"He's full of rubbish!" Charade burst out hotly. She had been stirring the fire up, and waved the poker like a weapon. Then she affected a ridiculous Orlesian accent, and a comical sneer. "I haf never beeeen to yoooor countree, and I know nozeeeng about eet, but I will make zee seelly taunts all zee zame. Pah! I speet on you, Dog Lords!"

Adam laughed, and applauded heartily. "You should have been a bard!"

"Stop!" Bethany pleaded, wiping her eyes, laughing in spite of herself.

"Knight-Divine or no," Charade said fiercely. "he's full of rubbish. He's a nasty man and his opinion isn't worth a copper. Everybody in the Landsmeet knows that, and those that don't are too stupid to live. And next time I see him, I'll say I don't care *that*—" she snapped her fingers "—for his ugly lies!"

"You're braver than I am," Bethany sighed. "All the same, nobody sensible would want to marry a mage."

"You don't know that, " said Adam. " I've seen plenty of men dancing with you. If you wash your face and do your hair, I predict that yet more will beg for the honor. It's a new world here in Ferelden, Bethany. The Queen favors the mages.

Everybody knows that. The King, too. He brought all those mages up from Ostagar, and gave them places in the army. Look at all the mages in the Wardens. Nobody shuns them."

"I don't see anyone asking to marry them, either!" Bethany shot back.

"I think Warden Anders would marry that Morrigan in a heartbeat—if she'd have him," he pointed out. "And I certainly don't expect you to associate just with mages. Just last night, at least three men told me how pretty you are. A lot of people think well of you—"

"Mother said you were her 'only hope!'"

"She said that to make me feel guilty. It had nothing to do with you. She didn't mean that at all. She was just using all the weapons in her arsenal to get me married. She even cried real tears."

"Well, I cried real tears, too. I have dreams, after all... I have hopes for something like a normal life. Maybe they're silly, but I have them all the same."

"So do we all, sister mine. Whatever a 'normal' life may be."

Bethany sat up, and Charade brought her a handkerchief.

"Tea's almost ready. I'll put honey in it."

They drank it down gratefully, only exchanging the odd word or two. Charade took her cup to the window and sat on the

seat, peering out at the twilight on the roofs of Denerim.
"There are horses in the courtyard. Someone must be calling on the Arl."

"Someone's *always* calling on the Arl," Bethany said.

There was a knock at the door.

"My lady?" a manservant asked. "Is Bann Adam there? The Arl wishes to speak to him."

"Right here." Adam said, opening the door. He quaffed down the last of the pleasantly sweet tea, and set down his cup. He gave a nod to the girls. "Later, then."

He followed the footman down to the study. What did the Arl want? Adam hoped this was not about his mother's earlier scene. It could be embarrassing and difficult to navigate if the Arl decided to 'help' find his stepson a wife.

The door to the study was opened for him, and the servant said quietly, "Bann Adam, my lord."

No. It was not all about him. Laughing at himself for his vanity, Adam noted that Arl's guests were Arl Wulffe and his son, Rothgar.

"Come in, my boy," said Leonas. "We have family business to discuss."

Later that evening, Hawke tried to present his best and most

cheerful face to his dance partners. It was not easy, as his precious new fortune had dissolved into dowry money. Most of it, anyway. Arl Wulffe was eager for Rothgar to make a happy, early, *fruitful* marriage, and Rothgar was eager to get his hands... etcetera... on Charade.

However, considering that Rothgar was heir to an arling, it was unreasonable to expect them to accept less than five hundred sovereigns in dowry, in addition to the bride's clothes, jewels, and other possessions. Adam had hoped that Arl Leonas would offer to contribute to the dowry money, but he did not. He only said that his Arlessa would no doubt enjoy putting together her niece's trousseau. That would be a real help, but at the spring Landsmeet, Adam would have to come down with the coin himself. By then he would have some steady income streams from taxes and trade tariffs, but it was still a blow. It was almost exasperating enough to make him find a bride and a dowry for himself.

He dutifully danced with only marriageable young women. Some were better than others, though none of them particularly interested him. Perhaps it was his mood.

The dance ended. He smiled with practiced charm at his partner, and gave her a graceful bow of thanks. Beyond her, he saw Fergus and Nathaniel talking quietly and earnestly, looking in his direction. Fergus raised his brows at him; a clear, discreet summons. Adam made his way across the hall toward them, smiling at all the ladies, making himself agreeable as he went. Bann Berthilde winked at him, the naughty minx—and she married and the mother of three. He

smiled back at her. A very fine woman, that.

"Adam," Fergus acknowledged him. "Nate and I want to sound you about a little plot we're concocting. Let's go to the Yellow Parlor and watch the sprogs at play."

Proud mothers and fathers were in and out, pleased to see their offspring mingling with suitable companions. Said offspring and their companions were waxing fairly hilarious over a game of Musical Statues. A few older, more dignified sorts were strolling about, chatting, looking very superior, or simply stuffing their faces. A knot of the big girls were gossiping exactly like their mothers. It was a very cheerful scene for all that.

Fergus knew from the moment he entered that he had made a mistake. Seeing these children, imagining Oren among them, almost hearing his clear young voice and his happy laughter made his heart twist inside him. Stolidly, he put those memories by, and stationed himself in a corner.

"Adam!" shouted Corbus. "Look at us! We can leapfrog all the way across the room without stopping!" He ran up behind Bevin, and vaulted over him, and then over Lothar. Bevin quickly leaped over Lothar and then Corbus, and then...

"Come on, Lothar! Don't be a baby!"

Thus urged, Lothar bounded after Corbus and failed to make the jump, sprawling with an uproarious shriek on his brother's back. The room erupted into squeals of delight. The boys

laughed, too, though Corbus looked a bit put out.

"My lords!" Their tutor bustled after them, trying to swallow a distracting sweetmeat. "This is most inappropriate!"

Adam gave Corbus a grin and a wave, and the men talked quietly among themselves, pretending to watch the children.

"This is absolutely secret," Fergus said, sipping his wine. "You may choose not to participate, but you must tell no one about this conversation."

"Of course."

Nathaniel admired a group of little girls, colorful as a wreath of pansies, dancing in a ring. They reminded him of his sister, long ago. Delilah had been such a pretty, serious child... "The Council is planning an embassy to Nevarra. It was Fergus' idea, but I'll head it. I'd like you to come along. It's important. And it could be extremely dangerous."

Adam thought briefly of his mother, Charade's betrothal, his projects in Amaranthine, and the Fereldan marriage market, where he was so much meat to the grinder.

He smiled. "I'm at your service, my lord Arl."

Bronwyn's head was full of recent Nevarran history and genealogy throughout the evening. It was unwise to take notes at this point, and so she used the memory tricks taught

to her by Aldous years before. She would also, during her next visit to the Wardens' Compound, look for any notes left by Jowan during his Nevarran studies. They might prove a treasure. On leaving, she did take one book with her: *The Noldor Anthology of Dwarven Poetry*. That should baffle any spy.

An aggressive people, the Nevarrans. Their nation was only five years older than Ferelden: also founded in the Exalted Age in the backwash of the Fourth Blight. The Van Markham family still ruled there, their line crossed again and again with the powerful Pentaghost clan. King Baltus was forty-six years old and had reigned for the past fifteen years. Melantha, his Queen, was a Pentaghost by birth, and his second cousin. Their succession seemed secure: their son Tylus was the heir and Prince of Cumberland, as was the custom. There was another son, Paris, and two daughters: Sophia and Porphyria—*neither* of whom was going to marry Fergus! King Baltus had not been on good terms with one of his sisters, but there seemed to be no threat to his rule. The royal family was large and branching, but of course, *theirs* had not been slaughtered during an Orlesian invasion, unlike the Theirins.

They were highly cultured, too. All the sources—including Brother Genetivi's book—described Nevarra as a land of artists as well as warriors. That book, of course, Bronwyn possessed.

"The whole country is filled with artistry, from the statues of heroes that litter the streets in even the meanest villages to

the glittering golden College of Magi in Cumberland. Perhaps nowhere is more astonishing than the vast necropolis outside Nevarra City. Unlike most other followers of Andraste, the Nevarrans do not burn their dead. Instead, they carefully preserve the bodies and seal them in elaborate tombs. Some of the wealthiest Nevarrans begin construction of their own tombs while quite young, and these become incredible palaces, complete with gardens, bathhouses, and ballrooms, utterly silent, kept only for the dead."

That was a new word for her: necropolis. A City of the Dead. Preserving and housing bodies in elaborate tombs seemed very peculiar and rather nasty to Bronwyn, but perhaps they had adopted that custom from the dwarves?

At any rate, it was *their* custom, and must be respected. They had done extremely well against the Orlesians, and taken quite a bit of territory from them. Good.

She also found herself doing a bit of research on Kirkwall, the first stop on the itinerary abroad. She had heard rumors before, of course, but Arl Wulffe was right: Kirkwall was definitely a dodgy place. It was a very ancient city—or perhaps one might say that modern Kirkwall was built on the bones of a very ancient city: Emerius, a center of the Tevinter slave trade in the days of the Imperium. Very likely that was the first "civilized" city that Andraste had seen after she was enslaved. In those days, southerners from what was now Ferelden were taken in the slave ships to Emerius, to begin the weary overland march to Cumberland, there to travel up

the Imperial Highway through all weathers to their masters' capital.

Not always, of course. In those days when Tevinter ruled all Thedas, and slaves would be sold off at every city, only a small percentage—the best of the best— kept back for Minrathous and the Court of the Archons, on account of remarkable beauty, strength or talent. The story was that Andraste was one such. Bronwyn wished that more was known about her escape. That must have been an incredible adventure.

At any rate, Kirkwall was still an odd place, even with the Tevinters long departed, even after throwing off the Orlesian yoke themselves. A very high percentage of the population were mages, many of whom evaded the Templars and lived as apostates. Many of said apostates became abominations, rampaging through the streets—or at least that was the story the Templars told. The Templars were immensely powerful in Kirkwall... so powerful that the Knight-Commander brazenly murdered the Viscount, Perrin Threnhold, when he tried to oust the order from his city. She had put a weaker man, Marlowe Dumar, in his place, but everyone knew who held the real power in the city. Personally, Bronwyn thought the Kirkwall Templars sounded particularly incompetent, since they could not get the mages under control, despite their numbers and political authority. Odd that they should not recognize that their failure made them look incompetent: good only for cutting down unarmed noblemen who spoke against them. She was surprised that the city had not risen.

But of course they would be afraid of an Exalted March, the threat the Chantry pulled like a dagger whenever anyone dared displease them. Ferelden itself had been threatened, and Bronwyn sensed that many were frightened at the prospect. Truth be told, she was worried herself.

Not enough to bend the knee, however. Would the Orlesians dare an Exalted March for such cynically political reasons? Another good reason to ally with the Nevarrans, who were unlikely to be impressed by that sort of bullying.

Preoccupied as she was, she smiled properly when the children were trotted out from the Yellow Parlor to perform a little dance, and she showed appropriate approval when the betrothal was announced between Rothgar of West Hills to Lady Charade Amell. The marriage was planned for the spring Landsmeet, here in Denerim.

"I had not imagined Wulffe to be so patient," she murmured to Fergus.

"Hawke needs some time to get the dowry together," he whispered back. "Coming down with five hundred sovereigns when he's a new bann can't be easy. We'll have to give the embassy some coin out of the royal treasury."

"Of course. I've been taking your advice. Perhaps we can have a private meeting about those Coastal Improvements—not tomorrow, but the day after. By then, maybe we'll have more pieces put together."

If her elves had not gone to the Alienage the following day, Bronwyn would not have known Marethari and a band of her Dalish were in Denerim. Danith sought her out in the afternoon after the Landsmeet session to give her the news. It could not have been easy, making their way to the city and dealing with the guards and the hostile humans. Once there, they had been laughed at when they asked for directions to the WARDen-Commander, and had been shunted off to the Alienage.

"They camped in the big empty building," Danith told her. "The orphanage, they call it. The one you plan to replace with something less flimsy. The Keeper tells me they were comfortable enough. There is plenty of room for the ten of them."

Bronwyn could have sworn like a trooper. Was every human in Ferelden part of a plot to undermine the Warden alliances?

"I am very sorry they were treated so discourteously. I will give orders... no... let's have the Wardens escort them to the Palace. I would like to talk quietly with Marethari and hear what she thinks of the lands near the ancient temple. The guards will be made to behave properly."

"Why not in the Warden Hall?" Danith shrugged. "Her alliance is with the Wardens, not the Queen of Ferelden. If your husband wishes to come, let him come as the mate of a Warden."

"That will do for now," Bronwyn allowed, rather amused by Danith's description of Loghain as 'the mate of a Warden.'

"But when we announce the grant, it should be in front of the nobles, in the Landsmeet Chamber. The Wardens have no power to offer the land grant; that really must be done in the name of the Crown of Ferelden. We have to make them all understand that this is a binding agreement. The Dalish are our allies, and should be treated with respect. Yes, put together a honor guard of Wardens—of all races. There is no reason that Marethari and her party could not be accommodated at the Compound, if they wish. It is good of her to venture to Denerim in this weather."

"The Dalish do not tremble at a little snow."

Danith left to gather her detail, and after Bronwyn gave some stern orders to an officer of the Palace guard, she decided to change into her Warden gown, still thinking about the afternoon session. It had featured a very unpleasant public petition that should have been presented in a private audience. The nobles had watched, some sympathetic, some titillated by the scandal.

It could not have been easy for Anora to sit impassively, while those women—Cailan's mistresses—made their demands. Three of them had joined together, finding strength in unity, waving their grubby scrawls on grubby parchment. One wanted a house that she said Cailan had promised her. Another wanted a pension. The youngest—and she was too young to be debauched by a king, in Bronwyn's opinion—told them that Cailan had promised her a dowry of ten sovereigns, with which she planned to marry and open a bakery.

None of them had any proof in writing, of course, though that did not mean that Cailan had not made such promises. The other two known mistresses were both elves, and had not dared to show their faces in the Landsmeet Chamber. One had slipped back into the obscurity of the Alienage, clearly expecting nothing now that Cailan was dead. The other had sent a pitifully misspelled plea for help. She claimed that Cailan had promised to support her and her child, whether it was his or not. Yes, her child was an elf, but the King had promised to stand by her.

Anora was not speaking, so Bronwyn saw an opportunity. She leaned over to Loghain, and whispered. "Give them each ten sovereigns, and send them away. I like the girl. She has a plan. Give the elf who wrote ten sovereigns, too."

Loghain snorted, "That's a lot of coin."

"Cailan would have spent far more than that on them, had he lived. Don't haggle. Consider it payment for services to the Crown. Anora wants them gone."

That was a sure push at Loghain's feelings. Bronwyn smiled with satisfaction at the memory. The girl had been pleased and happy; her companions less so, but relieved to get anything at all. They had been hustled away, after Loghain told them that the issue was closed, and no further claims of the sort would be entertained.

As it was getting dark and very cold, Bronwyn hurried to the Compound, leaving a message to Loghain telling him where

she was. She looked forward to reconnecting with her Wardens. She warned Mistress Rannelly to expect visitors, and went to check on Aeron. He was rapidly improving, since his dose of improved Joining potion. His hair was still not growing out, but he was free from pain and his frostbitten appendages were all functional, allowing him to practice a new song quietly in a corner.

"That's nice," she murmured, pulling a stool closer so she could listen.

He smiled, and strummed more chords, searching for just the right one. "Just a little something of my own. A lot of the others went with Danith to fetch the Dalish. Anders and Morrigan are up in their room. Niall's reading in the study, and Maeve's doing a bit of sewing. I'm not in the mood to face the cold until I absolutely can't avoid it."

"Then play for me."

The light strumming grew more certain, and the pleasant tenor rose in song.

*"Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude, as man's ingratitude.
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy teeth are not so sharp,
Although thy breath be rude, although thy breath be rude.

My faithful friends draw nigh*

*And look us in the eye.
It is a wealthy man who has good friends like you.
Through darkness, cold, and snow,
Wherever you may go,
You bear my friendship true, you bear my friendship true.*

*Now warm these gentle folk
With maple, birch, and oak,
And turn you front and back to feel the cheerful blaze.
And be of cheerful mind,
And bless the wintertime;
Its calm and starry nights and bright and silent days."*

Bronwyn fell warm and relaxed listening to the song, and accepted with whispered thanks the cup of hot cider Rannelly pressed into her hand. She always felt at home here. Seeing her pleasure, Aeron sang a few more for her. Very soon, Niall and Maeve joined her, and a bit later, Anders and Morrigan.

"Hah!" Morrigan remarked. "The Queen deigns to join her humble minions. We are honored!"

"So you should be," Bronwyn said, pleased to see her. "Of course the food and the entertainment—" she gave a nod to Aeron "—are mighty draws."

Morrigan huffed, but sat down by her all the same.

"Another song, please, Aeron," Bronwyn urged.

"How about this?"

*"Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more;
Men were deceivers ever;
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never;
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny;
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into 'Hey, nonny, nonny.'*

*Sing no more ditties, sing no more,
Or dumps so dull and heavy;
The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leavy.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into 'Hey, nonny, nonny.'"*

"'Hey, nonny, nonny,' indeed," Morrigan scoffed. "What curious fellows you minstrels are! If any man dared deceive me, he would hear me say something quite other than *'Hey, nonny nonny!'* Though I should not waste my sighs, either."

Anders laughed, and bowed gallantly. "I couldn't deceive you even if I tried!"

"Yes, you are perfectly transparent. I like that in a man."

The outer door opened, letting in a draught of icy air. Marethari, her nine Dalish companion, and a large party of Warden made for a noisy entrance. Bronwyn got up immediately to welcome her guests.

"Welcome, Keeper Marethari, to the Grey Warden Hall," Bronwyn greeted her. "I am glad that we will have this opportunity to talk. First, however, we would be honored if you and your companions joined us for a meal. Later tonight, we will be feasting at the Palace, and I hope you will all come."

"My thanks, Grey Warden," replied the elven mage, "for myself and my clan."

It was a very pleasant meal. The elves had seen no darkspawn on their journey north, which was obviously good news. Urged by Steren, the Dalish brought their aravels and halla to the Compound, where they could be comfortably stabled with the other Wardens' animals.

"Our city cousins," said Marethari, "were quite courteous, especially the hahren, who seems a very good man. It is sad, however, to hear the tale of the lost. Were it not for the weather, I suspect that a number of the elves might wish to travel with us."

"You are, of course, very welcome to stay here with us," Bronwyn said. "There is plenty of room in the Compound..."

"You are gracious," said Marethari, "but I think... not. It is

very interesting to see an Alienage for myself. I wish to know more of how our cousins live. There is some good we can do there during our visit. Divided or not, we are all elves. I want them to know that should they decide in the future to join us, they would be accepted."

"The Keeper," Cathair said proudly, "healed many in the Alienage today."

Bronwyn smiled dutifully, hoping against hope that word of this would not spread outside the Alienage. Very likely it would not—or not very soon. The weather was cold; people were not getting out and about to gossip. Humans were not interested in elves, anyway, and elves were close-mouthed about their own doings. However, Templars did patrol there from time to time, and there was an enticing bounty for reporting magic use. In her heart, Bronwyn hoped that Marethari's stay would not be protracted.

Loghain made his appearance a little later, bringing a map of the Brecilian Forest with him, naturally.

"We can't talk long today," he told Bronwyn in a low voice. Perhaps a few preliminaries."

West of the White River; south of Dragon's Peak; north of the Brecilian Passage. That much was clear. What was not settled was the exact extent of the lands to be granted. Based on the location of the ancient temple and a tributary of the White River, they marked out a rough ellipse of land in the bulge of land jutting out into the Amaranthine Ocean that could

do. It was a day's journey along the long axis, and half a day's journey from south to north. Another big question was whether the elves wished for any part of the coast. They did not.

"We know nothing of the sea," Marethari said calmly. "It has never been part of our lore. Elves belong to the earth. We fish in fresh water, not in the salt of the ocean."

Loghain was deeply relieved by that, since he did not want any disputes about land ownership along the coastal trail. It was a road in places, and one really could travel along it all the way to Denerim. Not easily, but he hoped to expand settlement in that direction and the fishing industry as well. There was a little village south of Bear Island that would be the closest human settlement. The people there were isolated, and traveled mostly by boat to Denerim. There was a country lane that wound around the south side of Dragon's Peak to the River Way that they used for foot travel. They would still be a day's journey from the elven lands, which would lay to the southwest, and through dense forest. South Reach would not be a problem, being on the other side of the river, and two days journey distant. Even the foresters would have little reason to penetrate so deeply into the woods.

Ferelden was underpopulated; there was plenty of room for all. There was room for immigrants, for that matter, as long as the land could be made safe and secure. Loghain had his eye on new territory for those wanting their own holdings: the islands of the Amaranthine Archipelago; the lands west of the River Dane above Orzammar. No one would be deprived of anything by the elven grant, but he knew that there would be

some who would grudge it all the same.

The first leg of the march from Ostagar was the riskiest. There was not much in the way of shelter between the ancient fortress and the town of Lothering. If a blizzard came down upon them, they would be in serious trouble. Cauthrien watched the weather with a gimlet eye, and consulted with the Dalish, who were weather-wise of necessity.

She supposed they had made a brave show, as they departed from Ostagar, leaving behind the small garrison lodged in the Tower of Ishal. Road details had been constantly at work, moving the snow from the road, keeping the way clear for couriers. The soldiers trampled the remainder of the snow flat, and the wagons rolled along the roads easily enough, though the going was slippery in places. Alistair rode in the vanguard with her, scouting for darkspawn, and Stronar's nephew Emrys in the rearguard. Most of the other Wardens rode in the wagons carrying the contents of the Glavonaks' workshop.

Not so the huge Qunari warrior. He was mounted on his massive steed beside Alistair, looking about with interest and curiosity, and bearing the cold with admirable stoicism.

"Snow and ice will occupy a great deal of my report to the Arishok," he remarked. "They are a formidable obstacle. However, the warmth of the horse is of great assistance."

Alistair thought so too, glad of the strong, heat-generating

horse between his thighs. He had a fine wolfskin cloak now, too: lined and hooded, fashioned from the hides of wolves he had slain himself. There was something infinitely satisfying about that. The artisans and craftsmen who had followed the army had made a great deal of coin off the fact that many in Ostagar had not come expecting to face the cold. Once the darkspawn had been exterminated, trappers and hunters had moved in...cautiously at first, fearful of handling Blighted animals...but later on with more and more confidence. Their comparatively high pay had allowed the Wardens to commission warm gear. Everyone had furs now; and nothing like them for keeping out the cold!

He turned in his saddled, grinning at the soldiers behind them.

"We look like a troop of bears on horseback," he said to Cauthrien. "Big, fluffy bears."

Cauthrien snorted. Just like Loghain, Alistair noted. He shrugged. "Well, not all of us look like bears, of course. Some of us look like wolves or foxes. More elegant, I guess. But on horseback it still counts as unusual."

Part of that was a tribute to her silver fox cloak. It was very becoming, though Alistair supposed he shouldn't say that to a hard-as-nails Commander of hard-as-nails troops. It was, though. She looked really good in it, with her cheeks pink from the cold.

Then, too, Adaia and Siofranni looked like adorable little bunnies in their own furs. No— more expensive-looking than

mere rabbits. More likes sables. Minks. They had designed some quite gorgeous sleeved coats that they said were comfortably toasty. Everyone had fur boots and mittens, too and big fur hats: bearskin and wolfskin and deerhide; fox and beaver and rabbit and squirrel and marten. Sten's hat seemed almost large enough for the elves to use as a tent. The dwarves favored fur hats that fit entirely over their helmets. It made their heads really... big.

Cauthrien said, "I sent a courier to Lothering to arrange for billeting in the town, as far as possible. The Chantry can sleep hundreds. The bann's manor, too."

"I've stayed there," Alistair told her, happy to share the memory. "They have a boiler there and a bathroom and all. I had a private room. The bann's manor is really fancy."

"Well, you won't have a private room this time. Likely we'll all be four to a bed and the rest packed into the rooms on straw pallets. And those will be the ones with the *good* billets. We'll have soldiers sleeping in pigsties tonight."

"Even in a pigsty, I'll still have a fur blanket," Alistair said, laughing, "and so will you."

They moved along steadily, but rather slowly; stopping to rest the horses and eat and drink. Unsurprisingly no bandits challenged their passage; no darkspawn manifested. The Blight along the road had either been burned out by earlier patrols, or it had frozen, crackling into innocuous dust. As far as Alistair knew, there had never been a Blight in lands so far

south before. Maybe that was the reason the Archdemon had pulled the horde back from Ostagar. Darkspawn were tough, but apparently not tough enough to survive a hard freeze. Especially not without magnificent fur cloaks.

On they pushed; on and on. It was a hard, long march, and it lasted well into dark, but it was safer to billet in Lothering than to risk camping in tents. The sky was heavy and grey, but it seemed to Alistair that the Maker's hand held the snow in check. Even the air grew still toward evening, sparing them the wretchedness of bitter winds.

Cauthrien's courier had got through, and her careful planning paid off. The units were directed toward their billets with a minimum of confusion. The town militia had considerately lit tall torches that would light the way into and about the town. Sergeants bawled orders at their troops and hustled them into the houses and barns of wide-eyed townsfolk. Disciplined companies of Maric's Shield poured into the Chantry. The dwarves had good, sturdy quarters in the big gristmill and the tavern, among other places; and their leaders, like most of the officers and the Wardens were given quarters in the bann's manor. The Dalish stayed in the stables and barns with the halla, as did those guarding the oxen and horses. The Glavonak brothers refused to leave their wagons, and dossed down in the stables as well. There was kennel space enough for most of the dogs, and the rest found a degree of comfort in chickenhouses and pigsties.

Inside the manor, the traumatized seneschal was wandering the hall, hands over his mouth, as filthy, lice-ridden soldiers

fingered the tapestries and scraped the woodwork with slush-covered boots and spurs. Cauthrien was shown to an elegant bedchamber, and immediately declared that there was plenty of space in there for her staff as well.

The Wardens were given a room to themselves. As it happened, it was the room that Alistair had slept in last spring. It looked much smaller with nine Wardens and a Qunari warrior filling it. Alistair wondered, smirking, how long the bann's fancy plumbing would last under the onslaught of them all. They'd probably do better bathing together in the laundry. He suggested it to a passing maid he vaguely recognized.

"We have a boiler for that, too, my lord Warden. I'll see to it," she said, bustling off.

'My lord Warden!' Alistair smirked to himself. He liked the sound of that. He took another look at his mob. Half of them looked afraid to touch anything. They slowly pulled off their heavy furs. Adaia was staring at the blue brocade-draped bed. It was quite the sight, heavily carved with oak leaves and acorns, gilded in places, and long enough for a qunari.

Emrys muttered, "It's easy to see where old Ceorlic spent his coin. Is this his own bedchamber?"

"Don't think so," Alistair told him. "I think it's just one of many guest rooms. They're all incredibly posh."

"It's beautiful," Adaia whispered, thin fingers tracing the

carvings. "So this is a noble house. Do they all live like this, Alistair?"

"Pretty much."

"And all the rest of us... live the way we do..." her voice drifted off, and she studied an elegant x-shaped chair with scrolled arms. The back was painted with golden flowers, and it was cushioned with purple velvet. It stood in front of a inlaid writing desk. On the desk was a bronze inkstand with the image of a knight fighting a pair of wolves. Light was provided by a bronze candelabra, holding four scented candles.

"Not all of us live like this," Emrys snorted. "My family manor wasn't much more than a big farmhouse. We didn't have upholstered furniture or gilded beds. Or fancy gew-gaws everywhere."

"Still..." Adaia whispered, now admiring the wall hangings.

"Did that girl say we could have a bath?" asked Petra, sniffing gingerly at herself. "because that would be a gift of the Maker."

"A hot bath?" echoed Asa. "There's a long-forgotten treat."

Oghren rubbed his red beard. "Now who's going share *that* big bed with me? Heh-heh. Looks like there's room for all you fine ladies."

"Don't be a pig, Oghren," Ulfa rebuked him wearily. "Or we'll

have to skin you and roast you."

"Er..." Alistair mumbled. "I thought we'd let the females... er, ladies have the bed, and we men would take the floor. We've got lots of furs and things..."

"Do not patronize them as weaklings," said Sten. "However, if one observes that most of the females are indeed smaller, it is logical for them to take the bed, as more of them will fit."

"You have a brilliant mind, Sten," admired Asa. "You see everything so clearly. I think we can find a way to fit five on that bed. I'll fine-comb my hair first, though, just in case I've got some visitors."

"Considerate of you," Ulfa approved. "Me, too."

There were some fairly unmilitary shouts down the hall. Alistair guessed that someone had found the bathroom. Right. There was Cauthrien's voice, raised in command, reining in the chaos, organizing a rota.

"That's the upstairs bathroom," Alistair said. "Let's not get involved in that. The tub's only big enough for one or two, so they'll have to use the water over and over again. The laundry tub is probably really big. Maybe a bunch of us can go at once."

"I'm not bathing with Oghren," Asa declared. "I'll bet he'd pee in the water."

The dwarf put his hand on his heart in mock protest. "Me? Never!"

As it turned out, the manor's laundry tub was huge. It was on the ground level, next to the kitchen, and was likely the warmest place in the entire manor. The minute the women saw it, its steam roiling up whitely, they collectively screamed and began throwing off their clothes.

"Wait!" Alistair protested. "What are you doing? Stop—"

"I guess they're going first," Emrys said, craning to get a look at the retreating back views. He grinned at Alistair. "I can put my hands over your eyes if you're feeling faint."

"Mighty fine," leered Oghren. An indignant scullery maid shut the door in his face. He shouted through the door. "Don't take so long that the water gets cold!"

The horde was marching: thousands upon thousands of genlocks and hurlocks. Thousands of shrieks were among them, loping along like beasts. Ogres lumbered slowly, twice as tall the rest. Above them, the Archdemon bellowed in triumph.

Alistair awoke, that terrible cry still ringing in his ears. Around him his Wardens were moaning. Adaia was awake and whispering to Siofranni, too softly for him to hear. The figures on the big bed shifted. Petra, sleeping crosswise at the foot of the bed, sat up, gasping for breath.

"It's all right," Alistair murmured. "It's real, but it's all right. It can't be anywhere close."

"Are you sure?" Emrys said softly, stirring on his pile of furs. "I saw a great wave of darkspawn, marching in endless columns through the Deep Roads. They hear the song, and are filled with purpose."

"Sodding blighters," swore Oghren. "This dreaming thing is the worst bit about being a Warden."

"What if they're going to Denerim?" Nevin's eyes caught a shaft of moonlight and reflected it back. It made him briefly look like a frightened animal.

That was a terrifying thought. Alistair fought to control the brief flare of panic.

"I don't see how," he said quietly. "We haven't seen them any place where they could be gathering. From Bronwyn's letters, nobody's seen the main body of the horde in months. They're going somewhere else, and Maker help the people there."

The nightmare forced Leliana out of her bed at Soldier's Peak, heart pounding. She fumbled into a warm wrapper, and slid her feet into her sheepskin-lined slippers. Holding her flickering candlestick, she went upstairs to the kitchen. At this hour, all the servants would peacefully asleep. The fire, however, was burning brightly. Someone had already made it up.

"You too?"

Hakan and Soren were there, eyes shadowed, playing one of their endless chess games. Wind whistled through the high kitchen shutters. but the room was warm enough.

"I've had some wild dreams," Soren said, "but that one was pretty creepy. Who could fight an army that size?"

"Any army *could*," Hakan pointed out. "But they'd be massacred."

"Thanks for that cheerful insight," Soren snarled.

"I'll make some mulled wine," Leliana offered.

"You're a sweetheart," Hakan grunted.

Red wine, of course. She opened a bottle and decanted it carefully into the pan, adding spices and a bit of raw sugar. While it warmed, she took down cups from a shelf, humming softly to herself.

"I wonder if I should go see if Jowan is all right."

"Don't bother," Hakan advised. "It's too cold for you to go hold his hand. The wind would blow you right off the bridge to the Mages' Tower. You'd better stay here and fix up that wine."

"The old man probably still has him working late. Likes to crack the whip. Crazy mages can take care of themselves," agreed Soren.

"They've been very helpful," Leliana scolded them mildly.

Hakan was not altogether wrong, of course. To check on Jowan she would have to put on boots, breeches, jerkin, cloak, and gloves, and then hope that Avernus had not locked the tower entrance. She really did not want to stand on the high walkway, pounding unheard at the heavy door. She could pick the lock, of course, but Avernus often laid traps for the uninvited. Horrible old man. Paranoid and horrible. He only liked Bronwyn and Jowan. Maybe Morrigan, from something he had said, but that was not so surprising. Morrigan was quite horrible herself.

Truth was, she was inclined to look for Jowan because she was rather lonely, especially at this dark hour, when only Wardens were stirring. The women of the Wolf and Dryden families were very nice and very hard-working, but Leliana had little in common with them. She enjoyed putting the Wardens' castle in order, but there were times—like now—when it was simply not *enough*. Jowan at least could talk to her of travel and history. He had read many of the same books, and they had had fun putting the library here in order, working together pleasantly. They had something in common. He had made terrible mistakes, but so had she. He liked her songs, too.

She must talk to him tomorrow about moving out of the tower. Surely it would be much nicer for him to be here, with his friends.

The wine smelled so good. She poured it out, and brought the

dwarves their cups, smiling as they grunted their thanks. While she sipped her wine, she thought back on the dream. The horde looked like a river of Taint, but here and there streams of other darkspawn flowed away from it, heading toward other destinations. Where were they going?

"Did you see that?" Velanna whispered, unsure if she was awake or asleep.

Askil swore softly. "By the Stone, I *hate* the Fade."

Astrid agreed, but said nothing. Instead, she sat up, resting her back against a smooth stone wall, and lit a small lantern, considerately keeping the sides facing her Wardens shaded. They were in the Deep Roads, not far from Orzammar. She pulled out her map and brooded over it. Falkor had to have reached the city by now, bearing her letters. A letter to House Helmi. A letter to House Dace. More letters... twelve in all. By tomorrow, Falkor would stand before the Assembly with Rodyk, proclaiming her victory. Amgarrak Thaig regained. Kal'Hiol regained. Golems won to aid in the fight against the darkspawn. The entire Amgarrak Road cleared from Kal'Hiol to Orzammar. When was the last time that Orzammar had had such news? Not in her lifetime, certainly. What was Branka's smokeless stove to the reconquest of dwarven territory? Lady Dace, at least, should be swayed by the argument that a Paragon would be a useful counterweight to the power of the King.

Her fellow wardens were not so elated, and were having

trouble going back to sleep. Some nearby Legionnaires grumbled, cursing restless Wardens.

"I saw the Archdemon," said Ailill, his voice trembling. "I saw the horde."

"We all did," said Astrid. "But they are nowhere near. We have done well."

Kal'Hirol was dark and empty, and Tara thought it was a lot creepier than Amgarrak Thaig. That was just clean and vacant, like a newly built house awaiting its owners. Astrid and the Legion had cleared it out so thoroughly that there were no signs in evidence of the recent disaster. Kal'Hirol, on the other hand, was a disgustingly Blighted place where lots of people had died horrible deaths at the hands of the darkspawn.

No surprise, then, that she had horrible dreams. That bloody stupid Archdemon had the horde on the march again, and was being some sort of stupid drama queen about it. Everybody woke up, and it was a good thing that they had found a little corner to themselves, or Sigrun's yell would have roused the entire Legion.

"Stone preserve us!" Jakka grumbled. "That's not... right."

"You've been all over the Deep Roads, Tara," Catriona said, shivering under her cloak. "Did you recognize the place we were seeing?"

"No," Tara admitted. "Brosca, what about you—? Brosca? Where did she go? No, Sigrun don't call for her, or we'll wake everyone else up and they'll be mad at us."

"I will search for our sister Brosca, Keeper," Darach said virtuously. "It will be some time before the impression of that evil vision fades. Better that I occupy myself in useful labor." He got up and was just reaching for his quiver when there were footsteps and then a little wavering light, and Brosca bounded in among them.

"You're all awake! That's great!" she enthused, and then clapped a hand over her mouth. "I need to be quiet. I've got something to tell you guys! What are you all doing up, anyway?"

"The Archdemon paid us a visit," Tara said, making a face. "Bad dreams."

"Glad I missed it. Anyway, gather round, boys and girls." She knelt, face gleeful, and whispered, "Astrid's been holding out on us!"

Tara struggled up to a sitting position. "What do you mean?"

Brosca grinned. "I found the thaig's treasury. A nice, *full* treasury. What's more, I think Astrid did, too. There were footsteps in the dust and the seals were broken."

Sigrun looked at Jukka. "Maybe she thought it belonged to the dwarven people."

"That's what I say!" Brosca agreed. "To dwarven people and their friends!"

The reaction to this was generally favorable.

"She'll know if we loot it," Tara said doubtfully. "And probably she wants to help Orzammar. I guess that's fair..." She shook her head at Brosca. "I don't want her to be mad at me. I'm sure she had a very good reason for keeping it quiet."

"It's huge," Brosca said. "She'll never know if we're careful. Six huge tubs of gold and jewels. We can skim a bag off the top of each one." She added. "Yeah, she'd probably be pissed if she knew, but the best way to keep her from having her feelings hurt is not to tell her. So we don't. We don't tell anybody. Finders keepers. Let's go."

Sigrun was already on her feet. "Yeah. Let's go before the Legion wakes."

"We don't want to wake the Legion," agreed Jukka, stumbling over his cloak. "That would be rude. They need their rest."

Catriona thought of her brother and his skinny, barefoot children. "Right. Let's go. Come on, Darach. With gold you can help your clan."

"There is that," he agreed. "Let us go."

There was gold, all right. There were carved jewels and strings of fiery opals. There were silver goblets and diamond

rings. They decided not to take any bulky armor, since their own armor and weapons were adequate. The bags were filled; carefully, prudently. Brosca weighed each one in her hands, shutting her eyes to be fair, and was able to roughly gauge equal shares for all.

"Look!" she said, pointing at the levels in the huge vessels. "You can't tell we were here. Told you. Astrid shouldn't have held out on us, but I forgive her, since I got a share anyway."

When they were done, they slipped away, concealed the entrance just as Astrid had, and returned to their night camp, to dream of gold instead of darkspawn.

There was one place where Anora's influence was entirely absent. Some might consider making use of her advantage unsporting, but Bronwyn decided that being overscrupulous in the marriage bed would be casting away a tactical advantage. Here, Loghain listened to her, and her alone. All one had to do was ravish him thoroughly, and thus gain his undivided attention.

"Should we even let the Orlesians leave?" Bronwyn wondered aloud, after collapsing onto her husband's chest. Quite a nice chest: broad, not overly hairy, and hard as oak.

"What?" Loghain asked, roused from his descent into peaceful sleep. "Keep them as hostages, you mean? It won't work with the Knight-Divine. The Duke? Perhaps."

"We know they must have planted agents here in Denerim. Those agents won't do anything public until the Knight-Divine and the Duke are safely away. Afterwards..." She slid off him and curled up at his side, head pillowed on his arm.

"On the other hand," Loghain pointed out, his head pleasantly muzzy, "they might be motivated to rescue their leaders. I was considering waiting for particularly bad weather, and then sending them on their way."

"That might do," Bronwyn mused.

Loghain smiled faintly, dreamily: liking the justice of it. Let the pair of them sink into the oblivion of the Waking Sea; let them be trapped under a coastal ice shelf, faces turned up pleadingly to the impotent Sun; let them cling to broken spars on the grey and shifting sea until the cold leached life from their bones. All pleasant, restful images...

"Besides," he said, "keeping them as hostages without open acts of war by the Orlesians puts us in the wrong. It won't help our case with the Nevarrans. The longer we keep them, the more likely they are to bribe or coerce someone to act as a messenger with their people. They might even find sources of intelligence within the Palace. Not worth it. Let them go, but after Howe and his men are safely away..."

So they drifted off to sleep very companionably. Even later, when Bronwyn's nightmares began, Loghain was not irritated, but spooned up behind her and nuzzled her awake.

"You were dreaming."

She shivered. "If you want to call it that. The horde is enormous. The Archdemon screamed in my face. It doesn't help to know that all the Grey Wardens see the same things. It *feels* personal." She tried to slow her breathing. Loghain pulled her closer.

"The same things?" he murmured. "That's strange."

"Strange but true. I've asked. We really do seem to see the same things. Gruesome, actually."

"Try to sleep. No Archdemons here..."

Thanks to my reviewers: reality deviant, Phygmalion, anon, Jyggilag, Papercut Peterson, Blinded in a bolthole, Zute, Juliafied, JackOfBladesX, Girl-chama, Mike3207, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Nemrut, KrystylSky, KnightOfHolyLight, EpitomyofShyness, almostinsane, Sarah1281, MsBarrows, Robbie the Phoenix, Kyren, Verpine, Psyche Sinclair, Cjonwalrus, darksky01, Costin, Gene Dark, Jenna53, Notnahtanha, Sizuka2, Have Socks. Will Travel, guardian1165, Koden21, dragonmactir, LadyoftheDrow, Tsu Doh Nimh, and rhcpftw.

The first song is used in Act II, scene 7 of As You Like It. the second song is from Act II, scene 3 of Much Ado About Nothing.

88. Uneasy Lies the Head

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 88: Uneasy Lies the Head that Wears a Crown

It was clear that the Landsmeet would be over in a day or two. A few betrothals were announced, a few weddings celebrated, and quiet plans were made to send the "Coastal Improvements" mission on its way north.

The exact location of the lands granted to the Dalish was marked on the map and agreed to by Marethari. Loghain was saving that for the last order of business, when everyone was too tired and too eager to go home to put up a serious opposition. Not a single nobleman of Ferelden would lose a fingerlength of land from it, but there was certain to be resistance to anything favorable to elves.

The Council, at least, was in agreement about the concept. Even Teagan, whom Loghain had expected to oppose it on general principles of opposition to Loghain, only said that the Dalish must expect and tolerate visits of Chantry missionaries. Bronwyn groaned inwardly, A slippery slope. First the missionaries would come, and when those were ignored, the Templars would move in to compel belief and arrest the Keepers... And then they would see the Fall of the Dales all

over again. How to prevent it? She wracked her brains, trying to think of ways to prevent that disaster. There was only so much disaster-prevention she could manage. The elves might be fairly safe for a few years. Meanwhile, there was still a Blight and a possible Orlesian invasion to deal with.

They must bid farewell to their Orlesian guests, too. Their ship had been thoroughly searched, and two men found hiding aboard. They were taken to Fort Drakon for questioning, and it was decided that they would not be surrendered to the ambassador. These men, Dagonet and Lenoir, had been going about collecting juicy intelligence here in Denerim: news of troop movements; news that the darkspawn had withdrawn from Ostagar—something which Loghain absolutely did not want the Orlesians to know; news of the rumored Dalish land grant. That was one more thing that did not need to go beyond their borders at the moment. They must get rid of the Knight-Divine and the noble Duke before the announcement was made.

As to the Nevarran affair, they had worked hard and quickly to move things along. Nathaniel had a band of eight picked men to go with them: two knights, four men at arms, and two servants. The knights, Ser Zennor Stone and Ser Erald Mac Morn, were sworn to Loghain, and were sober, talented swordsmen; the four men-at-arms were selected from Maric's Shield. Sergeants Darrow and Kain were trustworthy veterans, and Rhys and Walton were highly thought of. The servants, too, Mapes and Dudgeon, had known hardship and battle, but were young enough not to find the journey too

arduous.

Bronwyn took Carver aside to tell him of the proposal. He was thrilled at the idea until he realized that Adam was going, too.

"Is that the only reason you asked me?" he demanded, looking very hurt. "Because Adam's going?"

"No," Bronwyn said patiently. "It's not the only reason. I must have a Warden go. Between us, and to be perfectly blunt, I felt it best to send a human, because you never know how hidebound and prejudiced other people are going to be. I prefer to send a man because the rest of the party is male and we don't need romantic distractions. I thought of you because I *know* you: you're a proven warrior, and I think it's going to be very dangerous. Yes, I did consider the fact that your brother is going and I thought that was a positive, because for all your rivalry and quarreling, I know you would never turn on each other or on Ferelden."

That rather took the wind out of his sails. "*Bann* Adam," he muttered.

"—And *Warden* Carver," she added. "I think you, Arl Nathaniel, and your brother will make a powerful team. Who can you think who'd be better than you? I've *got* to have a Warden there, Carver. Someone I can trust, and who can see the big picture. I have a mission for you that I have not disclosed to anyone else—no, not even the King."

He looked up, much more pleased.

"Yes," she said, "you must keep this quiet. You need to visit the Warden-Commander of Nevarra. I need you to get him to talk to you frankly, face to face, about the situation in Weisshaupt and about why no one has offered us help—I mean *real* help in good faith. There may be things he will tell you in person that he would not trust to a letter. Our order has many secrets, and great energy seems to be directed at keeping them from our own people!"

She was not being entirely honest. She could think of Wardens who were more mature, but she did not know them as well, and in the end blood was a mighty bond.

"Also," she said, "You need to find out all you can about the old Nevarran dragon-hunters: what weapons they used... their tactics... everything, really. Surely the Pentaghasts would like the chance to boast a bit."

"Aren't you going to send a mage with us?" he asked, with a sly grin. "Bethany would love to get out from Mother's thumb!"

Bronwyn laughed. "Your mother would probably assassinate me if I sent all her children to Nevarra! I'll admit I think your idea is good, but if we send a mage, he must be a Warden. Anyone else and the Chantry might try to interfere. Whom do you suggest?"

Flattered at being asked his opinion, Carver hesitated, and then said. "Jowan. He gets along with all the posh types. And carrying that staff that looks like a sword, he blends in. Nobody will know he's a mage until he zaps them. You can

say he's our secretary."

"I'll consider that," Bronwyn said. "Yes, It might be better to send two Wardens on a mission to another Warden post. There might be magical lore that Jowan could pick up, while you deal with the commander. At any rate, you'll have the best equipment and the warmest clothing. Court dress, too, for we'll need to make a good impression on the Nevarrans."

Carver groaned. Bronwyn was standing for no nonsense.

"And it can be all black and grey, for all I care, but our ambassadors aren't going abroad looking like beggars!"

Captain Isabela was sent an intriguing message, and met a representative of the mission at the one place no one was surprised to see a nobleman visit: Denerim's finest brothel, the Pearl.

On seeing her, Hawke no longer wondered why she had made an impression on Fergus. He knew her at once from Fergus' description, even though Hawke himself had never set eyes on her before. Captain Isabela was a damned fine woman, with luminous amber eyes, a roguish grin, and skin the color of old honey. She had the air of someone who had seen it all, and knew how to handle herself in even the worst of it.

He made his way through the tables near the bar without hesitation, giving her his best smile.

"Well!" she said, gesturing to the chair across from her. "If it isn't my new best friend!"

She liked the coin Fergus was paying. She liked the idea of tricking Orlesians. She liked Hawke, for that matter.

"I can't promise a timely arrival, though," she said, "not in this weather. Oh, I think I can make it out of the harbor all right, and I'll sail for the northern shore directly. I can leave tomorrow, for that matter. Ten to one I can make it to Kirkwall. The cargo's a good idea, and I want half the profits. I know just the man to get us a good price for it. The problem, Handsome, is getting back to Ferelden and navigating that nasty little obstacle course near the Virgin Rocks. You may have to row out to the ship, and we'll have to settle on a range of arrival dates."

"I'd be surprised if we could get to Kilda before the 23rd," he said. "Could I buy you another drink?"

"You can buy me anything you like, Handsome," she replied. "Be generous."

He smiled, feeling comfortable with her. She was, after all, the same sort of woman that he was a man. Knowing that, obviously, did not make her more trustworthy. She would be on their side, as long as it paid well and offered her amusement.

So he bought a bottle of Madam Sanga's finest Antivan red, and deep bowls of spicy fish chowder. While Isabel wolfed

down the food and drink, Adam laid out the dates she needed to meet him and his associates in Kilda. The 24th of Haring, or as soon as the weather permitted; the pay highest the earlier she got there.

"And once we get to Kirkwall, we'll pay you for your time there, We want you to wait for us while we take care of our business, and then get us home."

"Any idea how long that might be?"

"Maybe a month. Maybe less."

"Hmmm. I want a letter of marque and reprisal from your King...Queen...whatever... licensing to me to attack their enemies at sea and bring the captured ships and cargo to the safety of Fereldan ports for sale."

"And what do they get?"

"A fifth of the profits."

"Half."

"You're dreaming. A third."

"Sounds good. I think they'll grant it. Once the mission is a success."

They probably would. Licensing privateers was a way to run a navy on the cheap. It would also bring gold into the royal coffers, which Adam thought was probably something very

much to be desired.

They haggled a little over the amount of coin to be paid outright, mainly because not haggling would be boring and rather insulting. Isabela named further demands, and Hawke assented, smiling as she led him into one of the private rooms.

Two bands of friends arrived on the twelfth. The first was that of Merrill and a dozen of her companions, who were passed through the Great Gate of Denerim with considerably greater courtesy than the guards had shown to Marethari a few days before. Merrill too, ended up visiting the Alienage, and like Marethari, found plenty of room in the sprawling former Orphanage. There was great excitement among the Dalish when Marethari described the extent of land to be given them.

"But will the darkspawn allow us to enjoy it in peace? The Blight is not yet over," Merrill said softly.

"More to the purpose," Marethari pointed out, "Will the shemlen priests allow us to enjoy it? We must find ways to protect ourselves—no, not the old ways, Thanovir, but subtle ways. If we can persuade the land itself to hide us, we may not once again fall to the Templars' swords."

The great news was that their shemlen friend Bronwyn had been declared Queen by the nobles. She and Loghain were married now, and he was King. That gave the two of them more power to enforce their will, but their power was not

absolute.

"Still," Maynriel said cheerfully, "they are more likely to favor us than anyone who might rule this kingdom. We should call on them, since this is their home. They would certainly not enter our camps without making their presence known."

"Truly," agreed Marethari, "and there are others you should meet: our cousins here in the Alienage, and especially their hahren, Valendrian."

Word was sent to the Warden Compound of Merrill's arrival, and they were given a friendly welcome. Loghain made a point of joining Bronwyn, and they sat and talked more of the plans, looked at the maps, and considered how this one change would cause other changes.

The sun shone brightly that day, though it was still cold. There was much to see for elves unused to town life. They explored the Alienage at length, curious about Alarith's shop, since he was not a craftmaster, but one who sold the work of others. The Dalish did not have merchants, per se, but Alarith was a pleasant man, and happy to trade for furs and Dalish crafts.

"When we have land of our own, our way of life will change somewhat," Merrill remarked, almost to herself. "We have the Temple, of course, but some might wish to live outside its walls. It is inevitable that a village will spring up around it."

"Elves have lived in cities of their own before," Maynriel pointed out. "What is important is that we plan carefully, and

not create a filthy, rambling warren like this Denerim!"

To Bronwyn's manifest joy, the other arrivals were Tara and her Wardens, and they were given a hero's welcome at the Compound, late that afternoon. No, one, unsurprisingly had offered to bar Shale's way. The six other—much less stony—party members were in fairly good shape, though chilled by their march from the Wending Wood. Anders fussed over them.

"Still got your ears, elfkins? It'd be a shame if you couldn't wear hats anymore!"

"Don't own a hat," she complained. "I should get one. Helmets aren't very warm!"

They were deeply relieved to see Aeron alive and well. Catriona gave the minstrel a heartfelt, sloppy kiss, while everyone else cheered and catcalled.

Food was served and for awhile there was no interest in doing anything but eating. And drinking, to get rid of the taste of the improved Joining potion. After the first edge of hunger was blunted, the servants were allowed to help the newcomers out of their cloaks and gear, while baths were drawn and beds made up. Bronwyn came down to meet them, excited at the news.

"Tara! Brosca!"

"Hey, Boss!" Brosca ran over to see her, still gnawing on a chicken bone.

"Look at you! Queen of Ferelden!" Tara dropped a curtsey, forgetting that she was not wearing a skirt. Her party followed suit, dropping to one knee in respect.

"Up!" Bronwyn ordered. "Wardens kneel to no one! Tell me everything while you're eating."

A rumbling, sarcastic voice spoke, causing Bronwyn to look up in surprise.

It said, "I neither bow nor eat, so perhaps I should tell something of what transpired, while the squishy folk devour the comestibles."

Bronwyn looked at the creature in bemusement. She had seen golems, but never been addressed by one.

"Shale, I presume?"

"You do."

A burst of laughter, which Bronwyn joined, somewhat nonplussed.

"Be respectful, Shale," Tara reproved the golem. "This is the Warden-Commander and the Queen of Ferelden. Maybe not quite as grand a being as the Mighty Golem King of Snark, but pretty close."

Anders got close enough to Bronwyn to whisper, "Should we give them the new Joining potion? It would give them a boost."

"Good idea." She raised her voice again. "Anders has a healing potion for each of you new arrivals. Take it right away, and then enjoy the rest of your meal."

Tara downed hers obediently and then made a horrible face. "What is that? It tastes almost as bad as—" She cut herself off abruptly. "Ummmm... I mean..."

"Tell you later," Anders promised.

There was much to learn. The first, exciting news was that Tara had indeed come from West Hill to Denerim nearly entirely by way of the Deep Roads, only excepting the walk from West Hill to the access point, and to Denerim from the silverite mine in the Wending Woods.

"And you had no trouble? You saw no darkspawn?" Bronwyn pressed her.

"No darkspawn, Bronwyn. And the way was really pretty wide open. We brought a wagon with us, and had to take it apart and put it back to together, which was no fun. Shale pulled it." She whispered to Bronwyn. "It's in the stables, but we need to unload. It's got an emperor's ransom of lyrium in it, packed in an old tin tub!"

"What?"

"No lie, Boss," Brosca said eagerly. Her voice dropped to a confidential growl. "There's a lot of treasure in the Deep Roads, if you know where to look."

"For Maker's sake, let's get it inside and locked up right away," Bronwyn said, already out of her chair.

"I shall carry it," Shale offered, "if some individual can be troubled to open the door."

The tub was wrapped in heavy canvas, and Shale, as directed, brought it into the study. Bronwyn gasped when the cover was thrown aside and the size of the windfall revealed.

"This is worth..." Words failed her. "I actually don't know how much this is worth," she said, rather lamely.

"Lots," said Brosca. "Astrid figured it would last the Grey Wardens for hundreds of years, and there's more where that came from."

"The tub looks old. Where did you find this?"

Brosca beamed. "In a place called Kal'Hiol. Old dwarven thaig. Important. Astrid thinks the deshyrs are going to be really chuffed when they hear it's all cleaned out."

"Where *is* Astrid?"

Tara told her. "She thought the mission wasn't complete until we made sure we could get all the way to Orzammar, so she

went that way with half the Wardens and half the Legion. Our half stayed at the silverite mine. They've got supplies for another week or so, but they could use more. Astrid's got some food growing in Amgarrak Thaig, but Kal'Hirol is too messed up without a lot of work. Anyway, it looks like the whole Amgarrak Road is clear right now."

"Holy Maker," Bronwyn swore. "Call all the Wardens to the Hall. Call Rannelly, too, and all the servants."

The crowd in, wondering and excited. Bronwyn stood at the head of the table, looking stern, and waited until the last trickled in.

"Not everyone's here," Bronwyn noted. "Where's Zevran and Danith?"

"The elves went to the Alienage, Bronwyn," said Maeve. "They said they'd be back before full dark."

"When they get back, send them straight to me. Don't tell them anything before I have a chance to talk to them."

When the rest were gathered, she said, "We welcome today Senior Warden Tara, and Wardens Brosca, Sigrun, Jukka, Darach, and Catriona. We welcome our ally, the golem Shale, who is to be treated with the same courtesy as all our other companions."

"Ooo! Courtesy!" Shale snarked. "What a concept!"

Bronwyn did not smile, but went on, "My first word is for the staff. You may hear some very interesting and surprising things from our travelers. You are not to repeat a word of it. Not to *anyone*. This is vital. You are to tell Warden business to *no one*. The lives of the Wardens and the safety of this country depend on it. Do not speak of our business to your own family. Do not speak of it among yourselves, for you may be overheard. Mistress Rannelly, our lives are in your hands. Please take the staff to the kitchen, while I address the Wardens and allies."

"Of course, Your Majesty dear. We won't fail you. I'll tell them all what's what."

When they were gone, Bronwyn leaned forward and spoke urgently. "Most of you have now heard that our comrades came all the way from West Hill largely by way of the Deep Roads. That cannot be become common knowledge. In fact, I intend only to tell the King, the Dowager Queen, and my brother. This is a major tactical secret. Those of you who have been present for the Landsmeet as guests witnessed the day that the Orlesians arrived and threatened this country. That we have a way to traverse northern Ferelden unseen and unhindered by weather is something that must be kept silent. Do you all understand me?"

Mumbles and nods. Bronwyn repeated, "Do you *understand* me? Must I have each of you take an oath of silence?"

Tara looked at her wide-eyed. "Of course we understand, Bronwyn. Are the Orlesians going to invade? During a *Blight*?"

Anders said, "They don't like all the uppity mages being out of the Tower, even when they're saving lives. Or maybe *because* they're saving lives. They don't like our Bronwyn and her Loghain wearing crowns. They don't like anyone very much, I think."

They talked for some time, going over the story of the march north, the battles, West Hill, and the horror of the flesh golem at Amgarrak. Shale had been there as well as Catriona, and they all had quite a bit to say about it.

"Hardly a *golem* at all," Shale sneered. "Simply a mindless savage monster. I am quite of Warden Astrid's opinion that the Tevinter mage the dwarves hired was some sort of fraud. Of course, she was quite rapidly a *dead* fraud..."

Tara added, "She had dozens of casteless murdered, and used their flesh to make the thing, and then—get this, Anders—she used a *Fade spirit* to animate the hulk."

Morrigan scoffed in contempt, while Anders and Niall groaned.

"It was horrible," Catriona said quietly. "It stamped one of the dwarves to death. It threw others against the wall. It was incredibly huge and powerful. And fast. And then, when its head detached and attacked Astrid, running on those creepily little legs... It was unbelievable. I kept shooting and shooting, and I might as well have been shooting at hay bales. Only heavy axes and swords could cut into it. I really thought we were all going to die. Astrid saved us. It was ghastly that she lost her hand."

"I wish I could have done more for her," Tara agreed, "but the dwarves made her some things she can put on the stump, and so she's able to do a lot she could do before. She's such a hero."

"She's all right," Brosca said, very happy about the bag of treasure that was even now bulging on the floor by her feet. "We accomplished a lot. The Legion's pretty pleased too. And we had lots of other adventures, too. We should tell you about how we met Shale..."

"Maybe later," Tara said, not wanting Honnleath to be a subject of general discussion. "Did Aeron tell you we had desertions?"

"He did. We have every reason to believe that they were killed by the darkpsawn in Amaranthine."

Brosca slammed her fist on the table, making the tankards jump. "All right! Sodding justice!"

That seemed to be the general opinion of Tara's party. Even mild-mannered Darach nodded sagely.

"Did someone find their bodies?" Catriona asked.

"I believe I did," Bronwyn told her, and then related the tale of the Architect and the battle in the silverite mine.

Carver blurted out, "Bronwyn rode a dragon! There was this huge chamber and the dragon took off with Bronwyn on its

back, and she went up and down, and the dragon tried to scrape her off, but Bronwyn held on and stabbed it. It was something, I can tell you!"

The dead deserters were forgotten, and there was laughter and disbelief, and then there were toasts.

"I want to ride a dragon like that!" Brosca declared. "I'll bet the Archdemon could carry us all at once!"

In the midst of this, the elves returned from the Alienage: Danith, Cathair, Steren, Nuala, and Zevran. It was a merry meeting. Tara hesitated, wondering if Zevran had found a fresher, prettier elf girl at the Alienage, and came forward shyly.

Zevran saw it, and went to her at once. Falling gracefully on one knee, he took her hand and kissed it.

"*Cara mia,*" he declared, "Once again, my life is complete as I see your face. Let the night come at once, for you shall shine in it like the silver moon!"

"Awwww!" said the Wardens.

"Ewwww!" said Morrigan, waving a hand in weary disgust.

"So..." Tara ventured. "You're happy to see me."

"*Tesoro,*" Zevran assured, "It is not a dagger I have in my pocket. Or more properly, not *just* a dagger."

Bronwyn wondered if the two of them should not just go to Zevran's room at once. She got up to leave. "We'll talk more. Tara; you and Brosca please come see me early tomorrow morning and bring your maps. If you're all up to it, come join us tonight at the Palace, too."

The meeting broke up, and Bronwyn left for her apartments and the Wardens variously for baths and their quarters. Those new to the Compound were taken on a tour by Maeve, who was very house-proud of their fine home. Catriona and Sigrun were to join Aveline and Maeve in their room, and Jukka and Darach were shown to the larger men's quarters. Anders and Niall discreetly gave the newcomers the word about the improved Joining potion. As for Shale, it found a quiet corner of its own, where it loomed over the armor stands.

It was not until her early breakfast the next morning that Tara noticed the puppies playing under the table.

"Whose dogs?" she asked Zevran.

"That one—" he pointed —"is Carver's. He has named him 'Magister' in memory of the adventure that delivered him to us. His friend is not yet claimed, though not for lack of bribes to win his favor."

"Really?" Tara was hopeful. "I used to be afraid of Scout, until I found out he was a sweetheart. And that he could rip out genlock throats with one bite. I wish I had a dog. Everybody respects a dog."

Zevran patted her thigh, amused. "It is true. Everyone in *Ferelden* respects a dog."

"Here, girl...er...boy. Do you like bacon?"

"Everyone likes bacon," said Quinn, sitting on the bench opposite. "Hey, sport," he said cheerfully, tossing a bit to the pup. "Maybe he likes all of us so much he can't decide."

Catriona came in, smiling archly at Tara and Zevra. "I never thought you'd be up so early."

"Bronwyn wanted to talk to me about the Amgarrak Road. She's really excited about it."

"Personally," said Catriona, "I've seen about all I want to of it, but a soldier goes where she's ordered." Her voice softened and she leaned over to give the independent puppy an ear scratching. "Hello, precious."

Tara knew herself happy, here with Zevran, with a wonderful breakfast in front of her, nice puppies playing under the table, and friends in plenty. Important friends, too. Bronwyn was Queen, and liked mages. Tara had been to the Palace feast the night before, wearing her lovely dress given to her by Arl Teagan. Things were changing for the better... if the darkspawn or the Orlesians didn't kill them all.

"Anybody seen Anders?" she asked. She needed to talk to her fellow mages about Honnleath and the new warding spell she had learned there, but they were not to be found so early,

the slackers.

"Anders always sleeps late," Carver told her. "Here, Magister, try these sausages..."

"Niall, then?" Tara persisted.

"Haven't seen him. Everybody was wiped out after last night. I like a good party as much as anybody, but I'll be glad when the Landsmeet is over."

"Not as happy, I suspect," said Zevran, "as our illustrious Commander."

"Really?" Tara asked concerned. "What's wrong?"

"I would not *know*," said Zevran. "I only observe. In my country, however, there is a saying: '*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*' She has much to concern her, and more than her rightful share of enemies. The Landsmeet is a necessary evil, but I think she has had enough of nobles and their plotting."

"Everybody's always plotting," Quinn remarked. "Human nature, I guess." He blushed, "and... elven and dwarven nature too. No offense."

"None taken," Tara assured him, amused. "What's the weather like outside? I was too dopey when I woke up to look out the window."

"Pretty white," Carver said. "The dogs and I took a walk. Pretty cold, too."

"Rats," Tara complained. "I wanted to go to the Alienage."

"Why do we not go tomorrow, *cara mia*?" Zevran suggested. "You have your meeting with our noble Queen, and then, this afternoon, you should come to witness the mysteries of the Landsmeet. It is a rare and delightful opportunity to watch nobles in their natural habitat."

Tara was rather taken with the idea. "I never thought I'd have the chance. Pretty good for an elven mage, I'd say. Look, Brosca and I are going to see Bronwyn now. As soon I get back I'm calling a mages' meeting. I learned a neat new spell I want everybody to learn!"

The servants and guards were nice enough to get Tara and Brosca into the Palace, and then direct them up staircases and down confusing halls until they found the Queen's Apartments, which were where most people thought they would find Bronwyn.

"*Come see me,*" Tara, muttered. "Like we're supposed to know where she is, now that she doesn't live at the Compound anymore!"

Brosca shrugged. "Well, everybody *does* seem to know where she is. Relax, it's just another Palace, just like my sister lives in. How hard can it be?"

Tara's annoyance and embarrassment dissipated, once she was shown into Bronwyn's sitting room.

"Boss!" Brosca burst out. "This is great!"

"It's really nice," Tara agreed, looking around her. She liked the little flowers in the carpet a lot. Come to think of it, there were some silk rugs in the storerooms. She could lay one on the floor in her own room. This room gave her lots of ideas about fixing up her own quarters.

"Glad you like it," Bronwyn smiled back. "Come in and sit down. I want to hear all about your adventures."

They talked for some time. Bronwyn, obviously, was most interested in the darkspawn movements and the clearance of the Deep Roads.

"Loghain very much approved of your map," she told them. "Giving the places you encountered the darkspawn as well as the numbers was very helpful. If Astrid finds the way clear to Orzammar, it will give us a way to keep in contact with the dwarven kingdom all winter long. We'll also use it to pay a visit to Soldier's Peak."

"Oh, I'd love to go!" Tara enthused. "I'd like to visit with Jowan and Leliana. Let's go!"

"Not all of us," Bronwyn said. "I don't think the place is ready for that many. But when we go, I'll definitely take the two of you along."

"Sounds like fun, Boss," Brosca smiled. She wouldn't mind another chance to skim a bit more off the Kal'Hiol treasury.

Bronwyn had to go to her council meeting, but Brosca's curiosity was not satisfied.

"Can we see your crown?"

"If you come to the Landsmeet today," Bronwyn said wryly, not looking forward to wearing it, "you'll see it on my head. But all right. It's exactly like Loghain's, so we match."

So the heavy gold object was trotted out. Compared to the crown that Caridin had made for Bhelen it seemed pitifully plain, and Brosca was disappointed for her friend, thinking that the human deshyrs must be a bunch of cheap bastards. It should have some big rubies under each of those leaves, and maybe a ring of diamonds around the bottom. It should have something sparkly on it, anyway. Then she had an idea: Tara could write out a letter to Bhelen...nah...maybe to Rica. Rica could wheedle Bhelen into sending proper dwarven-crafted crowns to Bronwyn and the big guy. Didn't kings give each other presents? Bhelen owed Bronwyn *a lot*.

"Magetown?" Anders repeated, astonished. He had hardly known what to expect when Tara called the mages to a meeting, but this was beyond his imaginings. "A town of mages? A *secret* town of mages?" His smile burst forth. "That is the neatest thing I ever heard!"

Niall was even more astounded. In the Circle, he had been a member of the Isolationist Fraternity, where mages dreamed of leaving Thedas entirely, and creating their own ideal society. While they were blowing hot air about it, other mages were living that reality in a place called Honnleath.

"They're not all mages," Tara confessed. "Just a lot of them. Mages and their families. Maybe the husband or wife is a mage, and some of their children are mages. They use a lot of household spells I've never seen before, but then we never needed them in the Circle. Morrigan, have you ever heard of cooking and cleaning spells?"

"I have not," Morrigan replied, rather huffily. "Flemeth did not approve of using magic for frivolous ends."

"But it's not frivolous, really," Tara said. "They're some nice, everyday chopping and boiling spells... a spell to get stains out of linens... that sort of thing. Matthias told me they were derived from larger-scale spells, but they're quick and useful and don't take much out of you. The old man Wilhelm who was their leader for a long time had *views*," she snorted, "about 'living in peace,' so the people were weak on their primal and entropy spells. I gave them some remedial training. But they had this warding spell that I've never even read about. It creates a barrier that no darkspawn could break through, not even using magic. Really powerful—like a wall. What's absolutely brilliant about it is that spells and blows don't bounce off. Their energy is absorbed, making the barrier even stronger. You need something to anchor it, but let me show you. I'll use that doorway. Anders, get on the other side

and I'll shoot spells at you."

"Yes," Anders answered, dead-pan. "I really to stand there while you shoot spells at me."

"All right!" Tara jumped up, nothing daunted. "Then you can shoot spells at me! I'll put up the barrier, give you a wave, and then you can send a fireball my way!"

"Tara?" Niall said, growing nervous. "Are you absolutely sure about this?"

"Come on! Prepare to be amazed. This is going to great for all of us!" She ran into the hall, stretched out her hand and murmured the incantation. She felt a smooth buzzing under her skin, and then grinned at her friends, waving them on.

"Er..." Anders grimaced. "I don't think so. I don't see anything."

"You asked for it!" Impatiently, Tara fired a bolt of lightning straight at them. Anders and Niall ducked. Morrigan flung up a hasty shield spell. None of those things were necessary. The lightning stopped at the doorway, spread out in a pool of cool light, and with a faint ripple, the doorway was transparent again. The other mages stared, and then each took a deep breath.

"Hit it!" Tara yelled. Or rather looked like she was yelling, because her voice did not travel through the barrier either.

"Let me see..." Morrigan approached, intrigued. She put out her hand at the doorway and came in contact with a smooth, hard, transparent surface. She rapped on it sharply. There was no sound, and the barrier did not yield in the least.

"Impressive..." she muttered. "Stand back!"

She tested spells for some time. Tara grinned at her with cheeky impudence, unharmed, unaffected. Neither an entropic spell, nor a primal spell could pass the barrier. Anders found that not even a healing spell passed; all were absorbed into the barrier. Tara put up her hand at one point, and they watched while she took the barrier down.

"See? And there's also a version that makes *you* invisible and makes people avoid the barrier itself. You can anchor it to all sorts of things: trees, rocks, fence posts, houses. The people at Honnleath got sloppy and complacent and nearly got overrun by the darkspawn, but some got into a cellar and put up the barrier. The darkspawn couldn't get at them, but the people might have starved to death there if we hadn't come on the scene. It's great when you're camping. I'm going to teach it to the Dalish. It'll make their camps safe, too."

Niall was still bemused by the idea of a town where mages lived unharassed by the Chantry. "It's sounds perfect."

"It's not *perfect*," Tara said, shaking her head. "They're mostly farmers. They have to work hard. They have to make a living, but their magic helps. It doesn't do everything for them. It doesn't solve all their problems. But yes, they have nice normal lives, and people don't run around turning into

abominations. One little girl was being bothered by a demon, but we got that sorted out pretty quick. I don't think they'd want a lot of mages with phylacteries coming there, bringing the Templars down on them, but otherwise it's great. I knew I was going to like it when I saw that there was no Chantry there. The houses look better than in any town I've visited, probably because they're not supporting a Chantry!"

"No Chantry?" Anders asked, with growing delight. "No Chantry *at all*?"

"I have already given orders to put the Orlesians' ship in order," Loghain announced to the rest of the Council. "They will be received at the beginning of the Landsmeet today, given a letter to the Empress, and escorted to the docks. The crew is being taken from Fort Drakon to the docks now. They will leave on the evening tide with instructions not to make port anywhere in Ferelden. I've done with pampering our enemies."

The letter, written by Anora and her long-time secretary, was a cool and perfectly polite political nothing. It was merely a pro forma communication from King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn, announcing their accession to the throne of Ferelden, and expressing their regards to Her Imperial Majesty as their neighbor.

Bronwyn was annoyed not to be included in the composition of the letter, but accepted it as part of Anora's duty as Chancellor. Reading through it, she found nothing to complain of, as the letter was remarkable only for its restraint. There

was absolutely no point in sending threats or insults, however satisfying they might be. It was vital to try to put off any Orlesian invasion as long as possible, in order for Ferelden to prepare to counter it. The coronation of Loghain Mac Tir was provocative enough.

The letter was signed and sealed. Bronwyn was almost becoming accustomed to writing the words "*Bronwyn, Queen of Ferelden.*"

And now, it was time to discuss the Dalish.

"We want to present the grant tomorrow, as the final act of the Landsmeet," said Bronwyn, seizing the moment. "The Orlesians will be gone, and won't be able to gossip about it. Those of us who have stood beside the Dalish—and there are many of us—will agree that it is best that they are suitably rewarded for their courage. The Council has already agreed to it in principle. This was the will of King Cailan, and it is incumbent on us to honor his commitment."

That largely silenced Teagan, who knew that Cailan had indeed wanted very much to reward his Dalish friends. He had felt that not enough was being said about his royal nephew, and that the last act of this special Landsmeet would be to honor his memory was deeply satisfying to him. That did not mean that he expected it not to meet some resistance and some very unpleasant remarks. He had done his best to meet and talk with his own banns, and present arguments as to why this was not only the honorable thing to do, but a good thing in itself. Let the Dalish have a little place of their own, and there

would be fewer of them traveling the country, poaching game and quarreling with the locals.

Kane did not see how this affected him at all. His father-in-law had explained the map to him. The Dalish land was far to the south, days from Denerim. For all Kane cared, all the elves in Ferelden could move there, including the layabouts in the Alienage that the Queen fussed over. Maybe they *should* move there, and be with their own kind. Kane was more interested in getting home, and inspecting the kennels he had discovered he owned. The girls wanted puppies, going on and on about the King's 'cute little Amber.' Maybe one of the bitches was about to whelp. It was be wonderful if both the girls could have their own mabari friend. Reluctantly he set aside the pleasant dream. People were looking at him and still talking about the bloody elves.

"The Chantry is going to insist on sending missionaries," Bryland said glumly. "There will trouble. Not this year or the next, perhaps, but eventually."

"I've talked to the Dalish leaders about the importance of dealing courteously with Chantry personnel," Bronwyn said. "If they can keep their interactions peaceful, the Templars may not see fit to move in."

"You're more hopeful than I am, Bronwyn," said Fergus. "But I agree that we must honor the late King's promise here. "At least the agreement is under the authority of the Crown, and the King and Queen have the power to mediate any disputes."

The document was quite explicit about that. The grant was irrevocable, but the land was *called* a "protectorate of the Fereldan Crown." The Dalish would be self-governing within their borders, but still legally subject to Fereldan law outside them. The Dalish, as subjects of the King and Queen, were also entitled to their protection. A small, token tribute was written in, which a Dalish delegation must present at every spring Landsmeet. That was the palpable, concrete sign of the contract between the parties. The Dalish had not liked certain clauses, feeling they limited their independence, but it was the best everyone could do. The elves did not have a vote in the Landsmeet, but they had the right to attend and speak, which would not please some humans.

"After this, we should be finished," Anora told them, rather pleased. "Everyone will be glad of that. The Kornings and the Mac Coos are not going to put up a fight about their boundaries after all. We've already put quiet pressure on Bann Frandarel about keeping watch on the coast, and after consulting the treasury, we should be able to squeeze the coin for renovation of the tower on the Isle of Mourne. It commands all of Denerim Bay, and could give word of any fleet heading to the capital."

"We can't start construction on any of this until the weather improves," Loghain said, his face sour, "but by mid-Guardian we can make preliminary surveys and transport the materials. By Drakonis we had better put our backs into building our defenses."

Bronwyn was eager to inform those concerned about the

situation in the Deep Roads. After the Council broke up, and Anora and Loghain were talking quietly together, Bronwyn asked Fergus and Nathaniel to speak to her, and quickly told them the news.

"My Wardens from West Hill arrived yesterday. The Amgarrak Road is clear all the way from that infamous silverite mine to the Deep Roads access point a mile from the fortress. Obviously, you'll have to travel on foot, but the going should be quick and easy. I have maps of the route, and we have a golem who can haul a wagon of whatever supplies you need."

"The Deep Roads!" Nathaniel stared at her, full of instinctive horror at the idea of descending below the surface. "Truly? They are free of darkspawn?"

"Good," Fergus gave her a nod. "I've already sent our ship off to Kirkwall. All that remains is to get Nate and his men to Kilda. This sounds like the way."

Loghain and Anora joined them. "The Deep Roads are clear?"

"The Amgarrak Road across the north of Ferelden is clear," said Bronwyn. "So say my Wardens. I can't guarantee that entirely, but they found no evidence of anything. My guess is that there might be some stragglers in side tunnels. Our party will be more than powerful enough to deal with them."

Fergus cocked his head. "'Our' party?"

Loghain scowled at her.

"Absolutely," Bronwyn replied, not about to be intimidated. "I need to inspect the Deep Roads myself, in my capacity as Warden-Commander. I want to visit Soldier's Peak and have one of my mages go with Nathaniel. The Landsmeet will be over, and that means that it's time for me to search for darkspawn again."

Loghain did not trust himself to speak calmly to those infernal Orlesians. It was important to *be* calm, to put on an Orlesian mask of good manners, to pretend that he did not know that they were trying to cut his throat. He knew Anora could manage it, but it would have to be Bronwyn, whom even the Orlesians seem to regard as having some sort of right to the throne. They held a brief conference, in which he and Anora told her what she needed to say. That only seemed to irritate her.

"I know perfectly well how to speak to ambassadors," she said. "Especially to ambassadors who will not like anything I say. I saw my father and mother gild the word 'no' in all sorts of ways. We're not granting them anything they want, and we're rather insultingly giving them the boot. I will phrase all the shameless hypocrisy as politely as possible."

And so she did. First she took great care to look her best: dressing in the elaborate gown she had worn at her wedding. Her hair was carefully arranged around her crown, and everyone seemed pleased at her appearance when she glided into the Landsmeet Chamber, her hand on Loghain's arm.

Duke Prosper and the Knight-Divine were escorted in, under guard. The Duke had evidently brought a great deal of fine clothing, for he was arrayed in a different doublet and hose than the one he had worn on his arrival. These were equally colorful, exquisite—and even picturesque. His beard and hair were perfectly arranged, and he appeared quite at his ease. He certainly, Bronwyn mused, did not lack courage.

The Knight-Divine was not so calm. He looked ruffled, like a hawk readying itself for an attack. There was something seething under the surface, and Bronwyn suspected it was anger.

Of course, they had been confined to their quarters for the past seven days, leaving only to witness the coronation—which they could not have found very enjoyable. True, the Knight-Divine had been permitted his interview at the Cathedral with the Grand Cleric a few days ago, but had not requested another audience.

The men bowed, though the Knight-Divine's bow was rather cursory.

Bronwyn took the lead, as planned.

"Your Grace. Knight-Divine. As gracious as your visit has been, it is now, alas, the time for farewells. We are impatient for you to transmit our regards to Her Imperial Majesty. Your crew has been set to work preparing your ship for your departure with ample supplies. Only your presence is needed there. Here is a letter for the Empress, expressing our

respect to her, and informing her of our accession." She gestured to a clerk, who handed the document to the Duke, bowing.

She smiled, and gave them the real message. "The independence of Ferelden is innate, immutable, and indisputable. We are a free people, back to our earliest origins. We need neither foreign gold nor foreign arms to defend ourselves. We owe no fealty and pay no homage to those outside our borders. That said, the hand of Fereldan friendship is always outstretched to those who reciprocate in good faith. We look forward to peaceful and profitable relations with the Empire of Orlais and its illustrious Empress. Go now, with our wishes for your safe journey, and with these tokens of our gratitude for your endeavors."

Impatiently, Loghain snapped his fingers at a footman, who came forward, bearing flat, silk covered boxes. Opening one, the servant revealed to the Duke a large disc of gold, set with a carved emerald. It was attached to a long silk ribbon and could be worn around the neck like an order of honor. It was a particularly fine piece of loot that Bronwyn had found among the Architect's treasures, but the Orlesians did not need to know that. Bronwyn had assured Loghain that the jewel had been carefully cleaned with fire, but Loghain did not care. In fact, he would have been better pleased had been infected with Taint. That would have been too obvious, he supposed. The box for the Knight-Divine contained a similar item.

Bronwyn wanted to give them something particularly costly, partly to show him that the Crown of Ferelden was in no way

necessitous or poor; and partly to rebuke the Empress' breach of manners. Celene, after all, had sent no gift to Ferelden, as was customary upon the accession of a new monarch—even upon the accession of a monarch one disliked.

Duke Prosper, understanding all this perfectly, accepted the generous gift with another elaborate bow and a twitch of his lips. It was clever of the girl. She had put him in a very awkward position. He could not keep this secret, and such a very handsome gift might suggest that she had bought his loyalty—especially as no gift was being sent to Her Imperial Majesty. All in all, it was better played and more polished than he would have expected, had it all been left to the bandit Loghain.

There *he* sat on his stolen throne, wearing a doublet as black as his heart, stroking his mabari puppy and smirking grimly; while his fair and noble young queen did the honors.

"I shall convey your message to the Empress, Your Majesty," Duke Prosper assured her, "and I shall have much to relate of my experiences in Ferelden."

She smiled graciously, and turned her attention to Ser Chrysagon. "Knight-Divine," she said "We are also grateful to you for honoring us with your presence at such an auspicious time. Express our devotion and respect to Her Perfection, and assure her that Ferelden, the birthplace of Andraste, remains a bastion of devotion to her."

Duke Prosper admired the diplomatic ambivalence of the Queen's words. Devoted to the Divine— or only to Andraste? The Knight-Divine was too disgusted to play the courtier.

"I shall return," he gritted out, controlling himself with an effort. "Indeed I shall return. I shall tell Her Perfection of what I have seen—and heard—in this country!"

His tone caught the attention of the lords and ladies assembled. Charade and Bethany exchanged glances, lips twitching, remembering Charade's imitation of an Orlesian accent.

"I zhall tell Hair Perfection of wat I haf zeen—and haired—in zees countree!"

But there was only a moment for laughter. The Knight-Divine was working himself into a state of righteous fury. He spurned his gift from the footman, knocking it to the floor.

"Even the Grand Cleric joins with you in your mockery of the Maker's laws! She gives me papers making absurd, blasphemous claims; she tells me untruths to my face—"

Gasps, rising voices, cries of shock and alarm followed this declaration. Thunderstorms began gathering in the faces of the King and Queen. Duke Prosper was actually startled into showing surprise and a certain alarm. The Grand Cleric shut her eyes and slumped wearily, knowing that this was the crisis she had foreseen.

"The Grand Cleric," Knight-Divine shouted above the noise in the chamber—"the Grand Cleric has presented me with documents purporting to substantiate a miracle performed by Queen Bronwyn! She has dared to impute to her powers of healing derived from the Prophet Andraste herself! This lying testimony—signed by many in high positions in the Fereldan Chantry—states that the Queen obtained a pinch of the Prophet's Ashes, by which she healed Queen Anora and a child close to death!"

"She *did*, you fool!" shouted Knight-Commander Harrith, offering his arm to the trembling Grand Cleric. "I saw it for myself!"

The noise only grew greater. Duke Prosper's brows rose. This piece of news was extremely interesting, and he wanted to see the papers for himself, if he was not summarily executed in the next few minutes. The herald shouted uselessly for silence. Loghain lost patience with it all.

"Enough!"

The bellow silenced the room. Excited gossip died away into frightened squawks.

"Knight-Divine," said Loghain. "You have overstayed your welcome."

Ser Chrysagon seemed to have completely lost his head. "I have stayed long enough to see this barbarous land for what it is! I hereby arrest the Grand Cleric Muirin for heresy! She will

travel with us to Val Royeaux to face the judgment of the Divine and the Holy Office of the Grand Cathedral!"

Thanks to my reviewers: Reyvatiel Songtress, TSLi, Sash'Rahaal, Blinded in a bolthole, Guest, anon, reality deviant, KnightOfHolyLight, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Raxiselic, Kyren, Robbie the Phoenix, Mike3207, Girl-chama, Tirion, JackOfBladesX,Phygmalion, Jenna53, Gene Dark, Have Socks. Will Travel, Halm Vendrella, sizuka2, jnybot, mille libri, rhcpftw, dragonmactir, and Josie Lange.

Letters of marque and reprisal—these early licenses were granted to specific individuals to seize the king's enemies at sea in return for splitting the proceeds between the privateers and the crown.

I've been hurrying to finish this chapter, since I wanted to spend the weekend goofing off at Windycon in Chicago (Lombard, really). The theme this year is zombies.

The title is from Henry IV, Part II, Act III, scene 1.

For Loghain fans: you should have a look at dragonmactir's story, The Return.

89. Andraste's True Champion

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 89: Andraste's True Champion

"I hereby arrest the Grand Cleric Muirin for heresy!"

Those words, thrown out by the Knight-Divine like a gauntlet, shocked and scandalized some of the Landsmeet and infuriated the rest. The Grand Cleric's companions, Templar and priest alike, rallied to her, the priests supporting her, the Templars forming a protective circle. Ser Otto and Ser Irminric were in front: Irminric glowering and Otto serenely confident.

Sister Justine whispered protests to Sister Rose. "He hasn't the authority! Not unless he's been given apostolic powers by the Divine herself and... er... oh, dear... Maybe he has!" Sister Rose's face was as panicked as her own must be.

Bronwyn rose from her throne before Loghain could stop her, and stalked down to confront the Knight-Divine.

"The Grand Cleric is going nowhere with you!"

Duke Prosper edged close to Ser Chrysagon, and whispered urgently, "Are you *mad*? Are you deliberately provoking

them?"

In a ghastly flash of insight, it occurred to him that those might be indeed the Divine's orders: to provoke an unforgivable scene resulting in their deaths. Perhaps that was exactly the *casus belli* that the Divine wished. He himself had been somewhat out of favor of late, and had looked upon this mission as a chance to raise himself in the Empress' eyes. Perhaps she had viewed it somewhat differently. Chrysagon was a fanatic, and coming close to the end of his active service, due to his heavy indulgence in lyrium.

The Templar pushed Prosper away, and took a heavy step toward Bronwyn. Scout, sensing the big man's ill intentions, bounded down from the dais more quickly than any human could manage and barked angrily. Without breaking stride, the Templar kicked out with his steel-shod boot, and caught the surprised mabari in the ribs. With a pained yelp, Scout twisted away from the full force of the kick, and prepared to spring on this enemy and rend him.

"Scout! To me!" cried Bronwyn. However satisfying it might be to see the Knight-Divine mauled to death by a mabari, it probably would not do Ferelden's reputation much good with the rest of the Thedas.

A terrible, shocked silence fell. It penetrated even Ser Chrysagon's understanding that perhaps he had overstepped his limits, though he was not entirely sure why. After all, he had only kicked a dog.

Duke Prosper had the sense to frame it quite differently. Ser Chrysagon had kicked the *Queen of Ferelden's* dog. In Ferelden. In front of a great many angry Fereldans and *their* dogs. Loghain was coming down the dais now, and was reaching for his sword.

Prosper's chances of leaving this country alive were shrinking to a tiny window—

He reached out, and spun the Templar around. A single punch to the jaw put the man down. The Duke immediately dropped to one knee in front of Bronwyn. The huge dog at her side panted, jaws slavering.

"Pardon, Your Majesty! The Knight-Divine is ill! He is deranged! Spare him, I pray you!" And then, he held his breath, wisely not looking the young woman in the eye. Instead, he fixed his gaze on the glittering hem of her gown, and took quick glances from side to side with his peripheral vision.

There was noise now, hushed but expectant. People were chattering and gesturing. Some were chuckling at the brawl, which while not as thrilling as a duel, still provided them with entertainment. Dogs were barking and growling, baring their teeth. It was a thoroughly bad situation, but he had given the Fereldans a pretext for allowing them to live.

And besides, Chrysagon was a madman.

Anders moved through the crowd, and cast a healing spell on

Scout. The dog was only bruised, but humans, he had found, often were more sympathetic toward the sufferings of animals than toward those of their own kind. Some coos of sympathy and approval were directed his way. Immediately, he withdrew behind the rest of the truculent Wardens, who were crowding up near Bronwyn.

"I can cast a sleep spell on the Knight-Divine, Your Majesty," he said, in a voice at once manly and subservient, perfectly pitched to carry. "Perhaps after a healing sleep, he may come to himself once more."

"Grand Cleric," Loghain said, "This man began his raving insults with you. What do you wish done with him? His behavior deserves a cell at Fort Drakon or worse."

Muirin paused, wondering what she *ought* to do. Harrith whispered in her ear.

"It could be that it's the lyrium, Your Grace. It *could* be. With the strain and the sea voyage, it *could* be early collapse. Another voyage in this weather might kill him."

Muirin raised her voice, hating the easy escape, hating the deception, hating everything that sullied that one thrilling, never-to-be-forgotten moment when she seen Andraste's power for herself. She dipped her hand into her pocket, and found the inextinguishable warmth, drawing strength from it.

"Your Majesties," she said. "If the Knight-Divine truly wishes me to travel to Val Royeaux, I shall go—"

Cries of "No!" interrupted her. Some of them came from her own people. Bronwyn glared at her, furious. Muirin put up her hand to be heard.

"—in the spring. I would go now," she said, "if I thought I could survive the winter in a ship. I *will* go in the spring and present myself to the Divine. I shall go as soon as the Waking Sea is free of ice. Duke Prosper, as the Knight-Divine appears to be indisposed and unable to attend to practical matters, I will tender the written account of the miracle to you, and I charge you to deliver it into the hands of the Divine. She will have time to ponder it before my arrival."

"Gladly, your Grace," Prosper assured her. Things were looking better. If he was charged with an errand, there was yet another reason to let him live and sail away; far, far away from this land of bandit kings, of fierce, green-eyed queens, of unnaturally intelligent dogs, and of impolitic, inconvenient miracles. He could not wait to read the Grand Cleric's account. For that matter, it might even be true. Truth was, after all, very often stranger than fiction. That did not mean, of course, that the Divine would allow herself to be convinced by something so very contrary to the political currents in Orlais.

"You cannot mean to go before the Holy Office," Bronwyn hissed at the older woman. "It is tantamount to suicide!"

"It is not suicide," Muirin said. "It is bearing witness. I can do no other, though I perish for it. What is a priest, but one who bears witness to the truth of the Maker? I do not fear the truth, though it might be distasteful to those for whom the

Chantry is only yet another path to worldly power. I saw a miracle. Yes. I saw it. I witnessed it in a conclave of priests and Templars. I will never deny it, though the fire burn and the blade pass the flesh. I would go to Val Royeaux, but I cannot go *now*, not when there is a strong chance that the ship would sink in a storm or I would die before I had a chance to speak in my defense. Yes," she said, feeling a little braver. "I *shall* go, but in the spring."

She could not risk dying at sea. If that happened, the Fereldan Chantry would be left without clear leadership. The Divine might send one of her favorites to create even greater fractures among the faithful. It was clear that the Divine wished to remove her from office. If she had just a little longer, she could ordain more priests and prepare her people for the inevitable onslaught. Just a little longer, and perhaps Beatrix would die, and a Divine of stronger will and less loyalty to the Empire might be elected...

"Meanwhile," Loghain said, "what is to be done with *him*?" He waved a contemptuous hand at the Knight-Divine, who was stirring, moaning, on the stone floor.

"He is my responsibility," Muirin said. "Let him be taken to the Cathedral where we can care for him. His duties, it seems, have become too onerous for him. Let the mage cast a spell of sleep on him, lest he harm others or himself."

Anders smiled, and cast the most powerful, crushing, repressive sleeping hex in his power, relishing the public permission from a priest. It was sweet.

With consideration, feigned by some Templars, but quite genuine in Otto's case, Ser Chrysagon was loaded onto a litter, and carried out to the Grand Cleric's carriage, to be taken to one of the clean, comfortable cells in the Cathedral set aside for Templars who had at last become dangerously addled by their addiction to lyrium. Most were eventually sent to the hospice in Val Royeaux, to be tended by the well-trained brothers and sisters there. Some were too ill for the journey, and those were cared for in Denerim. Ser Chrysagon would very likely be one such, though Muirin's conscience pained her. She did not think it was lyrium talking in his case: she believed that the man simply had no respect whatever for Ferelden and its inhabitants, and had lost his temper.

Bronwyn pointed at the discarded box on the floor. The gold and sapphire ornament had spilled out, gleaming. "And do take him his present," she said acidly. "Perhaps it will please him to contemplate it."

"Your Majesty," Nathaniel Howe spoke up. "After the Knight-Divine's wild words, there is bound to be speculation and gossip. Might I suggest that it would be better to be told the true facts? Could the Grand Cleric be prevailed upon to tell the Landsmeet the result of her investigations? If Andraste has made a miracle in Ferelden, that is a holy thing, something to be honored and celebrated throughout the kingdom."

"I agree," Kane Kendalls called out. He wanted to know. The Council never told him the juicy bits. Besides, the Knight-Divine was a bastard who kicked dogs. Kane thought hanging was

too good for anyone who'd hurt a dog. Anything that got the Orlesian dog-kicker that wound up was something Kane favored.

"Loghain," Wulffe growled in an undertone. "Better to get it out there. Bronwyn's been too modest about it, after all."

"Yes," Loghain said aloud. "Grand Cleric, the truth should be known."

Bronwyn sighed deeply, feeling rather sick at the prospect, and went back to her horribly uncomfortable throne. "If that is the wish of the Landsmeet, then I agree, but let it be known that it was never my intention to boast of this."

The Grand Cleric was too exhausted to tell the story herself. Instead, she beckoned to Sister Justine. Muirin had suspected there would be some sort of scene at the Orlesian's leave-taking, and had ordered a copy of the transcript brought to the Landsmeet in case she needed to refresh her memory.

Sister Justine was shown to the speaker's platform, and glancing about nervously, began reading.

"Minutes of the Examination of Lady Bronwyn Cousland, this first day of Umbralis,, Dragon 9:30. In attendance at the conclave:

Grand Cleric Muirin, officiating.

Revered Mothers Perpetua, Boann, Rosamund, Damaris,

Eudoxia, and Juliana.

*Knights-Commander Harrith, Rylock, Bryant, and Greagoir.
Templars Ser Otto and Irminric.*

Sister Justine, curator of holy artifacts.

Sister Rose, conclave clerk

Demelza, a child of the Chantry

Also in attendance:

First Enchanter Irving of the Kinloch Hold Circle of Magi.

*Grey Wardens Anders and Jowan. Grey Warden Leliana,
formerly a lay sister of the Lothering Chantry.*

*Lady Bronwyn Cousland, Acting Warden-Commander of the
Grey in Ferelden, as the individual to be examined in regard
to claims made as to the discovery of the Ashes of Andraste,
and in regard to a certain cure alleged to have been made of
the Dowager Queen Anora by means of said Ashes.*

The excited whispers faded, as the complete attention of the Landsmeet focused on the small and mousy figure in the speaker's platform.

Bronwyn was relieved, as Sister Justine kept reading, that this account was edited to reveal nothing about the *other* pinches of Ashes. It gave the impression that the child had been

healed by the remains of the pinch that had been used for Anora. This was what the Grand Cleric had promised to do, but Bronwyn was rather surprised that she had kept her word in the official version intended for the Divine.

"And that's the end," Bronwyn broke in, after the final account of the events at Haven: the slaying of the High Dragon Andraste, the death of Cullen, and her warning to the villagers to desist from their murderous ways.

"Why isn't this a place of pilgrimage?" one old lady called out. "The Prophet's Shrine should be a place of worship and healing! Why is it being kept secret?"

Many voices supported this, and Bronwyn had a ready reply.

"Because it is *dangerous!*" she shouted, exasperated. "The journey is dangerous; the villagers are dangerous, and the caverns might harbor more dragons yet. The Gauntlet itself is dangerous. We found the remains of many who had failed and died. Yes, we hoped to make this public, but after the Blight is over and the way can be made safe."

Duke Prosper had listened to the entire tale with wonder and pleasure. It was better than the best bard's tale, full of variety, adventure, and tragic death. It was, he believed, largely true. Most impressive. His opinion of the young Queen rose accordingly. All the more reason to deplore her marriage to a man no better than Maferath. In fact, Loghain bore unpleasant resemblances to Maferath. It was astonishing that these bumpkins did not see that. One did not really factor the

Maker into one's affairs—not if one were rational man of the world; but Andraste had clearly shown this young woman favor. It was something to consider seriously. If only she could be freed of her frightful *mésalliance*.

He had heard that she had previously killed a dragon, hence her *sobriquet* of Dragonslayer. That, however, had been a well-prepared expedition. This was something far more dangerous. How big was a High Dragon, really? Prosper had no real idea. However, he had hunted wyvern in one of his family estates, and they were quite dangerous enough. He even had tamed a wyvern and had trained it as a mount. Could one ride a dragon? All very interesting. Even more interesting were the things obviously not in the report.

Meanwhile, he wanted very much to take these papers, retrieve his luggage, and get out of this country. Loghain noticed him, and promptly ordered exactly that.

Bronwyn was put out at all the furtive, awed looks directed her way. Even Nathaniel and her own brother were being perfectly ridiculous. The Ashes were old news to her, but clearly not old news to most of the nobles of the Landsmeet. Rumors were one thing: the findings of the Chantry were something else. She overheard the murmurs about "Andraste's True Champion" throughout the evening. Loghain must have heard them, too. He was even more stone-faced than usual. Of course, dealing with the Orlesians earlier in the day had put him out of humor. At least he had had the satisfaction of one being tossed into custody at the Cathedral,

and the other sent to sea in questionable weather.

She wondered at the depth of Duke Prosper de Montfort's loyalty. The Empress was not going to be pleased at any news he carried. Bronwyn thought that in a like case, she would make for the warmer seas of the Free Marches and winter in Ostwick or Hercinia. Of course, if he did that, he might not be able to return to Orlais... *ever*. At least he was no longer their problem. She was happy to leave the Landsmeet and the day's business behind

More pleasantly, the Nevarran musician Zoe Pheronis arrived for her private audience, along with adorable little Amethyne. Loghain grimaced at the thought of such frippery, but attended after all when he heard that Nathaniel Howe and the Hawke brothers were invited, as well as Fergus and Anora. The Little Audience Chamber was arranged with cushioned chairs. and in the middle of the room, some padded stools for the musicians.

The Nevarran was a woman of about fifty, handsome and well-preserved. It was possible that she was even older, but it was difficult to tell. Understanding that the Queen wished to see something unusual, she wore Nevarran dress. It differed from Orlesian styles in small but interesting necklines were lower; and the sleeves of the overdress were slashed from elbow to wrist, falling away from the tight undersleeves. It was quite attractive when she played the lute, and the color combination of greens and turquoise-blues was subtle and restful. She had devised a similar costume for the child out of the same materials. Of course, it took very little cloth to dress

a slender little elf maiden.

She brought a number of instruments: a fat-bellied lute, a smaller mandora, a straight flute of—of all things!—dragonbone. She had a wide drum, called a drogedan, and rattles, bells, and a little triangle of silverite. Amethyne carried these in, with an important air, as well as her own little tambourine. Both the woman and the child made the most beautiful and elaborate curtseys before the King and Queen.

Amethyne was learning drumwork quickly, and accompanied her teacher both on tambourine and then on drogedan. The Nevarran woman was a superb instrumentalist. Bronwyn, accustomed to good quality music by Leliana, could tell that here was a true musician. Then Mistress Zoe played a Nevarran tune, and Amethyne danced for them like a leaping kitten, all quick grace and trailing scarves. It was really very charming, and Bronwyn thought her coin well spent.

After the applause died away, Bronwyn said, "Thank you, Mistress Zoe, and thank you, Amethyne. I am glad that you are making the most of your opportunity to study with such an accomplished teacher."

Zoe immediately bowed low once more, glancing quickly at Amethyne, who copied her perfectly.

"I thank Your Majesty. Allow me, I pray you, to express my gratitude at the opportunity to serve you in this. Also, indeed, for your gift of such a talented pupil. She is a joy to teach."

"You are from Nevarra originally, I understand," said Bronwyn.

"I am indeed, Your Majesty. The life of a minstrel is one of travel. It is some years since I saw the city of the Van Markhams, where I was born."

"I know little of Nevarra. I should like to hear some of your country's songs."

"As you wish, Your Majesty. I shall render them into your tongue."

They were quite nice songs, too, though the mode of their composition sounded a little odd to Ferelden ears. Many of them were about the land itself, and about the Minanter, greatest of rivers.

"Orlais, of course," said Mistress Zoe, at the end of a ballad, "is our great enemy. We have many songs about battles fought against the chevaliers and about how Nevarrans have resisted their invasions. Would it please you to hear one? I can render it, also, into your tongue."

"Yes," Loghain said shortly, before Bronwyn could make a gentler reply. The song proved quite gruesome.

*"In Blessed Age eight forty-one the Orlesians formed a plan
To massacre us Nevarrans down by the River Vann
To massacre us Nevarrans and not to spare a man
But to drive us down like a herd of swine into the River
Vann."*

"Ah, those are the Orlesians we also know!" laughed Bronwyn, at the song's end. Loghain, she saw, was pleased, as he would be by anything vilifying Orlesians. "But tell me: it is true that the Nevarrans, unlike the rest of Thedas, bury their dead in elaborate tombs? I have read that in the works of Brother Genetivi."

"It is true, Majesty, though only the greatest and richest have the famous tombs that encompass gardens, baths, and ballrooms. Most families have small stone tombs, no bigger than a cottage, where the dead of a family are stacked in their coffins on shelves inscribing their names. That said, the Necropolis is a vast place and not one to linger in after dark, for many things walk there, and the least dangerous are the bandits who dwell in untended tombs."

"Might we hear a Nevarran tale?" asked Anora. "I should like that."

"I can relate to you a famous one, Majesty, that comes down from ancient times."

The Minstrel Zoe Pheronis' tale of Rhampsinitus and the Clever Thief

Lord Rhampsinitus was possessed, it is written, of great riches—indeed to such an amount, that no other noble of Nevarra surpassed or even equaled his wealth. To guard this great fortune, he had built a vast chamber of hewn stone, one side of which was to form a part of the outer wall of a new

castle.

The builder, however, was corrupt, and contrived, as he was constructing the outer wall, to insert in this wall a stone which could easily be removed from its place by two men, or even one. So the chamber was finished, and the great lord's gold stored away in it.

The builder fell sick; and finding his end approaching, he called for his two sons, and related to them the contrivance he had made in the Lord Rhampsinitus' treasure-chamber, telling them it was for their sakes he had done it, so that they might always live in affluence. Then he gave them clear directions concerning the mode of removing the stone, and communicated the measurements, bidding them carefully keep the secret, and soon after, he died. The sons were not slow in setting to work; they went by night to the castle, found the stone in the wall, and having removed it with ease, plundered the treasury.

When the lord next paid a visit to his vault, he was astonished to see that the coin was sunk in some of the storage vessels. Whom to accuse, however, he knew not, as the seals were all perfect, and the fastenings of the room secure. Still, each time that he repeated his visits, he found that more gold was gone.

At last the lord determined to have some traps made, and set them near the vessels which contained his wealth. This was done, and when the thieves came, as usual, to the treasure chamber, one of them was caught in the trap. Perceiving that

he was lost, he instantly called his brother, and telling him what had happened, entreated him to enter as quickly as possible and cut off his head, that when his body should be discovered it might not be recognized, which would have the effect of bringing ruin upon both. The other thief thought the advice good, and was persuaded to follow it; then, fitting the stone into its place, he went home, taking with him his brother's head.

When day dawned, the lord came into the treasure chamber, and marveled greatly to see the headless body of a thief in the trap, although the building was still whole, and neither entrance nor exit was to be seen anywhere. In this perplexity he commanded the body of the dead man to be hung up outside the castle wall, and set a guard to watch it, with orders that if any persons were seen weeping or lamenting near the place, they should be seized and brought before him. When the mother heard of this exposure of the corpse of her son, she took it sorely to heart, and spoke to her surviving child, bidding him devise some plan or other to get back the body, and threatening that if he did not exert himself she would go herself to the king and denounce him as a robber.

The son said all he could to persuade her to let the matter rest, but in vain: she still continued to trouble him, until at last he yielded, and contrived as follows: Filling some skins with wine, he loaded them on donkeys, which he drove before him till he came to the place where the guards were watching the dead body. Then, pulling two or three of the skins towards him, he untied some of the necks which dangled by the asses'

sides. The wine poured freely out, whereupon he began to beat his head and shout with all his might, seeming not to know which of the donkeys he should turn to first.

When the guards saw the wine running they rushed one and all into the road, each with some vessel or other, and caught the liquor as it was spilling. The driver pretended anger, and loaded them with abuse. They did their best to pacify him, until at last he appeared to soften, and recover his good humor and set to work to rearrange their donkeys' burdens. Meanwhile, as he talked and chatted with the guards, one of them began to jest with him and make him laugh, whereupon he gave them one of the skins as a gift. They now made up their minds to sit down and have a drinking-bout where they were, so they begged him to remain and drink with them. Then the man let himself be persuaded, and stayed.

As the drinking went on, they grew very friendly together, so presently he gave them another skin, from which they drank so copiously that they were all overcome with liquor. Growing drowsy, they lay down, and fell asleep on the spot. The thief waited till it was the dead of the night, and then took down the body of his brother; after which, in mockery, he shaved off the right side of all the soldiers' beards, and so left them. Laying his brother's body upon the donkeys, he carried it home to his mother, having thus accomplished the thing that she had required of him.

When it came to Rhampsinitus' ears that the thief's body was stolen away, he was furious. Wishing to catch the man who had contrived the trick, he announced that he would bestow

his own daughter upon the man who would narrate to her the best story of the cleverest and wickedest thing done by himself. If anyone in reply told her the story of the thief, she was to lay hold of him, and not allow him to get away.

The daughter did as her father willed, and the thief, who was well aware of the king's motive, felt a desire to outdo him in craft and cunning. Accordingly he contrived a clever plan.

He procured the corpse of a man lately dead, and cutting off one of the arms at the shoulder, put it under his clothing, and so went to the king's daughter after sunset. When she put the question to him as she had done to all the rest, he replied that the wickedest thing he had ever done was cutting off the head of his brother when he was caught in a trap in the king's treasury, and the cleverest was making the guards drunk and carrying off the body. As he spoke, the princess caught at him, but the thief took advantage of the darkness to hold out to her the hand of the corpse. Imagining it to be his own hand, she seized and held it fast; while the thief, leaving it in her grasp, made his escape by the door.

Lord Rhampsinitus, when word was brought him of this fresh success, was amazed at the wit and audacity of the man. He sent messengers throughout the city to proclaim a free pardon for the thief, and to promise him a rich reward, if he came and made himself known. The thief took the lord at his word, and came boldly into his presence; whereupon Rhampsinitus gave him his daughter in marriage. "My daughter," he said, "has not only a bold man as husband, but the most cunning in all Nevarra."

"You know what?" Carver whispered to Adam. "If I ever get caught in a trap, I *don't* want you to cut off my head."

Hawke laughed. "Likewise!"

They kept the minstrel talking for some time, telling them of the land and customs of Nevarra. Bronwyn bitterly regretted that she would not be going with the embassy. They more she learned of the interesting places they would be going, the more put out she was not to be part of it.

The last festive night of the Landsmeet was a little wearying. Everyone was ready for it to be over. Bronwyn herself, while she enjoyed the dancing, was not sorry to leave early. It had been eventful, but it had gone on too long. And tomorrow, they would have to deal with the Dalish grant.

She nearly fell asleep while Fionn was brushing out her hair. Loghain came in, and set about going to bed in his usual matter-of-fact way. In the midst of this, a footman appeared at the door with a message.

"Pardon, Your Majesty, but a courier from Ser Cauthrien has arrived."

"I'll see him in my study. Show him up." He turned to Bronwyn. "Later, then."

"Certainly not," Bronwyn said, wanting news of her Wardens.

"I'll come with you."

"If you must."

He did not wait for her, and so Bronwyn threw on her scarlet dressing gown and practically ran after him. She did not notice the admiring looks of the guards.

"—Ser Cauthrien plans an early start tomorrow, Your Majesty, and will be here a little after midday. The weather looks to hold, and the roads are clear."

Loghain dismissed him, and read Cauthrien's letter.

Bronwyn shut the door and perched on the arm of Loghain's comfortable chair. "Tomorrow. They'll be tired, but they should come to the Landsmeet before the end and be honored. People really think we should do something for Alistair—"

"Yes, yes. I've already made plans for both of them."

"Really?" Bronwyn hardly knew whether to be pleased that he had thought of Alistair or offended that he had made said plans without her input. "Might I know what they are?"

Briefly, he outlined what he had in mind for them. He saw no reason why there would be serious opposition.

There was certainly no opposition from the Council. That morning, the last of their meetings during the Landsmeet, Loghain laid out his intention of creating two new bannorns in

the west of Ferelden. Reports from army scouts and from the Wardens had made clear that the country there was chaotic and lawless. Firm hands were needed to establish order and keep the peace. After considering everything they had heard yesterday, it was clear that the area around Sulcher Pass must have a ruler. That bannorn would encompass the villages of Sulcher and Haven. Considering the strategic importance of the Sulcher Pass and the value of the ancient temple near Haven, he thought the best choice would be someone of proven military capacity; someone who had worked tirelessly for Ferelden security. Thus, Ser Cauthrien would be named Bann Cauthrien Woodhouse of Sulcher Pass.

Bronwyn realized with embarrassment that she had not even known Cauthrien's surname. It was not a very distinguished-sounding one, to be sure, but that might well change, over time. Before the Council could react to this appointment, Loghain went on

"There's that neck of land near Orzammar, too; just under the Waking Sea Islands. It's important to make clear that it's Ferelden. There's a little village—Stonehaven— up on the coast that's the biggest settlement aside from the trading camp by the Orzammar Gate. I've thought over this appointment, and I decided that the bann there should be someone known to the dwarves. A name was brought up earlier in the Landsmeet, and many people feel that the young man deserves some recognition for his birth. I know him, and I think he's a fine lad who'd be an asset to the Landsmeet. Therefore, I'm going to propose young Alistair—Warden or

not—as the Bann of Stonehaven. I suppose we should grant him a surname of his own as well. I favor Fitzmaric, myself."

Bronwyn had thought that if he was given anything at all, Alistair's lands would be in the remote south. Apparently Loghain thought better of him than she had quite realized. Alistair's lands would be south of Alfstanna's, west of Bann Naois', and north of the royal desmesne at Gherlen's Pass. And important new foundation, and something else that the Orlesians might frown upon, not only because Alistair was a Warden, but because the borders that Loghain had sketched out on his map extended all the way to the Jader Bay Hills. Another provocation. Well, why not? As Nan used to say, *"Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb."*

"What a wonderful idea," Bronwyn agreed. "'Bann Alistair Fitzmaric of Stonehaven' sounds very well."

Anora knit her brow briefly, wondering if this might cause issues far in the future. At least father had not granted Alistair the name "Theirin." That would have been awkward indeed.

Teagan was extremely pleased, and less inclined to blame himself for his bungling earlier in the Landsmeet. If nothing else, he had made Alistair's name and heritage known, and now the boy would at last have some good from it.

Howe, Bryland, and Wulffe considered it the right and honorable thing to do. Kane was indifferent for a variety of reasons; among them the fact the new bann would be on the other side of Ferelden. Fergus knew that it was important to

his sister, both as a form of restitution for one she felt had not been given the upbringing he deserved—and as her friend, of whom she was very fond. For that matter, Fergus liked Alistair for himself, and was glad that the young man would have recognition, and an establishment in the North.

"All right, then," Loghain said, looking at the faces around the table. "We'll start the session a bit later than usual. The Dalish know to be there, and I'll give orders for Cauthrien and Alistair to come to the Chamber as soon as they arrive."

Fergus grinned. "They won't exactly be dressed for Court."

"They'll look exactly like what they are," Loghain snorted. "Soldiers of Ferelden. That should be enough for anyone."

The children were coming to the last sessions, partly because it was historic, and also because they might not be seeing much of each other in the near future.

Bad as the weather was, Bryland wanted to take his new bride to South Reach, and show her the arling, and the arling to her. He needed to be sure that things were running smoothly and that his revenues were being paid in properly. The boys, too, would enjoy winter sports there, now that the south was no longer dangerous. Then, too, he felt that his daughter needed some privacy to enjoy with her new husband. She seemed very happy—very pleased with her choice. Dinner together every day might be close and familial, but they all needed to work on their marriages. The boys

would miss the little girls, but they would treasure their meetings all the more for it.

Corbus, in fact, had begged him to take Faline and Jancy with them, saying that Habren would like it if they did. It was undoubtedly true, and Bryland was sorry for it, but he explained to the boy that Habren could not always have everything exactly as she would like, and it was important for Kane, Habren, and Kane's sisters all to learn to live together as a family. Besides, Kane was fond of his sisters and would miss them. Perhaps the girls could have a short visit this summer. Beneath his calm smile, his thoughts were racing.

If the darkspawn stay far away. If the Orlesians dpn't invade. If the Chantry doesn't declare an Exalted March on Ferelden.

Besides, he was not going to stay in South Reach very long. With the Orlesians making noises, he would need to be back in the capital by early next month. Even though South Reach was far from the border, he too would have a role to play in preparing the country for a possible invasion.

As to Leandra's daughter and niece, they had waffled back and forth about what to do. Originally, the plan had been for the girls to spend some time in the city of Amaranthine with Bann Adam. That was no longer feasible, as Adam was being taken by his Arl to assess the need for "Coastal Improvements." At least that was the story Adam told his mother. Leandra was not particularly happy about it, and not pleased that Carver, too, was leaving on an unspecified Grey Warden "mission." Bryland did not know all the details, but he

knew that the embassy to Nevarra was leaving very soon. The fewer who knew, of course, the better.

Instead of going to the coast, the girls could join them in South Reach and thus would have the chance to see Leandra in her new role of chatelaine of Castle Byland. It would be especially good for Charade, who needed to understand what would be expected of her in West Hills. Wulffe was a widower, and his eldest son's wife would be the mistress of the castle. No time like the present to understand what that was all about.

It was just as well that they had done with the great public feasts. Tonight they would enjoy a quiet dinner at home, and retire early. By late afternoon the Landsmeet would be over, and tomorrow they would be on the road.

The stares fixed on the Dalish envoys to the Landsmeet ranged from wondering to disgusted to outright hostile. It was one thing to make good on poor Cailan's promise to the elves, and quite another to have to stand in close proximity to tattooed knife-ears. A Landsmeet was the time for the nobles to air their frank opinions, and some very nasty things were said to the elves' faces.

"—Land belongs to people who'll use it properly!" objected Bann Berthilde. "The Dalish are nothing but vagabonds and poachers!"

"—It seems to me," huffed Bann Everly, eyeing the ethereal young Merrill, "that some elven wench might have used her

unnatural wiles on the young king!"

The Dalish, well-schooled by Marethari, only gave the shemlens filthy looks. They must remember the prize to be gained. It did not matter what was said, as long as the land was delivered to them. Cathair tugged at Danith's elbow, restraining her.

"Let the fools talk, *lethallan*," he whispered. "It is only so much wind."

Arl Wulffe glared at Everly, mortified that one of his own sworn bans would make this sort of trouble.

Bryland was equally annoyed. Raising his voice, he said, "I was in the King's presence when he raised the issue, and I saw no sign of undue influence. I was also present in my share of fights where the elves gave good service!"

Loghain, seeing Bronwyn's flushed, angry face, had something to say himself. "The Dalish kept their word to us. Now it's time to keep our word to them. This isn't the first time they've done Ferelden a good turn. No one lives on the land in question, and it suits the elves well enough. They'll *use* it," he said to Bann Berthilde, "as they see fit."

Then Teagan got up to speak, and gave an impassioned speech about his royal nephew Cailan, and what Teagan thought of those who sought to diminish his legacy. Cailan had believed that all his people deserved protection and a decent life—"

Anders muttered to Niall, "I never heard that he gave a fig for mages!"

"He used the term '*people*,'" Niall whispered back, grimacing. "I don't think he—or the late king—meant *us*. Bronwyn—and I suppose Loghain, too—well, they've already done more for us than all the other kings and queens of Ferelden put together "

Teagan was going on at length, though, and people were listening. It was a good appeal to sentiment. Furthermore, many nobles hoped that if the Dalish had a bit of land of their own, they would stay there and not trouble honest folk.

The Grand Cleric, of course, had to bring up missionaries. Bronwyn was resigned to it. It was the priest's duty, after all.

Marethari answered, quite a good match for the Grand Cleric in the dignified old lady department.

"No harm will befall such travelers at our hands. This, I swear. Those who find their way to us will be allowed to speak their words in safety."

Tara, standing among the Wardens, smirked. She had had a very interesting conversation with Keeper Marethari yesterday. An interesting conversation and an even more interesting demonstration. Chantry missionaries would walk in circles, round and round the borders, never penetrating into the lands at all. Very few people knew about the ancient temple. They would assume that the Dalish had moved on to another camp. It would be formidable protection from all sorts

of possible dangers: darkspawn, foresters, bandits, and yes, Templars. There must be some openings to allow forest creature their natural migration, but those would be guarded carefully. As the barrier would only extend up twenty feet or so, birds would be able to travel as they liked.

Anders saw her smirking and gave her a wink. Dalish Keeper and Circle mages were exchanging a great deal of interesting lore. Not everyone was compatible with the Arcane Warrior magic Tara had learned in the temple, but quite a few were picking it up. Morrigan had been surprised to learn that some Dalish mages knew shape-shifting. She had thought it was a secret known only to Flemeth, but that was not true. It was very difficult magic, however, and only the most powerful and the most attuned to the natural world learned it. Tara and Jowan had not taken to it. Niall was still studying various animals, trying to find one for which he felt an affinity.

Teagan finished his speech, and came down to considerable applause, smiling at an adoring Kaitlyn. Loghain, grimly pleased that Teagan had done the work for him, decided it was now or never, and called for a vote. Bronwyn bit her lip. She understood why Loghain did not want her to speak. She had already made a name for herself as a defender of elves and mages. It would be foolish to antagonize her human subjects by perceived favoritism, however ridiculous such an accusation would be.

A few curmudgeons actually voted against the proposal; there were about a dozen abstentions. It passed, and passed with a reasonable majority. Many nobles, in fact, were uneasy

about opposing anything the Queen favored. The document was signed and sealed and copies given to the Dalish and retained for the Royal Archives. Sensing that it was time for an exit, Marethari led her people out of the Landsmeet Chamber. Afterwards, a number of nobles breathed sighs of relief and reassured themselves that their purses and jewelry were still in their possession.

A round of self-congratulatory speeches followed, as the Landsmeet wound down: banns praising themselves and the new King and Queen. Some speakers embarrassed Bronwyn as they went on about her personal relationship with Andraste as her "True Champion," predicting that the favor shown the Queen would extend to the nation as a whole. A few speakers expressed some alarm at the fraying relations with their nearest neighbor, and other expressed hopes that the Blight would be over by spring. Bronwyn did not allow herself to roll her eyes at such fatuity, but the rest of the Wardens showed no such restraint.

In the midst of this, a messenger came forward to whisper news to Loghain, who grunted an order to the man. Bronwyn looked a question, and Loghain gave her a nod. Shortly thereafter, Cauthrien and Alistair entered the Landsmeet followed by a retinue of officers and Wardens. Curious eyes followed them, and there were a few double takes when Sten joined them, easily towering over anyone else in the room. Not all Ferelden nobles had seen a Qunari for themselves.

Alistair shot Bronwyn a bright grin, which faded into confusion when he was urged forward, along with Cauthrien. He and his

companions were not exactly at their best. They tracked in dirty slush, and to be honest, they were all a bit...whiffy. He had yanked off his ridiculous fur hat before entering the Landsmeet Chamber, but many of his companions had not, and the dwarves, especially, looked like an assortment of dirty, truculent stuffed toys. Oghren's hat was not only bearskin, but was most of an actual bear's head. Their entry was greeted by a few squeaks from the more sheltered noble ladies.

Loghain rose to his feet, and Bronwyn followed him a split-second later. Alistair thought she was looking fairly spiffy, crown and all. He wondered what the First Warden would say.

Looking about the room, Loghain said, "Ferelden is strong, and is growing stronger. To keep order within the realm, we must have leaders. Our reach is extending into the Frostbacks, and I, with the agreement of the Queen, the Chancellor, and the Council, have decided that these outlying lands will be formed into new bannorns. Ser Cauthrien, your loyal, courageous, and capable service make you our choice for the new Bannorn of Sulcher's Pass. Nobles of Ferelden, acclaim her."

Surprised and blind-sided, no one managed to put together a coherent opposition—or if they thought of one, they did not dare voice it. Applause and some resentful murmurs followed the announcement. Plenty of younger sons would have been glad of a chance at a new bannorn.

Eyes glittering with malice, Lady Rosalyn whispered to her younger son, "A handsome farewell present for a cast-off mistress! Everyone knows she's been his campfollower for years. Can't have her about now that he's decently married, and so he's sending her off to the far side of the kingdom! At least *he* hasn't produced any bastards... I *hope*..."

Her older son quieted her, hoping no one had overheard.

Still standing at attention before the throne, Cauthrien appeared quite shocked at the honor. Loghain gave her a hint of smile, and she responded with a salute. Then she blushed, realizing that she ought to have bowed.

"And you, Alistair," Loghain continued, turning to his old friend's son, and conspicuously leaving off the title of 'Warden.' "You have done good service in driving the darkspawn from Ostagar. Your father would have been very proud of you."

Alistair's jaw dropped. His blush was darker than Cauthrien's.

"There is no doubt," Loghain continued, "that by ability and birthright you belong in the Landsmeet. Therefore, we bestow on you the surname Fitzmaric, and the new bannorn of Stonehaven, knowing you will be a respectful neighbor to our brave allies the dwarves."

There was more generous applause for Alistair, especially from ladies who considered the tall figure clad in armor and wolfskin cloak very handsome and now very eligible. The

dwarves, too, liked any favorable mention of themselves, and thought 'Stonehaven' sounded like a respectable sort of place. It had the word "stone" in it, anyway.

"Does anyone," asked Bronwyn, "oppose the appointments of Bann Cauthrien and Bann Alistair?"

No one did. The seneschal insinuated himself between the rather confused new nobles, coaching them through the rite of homage. First Cauthrien, and then Alistair approached the King and Queen and received the Kiss of Peace from each of them. Alistair grew pink with suppressed laughter. Loghain glared at him.

Just like his father!

Bronwyn kissed him on both his stubbly cheeks and gave him a wink.

"But—"

"Shhh!" she hushed him. "This is a good thing. We'll talk later."

The Landsmeet closed with pomp and circumstance, and then with dozens of nobles scrambling to be first out the door to their carriages. Bronwyn watched the carnage, laughing and unseen, from an upstairs window. Then she changed out of her royal trappings, and went to join the noisy reunion in the Wardens' Hall.

Those who had never seen it were given the tour. There was astonishment at Shale, and excitement at the comfort their quarters promised. Bronwyn showed Alistair the room that had been hers.

"This is yours, now, Senior Warden."

"It used to be Duncan's," he whispered, and then scrubbed at his eyes furiously with the heel of his hand. Bronwyn patted his arm, not willing to waste any more sentiment on Duncan, whom she liked less and less in retrospect. Briskly, she helped Alistair get organized in his new space.

"What's in that chest? It rattles."

Alistair was a little embarrassed. "It's loot, all right? We found lots of things when we were exploring the Deep Roads."

"That's wonderful," she said, opening it to have a look. "Oh! Very nice! You should wear that jeweled collar. In fact, go down to the stores and have yourself fitted up with at least one good doublet. We have heaps in the storerooms. You'll need it when you get invited to dinner. Don't make that sulky face. Fergus will invite you, and you can hardly complain about him."

"I like Teyrn Fergus all right," Alistair allowed.

"You'd better!"

Mistress Rannelly called them to dinner, and Alistair was out

of the door before Bronwyn could pursue the matter.

"Maker! I'm starving!"

It had been a hard march, and the newcomers ate heartily. For the sake of camaraderie, so did all the rest. After that, the newly arrived Wardens were hustled into the study and given a dose of Avernus' potion, and then told briefly about Soldier's Peak. When that was done, the junior Wardens were dismissed to be happy, rowdy, and comfortable, and Bronwyn called all the rest to a long meeting. Some of it was repetition, but everyone was interested in what the others had been doing. Each made a detailed report of what they had seen and experienced. The dogs jostled their way into the meeting, enjoying the smells of pack members, old and new. Alistair was thrilled when the unnamed puppy sat beside him, listening for all the world like he understood the conversation.

The big news items were the slaying of the Architect, the curious withdrawal of the darkspawn, and the clearance of much of the Deep Roads.

"Now that the Landsmeet is over at last—" Bronwyn began.

Alistair interrupted. "—And I still have a bone to pick with you about that—"

"Later," Bronwyn said. "We'll get to that, I promise you. Now that the Landsmeet is over, I need to get back to Warden business. I'm going to take a party up to Soldier's Peak, mostly those who haven't seen it yet."

"I already called dibs!" Tara declared. "Brosca and I are first in line!"

"Oh, you're certainly coming along. Alistair, you just got here, so why don't you and your people rest a bit and hold the fort? Have some fun in the city and sleep in? You'd probably enjoy a rest from marching."

"No lie!" Alistair agreed.

"I need to go home, anyway" Adaia said, feeling very daring. "I need to see my family."

"Of course you do," Bronwyn agreed. "They'll want to see you. And Tara, you promised to go yourself. Go in the morning, and be ready to move out at midday."

Adaia punched Tara on the arm lightly, whispering.

"No," Tara said, "I don't think there will be any trouble. The new Arl of Denerim isn't interested in the Alienage at all, and I don't think he cares about Vaughan and Urien."

"I don't think he does," Bronwyn said with a nod. "All the same, I'm giving you the orders I've given everyone else, and pass them along to your junior Wardens. *No one* goes anywhere alone. When you do go out, you wear your Warden tunics. If you don't have one, go see Mistress Rannelly and she'll get you kitted out. The going out alone part goes for everybody, even *nobles*."

"That means you, Chantry Boy!" Oghren slapped the back of Alistair's head.

"Hey!" Alistair made a face. "Bronwyn, you said nobody would make me be anything I didn't want to be."

"I said," Bronwyn replied, "that no one would make you *King*. You're not *King*. Everybody felt that you deserved recognition. Teagan made a very stirring speech about you. Loghain, now that he knows you better, feels that you're someone the Landsmeet needs: someone not puffed up, someone who's known hardship and battle. It was the decision of the Landsmeet, Alistair. Obviously, both of us have to put our duties as Wardens first while the Blight lasts. We can but hope the Blight does not last for the rest of our lives."

"What are we supposed to call you now?" asked Carver.

"'Bronwyn' here amongst ourselves, or 'Commander' if you're feeling formal. If you speaking of me to someone else, maybe you should refer to me as 'Her Majesty,' or just as 'the Queen.'" She thought again, "Or as 'Queen Bronwyn' if my stepdaughter is anywhere in the vicinity."

Anders said, perfectly straight-faced, "I think we should always refer to you as "Andraste's True Champion."

"Please don't," Bronwyn said, looking pained.

"Or as 'The Dragonslayer,'" suggested Morrigan, with a faint, sly smile.

"Very funny. I thought 'The Girl Warden' was annoying enough."

"Who else is going to Soldier's Peak?" asked Tara.

"You and your your party," said Bronwyn. "Along with me. Anders, Morrigan, Carver, Zevran, Aveline, Toliver, too. Some others will be traveling with us, too, but they have a different mission. And Loghain."

"Ha!" Brosca burst out laughing. "The Big Guy doesn't want to let you out of his sight, does he?"

Bronwyn shrugged, smiling a little, "Something like that." She saw Alistair, still brooding over his new title. "Alistair, it's done; and it should have been done a long time ago."

"But what's the First Warden going to say about us?" he pleaded. "Me a Bann, and you a...a Queen!"

"At the moment," Bronwyn said, iron in her voice. "I really don't much care about the opinion of the First Warden. I've written to him about the talking darkspawn we killed in Amaranthine. I've written to a lot of the Warden posts. The Warden-Commander of Nevarra wrote back, telling me that all the Wardens have been forbidden to help us in any way. He believes it's Orlesian influence, and that nearly everyone thinks Ferelden too unimportant to be the real target of the Archdemon. Meanwhile, they sit on their hands, waiting for events to unfold."

She thumped the desk, the anger rising in her again. "We are facing the first Blight in four hundred years. In my opinion, any Warden worth his salt should already be here, facing it with us. What else are they for? And what's to stop them getting on a ship and coming here, if they had any honor or courage? Since they have decided to leave us to the darkspawn, I think we're free to run the order here any way we want."

"Oh, Cousin! You're home!"

An impromptu celebration in the Alienage led to some scandalously early-morning drinking. Warden Adaia was welcomed back by her family, and tried to accustom herself to the name "Melian Tabris" once more. Wardens crowded into the dingy wooden hovel, bringing gifts. The keg of ale Oghren carried was broached at once.

Adaia's father, Cyrion, cried over her, holding her as if he could not bear to let her go again. Even those elves who had looked on her as a troublemaker and disgrace in the past greeted her with respect. Adaia had never before realized that being the center of attention could be... pleasant. Her croaking voice, as always, was at odds with her delicate face.

"Father, these are my special friends: Alistair is my Senior Warden; and this is Siofranni—she's Dalish, as you can see; and this is Oghren, and this is Sten, You know Danith, Tara and Zevran, of course. That's Cathair and Darach, and there's Steren and Nuala, talking to Valendrian. We could almost make an Alienage from all the elves in the Wardens!"

Danith snorted, "Don't try to make me a city elf, *lethallan!*"

"Wouldn't think of it." Adaia said, pert with good humor. "But I think we've learned that Dalish elves and city elves have more in common than any of us realized! If you like, you can think of Alienage elves as just another clan!"

Shianni tipped her cousin's face up to the sunlight and approved. "You look good. Where did you get that fancy fur coat?"

"I earned it!" Adaia said proudly. "I've been working hard and fighting, too, and Warden pay is really high. I've brought presents! I earned the furs, and Siofranni and I designed our coats. It was really cold at Ostagar."

Alistair thought about joining the conversation, but then felt very shy all of a sudden. They had all been so close down at Ostagar: really like a family. He had thought that maybe Adaia... liked him, a little. At least she seemed to have forgiven him for being human. Emrys had warned him that maybe Adaia would not want a lot of big, armed humans intimidating her people, but Alistair had laughed at that. Now he felt awkward and out of place, and was wondering if he had blundered in somewhere where he really was not wanted. Emrys was smart; Alistair knew he should listen to him more often. Even the Dalish looked more at home here than he did.

Adaia was still talking, cheeks red with excitement.

"And as soon as we got to Denerim, we were called into the

Landsmeet Chamber—all of us! And Alistair was made a bann!"

The atmosphere around them suddenly froze. Everyone, to Alistair's horror, started bowing and cringing away. Some people even looked frightened.

"My lord, you do our house honor—"

"I'm just a Grey Warden," Alistair said, his throat thick. "Just another Warden! We're all friends together..."

"Kindly spoken, your lordship..."

It was hopeless. Fixing a smile on his face, Alistair left the packed little house as soon as he could and wandered across the frozen, filthy lane. Some of the Dalish Wardens had already come out, and were talking with Marethari and Merrill's people.

The Dalish were in the process of leaving, not wanting to give the shemlen a chance to change their minds about the land grant. The women trusted Bronwyn, and the old men trusted Loghain, but they trusted no one else but their own people and their Warden friends. Marethari wanted to get back to the land and start casting the barrier wards that would hide them from unfriendly eyes.

"*Anetha ara*, Warden Alistair!" called Merrill in her sweet, light voice. "We are going home."

"I'm glad for you," he said. "Really glad. We'll keep in touch, and let you know as soon as we find out anything about the Archdemon."

"We will come quickly, when the time comes. Our Keeper has spoken to Tara. She will know how to find us."

She was called away to help with the last of the packing. Alistair, once more at loose ends, shuffled back toward the Tabris hovel, and met Zevran, who was lounging outside.

"You look out of sorts, my lord," the Antivan said, smirking.

"That's right; it's Mock Alistair Day. I thought you'd be in there, the life of the party."

"Alas, there seems to be a plot brewing to arrange a 'proper' wedding between me and the divine Tara. She feels exactly on the matter as I do—that others should mind their own business. However, they are her cousins, and she does revel a bit in the hitherto unknown delights of family. As for me, if they cannot find me, they cannot drag me before a priest."

Sten appeared, stooping under the wooden lintel. "The ceilings are too low here," he rumbled. "And this place is a scandal of poor urban planning."

Zevran shrugged. "It is not the worst Alienage I have ever seen. It is my understanding that Bronwyn intends to demolish the derelict object opposite to us and build decent housing in its place. She has also spoken of having a sewage drain

underneath the 'street' rather than the current putrid open gutter. It will be interesting to see what comes of that."

Tara emerged from the door, hands up to forestall argument. "—I think it sounds grand, but I just can't right now. Oh, there you are, Zevran. We've got to get back to the Compound. Bronwyn had a mission for us, didn't she?"

"Indeed she did," Zevran agreed, gallantly rising to her defence. "*Cara mia*, may I take your arm?"

"You may, good ser."

"A mission?" Alistair said, snatching at the pretext. "I almost forgot!"

"Indeed," Sten said, already ahead of them, "It would be very wrong to fail in our duties."

Nathaniel Howe, Arl of Amaranthine, was going home to his arling. His arling, indeed; confirmed in his possession by the Landsmeet. With him were a number of his banns, a group of Wardens, and to the surprise of some, the King and Queen. Bann Varel had been quietly informed that Nathaniel and Adam would be traveling for possibly the next two months, and he was charged with running the arling and the city while they were gone.

As to Ferelden itself...

"Anora is Chancellor," Loghain told his people. "She has Fergus Cousland to back her up in case of trouble. Meanwhile, I have inspections to make."

While Bronwyn had been making merry with her Wardens the night before, he had enjoyed a long and detailed conversation with the Glavonak brothers, and even now had some detailed plans with him to think over. They had played with a number of substances, and their explosives were more powerful than ever. They had invented some war-engines, too; machines capable of throwing missiles and explosives over the highest walls, or onto the largest ships. There was still time to organize some thoroughly nasty— he hoped lethal—surprises for unwelcome visitors.

Traveling up the Pilgrim's Path was not easy at this time of year. Instead of oxen, they had hitched workhorses to the wagons they were bringing to resupply the Legion. Their speed was much better than usual, even on the wintry road. By the time twilight enshrouded them, they had reached the impressive entrance of a deserted silverite mine, deep in the Wending Wood.

Thanks to my reviewers: Kyren, Isala Uthenera, KnightOfHolyLight, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Blinded in a bolthole, Douche McNitpick, Girl-chama, Trishata96, Zute, Mike3207, EpitomyofShyness, EmbertoInferno, Sizuka2, MsBarrows, Robbie the Phoenix, Psyche Sinclair, Mastigo, almostinsane, Verpine, JackOfBladesX, al103, Costin, Bob,

Jenna53, Phygmalion, darksky01, brrt, Have Socks. Will Travel, Raxiselic, mille libri, jnybot, Griffon Rider, Promenius, Tsu Doh Nimh, WraithRune, Trevorswim, and DjinniGenie. Several of you have come up with clever and ingenious ideas for thwarting Orlesians!

The story, Rhampsinitus and the Clever Thief, is adapted from an Egyptian story preserved by Herodotus.

Yes, it will become clear in the next chapters that the puppy is imprinting on Alistair. After giving it a lot of thought, I decided that the early experiences of the Tevinter-bred litter would incline them toward humans, who had run the kennels and fed them. Elves, when they smelled or met them, would have been low-status, not-pack... almost prey. Alistair, for all his self-deprecation, smells very high-status indeed, based on the way other people behave to him. Don't worry- there will be other mabarais in some Wardens' futures!

90. Sunless Journeys

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 90: Sunless Journeys

While the wind blew sharp and the snow drifted high, the party composed of King, Queen, Ambassadors, Wardens, and the Legion of the dead sped along underground in comparative comfort.

Two mages were always in the vanguard, burning away clumps of Taint, while scouts and archers looked for enemies. There were none. What was before them, instead, was a long, rambling labyrinth of tunnels leading to the vast and majestic Deep Roads.

When he had made the journey underground from Vigil's Keep to the mine, Nathaniel had been too fixed on a goal to take in much of his surroundings. Now, making the same journey in reverse, he was astonished by all he saw. When they finally moved into the Deep Roads proper, he admitted to himself that he not really imagined their scope. Aside from some rockfalls and the remains of darkspawn vandalism, they truly were broad, smooth roads: easily traveled, well-marked, and engineered with unmatched genius.

Loghain accepted his return to the Deep Roads without complaint. At that, they were not the horror he had experienced so long ago. Parts of them were clean now, and the once shrouded glory was on full display. Ferelden had treated with Orzammar as an ally throughout Maric's reign. Only now, during the Blight, had Loghain come to see the full potential of that alliance. In its own way, it was just as valuable as a possible alliance with the Nevarrans.

The Chantry might control the lyrium trade, but the dwarves controlled the lyrium. If the Orlesian Chantry declared an official Exalted March, the first thing they would do would be to force the Templars to choose a side. Those in opposition to the Divine would have their regular supply of lyrium cut off, eventually making them mad and useless. However, it was just possible that a secret deal could be cut with King Bhelen, and the traffic conducted underground and out of sight. He did not expect the Templars to support him in large numbers, but some very well might. Even if they could remain neutral but sane, that would be a gain.

Access to the Deep Roads was a tactical advantage beyond his wildest dreams. He was keeping detailed notes on his maps of roadblocks and bottlenecks. For the most part, the Roads were in a condition to allow a large force to travel along them fairly quickly. The lack of beasts of burden was a logistical problem, but it might be solved by human laborers pulling supply wagons. Perhaps sure-footed mules could manage the stone steps from the surface. Furthermore, traveling the Deep Roads simply did not require the same

amount of equipment that the surface world did. Tents were optional; blankets largely unnecessary. There was no challenge from the environment, other than possible attackers that would be dealt with by the use of weapons, which he and his soldiers carried anyway. There was water in plenty, marked on the map; and where it burst out in springs filtered through rock, it was pure, even in places the darkspawn had traveled.

Food was the one thing they must carry. A large human army could not live off lichen and deepstalkers. Provisions would be the largest item they need carry, but not needing tents, blankets or heavy clothing already reduced the wagon train of his imagination to comparatively modest proportions. How deep did the Deep Roads run under Gherlen's Pass? Would it be feasible to dig into them from the surface directly to the stronghold?

Or—he pulled out his maps once more, and began studying the other side of the border. Where was the nearest access point in Orlais? He knew quite a bit about Roc du Chevalier from various agents. Their main defenses faced east, of course, into Ferelden. Did they even guard the western approach? He smiled, happily and very unpleasantly. Then he noticed a pair of his old soldiers gazing reverentially at Bronwyn, and he scowled again. People were taking the whole issue of "Andraste's True Champion" entirely too seriously.

They stopped briefly to leave Varel—now Bann Varel—in charge at Vigil's Keep, pick up yet more supplies, and for

Nathaniel to apprise Adria of what was going on. She, of course, could be trusted.

"All the way to Nevarra!" she gasped, her warm dark eyes scanning his face with anxious affection. "You've hardly been home at all, and now you must travel to foreign parts again!"

"I've been entrusted with a great responsibility, Adriaia," he told her, kissing her lined forehead. "It's an honor. I'll try to be back by the end of Wintermarch, but we'll see how it goes. I'll bring you back a present."

Topaz, Adria's wise and faithful mabari, gave Nathaniel a whine and a wag. He patted the dog, smiling.

"And now, I'm off! I can't keep the Queen waiting!"

They moved swiftly and slept securely in the sunless gloom of the underworld. The wonders of Kal'Hiroi were revealed, and there they camped for a few days, while Bronwyn led her Wardens on a journey north to Soldier's Peak. Loghain insisted on going along, and at length they burst out into the piercing cold light of winter from beneath Drake's Fall.

It was just as well that they had left the wagons behind in the Deep Roads, for the going was hard on the surface. Snow had drifted high, obscuring the landmarks. Bronwyn studied her map anxiously. Once into the tunnels leading up to the fortress they were somewhat sheltered from the wind, but it was a profound relief to climb the rest of the way up to the

rambling, soaring stones of the ancient Warden fortress.

The wind drove tiny grains of ice into their faces. Bronwyn gestured at the massive structure, a looming grey shadow in the swirling whiteness. Loghain peered at it, proud that Ferelden possessed a fortress so imposing, and displeased that it belonged to what was essentially a foreign military order. No Orlesian must ever be permitted to command here.

A voice called to them above the scream of the wind.

"My lady! Is that you?"

"It is indeed!" She peered at the tall, lean shape bundled in furs. "Dirk!" She told Loghain. "This is Dirk Wolf." She shouted at the former werewolf. "Is everyone all right!"

"All is well, Lady. All but those on watch are safe behind stout walls. Let me lead you to the Keep."

The broad double doors opened, and the wild noise faded to a dull roar. Bronwyn wiped her eyes with the back of her gauntlet, leaving a faint pink smear on it. The storm was *fierce*. The next door led them into the Hall proper, alight with a cheerful fire in the big hearth. Wolf surged ahead of their party, heralding their arrival with a triumphant shout.

"It is the Lady of the Wardens. She comes, with her companions!"

More shouts, cries, scrambling feet, doors slamming; and

Leliana ran in from the door on the far wall, her arms out.

"Oh, Bronwyn!"

Hakan and Soren came in through a side door, pleased and grinning, happy to have company other than their own, especially happy that some of the dwarven company was female.

Leliana was enchanted to have company, herself. She recognized Loghain, and started; then curtsied graciously.

"My lord! What an honor! Thank the Maker we have a decent quarters for you! Really! We've accomplished so much! I want you to see everything! But you must have had a terrible journey."

"Not so bad, really," Bronwyn said, "We traveled by the Deep Roads much of the way. The darkspawn have withdrawn elsewhere for the moment."

"How strange!" Leliana wondered. Then her mind turned to her large party of guest and how to care for them. "We always have soup on the simmer. We can give you a hot meal directly! Here—yes—Rizpah, take the Teyrn and Teyna's cloaks and packs to the Commander's quarters."

"—the King and Queen!" Tara corrected her, smirking.

"Oh, yes! How exciting!—Hello, Tara, I'm still so surprised—Rizpah, take *Their Majesties'* cloaks and packs upstairs. We

have not yet had a chance to furnish it as I would like, but it will be at least warm and comfortable."

The news that they were entertaining the King and Queen of Ferelden sped rapidly through the castle, and mobs of red-haired and black-haired Drydens and yellow-eyed Wolfs crowded close, eager to meet, greet, and help.

"—And this is Levi Dryden," Bronwyn said, introducing him to Loghain, "Patriarch of Clan Dryden, and descendant of Commander Sophia—"

"What an honor, Your Majesty!"

A child pointed at Loghain. "Is that Teyrn Loghain?"

"He's the King now, darling," her mother murmured.

"Hello, King Teyrnloghain," the child sang out.

General laughter and good feeling. Those who had not seen the place before marveled at it.

"This is all ours?" asked Catriona. "It's immense!"

"This is great!" Brosca yelled. "By the Stone! This is huge!"

"It was nearly a ruin," Leliana told them, showing them around the downstairs proudly. "But now it has had a good cleaning. I have all the plans made out as to plastering and masonry, but those must wait for the spring. I am so glad we have enough bedding..."

Bronwyn looked about, amazed at how much had been done. Simply clearing away bones and cobwebs had made a tremendous difference. The demon-haunted ruin was now a shabby but functioning castle. The Great Hall was warm and welcoming, its long table polished to a mellow shine. The kitchen was clean and full of inviting smells. At the end of the corridor stood Andraste, shelves of votive candles on either side. She looked pleased, too, Bronwyn thought.

Leliana showed them the library, which was rather dark.

"I cannot open the shutters until the glazier can come, and that will not be for months. Still, we organized the books and used the hopelessly broken shelves for fuel. It is a pleasant place to read on clear days. Oh, and let me show you the *salle d'armes*."

The big chamber on the other side of the Great Hall had been made into a very nice practice room, complete with weapons racks and archery targets. The long gallery running the length of the room and up a few steps had been cleared of its bunk beds and was now a place to meet and talk and oversee training.

"And we can use it as a ballroom, someday," Leliana said, dimpling. "With its own minstrel's gallery!"

Their supper was put on the table, and they ate hungrily before the tour resumed. Part of the way through the meal Jowan appeared, looking a bit harassed, but bowing dutifully.

"How is Warden Avernus?' Bronwyn asked him quietly.

Hakan and Soren snorted. "Couldn't kill *him* with an axe!"

"He's fine, Bronwyn—er, Your Majesty. His mind is razor-sharp."

Loghain scowled, wondering of whom they were speaking. He was eager to see every corner of this structure, and to analyze it for weaknesses—which were few from his cursory examination. There was a great deal of talking, drinking, and laughing, but Loghain spent most of his time in thinking.

Soon they were on the move again: the Wardens were shown their quarters, and Bronwyn and Loghain were given the tour of the offices and storerooms. Bronwyn told Jowan that she wanted to meet with him, Anders, and Tara in the "workroom" later, and he nodded, understanding her.

The next floor was in confusion, future rooms marked out in detail on the stone floor. Only the little mezzanine was still fairly intact, though Hakan had decided that the staircase from it to the upper floor must be moved, and the new one be made of stone.

"This will be six private rooms," Leliana informed them. "As you see, the space was entirely wasted before... And upstairs..."

Andraste's former location was filled with a large table surrounded by chairs. The far wall was warmed by an old wall

hanging embroidered with griffons.

"I have commissioned a round table for this space," Leliana went on. "It will be such an excellent council chamber, and very quiet for meetings. And here, of course, are your quarters."

Ah, the wonders of soap and water. Bronwyn had felt some trepidation at the idea of sleeping in the room so long occupied by the demon possessing Sophia Dryden's decrepit corpse. Good work had been done here: the reek of decay was gone, as were the... er... remains. The room was scrubbed out and mildewed books removed. It was furnished with a wash stand, a tub, chests and armor stands, a writing table, and a pair of chairs. A servant had made up the fire while they sat at supper. The bed was actually two single beds, pushed together, with feather beds heaped high across them. It was crude and ungraceful, but looked invitingly soft for all that.

"You've worked wonders, Leliana," Bronwyn said, "Thank you."

"It was my great pleasure. Will you be staying long?"

"Alas, no. We're in the midst of a mission. We'll be off tomorrow, and we'll need to steal Jowan for awhile." Seeing Leliana's disappointment, she added. "Now that we have a way to avoid the worst of the weather, I'll be sending more people here to help. Alistair is back from Ostagar with his people, and they would love to visit."

"How delightful! It does get a little lonely here."

"I'll see that we do it soon."

Loghain was looking a bit impatient. The maids were bringing up some hot water, and were filling the bath.

"I have to meet with some of my Wardens, Loghain. I'll bathe after you."

He frowned at her in suspicion. Bronwyn smirked. The snow had reduced their visibility so greatly that Loghain had not even seen the free-standing Mages' Tower. Leliana's strategically placed wall hanging had concealed the door to the high stone bridge connecting the tower with the rest of the castle. Bronwyn hoped Loghain enjoyed a nice, long bath. There were secrets she did not wish to share, nor did she want to discuss Avernus with him.

"Where is the treasure chest?" she whispered to Leliana.

"In the Mages' Tower," Leliana whispered back. "No one will dare trouble it there."

Her meeting with the mages was interesting but contentious. Bronwyn told them about the embassy to Navarra, and told Jowan to be ready to move out the next day. The diffident young mage had clearly learned a very great deal from Avernus, but not everyone approved of the new battlemagics he described.

"It's still Blood Magic," Anders grumbled. "I don't like it."

"Well, the Joining is Blood Magic," Tara said, "so some kinds of Blood Magic are necessary. And if you need to put a powerful opponent down really quick—"

Bronwyn saw Avernus' eyes glint with malicious amusement, and wanted to head everyone off the path to loud, pointless arguments.

"I agree that Blood Magic is wrong, up until one reaches the point at which one is going to die without it," she said, her face hard. "If that is what it takes to keep you all alive and killing darkspawn, I'm all for it."

"Bronwyn!" Anders threw up his hands in disgust.

"I'm serious," she insisted. "Your lives are more precious to me than your principles. I don't want anyone dying a noble, preventable death. I also don't want other people dying if they can be protected. Certain forms of Blood Magic have always been accepted. No one's proposing that you keep phylacteries of your enemies and try to enthrall them the way those vile Tevinters did."

Avernus nodded sagely. He had wheedled and manipulated every single detail of the story about the Tevinter hideout from the Wardens. Those were forms of attack that also needed countermeasures. He had done his bit of enthralling... or at least *nudging*... in his day. That *Wardens* would be controlled in such a way was unacceptable.

Bronwyn could see that he was not particularly pleased to be losing his new acolyte, but he accepted it as necessary, holding out for another Warden mage to train up his way. Tara did not seem unwilling, which was a good thing, since Anders and Avernus seemed likely to butt heads. It was unfortunate that Morrigan was not a Warden, for Avernus had met Morrigan and thought well of her mind—aside from her failure to take the Joining. He refused on principle, however to teach her spells that he considered Warden secrets.

But Tara would get on with him. After they completed their journey to West Hill—or a bit farther—perhaps they would return and let Tara spend some time here. Zevran, too. He was always worried that someone was about to assassinate Bronwyn, but with the Landsmeet over and won, and no Orlesians likely to fall upon them until spring, surely he could enjoy a well-deserved holiday, complete with winter sports, here in the Wardens' Keep. It was a better place to train and spar than the more cramped training room at the Compound.

Jowan looked a bit hunted and harassed at the orders to pack up and go on a long, dangerous mission across the Waking Sea. He clutched his mabari puppy closer. He was, Bronwyn decided, getting just a little too comfortable here.

"I know it's sudden, Jowan," she said gently, "but you're the closest thing we have to an expert on Nevarra, and the party really needs a mage."

"And no phylactery in sight, on that side of the Waking Sea!" Anders pointed out.

"Actually..." Jowan looked around from habit, and then confessed. "You don't really have phylacteries anymore either."

Tara stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Jowan fidgeted, rubbing Lily's ears. "I tampered with them. I already told Anders and Morrigan about this, but you wouldn't know. When I was searching the Cathedral with the soldiers. I found the phylacteries. I injected them all with sheep's blood. They're all useless-at least the ones placed there before the tenth of Harvestmere."

A silence and then a burst of wild laughter. Lily was startled and woke up from her doze with a yip. She jumped from Jowan's lap and trotted over to Scout.

Anders, who generally disliked Jowan, actually slapped him on the back. "It's still the best thing I ever heard."

Tara frowned. "You didn't just smash them?"

"Of course not," Jowan said, irritated. "They would have just cut everyone again. They're no good, but the priests won't ever know it."

"Well reasoned, acolyte!" Avernus praised him. "An admirable ploy."

They went around the room, reporting more of their various discoveries. Bronwyn found some of the talk boringly

technical, but their results were not. New barrier spells, improved Joining potions, greater skill with shape-shifting and battlemagic like the Arcane Warrior ability... her mages were proving their worth, over and over.

"Did I tell you guys about how I found the Aeonar Prison?" Tara asked. Jowan fell silent. Tara, remembering Jowan's escape from the Circle, as well as its cause, said, "No, I didn't go in, but I found the place. It looks like a ruin, and there's a little stone cottage nearby, with a squad of Templars keeping watch... in disguise. Templars pretending to be honest countryfolk are pretty funny."

Avernus was interested, and asked her to show him the location on a map. Considering it, he remarked, "It is well known that the Tevinters conducted experiments there. I think it very likely that the Chantry has followed suit. Though it is a prison, it is not precisely a *mage's* prison."

Anders agreed. "Nobody ever suggested sending me there. I think it's more for cleansing anyone who's had contact with Blood Magic."

Tara got up and prowled around the room. "Someone who's *not* a mage! Nobody said a word about sending me there, either! I'd like to sneak in and find out what's going on."

Bronwyn was not thrilled at the idea. "I think I've kicked the hornet's nest quite enough for one year, thank you. The Chantry's already threatening an Exalted March."

"Then what have you got to lose?" Jowan asked. "If they do declare an Exalted March, then the Aeonar Prison would be an enemy stronghold!"

They set off moderately early the next morning. Snow was falling again, turning the air dense and white. They were in the rugged hills of Drake's Fall as soon as they could manage it, and then glad to be underground for the long slog back to Kal'Hiol. Jowan carried Lily in a sling similar to Loghain's and Carver's. The puppies were growing rapidly, but the snow was too deep for them to manage in comfort.

Bronwyn brooded over the Aeonar issue, not willing to mention it to Loghain at the moment. If it was not used to incarcerate mages, what was it used for? What did the Chantry need a remote location for, when they had a vast complex in Val Royeaux. The only reasons she could come up with were not very savory ones. The Chantry had secrets, yes; she knew that. The location of the Aeonar suggested they had secrets they did not even want their own people to know about.

Just like the Grey Wardens, she thought wryly. Imagine a Thedas in which everyone told the truth and shared important information!

Actually, she could not. Was Aeonar a threat? Why did they not keep the phylacteries there? Was it a training facility? Tara had reminded Bronwyn—in discreet whispers—of the reason she had been locked up at the Circle. Jowan had tried

to run away with a Chantry initiate. Tara had helped them, and Jowan had panicked, used Blood Magic, and had fled, leaving Lily and Tara behind. Tara had been imprisoned in the Circle Tower's dungeons. Lily had been shipped off... to the Aeonar. So the place was a prison for failed priests? Perhaps for failed Templars, also?

Loghain roused her from her thoughts.

"Can you see the Waking sea from that castle of yours in good weather?"

"I don't know," Bronwyn admitted. "I've never been able to spend much time there, and it didn't occur to me to look. The topmost tower is pretty high, but as you saw, they had the shutters closed. That's something to look into, certainly. If not, I'm sure we can find a good site for a watchtower right on the coast. Of course," she added glumly, "if the Orlesian fleet is already that close, we're in serious trouble."

Loghain grunted. That was too true for argument. Ferelden had hundreds of miles of coastline. If Ferelden still had a proper fleet, it would be better to bottle up the Orlesians further west, where the sea narrowed at the Virgin Rocks by the Kirkwall Passage. That Rivainni woman Fergus recommended was supposedly a skilled captain. If they could find a few more like her, they might be able to eke out an effective tactical fleet, supplemented by what remained of Maric's shipbuilding. The Glavonaks' machines might well work at sea. They had another device, too, that the mad brother seemed excited about: it was a sort of pump with a

metal hose, and it squirted fire. While the effects resembled a mage's spell, it would be far more powerful. More like a dragon's breath, the dwarves told him. They were building him a prototype. Dragon's Breath. That was a good name for it.

Happy to be back in mild climate of the Deep Roads, Amber began squirming. Loghain let her walk, watching her trot along with her littermate Magister, the two of the following Scout like obedient little soldiers. Loghain had visited the royal kennels before he left. The kennelmasters were working hard there, making good the losses from the Bloomingtide battle. Cailan had launched the dog's charge far too early. The archers should have got off at least three more volleys before the young king released the hounds. Typical of him, of course: impulsive and slovenly. Dogs were as precious as any other soldier. How would the mabaris fare against the chevaliers? The ineffectual Brandel had made little use of them, and had fled Denerim leaving the kennels behind. The kennelmasters had for the most part set the dogs loose rather than hand them over to the Orlesians. Loghain's own childhood friend, Adalla, had probably been a descendant of those escaped hounds. How to make good use of the mabaris? They were effective, properly managed, against darksapwn. Against armored warhorses? Perhaps not— or not effective in a grand but idiotic frontal assault.

After long hours, they saw the campfires ahead, and the guards recognized them. Nathaniel came to greet them, relieved to see them again.

"It felt like you've been gone forever, but the dwarves say not.

It's hard to gauge time, without sun or moon."

Everyone at Kal'Hiol was in good spirits. Hawk's dog, Hunter, came to visit the other mabaris, and they appeared to be playing some sort of bizarre game of tag.

The dwarves, they learned, had enjoyed seeking out the mysteries of the ancient thaig. More books and inscriptions had been discovered, and some smithing workshops examined for their secrets. Once arrived, Brosca, Sigrun, and Jukka gave Tara a wink, and strolled off, suspiciously innocent. They had whispered a promise to go shares with the "old crowd." The treasury of Kal'Hiol was skimmed judiciously, yet again.

Carver, fresh from hot meals and a soft bed at Soldier's Peak, felt superior to Adam for once. Or at least cleaner. They were getting on better than they usually did. It helped that Arl Nathaniel was a good fellow: a little stuffy, a little formal and a little old-fashioned, but really decent. The others in the party actually looked up to Carver as a Warden.

He introduced Jowan to them, and found out that most of them knew that Jowan was the mage who had brought the Sacred Ashes to Queen Anora. That disposed them to think well of him from the first. The fact that Jowan wore light armor and carried a sword made him less a mage in their eyes than some sort of bookish gentleman Warden who knew healing.

The reading Jowan had done about Nevarra stood him in good stead. The embassy gathered together when they camped. Sometimes they walked together. Jowan told them lore he had gathered about Nevarran customs and the history of the dragon-hunters. Nathaniel told those who had not heard it the Nevarran story of the clever thief. Adam had unearthed an old copy of Brother Genetivi's *Travels of a Chantry Scholar* for the bits about Kirkwall and Nevarra. Of course, Genetivi had just been a wanderer, not an envoy to the Court. He had not represented the nation of Ferelden. Nathaniel knew that far more would be expected of an ambassador.

After a long march, they camped, ate, posted guards, and settled down to sleep, though the light was just the same as it always was. Nathaniel found that rather disorienting, and brooded quietly by his campfire. Not far away, Bronwyn was sleeping in her cloak beside Loghain. She slept very decorously, her hands crossed under her heart like a queen on a monument.

Nathaniel watched her, thinking of the imponderable twists of fate. How had it happened, that he was in the Deep Roads, going on a desperate mission to find friends for his country? How had it happened that Bronwyn Cousland should be married to Loghain Mac Tir, rather than himself? That Bronwyn should be a Grey Warden, commanding a rowdy company of misfits and castoffs? Was it the doing of the mad being called the Architect, who had caused a Blight to occur in their lifetimes? Was it the fault of those vile Tevinter mages, perverting Father's mind for who knew how many years?

Perhaps it was they who had turned Father against him. It was the shock of his life when Father had exiled him to the Free Marches. There was no apparent reason; nothing that Nathaniel had done to disgrace himself or his family. One day, Father had coldly declared his will, and nothing could sway him. While other heirs remained at their father's sides, learning the art of ruling, Nathaniel found himself squiring a succession of arrogant Marcher nobles. He had not even been given the chance to bid farewell to his friends. In the long run, it had not been to Father's advantage. Bryce and Eleanor had liked him, Nathaniel knew. If he had offered for Bronwyn, they would not have refused him.

And what of Bronwyn? Nathaniel could not believe that given time and effort, he could not have won her, if only because he saw little in the way of competition among the great nobles who would have been the only possible claimants for the hand of the noblest maiden in the land. Loghain had seemed disinclined to remarry, as did Arl Wulffe. For that matter, the Couslands might not have wanted to send their daughter to the south. Vaughan Kendalls was too unsavory to consider, and Bryland's boys were too young. No. He, Nathaniel would have been the logical, proper choice; the choice that would have bid fair to be a happy one for both of them. Father's intrigues had done nothing but destroy him, and nearly destroy the Howes altogether.

Actually, shortly sending Nathaniel away, Father's greatest fear was that Bronwyn would be wed either to Cailan or to King Maric himself. The King was a healthy, vigorous man,

and much of the Landsmeet felt he was failing in his duty by not remarrying and begetting more Theirins. He should have lived far longer, and Bronwyn might well have been his Queen. Nathaniel found that idea rather distasteful. King Maric had been a great man, but he had not been a great man where women were concerned. His conduct toward Alistair, for example, was deplorable. There might even be other bastards. For that matter, some Landsmeet gossip had noted that Warden Anders resembled the late king.

Bronwyn stirred in her sleep, frowning. She must be dreaming of unhappy things. Nathaniel grew anxious, wishing he could help her. As far as he could tell, Loghain cared little for her, using her bloodright to advance his own ambitions. Nathaniel had not missed the look on Bronwyn's face when Loghain turned to his own daughter for counsel, ignoring his young Queen. Nathaniel greatly respected Loghain, and felt he was the best man to rule Ferelden at this dark time; but that it had to be at the cost of Bronwyn sacrificing herself was a bitter thing to him. And who was fit for her anyway? The Prophet had shown her favor... the Maker had turned his gaze her way. Perhaps it was impious for any mere man to claim her. Marriage had not worked very well for Andraste and Maferath, after all.

A soft moan caught his attention. Grey Wardens were unquiet sleepers, Nathaniel had discovered. He was tempted to go over and awaken her from her nightmare, but Loghain, sleeping beside her, put out his own big hand. He laid it gently on Bronwyn's forehead, calming her. It was the first sign of

tenderness for his queen that Nathaniel had seen, and the young arl was not sure whether to be relieved or repulsed. Bronwyn woke a little, her eyes opening slowly. She saw Nathaniel, watchful and anxious, and gave him a sweet, sleepy smile before falling back into slumber.

He must stop thinking of what might have been, or it would drive him mad. The embassy to Nevarra had seemed to him important to protect Ferelden's independence; not it had become imperative, if he were to keep his honor.

At the end of the next march, they reached Amgarrak Thaig. The dwarves left there were overjoyed to be relieved, and even more overjoyed to be assured that they had not be left inside a dead thaig while all the rest of the Legion was slaughtered. Seeing everyone well and safe was cause for celebration. Shale pulled the supply wagon into the thaig with a certain careless panache, proud of its immense strength as a golem.

"I, over course," Shale pointed out. "Need no supplies, being self-sufficient in all things."

"That's nice for you," Tara agreed, munching on a spicy sausage. "But maybe a bit dull."

The Legion moved into the thaig as if into their own home. Loghain and Bronwyn were taken on an official tour and were impressed by the general shininess. Catriona was the supplemental guide, giving them details of the fight with the

flesh-golem. The bloodstains were barely visible.

"But other working golems were discovered here?" asked Loghain.

"Five, in fact," Shale put in. "Not as independent as I am, of course, but quite serviceable, especially the one named Rune. Most impressive in the art of squishing darkspawn."

Loghain wondered if one of them might have been the golem owned by the mage Wilhelm during the Rebellion. The mage had done good service, and his golem had been useful in a fight. It had never spoken, unlike the extraordinary creature named Shale—who had an opinion about nearly everything—but it had understood speech and could follow orders. Loghain coveted a golem. The immense strength would be invaluable in building defensive works. Yes, he coveted any golem other than Shale. The endless snark palled a bit after a few days.

Half a day out of Amgarrak Thaig they actually encountered darkspawn.

The scouts heard the scrabbling beyond the stone walls of the Deep Roads, and alerted the rest of the party. Bronwyn sensed the creatures first, and then the more experienced of the Wardens did too. Loghain immediately organized their defenses, and they were well-prepared by the time the wall collapsed, revealing a band of darkspawn pouring out of a crude tunnel, rumbling like bees bursting from the cells of a hive.

"Loose!" roared Loghain.

A wall of arrows arced to meet the charging genlocks. Sizzling spellfire shot out like fireworks. Hurlocks flung out their arms to summon their battle rage and were knocked flying. Brosca and Jukka threw acid bombs into the tunnel mouth. Darkspawn screamed in a murderous green haze.

Some of the creatures scrambled over their fellows' corpses and leaped forward. Shale trundled out, grabbed a pair of them and smashed them together. The oozing bodies were thrown in the faces of more darkspawn, which struggled to push past the piling bodies. Shale picked up a huge building stone and tossed it into the tunnel. It tumbled, end over end, crushing more of the monsters.

"Shale! Out of the way!" ordered Loghain. At his signal, another volley was launched: arrows, spellfire, and bombs in a fury of destruction.

Scout tensed impatiently next to Bronwyn, annoyed that he had not had the chance to tear at one of the Tainted things. Hunter bayed, ready to do his part.

That changed with another charge. The darkspawn did not intend to retreat. The survivors sensed their ancient enemy and attacked again. A handful reached the defensive line of Wardens and were cut down and mauled by the dogs. Bronwyn quietly ordered her people to collect some darkspawn blood. One never knew when more Wardens would be needed.

The looting by Wardens and Legion alike was a matter-of-fact business. Loghain frowned, watching it, not because of the looting itself—all soldiers did that—but because it occurred to him that there might be a great deal of treasure in the Deep Roads. He asked Bronwyn as much.

"Yes. I daresay they found quite a bit in the thaigs," she agreed. "No one's talking about it, but that's only to be expected. What? Are you considering a treasure-hunting expedition?"

"It's not a bad idea," he said, his voice low. "Down in some of the empty Roads there must be other lost thaigs. If the dwarves have done without the treasure for ages, I see no reason for us to hesitate to go after it. Let's look at that Deep Roads map again when we get to West Hill."

Bronwyn remembered that there were certainly some old thaigs marked on the map. One was a little south of the access point at Lake Belennas; another was east of Ostagar. There were some other, smaller ones as well. Unquestionably, they needed coin for the kind of defenses Loghain wanted to build. The Deep Roads were a possible option, though she felt a bit torn, wondering if any treasure found with the aid of Grey Warden ought to go directly to the Wardens. Perhaps. Perhaps not. She was already keeping a fortune in gold secret from Loghain. If he ever heard about the hidden chest at Soldier's Peak, he would not soon forgive her.

But he would not know. The Wardens and their friends had no reason to blab to him, and Bronwyn was not going to betray

that particular Warden secret, either. That gold made them independent; no longer hostage to the petty moods of Crown and Landsmeet. With the land she had wrung from the Council, they could be self-sustaining as to food. They might even make coin from the surplus. She had a real responsibility to the Wardens, and did not want to sacrifice them to the convenience of Ferelden. So far, she had seen little evidence that Ferelden's gratitude would outlive the Blight. Well... not more than a year or two, at any rate.

"I thought the idea of the letter of marque was a good one, too," she said. "Privateers are an inexpensive alternative to building ships."

He was still studying the map. "As long as they attack our enemies, and don't bring down the wrath of everyone else upon us. Your brother's Captain Isabela sounds like a dodgy little adventuress to me."

"Well," Bronwyn said, a little annoyed. "We'll see how dodgy she is when the time comes for the embassy to cross the sea. If she can *dodge* the Orlesians, then good on her."

They discovered later that they emerged from the Deep Roads on the twenty-first. The snow was thick on the ground, and heavy. Spoiled by days in the weatherless Deep Roads, soldiers bitched and complained about the effort involved in taking apart their supply wagon and hoisting it to the surface. Then they complained about marching through the snow.

Shale did not complain, but waded through the drifts with

undaunted aplomb. It only paused when a hawk and a raven rose up from the ranks and winged swiftly toward the jagged rise of West Hill. This feat roused murmurs of awe and admiration from the rest of the column. Shale did not seem inclined toward either emotion.

"Yes," Tara admitted meekly. "Morrigan and Anders can turn into birds."

"Indeed." Shale's voice was as frosty as the ice coating the top of its head. "I suggest they be careful about their foul and bird-like functions, lest I squish their fragile bird-like heads."

Loghain snorted. Personally, he was pleased that they had scouts who could alert the fortress of their arrival. For that matter, the mages were scouts who could take a quick look at the place... just in case unfriendly forces held it. Who knew what was going on in this part of the country? Frandarel was an incompetent fool. It was hard to access the fortress' condition at this distance and in this weather, but Loghain noted that the outer works at the base of the hill were badly eroded. Not a promising beginning.

"I'm glad you're with us!" Brosca told him in her frank way, trudging along beside Bronwyn. "The fellow in charge here nearly refused to let us in. Made Astrid sign some sort of paper, promising to pay for food and lodging. As if! Place is falling apart, too."

Loghain's lips thinned. His inspection here would be *very* thorough.

The reception accorded to Loghain was considerably more friendly—or at least more subservient—than the one earlier given to the Wardens. The news from Denerim was greeted with wonder, and the seneschal made bold to open one of the 'good' guestrooms for the King and Queen... and then another for the Arl of Amaranthine... and then another for the Bann of Amaranthine City.

"And his brother!" said Carver. "In fact, I think you should open them all up and give us the best lodging available."

Tara muttered, "They stuck us in a dusty old courtyard before. The barracks hadn't been cleaned in ages," She felt rather put upon. What did Wardens have to do to get some respect?

Apparently, wear the crown of Ferelden. The people of West Hill had heard of the Girl Warden, and were thrilled to acclaim her as Queen.

"Tall and human," Brosca comforted Tara. "That counts for a lot in these parts. Of course the Boss deserves it. She's first rate."

Loghain made good use of his authority at King to pry into the bannorn's finances and records. From what he could tell, Frandarel had done nothing whatever to repair or restore this fortress since Loghain had been here in 9:22. In fact, its condition was no better than it had been during the Rebellion, when the Orlesians had crushed the Fereldan army here and set Maric, Rowan, and Loghain fleeing for the dubious safety of the Deep Roads. The fortress was old, rambling, and

dilapidated. The nearby village was crumbling, and half the houses were vacant.

Nathaniel had no luck finding a boat to take his people to Kilda here, for the little harbor was fairly shallow and thus mostly iced in. All the fishing boats were in dry dock. The slack-jawed yokels informed them that there might be boats at Dane Sound or Tidewaters, but no one knew for certain.

At any rate, a cold snap forced them to stay indoors the next day... a tense, rather unpleasant day, during which Loghain terrorized the seneschal and the slack and portly guard captain.

"This place is hopeless," Loghain snarled to Bronwyn in the musty privacy of their bedchamber. "I could knock the walls down with a carpenter's maul single-handed. Frandarel has let the place slide, while he spends his coin on his collection of rarities. And where is his coin coming from, anyway?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Bronwyn answered it anyway. "Smuggling?"

"Of course, smuggling!" Loghain grunted in disgust. "The coin goes in his pocket and he sees that precious little of the lawful ship taxes and luxury taxes make their way to the royal coffers! I swear, I wonder how the nation has lasted this long, with nobles picking away at it like vultures. If the Orlesians invaded, they'd walk right into this place."

"If it had a good ditch," Bronwyn ventured, "and some

ballistae with explosive bolts..."

Loghain rubbed his hand over his eyes. Amber thought he looked tired, and whimpered in sympathy. Loghain picked up the puppy and soothed her and himself. When he spoke, he sounded calmer. "Someone would have to dig the bloody ditch! I'll order Frandarel to have it done, and then I'll have to come back and see that it's actually *been* done. And I'm not entrusting first-rate weapons to these puppet-show soldiers. I'm surprised they haven't sold the steel of their blades for wine!"

Hopeless or not, the local militia made a real attempt to smarten their drill under the gimlet eye of their new King. Loghain made exhaustive lists of the stores and supplies stowed away throughout the castle. They were plentiful, and much of them were clearly smuggled goods. When he returned to Denerim, Loghain decided that he would call Frandarel to account and make an example of him. On Bronwyn's urging, he unleashed Brosca and Sigrun, who found a secret cache of coin and papers. Out here in the remote reaches of the west, Bann Frandarel had been doing a tidy business in helping people and information enter and leave Ferelden.

They had to get the embassy to Kilda, so as soon as the cold eased, a party was on the march to Dane Sound in search of a boat. The tides there kept the cove ice-free, and they found a good-sized vessel and a fisherman who liked the look of gold in his palm. It took two attempts, but at length, on the twenty-fourth, the twelve members of the Nevarran embassy

made their farewells. The embassy had the appropriate diplomatic letters to present, and sufficient gold for their comfort. Each one, beginning with Arl Nathaniel, reverently kissed their Queen's hand, bowed to their King, and were soon on board and headed north to the little island of Kilda, there to await the arrival of Captain Isabela and the *Siren's Call*.

Bronwyn stood beside Loghain on the little pier, surrounded by her Wardens, hoping that nothing horrible happened to Nathaniel; hoping that nothing horrible happened to the Hawke brothers, whose mother would certainly never forgive her; hoping that none of the party were captured by pirates or infected by some ghastly foreign disease; hoping that they would get something worth the effort from the Nevarrans. Once again, she wished she were going on the embassy herself, so she would have a measure of control over its fate. As it was, she could do nothing but leave it to the mercy of the Maker.

"Can we go check out the Aeonar?" Tara pressed Bronwyn.
"Can we? I'd love to give the Templars there a hard time."

Loghain chuckled, amused by the little mage. She was perhaps his favorite of all Bronwyn's Wardens. Bronwyn had told him about Tara's discovery of the Aeonar. He would have to confirm that for himself, of course. The fact that mages were not sent there for punishment suggested that its purpose was quite different than the one he had imagined. A training facility? Why was it not in Val Royeaux, in the vast Chantry labyrinth surrounding the Grand Cathedral? Bronwyn had a

theory that they were doing something there that sensitive souls might object to.

"We'll have a look at your Templars in due course," he said. "First I want to find out if Warden Astrid has won her way to Orzammar. We won't enter the city, of course. It wouldn't do for foreign monarchs to pop up there uninvited. I'd like to know how close we can get to Gherlen's Pass without anyone seeing us."

Thanks to my reviewers: Phygmalion, KnightOfHolyLight, Girl-chama, EpitomyofShyness, Zute, Kyren, JackOfBladesX, Mike3207, MsBarrows, Anon, DjinniGenie, Trishata96, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, timunderwood9, Robbie, the Phoenix, Tirion, EmbertoInferno, Blinded in a bolthole, Nemrut, Koden21, Jenna53, jnybot, Griffon Rider, Have Socks. Will Travel, Notnahtanha, dragonmactir, TSLi, reignlief, Josie Lange, Gene Dark, and lemonjay.

Yes, Dragon's Breath is much like medieval Greek Fire. It was a very scary weapon at sea. And for those not expecting it, it will be even scarier.

In canon, while Frandarel owns the half-empty and decaying fortress of West Hill, he also owns a huge and sumptuous estate in Denerim, filled with rare and precious collectibles. Since he doesn't seem to have a sufficient population to make a lot money in agriculture, and since we hear nothing about extensive mining in West Hill (unlike, say,

Amaranthine), I presume that his riches are ill-gotten. He's on the coast, so smuggling is a real possibility.

The next chapter will be all Nathaniel & Co. I've been looking forward to it.

91. The Thirteenth Warrior

Victory at Ostagar

These events take place in Haring 26-30 9:30, at least a year or two before the Legacy DLC. As the Hawkes have not been living in Kirkwall, only a few Carta dwarves have been ensnared by Corypheus.

The Nevarran Embassy: Nathaniel, Adam, Carver, Jowan, Sir Zennor Stone, Ser Eraid Mac Morn, Kain, Darrow, Rhys, Walton, Mapes, and Dudgeon. Hunter, Lily, and Magister.

Chapter 91: The Thirteenth Warrior

The dogs were not seasick, at least. Nor was Captain Isabela, her face turned to the cutting wind. No one else particularly enjoyed the day's voyage to Kirkwall.

Contrary winds changed their direction almost hourly. Currents and eddies did their malicious best to push the *Siren's Call* off course. Isabela was on her guard, scanning the choppy seas for floating ice and the submerged rocks marked on her charts. The Kirkwall Passage was tricky at any time, and deadly in the winter.

Carver bid a regretful farewell to his good breakfast, leaning

dangerously over the rail.

"Maker!" he groaned. "I feel... I feel.. *sick*. What possessed Mother and Father to cross the sea to Ferelden?"

Groans rose from the deck like doleful music. Jowan repeatedly cast regeneration on them—and himself—but the effects were fleeting.

"Keep drinking liquids," he urged everyone. "You don't want to get dehydrated. The small beer is all right. I think Bronwyn had some cider put on board, too."

Nathaniel kept his roiling belly under control by sheer will. Jowan's words, however, could not go unchallenged.

"Do not speak of her as 'Bronwyn,'" he gritted out between his teeth. "Wardens may be informal, but foreigners will not understand." He swallowed bile. "They may imagine that we do not respect her."

"Then they're idiots," groaned Carver, wiping his mouth. "The only thing I have against Bronwyn is that she put me on a boat." He saw Isabela glance his way. "...I mean a... ship."

While happiness is fleeting, misery is eternal. The day stretched out endlessly, grey sky pressing down on restless grey sea. The passengers just wanted it to be over. The crew shook their heads and chuckled at the uselessness of landlubbers.

The light was just beginning to fade when Isabela nudged Adam Hawke with the toe of her boot.

"I've got something here you want to have a look at."

"Yes, Isabela," he groaned. "You're lovely. Maybe another time."

"Oh, get up, Handsome. Look to the north. That way."

He pushed himself up and squinted in the direction she pointed. Beyond the slim, brown, capable hand was a smudge of dark grey on the horizon.

"Land?" he asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"The Wounded Coast," she told him, with a grim smile. "And smack in the middle of it, Kirkwall. Better get his other lordship, your lordship."

Nathaniel was the only one of the party ever to have seen the immense fissure in the stone bluffs that was the entrance to the harbor of Kirkwall. It was an ancient creation of Tevinter magic, crowned with the colossal statues named "The Twins:" images of anguished slaves, the fountainhead of Kirkwall's earliest prosperity.

"Impressive," Adam remarked. "Intimidating, too. Kirkwall may not practice slavery these days, but they don't seem to be ashamed of their past."

Isabela shrugged. "They don't have to 'practice' slavery. A lot

of people have it down pat. Tevinter gangs prowl the city all the time. Keep your eyes open."

One of the knights, Ser Zennor, frowned at her words. "But none of us are elves."

Isabela rolled her eyes. "Tevinters don't care."

Those who had not participated in the raid on the Tevinter bases were stunned and horrified.

"Really?" asked Ser Zennor. "Tevinters enslave *humans*?"

Carver made a face. "Don't you remember your history? They enslaved Andraste. She wasn't an elf."

"That's right," Isabela agreed. "Humans, elves, dwarves, Qunari: they'll buy and sell anyone they get their hands on."

Nathaniel said nothing, but eyed the approaching harbor with an inscrutable expression. He said to Adam. "We should change into something a little more civilized, or people will think us a mercenary band and bid for our services."

Jowan had heard rumors about the treatment of mages in Kirkwall. "I'll put on my Grey Warden tunic. Carver, maybe you should, too."

"Fine. Come on, Magister. Let's prepare to meet civilization."

Kirkwall loomed above the harbor: the bulk of the Gallows, now the home of the Kirkwall Circle of Magi; the tall peaks of

Kirkwall Cathedral and the Viscount's Keep. The rugged terrain created a city on several levels. They could make out the tall mansions of Hightown. Nathaniel was their best guide here, for he had visited in a number of them, in his days as a squire in the Free Marches.

Another aspect of civilization came in the form of a cheerfully sardonic dwarf by the name of Varric Tethras. Isabela introduced them, in the dwarf's oddly luxurious quarters in a fairly squalid Lowtown inn.

"Varric, meet the Arl of Amaranthine. Hand up to the Maker, he's the Arl of Amaranthine, really and truly. His handsome friend is the Bann of the city of Amaranthine. They're not here to visit the Viscount. They want lodgings for a night or two and horses."

"Sure. I can fix you up with a place to stay. I can even find you some horses. Can't stand the beasts myself, but you all seem to be good with animals."

Nathaniel gave him a droll look. "We don't need you to say the words 'Dog Lords.' Someone else is sure to oblige."

"I aim to please," Varric said smoothly. "I've got just the place for you gentlemen. High-class digs up in Hightown, no less. But first, let me offer you the hospitality of the Hanged Man: piss for ale and mystery meat stew!"

They were all hungry after a day of starvation at sea, and managed to wrestle the mediocre fare down their throats.

Nathaniel did not want his party to spend the evening drinking themselves drunk in a cheap tavern, and so told Varric that it was time to show them to the "high-class digs" he had promised.

"Your servant, my lords and gentleman," smirked Varric. He shouldered a curious weapon that vaguely resembled a crossbow, and led the way out into the stinking streets of Kirkwall. Isabela remained at the bar, and gave them a sardonic little wave.

"I'll be waiting, boys!"

A dwarf followed by twelve well-armed men and three mabarais attracted some curious attention as they marched through the city. Nathaniel had lived in Kirkwall in the past, and accepted the possibility that he might be recognized at some point. However, it was long past sunset, and he hoped to be out of Kirkwall tomorrow or the day after at the latest. He was not here to treat with the Viscount, after all. Kirkwall had little to offer a Ferelden at war, and was unlikely to offer even that. The city had no standing army, and would not dare send its ships against Orlais. And considering that the Knight-Commander was the real ruler of the city, Ferelden could not hope for friends here—not when a Knight-Divine mouthed threats before Nathaniel's King and Queen.

Kirkwall, although 'civilized', was no safer than Denerim after dark. Stealthy noises from corners and alleys kept them on the alert. Two well-dressed noblemen were targets for the

gangs that owned the criminal enterprises of wealthy Kirkwall. These noblemen, however, were heavily guarded, and besides were in the company of Varric, whom most of the gangs had no desire to cross. He was too valuable a Merchants' Guild middleman for that.

Hightown was not free of such threats, but it was altogether grander than anything they were used to in Ferelden. The long, complex rows of houses, the dignified facades, the complete lack of defensive architecture all spoke of "foreign lands" to the visitors.

Adam looked about, remembering places his mother had described.

"There!" he said to Varric. "Who owns that house?"

"The old Amell place?"

Adam glanced back at Carver, who raised his brows.

"Yes," said Adam. "That one. Who lives there now?"

Varric gave him a droll look. "A cabal of wealthy Tevinter merchants. They're not too forthcoming about the kind of trade goods they deal in."

"Slavers?" asked Nathaniel, tensing.

"Could be. Probably."

"That's disgusting," Carver muttered.

Adam blew out a breath. He had had vague hopes of smooth-talking the current residents into letting him have a look at the place. In fact, he had brought a certain key that his mother had often shown him. He hoped Mother would not miss it, since he had not exactly asked her permission. There was supposedly a secret entrance to the mansion's cellars in Darktown. Considering the current residents, he almost certainly would not be going in through the front door.

They passed the Viscount's Keep, which was heavily guarded. A long arcade led back into darkness. It was a building that had been conceived by an actual architect, instead of growing organically and messily over hundreds of years. Ser Eraid did not have the vocabulary to describe it that way, but he responded to the grandeur of the Keep.

"Not much like the Palace at home," he remarked. "Fancy on the outside."

"It's fairly grand inside, too," said Nathaniel.

Varric's eyes were bright in the moonlight as he surveyed Nathaniel. "I've seen you before. I know it. This is not your first visit to these shores."

"No, it's not. Where is this place you're taking us? In the upper court west of the Chantry?"

"Someone who knows Kirkwall. I like that. Well spotted, my lord Arl." Varric thought a bit more, as they clanked into the Chantry courtyard. "You're Nathaniel Howe, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You're not very chatty. How unlike the nobles of my own dear city."

"That the Chantry?" Sergeant Darrow muttered to his friend Kain. "'S'big, innit? Wouldn't mind having a look. I hear Andraste in there is made of pure gold."

Varric chuckled. "Pure gold *leaf*. Sorry."

It was still a huge and imposing structure. The Fereldens paused to admire it and there was agreement that they should go in and have a look at it tomorrow.

Hunter pricked up his ears and whuffed. Adam was distracted from his sightseeing.

"What is it, old fellow?"

"Listen!" whispered Nathaniel.

To their left, up the staircase to a courtyard of elite houses, there came curses and the clash of metal. Shouting voices floated down to the Fereldans.

"You! Slave! Give yourself up and you'll keep all your bits!"

Another voice was raised in defiance.

"I am not a slave!"

"Tevinters!" Nathaniel snarled, loosening his bow. He immediately strode toward the staircase. "Slavers!"

"Tevinters!" echoed Carver. "I hate those guys!"

"Right," Adam said. "Come on." The knights and soldiers immediately fell in, moving up behind and to the sides of their arl. Varric, much amused, was perfectly ready to join in the adventure.

"We're getting into a fight?" Jowan whispered anxiously. "In a foreign country?"

"Looks like it," Carver said, feeling uncommonly cheerful. "Magister, watch yourself! Here now, Jowan, put Lily down. She's a smart girl and knows not to get herself hurt."

They ran up the shallow stone steps toward the fight. A city guard slunk away in the opposite direction, vanishing into the shadows.

Meanwhile, a band of soldiers in excellent, uniform armor was fighting a running battle with a slender man wielding a greatsword. A shaft of moonlight caught the warrior's hair, and its pure white color at first made Nathaniel think that the Tevinters were attacking an old man.

"Cowards!" he shouted, loosing an arrow. Hawke pelted toward the combatants with his dog beside him. Carver was grinning, Yusaris at the ready. The only ones hanging back were the sensible servants who were guarding the luggage,

daggers unsheathed.

Surprised in their turn, Tevinter heads turned toward them, mouths agape. Their hair was cut in a curious bowl-shaped style, which the Hawkes thought remarkably stupid-looking.

"How dare you interfere with an officer of the Imperium!" blustered a scrawny fellow, a few seconds before Carver took off his head.

The lone defender, it became clear, was neither old nor infirm. Though wounded and bleeding, he was a shaft of moonlight himself; shifting here and there, striking like a thunderbolt. Strange blue glints of light flashed from him as he fought. Nathaniel wondered if his armor was inlaid with jewels or mother-of-pearl. He was certainly a magnificent swordsman.

Jowan froze a group of soldiers in place, and they were shattered by lusty blows from the Ferelden men-at-arms. Carver cracked a skull with the pommel of Yusaris. Adam knocked down one of the last of the Tevinters, and was about to finish him off, when another of them stabbed at him from behind. The white-haired swordsman reached out, plunged his hand into the attacker...

... and crushed his heart in his fist. The Tevinter officer crumpled, and the Fereldans stared.

"Thanks!" Adam said, astonished. "I never saw that move before!"

The cold blue glow on the strange swordsman was not from inlaid armor, but from elaborate, luminescent markings on the man's very skin. The only substance that could possibly create that effect was... lyrium. And that was not the only unusual thing about the man.

"Will you look at that!" exclaimed Kain. "The fellow's an elf! Never saw an elf swing a sword like that!"

Darrow eyed the white-haired warrior with critical admiration. "Tall for an elf. Human-sized. Plenty tall to handle a greatsword. Nice work, that heart-crushing thing. You a mage?"

The elf glared at them. "No." He turned to Nathaniel and gave a slight bow.

"I thank you. My name is Fenris. These men were Imperial bounty hunters, seeking to recover a magister's lost property, namely myself."

Nathaniel gave him a nod. "Slavers deserve their fate."

"I have met few in my travels willing to help an escaped slave. The officer told me that my former master was on his way to Kirkwall. Because of you, he will be disappointed, once again."

Kain persisted. "You *sure* you're not a mage? 'Cos I never saw anybody who *glowed* before."

"I am *not* a mage," Fenris repeated, gritting his teeth.

"If you say so," Nathaniel said, unable to keep himself from staring. "Your abilities are far beyond the common, and your appearance is does have a certain touch of the arcane."

"My master's doing," Fenis said, his face bitter.

"...Not that we've got anything against mages." Darrow went on, chatting comfortably while he wiped his blade. "Warden Jowan over there can do a bit of magic. Hey, Warden! The fellow's bleeding."

"So are you," Jowan said, looking them over. Blue light bubbled up from his hands, and their wounds sealed over.

"Where are we?" Hawke asked Varric, looking about him in amazement. The dwarf had led them to an elegant townhouse with a huge reception hall. The servants seemed surprised, but certainly knew Varric, who was passing out silver to them with a smirk.

"My friends, welcome to the house of my fathers," Varric said cheerfully.

"You are generous," Nathaniel said, "to receive us all as guests."

Varric was unperturbed by guilt or scruples. "It's nothing. We'll work out a good price for the horses and I'll show you the coin

I made on that lumber shipment Isabela brought in. The Ferelden Crown gets half of the profits, as agreed, and I would be delighted to handle all such arrangements in the future."

"No doubt you charged an appropriate handler's fee."

"No doubt!" The dwarf was quite pleased with himself. "I'll get on finding you horses at the crack of dawn. Pack mules, too, if you like. Maybe a few extras. Sure you don't need a wagon or two?"

"I think fifteen horses and four pack mules would suffice," said Nathaniel. "We will also want three days rations. No wagons."

"Perfect! No problem at all."

They were shown to their rooms. Nathaniel had one to himself, and Carver and Adam were given a room with a pair of single beds. The rest were made comfortable in the currently vacant guards' quarters, and the servants of the house were cajoled into passing out enough bread, cheese, sausage, and ale to make good the deficiencies of the Hanged Man.

Fenris withdrew to a corner, isolating himself from the rest. At Nathaniel's urging, he had come along with them. Jowan felt sorry for him, and brought him a mug and a plate of food.

"Here. After all that fighting you must be hungry."

Fenris eyed him warily. "I need no favors from a mage."

"You need food. I already healed you as far as I could, but your body needs food to be healthy. That's my job. Keeping the company healthy."

Another puzzled stare. "You are a Grey Warden?"

"That's right. I'm a Grey Warden. So is Carver, Hawke's brother. He also carries a greatsword, so you have something in common with him."

"I confess I do not understand why your party interfered on my behalf. You are Fereldans? I have never met anyone from your land before. Why help a stranger and an elf?"

Darrow interrupted, happily quaffing, "Bored, mostly. Needed the exercise. That lot you were fighting looked like they needed killing."

Ser Zennor, more seriously, added, "—and the Arl hates Tevinters. Hates 'em. With a bloody passion." He walked off to find more sausages.

Fenris thought about that, and then quietly asked Jowan, "Why?"

It was not something to boast of, so Jowan's reply was equally quiet. "Some Tevinter Blood Mages enthralled his father. They made the old man do horrible things, and then they got him killed."

"Got him involved in slaving," Darrow added helpfully. "Sold a bunch of elves, and the young Arl took the disgrace hard. We don't hold with slavery in Ferelden."

"I suspect," Jowan said primly to Fenris, "that you don't hold with it, either."

Fenris grunted, but took the food and drink all the same.

Meanwhile, Adam and Carver were making themselves at home in the splendid upstairs bedchamber.

"Quite the swordsman, that elf," Carver remarked, flopping down comfortably on one of the beds, Magister jumped up and curled up beside him. "Ought to take him along."

"We should," Adam agreed. "I'll have a talk with him. Nate, too. If our lyrium-inlaid swordsman hasn't anywhere else to be, we might as well hire him."

He liked the idea so much that he decided to talk it over with Nathaniel at once. Hunter followed him to the arl's room.

Nathaniel was sitting by the fire, sipping some first-rate Tevinter wine from the mansion's cellars.

"Have some," he said to Adam, pouring another glass. "I haven't tasted this in forever. I wonder what the dwarf will charge us for putting us up here."

"Not a copper, because it's not costing him a copper, either." Adam grinned at him. "He told me. This place is his older

brother's. The brother is in Starkhaven on business."

Nathaniel laughed, and stretched his legs out on an embroidered footstool. "There's no guarantee we'll be able to leave tomorrow. Varric may need the whole day to find the horses we need."

"That elven swordsman, Fenris, is quite the warrior," Adam remarked, sipping the exquisite vintage. "Worth his weight in ... er... lyrium. Maybe he'd be willing to hire on with us. I suspect we'll be glad of another sword before we're done."

"I've already decided to ask him. He has extraordinary ability, and apparently nowhere to go. I'd hate to leave anyone to the Tevinters. If I can save just one elf from them..." His voice trailed off, and he poured himself another glass of wine.

"And while we're here in Kirkwall..." Adam ventured, a little nervous about presuming on his still-developing relationship with his arl. "Since we're here, my brother and I were hoping to have a look at our old family home. Not publicly," he said, seeing Nathaniel's concerned expression. "Discreetly. I have a key to the cellars. I thought that Carver and I could go. Maybe we'd take Jowan, too, since we might run into mages. I know it wouldn't do for you to be mixed up in such an affair, especially if there's violence. I hope there won't be, though. We just want to see if there are still any family heirlooms there... maybe pictures. Mother has nothing left from her family but the house key and memories. Charade had to flee Kirkwall with only the clothes she wore. "

"Actually, it's sounds like fun," Nathaniel said frankly. "If I lost Vigil's Keep I would certainly try to retrieve some of my family's things. But you're right: I can't be involved. If you won't be gone all day by all means see what you can find out. You know where the entrance to these cellars is?"

"My mother described it. I'm sure I can make my way there."

Adam found that Varric had not yet gone to bed, and so he asked the dwarf a few general questions. Varric clearly had an unsurpassed knowledge of Kirkwall's highways and byways, and he grew curious, and then amused by the adventure Hawke proposed.

"What say I go along?" He laughed. "I know more about Darktown than anyone in the city. I'll come along, and we'll slip in and out and get you your keepsakes."

They decided that instead of waiting until the following night they would leave in the darkness before the dawn. Quickly, they settled down to sleep and had several hours of good rest before they made their preparations. Carver threw on his armor and then went downstairs to awaken Jowan.

"What?" Jowan muttered into the dim light. "Who's there?"

"It's Carver! Shhh! Adam and I are going to beard some Tevinters in their lair and we'd like you to come along. No, don't wake poor little Lily. Grab your armor and come on!"

Jowan groused, but obeyed. They slipped out of the guards' quarters and Jowan set about buckling his armor.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"No. Do you?"

Adam and Varric appeared, annoyingly well-groomed and debonair. Hunter trotted after them, pleased at the idea of a walk and a fight.

"Maker's breath!" groaned Carver, peering at his brother. "You actually shaved, didn't you?"

"Now, now, ladies," Varric reproved them. "No bickering. I know a quick way to Darktown, and then we'll look for your secret entrance."

"And I shall go with you," said Fenris, from the doorway. "It is the least I can do for those who stood by me."

The Hawkes returned, triumphant, in the rosy light of dawn. To their disgust, every one was asleep, and so there was no one to boast to of their exploits.

They had fought guards in the cellars, won their way to the treasure vault, and then burst out into the mansion itself. The fifteen Tevinters in the house were scattered, and no match for motivated opponents. Locked in cages in the storage vault under the library were twenty-three captives, some of them in

a deplorable state. Jowan healed them as best he could, while the Hawkes plundered the place of all portable loot. Fenris, though suspicious of Jowan, saw the sense of it when told to fetch food and water for the captives. Very carefully, they did not use their names around the prisoners. Hawke gave them each a few silvers, opened the front door, and let them out, a few at a time, into the cold grey light. He and his companions decided it would be wiser to go back the way they had come, even though it would take longer.

They found books about the family, jewels, books, a silver inkstand, the family coat of arms, fur cloaks, and the last will and testament of their Grandfather Amell. Adam took a moment to actually read it.

"He left everything to Mother," he said, blowing out a breath. "She wasn't disinherited after all. Uncle Gamlen had no right to the house. He blew through the estate, *and it wasn't even his.*"

"No point in telling Charade," Carver said. "It would just make her feel bad. Let's not tell Mother either. She couldn't keep it to herself."

Adam agreed, and knelt by an elaborate Tevinter chest. Within minutes, he had picked the lock. Inside they found neatly-written invoices for dozens of slaves and over three hundred gold sovereigns.

"Blood money," Fenris said in disgust.

"Looks like clean and shiny coin of the realm to me," Carver contradicted him. "And considering that we were done out of this estate, I totally have no problem taking it as restitution."

"This may have been earned in an evil way, but much of it will go for our cousin Charade's dowry. She's a very nice girl," said Adam. "It certainly will not be enriching some Tevinter slaver. However, as our companions, you are each due a certain share. Would twenty apiece suit you?"

"Sure!" Varric said. *"Gold is always honorable,"* as the dwarves say. "And a bit of diversion with it, too. A good night, all in all."

Fenris stared at them, nonplussed. "You mean to give me twenty sovereigns?"

"Yes, I do mean that," Adam agreed, smiling suavely. "The fist-in-the-heart thing never gets old. Jowan? What about you?"

The mage blushed. "I don't really need any money. I mean... my Warden pay is plenty. I'd rather the money went to your cousin."

"Such a gentleman!" Carver clapped him on the back.

They had found other things, too: many of which they simply could not take with them. There were thick illuminated tomes of history and fables that were simply beyond price; huge oil paintings finer and more real-looking than any pictures the

Hawkes had ever seen; magnificent furniture carved and inlaid with malachite and gilded bronze. There were luxury fabrics: splendid garments of Tevinter make. Adam found veils of silk so fine that they could be folded to the size of a handkerchief. He took three of them, each in a different jewel-like color, and made a tidy package of them. Another splendid fur cloak with a wide fox collar was gathered up as a gift for their Arl.

Adam lingered, looking around him at the amazing house. Even after being abused by a criminal gang, it was still beyond anything he had seen in Ferelden. It breathed gentility... dignity... a civilized way of life. Compared to this, even the rooms he had seen in the Palace of Denerim were crude and unlovely. No wonder Mother missed it. Somehow, he would try to make his own mansion in Amaranthine something that fine.

The Tethras mansion, too, gave him lots of ideas. Once back and safe with his loot, Adam took an appraising look around him. Proper chimneys, smoothly plastered walls, tiled floors: no raw stone to be seen; upholstered chairs and fine ceramics; skylights overhead to brighten the place. Adam made up the fire in the reception hall, plans forming for major changes back in Amaranthine.

"What a lot of nice things," Carver said, patting the leather slung over his shoulder. It was bulging with his new possessions. "I think Mother will be thrilled to see that little portrait of her again. With pearls in the frame, no less!"

"I don't know," Adam laughed. "I think that was made when

she was engaged to the Comte de Launcet. Bethany will love it, though." He thought a little more. "Remember: we can tell Nathaniel what we've been up to, but no one else. Slaughtering an entire house full of law-abiding slave traders is probably illegal in these parts. We'll have to keep it quiet. Is that all right with you? Varric? Fenris?"

"I promise to keep it quiet until you're safely back in Home Sweet Ferelden," Varric promised. "After that, it will be grist for my latest thriller: *Hawkes Over Hightown*. Sound good?"

"I shall say nothing at all," Fenris said in his resonant and well-bred voice. Adam thought he could give any Ferelden noble pointers on sounding posh. "The slaves we freed need time to make good their escape. No doubt there are other gangs who would be glad to capture them. Slave traders are very competitive. "

Jowan grimaced. "You mean they steal slaves from each other?"

"Of course. What could be easier and more convenient than netting all the fish another has caught? That mage in the cellars was a mere foot soldier. What Danarius returns to Kirkwall..." His voice trailed off, and he slumped onto a bench.

"Was Danarius..." Adam considered how to put it. "Was Danarius the man who claimed to own you?"

"Yes," Fenris said heavily. "Danarius is a magister of the Tevinter Imperium, where he is a wealthy mage with great

influence. Yes, he was my master. As I told your lord, it is he who marked me as you see. He has hunted me for months, wanting to strip the lyrium from my very bones."

"Well, we can't have that," Carver declared. "I think you should stick with us."

"What do you mean?"

Adam shot Carver a 'let me handle this' look. "What my brother means to say is that our company could use a warrior of your quality. Arl Nathaniel was impressed by your fighting skills and hopes you would be amenable to the idea of joining us. He'd pay you well."

"Pay me?"

"Yes," Hawke said, giving him a wry grin. "Free men don't work for free."

Noise came from the servants' quarters. There was hope of breakfast, which seemed like a very good idea.

"Think about it," said Hawke, at his most persuasive. "We won't be staying in Kirkwall long. Why stick around alone for this Danarius fellow? Better to face him with some friends at your back. Can you ride a horse?"

"Yes..." Fenris was still rather dazed by the offer. "Yes, of course."

"And you'll need a pack. If nothing else, you can use it to stow

away your twenty sovereigns."

"Now those are *horses!*" declared Ser Eraid, staring in wonder at the string of Antivan barbs Varric had conjured for them out of his network of acquaintances, rivals, and sworn friends.

"Yeah, they're pretty good," Varric allowed. "I'm no horseman myself, but I know people who are. Could only get you ten of the barbs. The rest are cobs, but they're sound. The mules are healthy. Going to get an early start tomorrow morning?"

Nathaniel thought it over.

"Very early."

They spent much of the day preparing for their journey north. They had brought their tents, bedrolls, and other gear with them on the ship. Anything else they needed was obtained in the markets of Kirkwall. Nathaniel and Varric haggled—a little—and Varric was very pleased with his profits from the dealings. For that matter, Nathaniel decided that keeping Varric well-disposed to them was well worth some extra gold. They were coming back here, after all. He hoped that most of the animals survived the journey. If they did, he would do his best to bring as many of them back to Ferelden as possible. Anyone who could breed horses of this quality would be made for life.

He told Varric, "We hope to be back by sometime next month,

and perhaps will have more business for you."

The dwarf shrugged. "Bartrand—that's my brother—may be home by then, so I may not be able to put you up at his place. Why worry? There's always the Hanged Man!"

"That what I'm afraid of."

After their early-morning adventures, the Hawkes thought it prudent not to show their faces in Hightown. Yes, the escaped slaves *should* be grateful, but one could not presume too much on the honor or judgement of people who had been so abused.

Jowan, too, did not go out. He was impressed by the Tethras home library, and had no desire to visit the Chantry. The Templar presence in Kirkwall was beyond anything he had ever seen in Ferelden. True, he did not look like a mage, but the fear in him was bone-deep, and if there were a fatal 'accident,' he did not think there would be anyone who could call the Knight-Commander to account.

So it was that Nathaniel went to the Hightown Market and the Chantry with his knights and men-at-arms. Nearly all of them next paid brief but rewarding visits to Kirkwall's finest brothel, The Blooming Rose. It was in the Chantry that Nathaniel's presence was revealed to all the city. Nathaniel had always thought Sebastian Vael was something of an idiot. A well-meaning idiot, certainly, but still...

"Nathaniel Howe!" called the Prince of Starkhaven, above the

sweet lulling melodies of the choir. "How are you?"

There was nothing to do but shake the proffered hand and make the introductions. Sebastian was armed and arrayed in armor... white enameled armor, too, of all things. He told Nathaniel a grim tale of the murders of his family by the Flint Company.

"Who hired them?" Nathaniel asked. Clearly a band of professional mercenaries would not kill the ruling Prince of Starkhaven and his family without some sort of reason... or at least without being paid a sufficient amount of coin.

"That I do not know... yet," Sebastian said, wide blue eyes burning with wrath. "When I learn, though, they will not escape my vengeance! How is your family? Your noble father?"

"All dead, too," Nathaniel replied. It sounded very flat after hearing much the same tale from someone else... as if he were attempting to compete with him for the prize of Most Heartbroken Orphan. Sebastian was taken aback, and then blushed, remembering that he had heard that Arl Howe had been assassinated by the Crows. It had slipped his mind, with his own troubles.

"Indeed, I am very sorry," he said. "I share your grief." His eyes brightened. "You are here in the Free Marches to pursue his assassins?"

Before he could deny it, Nathaniel thought again. It was really not a bad cover story. it would at least do while they were in

Kirkwall and for a few days after. With any luck, Sebastian would spread it.

"He was betrayed. Perhaps the less said about it, the better," he answered curtly, and then changed the subject. "You have not yet gone north to claim your birthright?"

He was then treated to a long peroration as Sebastian described his spiritual struggles over the matter. Was it right to pursue something for what might be the wrong reasons? Did he want to be Prince of Starkhaven to spite his dead elder brother? Did he want to be Prince of Starkhaven to prove himself to his dead parents? Did he want to be Prince of Starkhaven *at all*?

Nathaniel, out of patience with all this waffling, ended the conversation. He had never felt any such compunctions about becoming Arl of Amaranthine. "Well then, just as you think best. Andraste guide you."

A laundry maid at the Tethras mansion gossiped to her scullion sweetheart who worked in the kitchens of the Comte de Launcet. That scullion knew a rich gentleman in Hightown who paid for any information about foreigners and nobles. The dwarven household had noblemen as guests—lords from Ferelden and a pair of Grey Wardens. There were dogs there as well: big smelly dogs that frightened the maid. No, nobody knew what they were here for, but the tip alerted the gentleman to watch the mansion and the movements of the merchant Varric Tethras.

The Fereldans visited the Chantry and made their devotions, as was proper. They had an elven servant amongst them who was permitted to wear a sword. Peculiar, but no more peculiar than their love of dogs, which were blessedly absent here in the house of the Maker.

The gentleman recognized the leader of the party: Nathaniel Howe. A well-known Chantry brother called out his name for all to hear. As the men of the party addressed him as "my lord Arl," he had clearly inherited his father's title, which was surprising, because it was the gentleman's understanding that his younger brother was the heir. Was the Fereldan in Kirkwall to ask for help against the Blight, or to wrangle some sort of shipping agreement for Amaranthine?

Yet Arl Howe had not petitioned the Viscount for an audience. Perhaps he was recovering after his sea voyage, which must have been disagreeable at this time of year. He had had some sort of dealings with the Tethras brothers, because there had been a large shipment of exotic southern wood from Ferelden that Varric had sold off at a very fine price. What was going on in the south? Perhaps the Dog Lords were trying to make what coin they could before fleeing their tainted country? One of their nation had come through here a few months ago: Bann Esmerelle of Amaranthine, who brought a huge fortune with her. The gentleman had heard she had settled in the city of Hasmal, an elegant, civilized place. Sensible of her. The Orlesian gentleman overheard what he could of the conversation between the Arl of Amaranthine and the Prince of Starkhaven, and then retreated into the shadows, making

mental notes. It was all very interesting.

Betrayed? Could the Arl mean the lady Esmerelle? Would he be heading north to Hasmaal? And why were Grey Wardens traveling with them? The gentleman had seen no Grey Wardens in the party. Perhaps the servant wench was mistaken.

But if there were Grey Wardens, what were they here for? There were only a handful of Ferelden Grey Wardens. He had heard that most of them were killed in battle last spring, fighting the darkspawn. Perhaps the Wardens were going to seek help from the Marcher Warden posts and had traveled with this noble and his guards for safety. The gentleman was under the impression that one of the Grey Wardens was a young woman in whom the Empress was very, very interested. The Girl Warden. Stories of her had spread across the Waking Sea, though obviously much exaggerated. He must check his source. Meanwhile, he must assign one of his agents to keep careful watch on the comings and goings from the Tethras mansion.

Moving out like shadows—or at least like shadows that clanked a bit—the Fereldans made an early start the next day. Horses were not permitted within the walls of the city, and so the men had a long walk to the outskirts where their horses were stabled. Gold passed from Nathaniel to Varric, and then hands were shaken. Horses were saddled, the puppies were settled in their traveling slings, and the mules loaded.

Fenris mounted the piebald cob designated for him with some approval. Not the best of them, but not bad. Not bad at all. The gelding was rather small, but sturdy and compact, and Fenris was told that its name unsurprisingly, was "Pye."

Varric saw them off, raising his brows at the amount of weaponry they carried. "Lord Howe, I almost wish I was going with you, but horses and me... well, we just don't agree. Take care of yourself. You too, Hawke... Junior..."

"Don't call me 'Junior!'" Carver muttered.

"...and the Broody Elf. Good luck to you all, wherever it is your going."

By daybreak, they were already galloping past the western face of Sundermount.

The Orlesian gentleman was pleased with his own acumen when his man told him that the Fereldans had left the city on horseback, traveling neither east nor west along the Wounded Coast, but north to the Vimmark Pass.

Yes! They were going north. His guess had been correct. The Fereldan lord was hunting Lady Esmerelle, whom he considered a traitor to his family. She had brought with her a very large fortune indeed. No wonder the young man was wrathful. Stolen? Perhaps. So... A Fereldan noble on his way to Hasmal. Did that merit a special report to Val Royeaux?

No. It was a routine matter, not a matter of state; and it could

be included in the regular correspondence on the usual ship.

The first distraction: a band of well-armed mercenaries in the foothills of Sundermount. Solution: Kill them all.

To Nathaniel's annoyance, they proved to be the very Flint Company upon whom Sebastian Vael had sworn vengeance. Perhaps it would be best to suppress the fact that he had killed them, since otherwise Sebastian might decide that his debt to Nathaniel could only be repaid by swearing an oath of blood-brotherhood, and by remaining at his side forever after as a loyal companion.

On the other hand, killing the Flint Company was a good thing. First, because they were trying to kill Nathaniel and *his* company. Second, they had quite a lot of loot on them. Some of it was obviously stolen from the Vaels. Nonetheless, it was a lot of loot and his people enjoyed sharing it out. If the journey continued as it had begun, they were all going to profit handsomely from it.

He was very pleased with them. They were jelling well as a fighting force. The little skirmish with the Tevinters had broken the ice, as it were, and they were all finding their places. The elf, too, was absolutely brilliant. The men seemed to regard him as something as a good luck charm—if there could be a 'lucky thirteen.'

Second distraction: a band of well-armed Templars patrolling

for mages. Solution: Ride past them and answer all their shouted questions with the word "no."

"We haven't seen any 'mages,'" muttered Kain, winking at a trembling Jowan. "Just the one."

The Templars, unfortunately, could not be completely ignored. Nathaniel was forced to rein in his horse, stop his party, and actually speak to the leader of the Templars, Ser Alrik. Apparently, there had been a mass escape from the Starkhaven Circle of Magi. Somehow, the place had caught fire, and rather than staying put and allowing themselves to burn to death like good, obedient mages, the wicked maleficars had run away. That was the message that the Hawkes gleaned from Ser Alrik's story, at any rate. Nathaniel told them that they were traveling to Tantervale "on business," and that they would be on their guard against such dangers.

The Templars came impudently close, and even ran their hands over packs and saddlebags, but Nathaniel did his best to calm the situation. He guessed that he was expected to pay some sort of bribe to Ser Alrik—a 'donation' to the Chantry, of course—but he was feeling impatient and not particularly generous. Ser Alrik did not press the matter, as there were only six in his party. The Fereldans rode on.

Third distraction: a band of well-armed lunatic dwarves haunting a sprawling abandoned fortress in the Vimmark Pass. This proved far more troublesome.

"There's something wrong here," Jowan declared. "It's not that the Veil is weak, exactly. I don't know. I've never felt anything like this. There's some sort of powerful, malignant kind of magic here. I think it's driven those dwarves mad.

"Blood Magic?" Nathaniel asked.

"Maybe." Jowan fidgeted. "A lot more powerful than anything I've seen. Worse than that coven of Blood Mages in Denerim."

The dwarves shot arrows at them, threw rocks, and chased after them like street dogs, howling inanities.

"It is the Blood of the Hawke! We must bring them to Corypheus!"

Nathaniel had to make a decision. The country past Sundermount was arid to the point of being a desert. The next day or so would be rough. It would be far worse if they were tracked by madmen.

"We'll check out that ruin," he said, "and deal with the dwarves."

The ruin was a crumbling old wooden fort, but as they rode through, they found that a ravine led them to a huge jumble of buildings trailing down a face cliff to a misty chasm below. Beyond was an ancient tower of strange design, decorated with... griffons. Equally ancient was an elaborate stone bridge over the chasm, also decorated with griffons.

"Griffons?" Jowan said, half to himself. "Is this some sort of Grey Warden post?"

"We really should check it out," Carver said. "Bronwyn wanted us to talk to other Wardens."

They gave chase to the dwarves, who melted away into the labyrinth of stone and mud brick. A gallery of arches sheltered a long descending staircase. Before them was a confusion of doorways and steps and tiny barred windows. Darrow and Kain dismounted and entered a few of the rooms, coming out and shaking their heads.

"There's a big staircase going down into the cliff. Crazy dwarves must be hiding."

Not all of them could go. Nathaniel detailed Kain, Walton, Mapes, and Dudgeon to stay outside and guard the horses. The puppies, too, were left with the guards, much to their disappointment. The rest of them moved in cautiously.

The cool air inside smelled of decay, and the structure did not appear to have been inhabited by anyone other than a handful of lunatics in many years. Here and there they found scraps of parchment, suggesting that a dwarven force had come through some ages before. The references were vague and confusing.

"Scout's report:

"Our examination revealed construction that is remarkably

sturdy for its age. The fortress's foundations reach deeper into the rock than expected. Two levels below the surface, we discovered a series of twisting, underground passages, chiseled out of the mountain itself. I commanded the men to set up camp there.

"Not an hour later, one of the newer men reported voices from the depths. He flew into a frenzy, demanding that we leave immediately. Those unused to tight spaces often display such hysteria. Thankfully, I was able to calm him before his raving affected the rest of the team.

"But he was gone this morning. Tracks led deeper into the caverns. We shall follow him..."

There were more staircases, more high-ceilinged rooms, mostly of rough-hewn wood. The supports and cart rails suggested that this had been a dwarven mine at some point.

Jowan scowled and whispered to Carver, "I'm picking up Taint. What do you think?"

"Makes sense, doesn't it? If this was a Grey Warden base, I mean."

"I don't know," Jowan shook his head. "The Warden Compound doesn't feel like this. This is... bad."

Bad or not, they found more loot: abandoned weapons and armor; some caches of old coins. Jowan saw a mage's staff propped up in a corner and went over to admire it. It was

inscribed with the name "Malcolm Hawke."

"Er... Carver... Adam... You may want to see this."

The staff was puzzled over.

"Father was here? Why?" wondered Adam. "It doesn't look like the Wardens have been here in ages, and if they were, what business with the Wardens would he have?"

"Dunno. Look here, we should save this. Maybe Bethany could use it. Anyway, it looks like a good staff."

"A very fine staff," Jowan agreed, regarding it with a bit of envy. He hefted it, but felt no hint of power. "At least it *looks* good. It might be..." he hesitated. "It might be keyed to your father himself. By blood. Probably your sister could use it, but no one else."

"Then we should *definitely* take it along," Adam decided.

Nathaniel was puzzled, too. "Could your father have been a Grey Warden who left the order?"

Adam blinked. "I don't think—surely he would have said something. I don't know."

Carver wondered, too. Father had been vague about bits of his past. *Very* vague as to where that coin had come from that had bought their place in Lothing and supported them for years. All sorts of ideas came to him, none of them very

attractive. He touched the staff, and felt a faint sizzle of energy.

"Whoa!"

"Whoa, what?" Adam touched the staff himself, and bit his lip. "I felt something, too. Bethany's staffs never gave me a buzz like that."

Fenris muttered, "Perhaps *you're a mage.*"

Hawke snorted, and shook his head. "It's strange, though. Like the rest of this place."

They searched all the alcoves and doorways and hiding places, checking for traps and plunder. There was loot, certainly, but Nathaniel was even more pleased to find a windlass and a well. Jowan inspected the water and pronounced it untainted and fit to drink. Canteens were refilled, and Carver and Darrow left to scout ahead. Not too much later, they trotted back to report.

"My lord," said Darrow. "There's a stone staircase ahead that don't look like anything we've seen before. Much finer and more finished-like. It goes down a long way."

Carver agreed. "It's different, all right. Older. It looks...important. And there are darkspawn down there, too."

"Darkspawn!" Nathaniel's grey eyes widened. "The Deep Roads?"

"No, my lord," said Jowan. "I've studied the maps. While the Deep Roads have an access point near Kirkwall, the Roads do not run here. This is something else. Maybe they wandered into the cellars here."

"I think..." Carver tried to remember. "Those dwarves didn't get close enough to us to see for sure, but maybe... Jowan, do you think those dwarves were Tainted?"

"I'm not sure either..."

"I know I don't want them chasing us all the way to Nevarra!" Adam snapped. "Whether crazy or Tainted or what, we don't need them sneaking up on us in the night. My lord, why don't Carver, Jowan, and I go on and see what we can find out?"

Hunter barked, reprovngly.

"And Hunter," Adam added, with a pat of apology for his mabari.

"I don't like the idea of hanging back and letting others face danger," Nathaniel scowled. "We'll all go."

It was not the Deep Roads. It was a Grey Warden prison, trapping darkspawn, demons, and the Fereldans, too.

Down, down the stairs they went. Down and down. The staircases transformed gradually into elegant masterpieces of stonework: a bit crumbling, but still very fine. At the foot of the

stairs there was a rumble and a flash, and a warded barrier glowed blue, sealing all access to the stairs leading back up.

Ser Eraid bellowed a curse. "Bastards have boxed us in!"

This was not good. Jowan inspected the warded barrier and agreed that going back was not an option for now.

"It's ancient magic," he said. "I could work on it, but without knowing exactly what it is..."

"Very well. Then we go forward," Nathaniel said. "Whatever is doing the magic is ahead, anyway. It looks like we have to go down to gain access to that tower we saw."

In the next room they entered was a handful of darkspawn. The Fereldans fought fiercely and efficiently. More darkspawn charged from a connecting hall. Once they were dead, there was quite a hush, and the party took a look about them.

"It's not the Deep Roads," said Jowan, "but the construction looks like dwarven work."

"And since there are griffons on everything, it was clearly built for the Grey Wardens," added Carver.

Along the fine stone walls were cells. Barred cells. Many of the cells contained skeletons. Some contained valuable loot.

"This was a prison," said Nathaniel. "But for whom?"

"That's interesting," Jowan said, gesturing at a shield hanging

in the next chamber. Part of it was glowing ominously. "I think it's a magical device of some kind."

He gingerly touched a glowing red light with the tip of his staff, and a resonant, disembodied voice issued forth.

"Be bound here for eternity, hunger stilled, rage smothered, desire dampened, pride crushed. In the name of the Maker, so let it be."

"That sounds like..." Hawke began uncertainly.

"...*Father*..." whispered Carver. "But how can that be?"

"They're triggers for demon wards," Jowan said. "I read a book about them once. The voice is part of the enchantment; a memory of the spell that was cast...well, who knows how long ago? It's called a Mark of the Binder."

Tapping another mark released the creature inside. The party was startled to find itself facing a demon that rushed them with a roar. Blades worked well against it. As the last glow of magic faded, the disembodied voice spoke again.

"I can do nothing about the Warden's use of demons in this horrid place, but I will have no one say that any magic of mine released one into the world."

"It does sound like Father," Hawke said.

Fenris found the place profoundly disturbing. He asked Jowan

angrily, "What do you know of this place? Do Wardens deal with demons?"

"I don't know anything!" Jowan squeaked. "I've never heard of anything like this. Bronwyn would have told us if she knew about it. I think it's a big secret that was so secret everybody forgot about it!"

Nathaniel remembered some of the unpleasant things his father had said about Wardens. Much of them were likely all too true.

"This place must have been designed by a lunatic," he remarked. Rows of cells led to nothing; corridors met at odd angles. And there were bones. Lots of human and dwarven bones. Most of them were quite bare and of not much interest to Hunter. Finally, in a particularly nasty cell, they found a document.

"Privileged to the Wardens," Adam read. He called out, "This is important!"

Jowan leaned in and then took the paper, reading it aloud.

"All we hear is that this is one of the great Grey Warden secrets. 'It must be protected at all costs.' As usual, we're most concerned with deceiving our own people. But why hide that the Deep Roads were shaped not only by the dwarves but also by us?"

"I found records dating back to 1004 TE, the wake of the First

Blight. Early Wardens discovered that some darkspawn could think and speak and command portions of the horde even after the Archdemon's death. A few could wield magic with the skill of a Tevinter magister, and the Wardens greatly feared them.

"It was here, in the Vimmark Mountains, that Warden Sashamiri set her trap to capture and study the greatest of these creatures, the one whom they called Corypheus."

"Corypheus! That is a Tevinter name," said Fenris. "How is it that a darkspawn has a name?"

No one knew. They moved from chamber to chamber. Everywhere were griffon statues and the arms of the Wardens. The place was grand even in decay. Carver moved ahead, peering out to a stone bridge connecting one part of the structure to another, and then shrank back, waving at Adam and Nathaniel.

"Come and see!" he whispered. "It's not a darkspawn. I think."

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. What was that creature, grubbing in the rubble? It moved like a darkspawn, but its skin was much lighter, and there were random patches of hair on its head. The creature rose from its haunches, and they all saw what it was wearing.

"Maker's Breath!"

They moved forward—cautiously—to meet the shambling

figure in Grey Warden armor.

It was a ghoul. Clearly, it was a ghoul, judging from the filmy eyes. It was also still, to some degree, a man, a warrior, and a Warden. The pitiful creature looked their way, and gaped. He limped toward them, calling out questions in a rasping, stammering voice.

"The Key! The Key! Did they find it? I heard the dwarves looking...digging. How did you bring the Key here?"

Carver asked. "Er... are you Corypheus?"

The ghoul Warden shrank away, lifting his hands as if to ward off even more evil than was contained in his own putrid carcass. "Do not say his name! He will hear you. Do not attract his attention—not when you hold the Key!"

Jowan hefted Malcolm Hawke's staff. "You mean this, don't you? How can this be a key?"

"Magic! Old magic it is. Old magic from blood. It made the seals. It can destroy them."

Nathaniel asked. "What is your name? And what are these seals you speak of?"

"So long since I said my name," the ghoul whispered. "Larius. Larius...that was my name. There was a title, too... Commander... Commander of the Grey."

"Eeewww," Jowan managed, a little helplessly.

Larius began babbling, overjoyed to have an audience other than himself.

"Wardens, yes. Guardians against the Blight. I can help you. Show you the way. Down and in. Down and in."

Hawke asked, "Are there are other exits to this prison?"

The decaying teeth were exposed in a sly smile. Larius said, "The Wardens built their prison well. If the center holds, who cares what else is trapped?"

"Who, indeed? Looks like we'll have to go through this place from end to end, Hawke," muttered Nathaniel.

The name riveted the ghoul's attention. "Hawke! The Blood of the Hawke. You, too?" he asked Carver. "Only the Blood of the Hawke holds the key to his death...Yes, I can show you out, yes." Larius hobbled away and returned with a piece of tattered parchment.

Jowan took it from him, grimacing. He cleared his throat, and read.

"The Warden's Prison.

"The Grey Wardens' prison in the Vimmark Mountains is believed to have been constructed more than a thousand years ago. The original method of construction has been lost to history, but the Warden-Commanders of the Free Marches have maintained the prison's secret through the centuries.

"The prison is concealed in a great rift in the Vimmark Mountains, far from any easily-traveled mountain passes. The Wardens themselves have spread rumors of banditry and beasts to prevent explorers from approaching.

"The prison consists of a central tower built into the rift with magically-maintained bridges allowing access at different levels. Each level is sealed by a blood magic ritual in which a mage of untainted blood uses his own life essence to create a magical barrier that is permeable from the outside yet impenetrable from within. This one-way access has caused other darkspawn—and perhaps unwary travelers—to be caught within the prison's confines. Those who disappear inside never re-emerge."

"Perhaps quite a few unwary travelers," said Ser Zennor. "Not very sporting of you Grey Wardens."

"What do you mean, 'you?'" Carver growled. "Nobody here built this place!"

"Come," cackled Larius. "The First Seal awaits the blood of the Hawke! Let the Key absorb the magic back into itself." He limped away, beckoning to them.

In a round chamber they found an elaborate magic circle, bound with iron and salt, with four lyrium torches at the cardinal points.

Gingerly, Carver tapped the top of the seal with his father's staff. It was insufficient.

"Blood of the Hawke, eh?" Adam asked Jowan, who nodded.

Without hesitation, Adam smoothly drew his belt knife and sliced a shallow cut into his forearm. As the first drop of blood touched the seal, there was a burst of white flame. A spectral ogre materialized, threw back its horned head, and roared. After a shocked moment, the Fereldans fell to, hacking and slashing. The ogre fell with a crash.

The lyrium torches blazed higher, wreathing Malcolm Hawke's staff in sparks of blue. When they died down, the staff glowed briefly.

"I think it fed more power into the staff," Jowan told them. "Maybe that's what Larius meant by the Key absorbing the magic into itself."

Larius peered around the corner and crept in. "So long... so long.. But the blood works. It is good. The magic calls to the blood...reads the thoughts of those that hold the Key. The last to hold it...the Hawke. I was here, when he laid the seals. Before I became...this."

"Stop right there!" Adam snarled. "How was my father caught up in this? Was he a Warden? What did you do to him?"

"Paid him," whispered Larius. "Paid him well, yes. Without the Hawke the prison would have fallen twenty-five years ago. Not a Warden. Would not take the Joining afterwards. A pity to conscript him so unwilling. A learned man. We held him until

he did my bidding, and then let him go to his woman."

He hobbled away, while the Hawke brothers looked at each other, horrified. The source of their family nest egg was now perfectly clear.

"Come on," Nathaniel urged them.

They moved out the far door. There was yet another bridge, connecting the round chamber with another part of the structure.

"Darkspawn ahead," Jowan muttered. The sensation was very strong, but he saw nothing. No, wait...

A squat figure detached itself from a pillar. They had not seen it at first, as it was sheltered behind a massive iron shield taller than itself. The shield was so large, in fact, that the genlock simply pushed it along in front, with an ear-splitting scream of metal on stone.

It was another powerful enemy, this time, extremely resistant to magic, and insensible to pain. It crashed into Rhys and Eraid, and knocked them down. Darrow flicked a knife into the creature's face, and it thudded home between its eyes. It paused, just the least bit, and Carver swung long, biting into the back of the armored legs. The genlock turned, with surprising speed, and rushed in Carver's direction. Nathaniel placed an arrow past the shield and the genlock's roar turned into a rasping gurgle. Hunter lunged, and knocked the genlock off balance. That was the edge the party needed to bring the

creature down, drag the heavy shield away, and hack to pieces. It took some time.

Once it was dead, however, they were pleased to discover that they had completely cleaned out that floor of the prison. Another staircase was found. They prepared themselves, and then descended to the next level.

It was very much like the floor above, both in design and condition. There were darkspawn; there were prison cells; there were bones, picked clean.

"Where's the seal here?" Carver wondered. "Too bad they're not all in one place, but no: that would be *convenient*."

They found more bindings, and more glowing triggers. They unleashed and slew more demons. And once again, they heard the voice of Malcolm Hawke.

"I may have left the Circle, but I took a vow. My magic will serve that which is best in me, not that which is most base."

With painstaking effort, they searched every chamber and every cell; opened every chest, read every scrap of parchment.

"Over here!" shouted Darrow, from the rubbly depths of a cell. "Look at this! It's got an inscription with it. Can't read it, though."

Jowan leaned over. "It's in Arcanum. *'The Crown of Dumat. In*

reverence, you will approach the altar. Know that you come into the presence of Dumat. With head bowed, say:

'Blessed are you, Dumat, silent and strong, secret and wise. We bring you gifts, sacrifices to your greatness.'"

"An offering to one of the Old Gods!" Fenris whispered in disgust.

"Probably cursed, I reckon," said Darrow.

They crowded to stare at the black and spiky circlet of iron. Flourished upon it was an inlay of lyrium.

"Don't touch it," advised Jowan. "Leave it alone."

No one disagreed, and they moved on.

Further down the rows of cells, they found more bones, and another archive of parchment. These documents were old and crumbling; much of the parchment fell to fragments when touched, but a few sheets were stronger. All of them were in Arcanum, and as such, only Jowan could decipher them.

"An unusual discovery." He read aloud.

"The creature can speak. It has a name, Corypheus. We have encountered darkspawn before who use words, but none individual enough to have chosen a name. This Corypheus appears unique among darkspawn, and has gathered many of its brethren to follow it."

"It would be wasteful to kill such a creature. If it can be captured, tamed somehow, its unnatural influence over the darkspawn could perhaps be turned to our favor. It is clear the darkspawn will never bow to human commands, but this Corypheus seems at times more human than beast. I have conversed with it, and though its thoughts are disordered and inhuman, it speaks of the Old Gods by their Tevinter names. I have wondered if perhaps he is no darkspawn at all, but a ghoul, so corrupted by the Taint as to have become a new creature entirely.

"I recommend we find a way to capture Corypheus, hold it somewhere safe from both men and darkspawn, and study its unique nature. This will require magic, however, for Corypheus' own abilities are powerful. It uses spells both human and Tainted, and has a strength that would shame any magister. We must muster our best mages to face it and to hold it. I shall send my findings to the First Warden."

"And it's signed by Warden-Commander Farele and dated 1004 TE. A long time ago."

"Pre-Andrastean!" Nathaniel said in amazement. "That must date to the First Blight... or a little after. But this is madness! To keep such a creature prisoner..."

More cells, more Bindings, more demons. Carver and Adam looked forward to breaking the Bindings, if only for the chance to hear their father's voice again. One magical echo was particularly poignant:

"I've bought our freedom, Leandra. We can go home now, us and the baby. I hope it takes after you, love. I would wish this magic on no one. May it never know what I did here."

Nathaniel listened grimly, and said, "Here's what I think happened: the Wardens felt the wards weakening, and so they captured a poor apostate and blackmailed him into fixing the place. I suppose he was lucky they didn't conscript him or leave him here to die."

They continued their meticulous search of the cells, in between savage fights with random bands of darkspawn. In a chest, Ser Zennor found a dagger of black iron, whose blade bore a tracery of lyrium.

"Be careful," Jowan advised. "The inscription says it's Dumat's Sacrificial Dagger!"

Ser Eraid jerked his hand away. "And he's welcome to it!"

They eventually came to yet another round chamber, and the second seal. Here, the release of magic nearly knocked them off their feet. There was another spectral ogre, and Malcolm Hawke's staff radiated sparks again after its satisfying demise.

They made yet another descent down a very, very long staircase, and they found themselves at the dark base of the structure. Dim green light filtered in. Mist rose from fetid hollows. The stink was vile. There was a scrabbling ahead,

and a pack of what looked like ugly, leathery green chickens scampered away into the shadows. Hunter growled, eager to loosed on the hunt.

"Deepstalkers!" Carver shouted. "I've heard of those! They're dangerous in a pack. What else lives down here?"

They found out, soon enough. Darkspawn, deepstalkers, and giant spiders lived down there. They had also died down there, adding the overall stench. The party came across more of the unusually powerful genlocks, and afterwards found a sepulchre that seemed to have belonged to one of the early Warden commandants of the prison, who, by his bones, had been a dwarf.

They found other traces of those who had gone before. Weapons, of course. Bits of Grey Warden armor. Long ago, some of the Legion of the Dead had come through, searching for the lost son of a dwarven Paragon. He had perished, trapped in the Wardens' Prison. Nor had his would-be rescuers escaped.

In a moldering chest they found more offerings to the Old God Dumat: a ritual scroll and an urn, all with rather creepy inscriptions. A squat and hideous little temple to Dumat, complete with altar and ever-burning flame, could be accessed by some stepping stones through the greenish muck. It was obviously very old: possibly one of the earliest parts of the complex. They backed away, the very surroundings filling them all with dread.

They moved on, and found themselves emerging from the wet and swampy foundations up a slow incline into something that was not a cavern, but was certainly not a man-made chamber, either. More light seeped down here, and they surmised that this might have been the surface before the tower was built. Now it was dirt and jagged rocks. They looked up, and through the swirling dust found that they were looking up the side of the tower. Far above were the labyrinth of bridges and balconies, like spokes in a wheel.

They came upon the remains of a long-deserted campsite and there found more evidence of the Wardens: skeletons and a weathered journal bearing the Grey Warden's seal. This appeared to be comparatively recent, as it was written in the Common Tongue in a legible script.

"This is interesting!" said Nathaniel, turning over a page.

"Speculations on Kirkwall"

The records say Corypheus has been trapped below the Vimmarks since the days of the Tevinter Imperium. Can it be a coincidence that the darkspawn besiege this area more fiercely than anywhere else on the surface of Thedas? Or that Kirkwall, the closest city, suffers from endless plagues of violence, lunacy, human sacrifice, and blood magic?

"If one studies Kirkwall's public records, it becomes hard to deny that some malevolent force has long shaped its history. Could a darkspawn, even a powerful mage, have such

influence even as it slumbers?"

He snapped the book shut.

"It explains a great deal."

Fenris said quietly, "Kirkwall was an evil place, long before the First Blight, but one cannot deny that such a creature might be a malignant influence."

The path began spiraling around the base of the tower, leading up toward a low arched door.

Darrow grunted in relief. "From now on, we go up, looks like."

Carver made a face, and glanced at Jowan. "I feel funny," he whispered. "Like there's somebody else in my head. Do you feel it?"

Jowan trembled. "I do. I think it's Corypheus."

And at the center of the tower's foundation, they found another seal. This was much like the others, though now they knew what to expect and were better prepared. Adam tapped the seal with his father's staff, Carver cut himself this time, and the ogre—now more powerful than the others—manifested, and they destroyed it. The power drawn into the staff this time made them all sit down abruptly. The seal chamber led out to a walkway that resembled the bridges higher up.

Larius appeared again, lurking at the end of a bridge.

"He feels the seals weaken. He's knows that you are close. We must hurry!"

A handful of dwarves rushed through another door. One pointed at the Fereldans and shouted, "There! Those are the Hawkes! The others are to be killed! To arms! And pray that Corypheus honors our sacrifice!"

They fell, quickly, no match for Fereldan soldiers. Larius himself was still pretty good with a sword. In a dingy stone chamber Jowan found a last piece of parchment: another ancient document in Arcanum, which was a copy of a memorandum send in 1014 TE from Warden-Commander Daneken to the First Warden in Weisshaupt.

"I was wrong. We cannot control the creature Corypheus. Even our most powerful mages hold no influence with him. In truth, it is they who have been most vulnerable.

"A dozen times, those assigned to guard or study the creature have sought the Key to free him. When they are removed to a safe distance, they remember little. They speak of a voice in their minds, a calling like that of the Old Gods, but it wanes outside Corypheus's presence.

"Darkspawn have attacked as well, seeking him. I can only assume they are summoned the same way. Somehow his magic lets him speak through the Blight itself, affecting any who bear its Taint.

"The same power stays the hand of any Warden who

approaches to kill him. I must recommend that we seal this prison over and conceal its very existence. Corypheus must not be allowed to go free."

"Well," Nathaniel sneered. "There you are. We can't set Corypheus free. The seals are broken or breaking, so the only thing left is to kill him. Good job that we're here and mostly not Wardens, since Wardens apparently *can't* kill him!"

Endless climbing; endless stairs. At the top of the last staircase they found themselves outside in the chill of a desert night, the dim stars flickering overhead. They had reached the top of the central tower, and only a single bridge separated them from the last, most desperate challenge.

Larius shambled ahead.

"He stirs! He wakes! Do not let him gather his full strength. Use the Hawke's blood! Free him, and slay him!"

It seemed a good idea to have a look at the ground before rushing into battle. Jowan determined that the griffons grounded the containment spell. Each was carefully disarmed, and the golden light faded, replaced by a baleful green glow.

Carver rapped the seal with the staff, and Hawke gashed his forearm once again.

The seal dissolved. They braced themselves for a burst of a light and another ogre. Instead, there was a silence, and then a long, attenuated figure floated up from the black hole gaping

in the middle of the floor. Something not quite human, but not like a darkspawn, either. Half of the gaunt face was nearly normal; the other half appeared to be crystallizing into slabs of stone. The limbs were grotesquely long and emaciated; the appendages on the arms more claws than hands. Ragged, decaying finery trailed on an uncanny breeze. The creature came to a stop three feet from the floor, and opened its eyes. A gravelly voice issued forth.

"Be this some dream I wake from? Am I in dwarven lands?"

Corypheus' head turned slowly, taking in the appearance of the strange warriors before him. His eyes fastened on Nathaniel, clearly the leader. He pointed a bony finger his way and began issuing commands.

"You! Serve you at the temple of Dumat? Bring me hence! I must speak with the First Acolyte!"

"I don't take orders from darkspawn," Nathaniel sneered.

Corypheus stared at him, nonplussed by his disobedience.

"You look human. Are you not citizens of the Empire? Slaves, then, to the dwarves? Why come you here? Whoever you be, you owe fealty to any magister of Tevinter. On your knees! All of you!" His gaze shifted to Adam and Carver, and became sly and cruel.

"You are what held me. I smell the blood in you." He lifted his voice to the unheeding skies.

"Dumat! Lord ! Tell me! How long have I slumbered? What waking dream is this?"

Larius whispered, "He slept. He knows nothing of the time. We must kill him now."

"Right." Nathaniel nocked an arrow, and in a twinkling, put an arrow through one reddened, rheumy eye.

A nightmarish battle it was—that they all agreed upon afterward. The darkspawn mage—or Tevinter magister, as he called himself—or whatever he was—commanded brutally powerful elemental spells. Lightning crackled from wall to wall, a firestorm swept along the floor, heating their armor, singeing their flesh. Larius was caught in it, and burned, shrieking, stumbling back along the bridge until he toppled, flaming, into the abyss. Carver screamed, tongues of fire licking at his face. A blast of force, and half the men were stunned and stumbling.

"Maker preserve us!" shouted Nathaniel. "Don't stand there staring!"

Jowan had tricks of his own. While he did not possess the raw power of an ancient magister, he knew a crushing spell that immobilized its victim, and the magister knew no way to counter it, other than shooting huge blasts of fire. Meanwhile swords and axes hacked at the vile and ancient flesh. Hunter howled and bayed, and Nathaniel shot arrow after arrow, his aim unerring.

Adam sliced off Corypheus' casting arm. The stump did not squirt blood, but oozed a black and foul ichor that Hunter sensibly avoided. Maimed, the creature slumped; and then Fenris, with a mighty leap, brought his blade down, cutting through the grotesque head from behind. Corypheus looked almost comically surprised, as his brain slid away, falling to the stones with an unspeakably wet flopping squelch. The creature collapsed like an unstrung puppet.

They all gasped for breath: some clutching at their wounds, some fumbling for flasks of brandy; some simply collapsing to the stones, dazed.

"Corypheus really was a Tainted ancient magister," Jowan marveled. "I always thought the Chantry's story of the origins of the darkspawn was just a myth."

Fenris' handsome face was tense with loathing. "If this is what the magisters of today sprang from, then much is now explained."

"We're lucky we fought him while he was dozy from sleeping a thousand years," Ser Zennor wheezed, holding his cracked ribs. "Lucky to be alive!"

Carver leaned back against a wall, wincing with the pain of his burned face. "Don't touch him or anything on him. You'd be Tainted. We need to get out of here and wash."

"Stay where you are, first!" ordered Jowan. "If you have blood on you, I'll clean it off. Here, Carver, let me heal your face..."

Carver tried to hold still. He muttered to Jowan, "Bronwyn is *not* going to like it when we tell her about this place!"

Thanks to my reviewers: Kyren, KnightOfHolyLight, Adventfather, Guest, le-maru, Girl-chama, forget the rest, Nemrut, Chandagnac, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Blinded in a bolthole, Gene Dark, Robbie the Phoenix, Mike3207, almostinsane, Raxiselic, JackOfBladesX, PhantomX0990, Phygmalion, TSLi, Have Socks. Will Travel, mille libri, darksky01, jnybot, dragonmactir, Griffen Rider, EpitomyofShyness, KrystylSky, mille libri, Tsu Doh Nimh, Costin, Josie Lange, and Advent of Shadows.

Fenris' encounter with Nate & Co occurs before his canon meeting with Hawke in DA2. He had escaped from Danarius considerably earlier, we know, and might well have been hiding from Tevinters—and fighting off slavers—for months.

No more Corypheus. Fenris got him before he had a chance to possess anyone.

92. Return of the Exile

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 92: Return of the Exile

While Astrid knew that she could enter Orzammar openly, wearing the panoply of the Grey Wardens, that was not the way she chose to enter Orzammar. Bhelen had bested her in a duel of wits that she had not even known she was engaged in. The worm had turned. This time, he would not know he was under attack until it was too late.

Her preparations were minute, exacting: she had rifled through Tara's memory for every detail of Bronwyn's venture in the dwarven lands: everyone she met, everyone she helped, everything she learned, everyone she had fought. Astrid had not the least scruple in calling in Bronwyn's debts on her own behalf.

She had her Wardens, and she had a unit of the Legion of the dead—fifty-five dwarves in all. They were all well-disposed to her and looked on her as their leader. She had newly-corrected maps of the Deep Roads that the scholars of the Shaperate would sell their firstborn children to possess. She had five golems. She could present the Assembly with two thaigs, and a clear road from Orzammar to Kal'Hiol.

They loaded a wagon with supplies from West Hill, piling on the victuals until the axles creaked. Astrid blithely presented the stupefied seneschal with a meaningless promissory note, and she left the fortress behind. If all went well, she would never see the place again. If she did return, she would dare the fool to try to collect.

The journey itself was eerily easy. No darkspawn challenged them. Even spiders and deepstalkers were rare. Astrid supposed that they had been slaughtered by the horde, in the irresistible tide of their passage.

There was plenty of extra Legion armor: the last bequests of those who had died in battle. Astrid donned one of the heavy, face-concealing helmets as they approached the city. The other Wardens would stay at the hostel: Velanna, Ailil, Askil, and Falkor. Astrid herself, and the soldiers of the Legion, would stay elsewhere. As for the golems, they would be brought in, one at a time, as the guard changed. The guards would know that the Grey Wardens had one golem: they would not know there were actually five.

Falkor was the ostensible leader of the Warden patrol; Rodyk for the Legion. Both were now her men.

The Legion entered first, quietly, without fanfare, by twos and threes. Falkor, also in a Legion helmet, came with Astrid, so he could find her later.

They did not go to the vast and noisome Legion barracks. Instead, Astrid led them to a shop, with a secret door. Down

a wide tunnel was a large, handsome chamber, suitable for meetings and assemblies. Off of it was the small, luxurious office Tara had told her about. So far, everything was going according to plan.

"This is the Carta hideout, Astrid?" Falkor asked, looking around in surprise. "I thought I was in a noble's house for a minute."

"I'm told the quarters here are very comfortable. Let's get everyone into this first big chamber and then we'll make sure the place is clear and defended. Tara told me that Bronwyn locked the place when she left, but we want to be careful."

Torkel, the smoothest of the Legion, kept the owner of the shop, the smith Janar, occupied and distracted, until the Legion had slipped past, to the secret entrance.

Once Torkel himself joined them, Astrid called them together.

"This was once the hideout of the Carta; the headquarters of Jarvia, until she was killed by the Wardens. We are going to clear the place thoroughly, and make certain that the other exit—the one to Dust Town—is sealed and inaccessible to intruders. I'm told that this place was well-supplied with preserved foods, not all of which were confiscated and taken to the Warden hostel. Sergeants, you will lead your men out and scour the tunnels and chambers for unwelcome squatters. This is our place, not the Carta's."

Using a scribbled map, she directed the various units off on

the hunt, and then settled into Jarvia's office. It had been thoroughly looted by Bronwyn's people, but that was no more than Astrid had expected. The furniture was still here, and still fine.

"Now, Falkor," she smiled grimly, "Bring the Wardens in. Get them settled in the hostel. Present the report that we wrote to the King's secretary."

The report covered the march north to West Hill. It covered the battles they had fought and the arrival at West Hill. The great news—the news truly significant to all dwarvenkind? That—*that* she would present in person, before the Assembly.

"*Atrast Vala!*" called the guard at the Orzammar barrier door. "Stone preserve you, Wardens!"

"Good to be back," Falkor answered cheerfully. This time he had removed the heavy helmet.

As it happened, the guard commander knew Falkor, and was very impressed that he had become a Warden. He was also impressed by Rune. The other golems were concealed, well out of sight, just outside the barrier door. Falkor would bring the next one in when the guard changed. This was the third watch, due to be changed very soon.

"You'll be wanting to stay in the Warden hostel, of course," said the commander. "Everyone will be interested in your report."

"I'm sure."

Askil, of course, knew every detail of the plot. Velanna and Ailil only knew that Astrid wanted to make a dramatic report of her successes to the Assembly, in order to spite a brother who had treated her so badly.

Once the elves were settled in, Falkor and Askil went about their other errands, visiting their own families; and then paying calls (with suitable letters of introduction) on some of Astrid's old friends, the Bemots, the Daces, and the ladies of House Helmi.

Nerav and Jaylia Helmi were bitter opponents of Bhelen. Jaylia had been betrothed to Trian, the murdered eldest son of King Endrin. Before his own fall and execution, Harrowmont had told them the truth of the matter: Gytha, the second child of the king, had been innocent. It was Bhelen who had assassinated Trian and then framed his sister. It was also now known that the sentence of certain death in the Deep Roads that had been unjustly passed on Gytha Aeducan had been remitted by the Stone itself: for the princess had survived.

There was, Falkor learned, no chance of support from House Harrowmont, for that house was nearly extinct. A few of the younger members had fled to the surface, but the rest had been assassinated at first, and then openly slaughtered, down the last babe in arms. The deshyrs were nervous. Orzammar politics could be brutal, but the extermination of an entire noble house overstepped certain traditional limits.

"I don't deny," drawled the extraordinarily ugly Lady Helmi, "that a counterweight to Bhelen might be a very, very good thing. We'll have to speak to the individual in question, of course."

"Of course."

There was another house to be contacted, too: House Ortan had been restored, and Lady Orta was known to be indebted to the Wardens. Falkor found her eager to discharge her obligation.

Those arrangements were made, and Falkor went past the barrier doors to bring in another golem and take it up to the hostel. Over the next few hours, the process was repeated, both by Falkor or by Askil, until all five golems were safely bestowed in a locked room at the hostel, away from the prying eyes of the servants.

Later, a pair of Wardens, accompanied by their golem, visited House Bemot. The golem was a useful threat. If the nobles gathered there attempted to ambush the Wardens, they would pay dearly.

But there was no such attempt. Lady Dace, senior in precedence, took the lead at the meeting.

"Being recognized once more as a dwarf, a noble, and an Aeducan has no precedent," she remarked, her voice harsh. "There is no law that can be cited."

"I do not ask to be recognized as a noble or as an Aeducan," Astrid said. Her eyes were limpid and calm, her voice under iron control. "I have not fought my way through Taint and blood to be a junior member of my brother's house. I bring great gifts to Orzammar: an entire Road clear of darkspawn; two thaigs completely ready for recolonization. I, Gytha Aeducan, have done this."

Aller Bemot leaned forward, his eyes avid. "Which thaigs?"

"Amgarrak Thaig. It is intact, and has never been Tainted. The lichen ponds are producing again and the veins are rich. And then there is Kal'Hirol."

"Kal'Hirol?" gasped Nedra Dace. "You have found it?"

"I have. The Taint there is thick, but the darkspawn are gone. Orzammar has but a short window of opportunity, but if we work hard, we can build doors to defend the entire Amgarrak Road, from Orzammar to Kal'Hirol. We will have places for our people to spread and to grow."

A silence.

"This is a great thing," said Lady Helmi. "If true, it is the best news that Orzammar has had in many an age."

"It is true," Astrid said at once. "True beyond denial. I have with me a unit of the Legion of the Dead which followed me throughout the battles. Two new thaigs are ours. One is ready for occupation immediately; the other holds important

engineering secrets for us, and it, too, can be made habitable with diligent work. I also," she added, with a cool smile, "have five golems in my retinue."

"Five!" exclaimed Nerav Helmi. "That's an army in itself!"

"I shall bring them with me to the Assembly," Astrid said, "in case there are... difficulties."

Lady Bemot had been silent a long time. "Where are the darkspawn? Word has it that the allied army, under Warden-Commander Bronwyn, has pushed them back into the Deep Roads, yet our patrols have seen no activity recently."

"The horde seems to have gone west," said Astrid. "Bronwyn saw them in the Dead Trenches. The Archdemon has led them somewhere else. We have met with only scattered resistance. That is why we must act *now*. Once the Blight is over and the Archdemon dead, the darkspawn will spread once more, a cancer in the Deep Roads. Let us act to salvage everything we can."

"What is your plan?" asked Lord Dace.

The Assembly was in session: another tense round of obstructionism and name-calling. Bhelen sat on his throne, smiling blandly, looking forward to the day he could get rid of this pack of useless parasites.

Lord Ivo, a loyal ally, bellowed at Lord Bemot, "And I tell you

that this trade monopoly will not stand, and I'll shorten you by a head if you—"

"Pardon, Your Majesty... my lords," Steward Bandelor called out. "The Grey Wardens are here, and wish to make a report to the Assembly."

"Let them come in!" Bhelen called out, surprised but genial. The Wardens' written report was positive. It would distract the nobles from their bickering. Their successes only made him look good, since he was linked to their prestige and the admirable Warden-Commander.

The war was going well. Warden-Commander Bronwyn had backed him, and he had backed her in return. She was a sensible woman, for a surfacer, and had seen the reality of the dwarves' situation far more quickly than many born in the deeps.

Perhaps that was the objectivity of the outsider. However she had come to her decision to support him, he was grateful to her. Recent news had suggested that she might be going for the throne of Ferelden. It was a questionable precedent, but from all accounts, she had the best bloodline, and was not about to let the throne go to a lesser claimant. And after all, why should she be intimidated by ancient custom? Bhelen knew that there were times when custom had outgrown its usefulness. In her place, he would not have hesitated to take what was his by right.

The Wardens entered. Bhelen narrowed his eyes, interested

in the make up of the group. Five Wardens. Two were Dalish elves from the markings and three were dwarves, two of them wearing full helmets. The leader was someone he thought he might have seen before—someone from a good old warrior caste family. Very appropriate; very honorable. Following them were three officers of the Legion of the Dead, and a... a *golem!* This was going to break up the monotony!

"My king! Lords of the Assembly!" Falkor began. "I bring great news! The darkspawn are pushed back. The entire Amgarrak road is clear, from Orzammar all the way to Kal'Hirol!"

A roar of astonishment and jubilation rose from the deshyrs. Bhelen was as astonished as the rest of them, and thought back over the Wardens' report. Of course! It was incomplete, only going through the beginning of last month. Why hadn't they updated it? Probably just to create this moment of drama. And Kal'Hirol? That was tremendous news. What a coup, what a success, and so early in his reign...

"Kal'Hirol is taken?" shouted Lord Ivo.

"Kal'Hirol is ours once more," affirmed Falkor, "and another thaig as well, in pristine and untainted condition. Amgarrak Thaig is ready for colonization. The Deep Roads paths to the east are clear. To answer all your questions, I present the hero and leader responsible for these victories, the Grey Warden Astrid, once Gytha Aeducan, Princess of Orzammar!"

One of the dwarven Wardens swept the heavy, concealing helmet from her head, revealing the golden hair and

handsome features of one known to each person in the room. At the same moment, the doors of the Assembly swung wide, and four more golems lumbered into the room, shaking the floor, along with a detachment of the Legion of the Dead.

Bhelen's jaw dropped. Instantly he comprehended the extent of his danger. Before he could summon his guard, his exiled sister was already speaking.

"Hear me, Lords of the Assembly! I have returned two of Orzammar's lost thaigs to the dwarves! If we move swiftly, and build well, we can keep the Amgarrak Road, even after the end of the Blight. We can move settlers into Amgarrak Thaig, and our smiths and scholars into Kal'Hiol. Such an opportunity may not come again. I, Astrid of the Grey Wardens, born Gytha Aeducan, say this!"

Bhelen used all his skills to keep his terror hidden, still unable to quite process the horrible sight before him. His voice shook just the least bit when he finally spoke.

"If all this is true, then it is good news indeed. Orzammar has always respected and supported the Grey Wardens, and my decision to send them troops has been proven to be the wise one."

His loyalists among House Ivo rumbled their agreement. There was mild assent from the rest, but more ominously, there was an air of expectancy. A Legion officer stepped forward and spoke.

"All that has been said is true, and more! The veins of Amgarrak Thaig are rich. The workings of Kal'Hiol show unparalleled genius. There is lyrium already mined there, waiting these past ages to be hauled for refining. Both thaigs are empty and unclaimed. Both were taken due to the valiant leadership and example of Astrid Aeducan. *Valos atredum!* By the favor of our ancestors, dwarven lands are again in dwarven hands!"

More shouting, more celebration. The Shaper of Memories himself was here among them, nodding his snowy, aged head in approval. Bhelen wracked his brains, trying to find a way to take credit for this. Perhaps he could fob one of those empty thaigs off on Gytha. Would she be satisfied with that, and go away?

Amidst the shouting, a voice—he never knew whose—called out, "Deeds worthy of a Paragon!"

Others took up the cry. "A Paragon! A Paragon!"

Lady Bemot—Bhelen noted her with loathing—demanded to be heard.

"When has Orzammar received such news? Not in many ages. Who has done more for the dwarven kingdom? Two thaigs restored, a major Road cleared. New golems to defend us, even! I call for a vote. Let us recognize Gytha Aeducan as she deserves—with the name of Paragon!"

"She is a Grey Warden!" shouted Lord Ivo.

When applied to, the Shaper of Memories was very definite on the matter.

"There is no law forbidding a Grey Warden be acclaimed as a Paragon."

"But surely," Bhelen remonstrated gently, "These admirable deeds are attributable to the honored order of the Grey Wardens, not to the individual Warden Astrid herself!"

Falkor eyed the king coolly. "With all respect, Your Majesty, it is due to our leader's heroism that these things have been achieved. She led us, and she sacrificed herself for Orzammar's greatness." He turned. "With my own eyes, I saw her hold off a monster of a horror never before seen, and save every soldier under her command. Show them, my lady, I pray you."

With a show of reluctance—not entirely feigned—Astrid unbuckled her left gauntlet, and lifted the stump of her arm high. There were gasps and a faint shrieks.

"Lords of the Houses!" she said. "This is what I gave for the dwarven people in Amgarrak Thaig, when we were attacked by a fell monster from the realm humans call the Fade. It was the only living inhabitant of Amgarrak, a creation of madness and folly, but I slew it and left the thaig clean for dwarves! I do not ask to rule you, but I ask that you look upon me with eyes unclouded, and judge my deeds worthy!"

Bhelen clung to the words "do not ask to rule," hoping to

survive the session, now packed with his sister's supporters and the five huge golems. She obtained a majority easily, only opposed by House Ivo and House Aeducan. He counted his enemies with every vote.

"House Helmi?"

"A Paragon!"

"House Dace?"

"A Paragon!"

"House Ortan?"

"A Paragon!"

On and on. Silently, Bhelen raged as the Steward and the Shaper tallied the vote and then bowed to her. Reverently.

"Paragon, will you name your house?" asked the Shaper.

"Let it be called House Gytha," she said. "I shall be known as Paragon Astrid, for my best deeds were accomplished under that name. Gytha, nonetheless, shall be the name of my House. I shall gather my household, and they shall take Amgarrak Thaig for their home. Also, I urge the assembly to ready a company of shapers, smiths, and engineers to examine Kal'HiroI. The darkspawn vandalized it, but most of its secrets appear to be intact. We must seize on them."

She spread her arms out, including friend and foe alike, and

looked Bhelen in the eye.

"Last, I propose that we immediately set about defending the Amgarrak Road. Let us prepare to maintain our control at the inevitable end of the Blight! Let us hold what we have! Let us build a great series of barrier doors to protect us from the darkspawn. In addition, some new magics have been discovered that will also thwart the incursions of the darkspawn. Let us recruit mages to use them! Let Orzammar be greater than ever!"

Bhelen concentrated on his facial muscles, forcing them into a pleasant smile... a smile of high-minded approval and noble clemency. If Gytha wanted to kill him, she had just passed up her one best chance of it. He would make sure she never got another. If she wanted to take a mob of malcontents and go live in a cave far away, who was he to object?

The other suggestions, of course, were perfectly sound, and he would undertake them right away and then claim the credit. Kal'Hiol? It was a valuable acquisition, and the colonial detachment he sent would include casteless, who were bursting at the seams in Orzammar. He had learned the lesson of Jarvia and her Carta. If the casteless had no other options, they would turn to crime. Why waste all that muscle? The traditionalists in Orzammar might keep them out of the army at home, but in a distant thaig, Bhelen could reshape dwarven culture into something more vital. For that matter, he would find a way to make Gytha accept some of the casteless too, in her 'pristine' little thaig. Serve her right.

"Our thanks, Paragon Astrid... Gytha. This day will never be forgotten."

Another roar of agreement. Gytha smiled at him, in the way Bhelen had known and hated from his earliest youth.

The naming of a Paragon called for a celebration. It was held at the Palace, naturally, and Bhelen gave considerable thought to poisoning his sister in the course of it. Perhaps that would be a bad idea, since Gytha went nowhere without her pet mage and her squad of golems. The best way to deal with his sister, as always, was to send her far away. Maybe the Archdemon would eat her.

And she had to sit to his right, in the seat of honor. She would always be given the seat of honor, now that she was a Paragon. It was horribly annoying, but not as annoying as it would be if he had been killed and she were sitting on the throne. She was in fine armor, and around her throat was a massive torque of gold. She had a jeweled ring on every finger remaining to her, and a golden hand with some kind of hook attached to her stump. Insufferable ostentation. To put her in her place, he invited Rica to the feast and put her in the place to his left, opposite his haughty sister.

That also did not quite go as planned. Rica was dutifully quiet and self-effacing, but Gytha actually addressed her. Voluntarily. On purpose.

"Your sister has told me so much about our mutual nephew.

How is dear little Endrin?"

"Oh! You know Freydis? But of course you do..."

"Yes. We're very good friends. She's a splendid warrior and a credit to the Grey Wardens and to Orzammar. She sent you a present."

That was a complete lie. Brosca had done nothing of the sort. However, this was a chance to irritate Bhelen, and as such, it was too good to miss. She produced a pendant from the loot of Kal'Hiro: an amethyst carved into the shape of a flower, set in gold, on an intricate chain. The flicker of envy in Bhelen's eyes was like fine wine. Rica was enchanted.

"How gorgeous! Oh, I've got to write Freydis and thank her!"

"I'll be happy to take her your letter."

"Thank you! It means so much to me!"

Rica glanced at Bhelen, and immediately was quenched by his expression; shrinking away like a rose trying to grow backwards. Astrid gave her a mild, understanding smile.

"I would love to see the child while I'm here in Orzammar."

Bhelen narrowed his eyes. His sister would not be allowed within shouting distance of his little son. "That's... dutiful of you, sister, but hardly necessary. Endrin is a fine boy, but only a baby. Hardly interesting to a hero and a Paragon!"

"How could I not be interested in the next generation of dwarves, brother?" Astrid inquired sweetly. "It would be irresponsible of me, as a Paragon, not to pay attention to their education and welfare."

"He's fed and clean. At the moment, that's all he requires."

"Why, brother! You act as if you thought I wished little Endrin harm! Nothing could be further than the truth. I, for one, have always thought there should be *more* Aeducans!"

The sharp-witted deshyrs of the Assembly watched the duel of words with thinly veiled delight, wondering when the blades would come out. A few discreet wagers were made. The less acute were pleased at so much family affection and duty, and began lifting their goblet in a torrent of toasts.

"Hail to Paragon Astrid!"

"Hail to Astrid Gytha, Paragon of Orzammar!"

"Hail to Astrid One-Hand, the Deliverer of Kal'Hiro!"

"Hail to Astrid Kingsdaughter, the Golem-Tamer!"

The surface delicacies were delicious, the meat so tender it slipped from the bones. Astrid ate heartily, not shy about asking for more. She gave Bhelen a wink, and whispered, "If I fall over poisoned, my golems have their orders!"

Apparently golems had very good hearing. The biggest of them, richly engraved with runes, turned in Bhelen's direction,

and its eyes briefly glowed with the hot blue of burning lyrium. Astrid lifted her golden goblet with a triumphant smile.

"Hail to King Bhelen, who heeds wise counsel!"

Frandlin Ivo stayed late at the feast, nervously watching the apparent détente between King Bhelen and the sister he had forced into exile. Afterward, even more nervously, he watched the Paragon Astrid's departure for the Warden hostel. Frandlin had played a great part in the scheme to make Bhelen Aeducan the only child of the king. Bhelen had lured his elder brother Trian to the site, and had managed to kill him. Then, when Princess Gytha had appeared on the scene, she and her party—including himself— had found Prince Trian dead. Bhelen had been with his father when they came upon the sight of the King's daughter kneeling beside the cooling corpse of the King's heir. Frandlin's job was to swear that there had been a quarrel, and that Princess Gytha had murdered her unarmed brother. The minions with them had sworn the same. Bhelen had often chuckled over the look on his sister's face at that moment. The minions were long since disposed of, lest their tongues wag. Frandlin, on the other hand, had been rewarded with wealth and promotion, suitable to his noble blood. He was in line to become head of his house eventually.

It had all been too good to be true. Now the Princess was back, only now she was raised to the rank of Paragon, far above any mere king. It was worrying. Even more worrying was the fact that the new Paragon had not once looked in his

direction. It was hard to believe that she had forgotten him, or the thing he had done to her. On the strength of his statement, she had been exiled into the Deep Roads without even a trial. The King was old and failing, and wished to avoid the scandal. Whether he had believed her innocent or not, he had allowed the farce to proceed, and the gates of Orzammar had closed behind his only daughter. Dressed in rags, barefoot and unarmed, she had been consigned to the dark of the Deep Roads.

"And that," said Bhelen at the time, dusting his hands off cheerfully, *"is that."*

Except that it wasn't. Somehow, the princess had survived. Somehow, she had found weapons and won her way to the Grey Wardens. She was certainly a Grey Warden by the time the first report of her continued existence hit Bhelen's desk. It had been quite a shock.

It was a lesson to everyone: Never gloat over your dead enemy until you've seen his cold and rotting corpse for yourself.

Frاندlin hurried along the corridors of the Diamond Quarter, feeling the need for solid walls between him and the Paragon Astrid. The way was deserted, and lit with the golden light of the lava streams, lambent and warm.

"Hello, Frاندlin," said a voice from a shadowed corner. "I haven't seen you since you swore my life away. Did you think you'd never have to answer for your little bit of fun?"

Yes, it was the Paragon Astrid Gytha, still wearing that enormous gold torque. Behind her loomed a monster of rune-engraved metal. Frandlin's blood turned to ice.

"Don't worry," she said, smiling. "the golems will only turn you into red jelly if you run away. I don't need them to fight for me. Is that why you did it? The day I defeated you in the Honor Proving? It was a fair fight, you know. What you did to me? Not so much."

"You can't do this," he protested, his throat thick. "You can't just kill me in front of my own house."

She frowned, thinking it over. "No," she said, with a quick shake of her head. "No, I believe you're wrong. What part of my being a Paragon do you not understand? The law is what I say it is. There is no one to arraign me for it. Bhelen can't help you here."

He drew his sword, blustering. "You can't fight me... you cripple! Astrid One-Hand! You're through with shaming good men in the Proving Grounds!"

Her sword was out now, too, and she was smiling.

"No, I think you're wrong about that, too I don't need more than one arm to kill you." She brought up her left arm. Instead of the hooked golden hand, there was a vicious serrated blade attached.

"Maybe *this* arm," she mused.

He had fought well, long ago in that distant Honor Proving. He was fighting for his life now, and it showed. He was strong, quick, clever and agile. He was everything a noble of Orzammar should be, if you had no use for truth or honor.

Another golem emerged from the shadows to his right. Frandlin stumbled briefly, remembering that the princess had five of the things. Frandlin made a feint to the left, padding about, looking for weaknesses. Astrid countered, watching his eyes. Their swords touched lightly, ringing with the contact. He lunged, quick and aggressive, and Astrid side-stepped him coolly, slashing down to her left with her saw-blade. It ripped through his gauntlet as if it were silk. There was groan of metal and a streak of red. Frandlin hissed with pain and jerked away. He swiveled, and tried to sweep her legs out from under her, but she danced away.

"Not good enough, I'm afraid," she mocked. "*As usual.*"

A swing, a lunge, a parry, another streak of blood, this time along his jaw. That saw-blade *hurt*.

They fought in silence, watched by impassive witnesses of stone and steel. The only sounds were the clash of metal against metal. Astrid was playing with him now, inflicting small cuts here and there: on his scalp, on the back of his neck, under his arm. He slipped in blood and sat there stunned, while Astrid cocked her head, looking at him.

"Get up and fight," she drawled.

His nerve broke at that, and he stumbled away, trying to escape.

"Help me!" he shouted. "Help me! Open the door!" He ran toward home, and stopped when another golem emerged, like living stone from behind the threshold. Another appeared, and then and another, until all five were ranged around them.

"Come back and fight me, you coward," Astrid snarled, "Or I'll *make* them bring you back. Or bits of you, anyway."

With a shriek, he charged her, waving his sword like a roasting spit. She parried it aside. He thrust again, and she parried it to the other side, smirking. Then the heavy serrated blade flash past his face and tore into his throat, nearly beheading him. He tried for some last words, but merely drooled. Then he collapsed, face-first.

Astrid pursed her lips, considering the body. It was not as complete a revenge as killing Bhelen, of course, but Bhelen was her brother, and not doing so badly as king. As Paragon she was not the servant of the law, but above it, which was a very nice place to be. Yes, she could leave Bhelen where he was for now. His stooge would disappear, and he could stew about it.

She shrugged, and gave Rune a command. "The surfacers like to burn their dead. Throw him in the lava stream."

There was a hiss of sublimating flesh and blood. The golden light of the lava dimmed in places, burning, stinking of bone

and leather. After awhile, it shone clean again.

"So being a Paragon is a good thing, I take it?" Velanna asked, with a touch of acid. The celebration at the Warden's hostel continued the festivities at the Palace. Astrid made a late entrance, a bit ruffled, but in high good humor.

"A very good thing," she replied, practicing her future discussions with Bronwyn on the Dalish mage. "It gives us a great deal more leverage over Orzammar in the matter of troops and weaponry. We're no longer dependent on Bhelen's moods, which, confidentially, can be bloody-minded. Yes, it's a very good thing. We're in with the Assembly, in with the Shaperate, and in with the casteless. Some of them might well volunteer to join the Wardens."

"I thought you were going to declare yourself Queen, as Bronwyn plans to do," said Ailil. "A Paragon is not a Queen, but more... like a hahren?"

Askil and Falkor hid their smiles.

"More like a Keeper," Astrid said. "A Paragon is a living ancestor, revered by all dwarves for their wisdom and their contributions to dwarven life. We lead by example, but are free of the day-to-day political grubbing of mere kings and queens. And the word of the Paragon is worth more than all the rest of the deshyrs put together."

"It makes it impossible for Assembly to be deadlocked,"

Falkor said, quite seriously. "No one can prevent us from pushing forward our plans for the defenses against the darkspawn. Velanna, there are other elven mages in Orzammar. If you could give them a bit of training..."

"Why do these elven live under the earth?" Velanna demanded, rather indignantly. "It is no place for an elf!"

"Nonetheless, they do," Astrid said. "Some have escaped from mage Circles... some are apostates from alienages, who've avoided the Templars. For all I know some may be Dalish survivors of extinct clans. None are unwelcome in the dwarven realm. We will be here a few more days, organizing the colonists. Why don't you seek out these elves? Some might wish to join us."

"It is very odd," Velanna muttered. "How could they not miss the Sun?"

Hundreds of people volunteered to join House Gytha, even after it became known that she was accepting a group of the casteless. These would be sorted out according to their abilities: those who passed certain standards would be declared warrior caste outright; others would be juniors of the smith caste; the rest would be servant caste, which was still infinitely superior to having no standing at all.

Astrid also made the proclamation that her brother and sister Wardens would be honorary members of the House Gytha as well, and did not distinguish between dwarf, elf, and human in this regard. In fact, she even mentioned a Qunari comrade-in-

arms who was to be given the courtesies of the House if he ever came to Orzammar.

It took many days to put together the colonization expedition, but at last Astrid was ready to lead her people out.

Bhelen was overjoyed to be seeing her off—he hoped to battle and death. The event was quite a festive, ceremonious one. Bhelen gave the Paragon the reverence custom demanded, and Astrid patted him on the head.

"Good luck to you, little brother. Try not to destroy the kingdom while I'm gone."

"I think Orzammar will fare quite well in your absence, sister. Do give my regards to Warden-Commander Bronwyn when you see her. I'm sure she'll be interested in your activities. I do seem to recall what she did to the last Paragon who crossed her path."

Yes! He was sure he saw her smile slip for a second. It was a relief to know that Bronwyn was not party to Gytha's plots. Bhelen hoped his sister would get in heaps of trouble with her commander.

Too quickly, her mask was back in place.

"The last I heard, Bronwyn was engaged in making herself Queen of Ferelden. She's no hypocrite. I hardly think she'll disapprove of anyone gaining her just deserts."

"And may you get your just deserts, too, sister," Bhelen said, smilingly. "Very soon."

"Movement ahead, Paragon!" called a scout. They were a day into their march back along the Amgarrak Road.

"Form ranks!" Astrid shouted, and was gratified with how quickly and efficiently her people fell into their defensive formation, with the wagons and noncombatants to the center.

Moving three hundred seventy-four dwarven colonists, four Wardens, sixty-odd soldiers of the Legion of the Dead, and five auxiliary elves, along with all the necessary paraphernalia, was a very different matter from leading a simple fighting unit. There were even a few children amongst the settlers : precious children , in Astrid's view. Dwarves needed to have many more children, and they needed to stop throwing away those children who were of insufficiently exalted castes. None of her people were to be considered casteless. Some might bear the brand of the Dust Town, but there would be no Dust Town in Amgarrak Thaig.

Nor in Kal'Hiol, for that matter. Bhelen was explicit about that, and Astrid agreed with him. If the casteless failed to make a go of their chance in the colonies, it would not be for lack of support from their leaders.

She glanced back over her people. There were some survivors of the Carta among them, clutching their weapons, their faces fierce and determined. No one was here against

his will—that was something Astrid had insisted on, when Bhelen demanded she take her share of Dusters. If they wanted to stay in Dust Town, they were welcome to it, though the old Carta headquarters was lost to them.

The new comers were coming up to the place where the Road curved. There were shouts and the sound of weapons and armor. The dwarven archers tensed. Astrid listened, and then smiled.

"Stand down!"

A familiar voice echoed off the walls of the Deep Roads.

"Astrid? Is that you?"

"Bronwyn?"

The two forces met, glad not to be fighting darkspawn instead. Bronwyn gave Astrid a hug. Tara, just behind her, hugged her, too. Loghain watched with admirable patience, until Bronwyn brought Astrid over to speak to him.

"A great many things have happened since we last saw one another," said Bronwyn. "Loghain and I are King and Queen of Ferelden!"

"Well done!" Astrid flashed a smile, pleased for her friend.

"Greetings to you then, Your Majesties!"

Falkor stepped forward, grinning, "And Astrid," he said, "is now a Paragon of Orzammar!"

"A Paragon?" Tara said, amazed. Bronwyn raised a quizzical brow.

Astrid smirked, pleased beyond measure. "The Assembly was happy about the thaigs."

They set up camp along the road, and the two parties had much to talk about.

"Quite a crowd you have following you," Loghain remarked. "A lot of campfollowers and support units."

"There's a reason for that," Astrid explained. "We going to fortify Amgarrak Thaig and move into Kal'Hirol to clean it up and make it defensible. I'm bringing some colonists, too. The Assembly has agreed to some serious building along the Amgarrak Road."

Loghain thought that only sensible and proper, and said so. Astrid, in her turn, was curious.

"Why are you traveling the Deep Roads?"

"For the same reason you are, essentially," replied Loghain. "We're avoiding the weather. Since the darkspawn have largely withdrawn, this is the quickest way to cross northern Ferelden. We're on our way to Gherlen's Halt."

They shared maps and discussed routes. Gherlen's Halt was only a day away, but the nearest access point to the surface had not been used in many an age and was near the mouth of

the mouth of the River Gherlen, where it emptied into Lake Calenhad. It would still be a surface walk of some hours to the fort. A meal was prepared, and afterwards, Bronwyn casually asked Astrid to come for a walk with her. Loghain waved them away, scowling, engrossed in a dwarven map. The two women strolled through the camp, talking of their adventures. When they were out of earshot, Bronwyn had a question.

"Are you leaving the Wardens?"

"Are you?"

"No. Queen or not, the Blight is my first priority."

"And mine as well. I now have sufficient power to force the dwarves to focus on fighting the darkspawn, rather than fighting each other for influence in the Assembly."

"How is your brother taking your rise to glory? He did not—forgive me for pointing what must be obvious to you—he did not seem like one who would be so in awe of a Paragon as to cease his plotting. When he sent me after Branka, he told me that if she would not support him, I should kill her."

"He won't cease his plotting: no. But nor shall I. I also remember that King Valtor did not scruple to turn a Paragon into a golem. Bhelen will always be dangerous, but for now I have control over him. I am a Paragon: I have my own house, I have great wealth, I control the Assembly, and I have two thaigs to command. I have five golems to defend me from

Bhelen's assassins. For now, he will not move against me. Bhelen, whatever else he is, is no fool. He knows that the darkspawn are the great danger, the *real* danger. Whatever he plans against me, he will stay his hand until the Blight is over. As will I."

Thanks to my reviewers: EmbertoInferno, KnightOfHolyLight, Blinded in a bolthole, Phygmalion, Girl-chama, Necrodeo, Cjonwalrus, Adventfather, Mike3207, Zhar of Shadows, Nemrut, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Enaid Aderyn, anon, MsBarrows, Robbie the Phoenix, Epitomyofshyness, Verpine, Kyren, Chandagnac, JackofBladesX, Tirion, KrystylSky, Have Socks. Will Travel, Eviline, BlackScyther, amanda weber, butterflygirl, Sings-off-key, jnybot, mille libri Guest, anon42, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

93. Brosca and the Avvars

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 93: Brosca and the Avvars

Loghain had not visited Gherlen's Halt in over three years. He thought well enough of Ser Blayne Faraday not to tell him his business, under ordinary circumstances. These, of course, were not ordinary circumstances. He had set up his office at the fort, and was conducting business in his usual no-nonsense manner.

The march from the Deep Roads exit to the fortress had been hard, and had taken most of a day. It was hard on men, hard on horses and dogs, and hard on everyone's temper. Without the strength of Shale, they would have been forced to leave their supply wagon behind.

Loghain had sent a messenger ahead, warning Faraday of the arrival of the King and Queen. Faraday had been surprised by the visit; not so surprised that Loghain now ruled in Ferelden. Happy enough with it, apparently. With the extra supplies, the garrison was able to enjoy fairly good cheer for First Day.

Ser Norrel Haglin was here, too, of course, and doing admirable work. Loghain had always thought well of the man,

though Bronwyn obviously had little use for anyone who had dared to call himself Bann of Highever City.

After the march, it was a relief to be here, though, and safe. The fort was fairly well supplied, but Ser Norrel Haglin's troops had made inroads into the foodstuffs. It was necessary to relay orders to West Hill, requisitioning additional victuals and weapons.

Along with the fortress of West Hill, Gherlen's Halt was another place where the Glavonak's inventions could do good service. During the Harvestmere attacks, damage had been done to the lower walls and the main gate. Faraday had done quite a bit to repair them in the time he had before the weather grew too harsh. Loghain thought that laying some of Dworkin's explosive grenades in the ditch, to be set off by tripwires, would have a most enjoyable outcome.

The Orlesians were keeping up the pretense that the attacks had been the work of mercenaries, but that pretense was thin indeed. Faraday's scouts included some excellent rangers and mountaineers, and they had observed comings and goings from Roc du Chevalier that confirmed that the attackers were receiving support from the commandant, Berthold de Guesclin. Like the assassination attempts, the attack on Gherlen's Halt had obviously been approved at the highest level.

A clerk appeared at the door.

"The rangers are here, Your Majesty."

Loghain glanced up. "Send them in, and then ask the Queen to join us."

The rangers were good men—Awwar tribesmen, named Ostap and Bustrum—trusted by Faraday, and they had scouted quite a bit of the area near Roc de Chevalier. They used peculiar devices called snowshoes to traverse the rugged, snowy hills, and had managed to slip over the border and have a look at the Orlesian movements along the Imperial Highway. Not much was on the road at the moment, save some supply wagons from Jader. There was an entrance to the fortress on the Orlesian side, which, though well defended, was not as formidable as the one facing Ferelden.

Bronwyn slipped in during the rangers' report and listened quietly. She was, in fact, one of the few Fereldans Loghain knew who had actually been inside Roc de Chevalier and lived to tell of it. There had been others—agents of his—who had infiltrated in the guise of servants, and had created a fairly complete plan of the place. They had gone back for more information, and had never returned, so Loghain presumed they were dead. For that matter, the agents had never been inside the commandant's personal office, and Bronwyn had.

The Awwars had been somewhere else that interested Loghain. Bronwyn's head shot up at Loghain's next question.

"When were you last in Jader?"

"Last spring, Lord King," said the taller of the two. "The market there is good for furs and spider silk. Once the

dwarves began their quarrels and sealed Orzammar, we were forced to trade elsewhere. The City Guard in Jader is vigilant for things of value, and took a portion of our goods for themselves, but we still made good coin."

"Not that we left with any," grunted his stocky friend. "Jader also has many places to *spend* coin, and when one plays games of chance, the house always wins."

Loghain snorted, "That's true anywhere. However, I'm not sending you to Jader for pleasure. I expect you to keep your eyes and ears open, and to do nothing to attract the notice of the authorities."

"They will not let us through the gates, King, if we have nothing of value. They are hard men, and do not suffer beggars to enter their city."

Bronwyn said, "I daresay they will let you in if your pouches are well-filled with gold."

"That is true, Lady," agreed the stocky one, making a reverence to her, "but they would call us bandits, and hang us, and take the coin. They would say that a pair of Awars could not have come by a bag of gold honestly, and that is indeed true."

Loghain frowned, thinking. Bronwyn said, "But what if you came as the bodyguards of a merchant, seeking shelter within the city?" She smiled at Loghain's glare.

"Absolutely not," he growled. "Don't even consider it."

"I'm not," she assured him with a light laugh. "I know I could never play the merchant. However, we are blessed with those who could. Yes, a sturdy dwarven merchant, with a pair of stout Avvar bodyguards. Why would Jader not be delighted to take *their* coin?"

Brosca, when summoned and sounded, was thrilled at the idea of sneaking into Jader.

"Hey, I'm from the big city, " she bragged. "I know the score. I know Orzammar and now I know Denerim. I'm not scared of Jader. Leliana said the buildings are greenstone. Sounds pretty. I can deal with that. I can hang out at the taverns and listen to the talk. I've done that sort of thing a zillion times. It's like the old days in the Carta!"

Had Leliana been with them, Bronwyn would have preferred to send her, but admitted to herself that Loghain would have vetoed the idea. He was perfectly happy to leave Leliana at Soldier's Peak, far from the Orlesian border. On the other hand, he liked and trusted Brosca to some degree, and believed that she was the best for the job. Knowing how Orlesians treated elves and mages, Bronwyn was reluctant to send Zevran and Tara.

"It's a two day journey to Jader in this weather," said Loghain. "Especially as they have to go round about the hills and over some rough terrain. Camping overnight will be risky."

"I know a hunting lodge where they can stay," Bronwyn told him. "There is a place northwest of here. It's sheltered and out of the way. Brosca has been there, though perhaps she might have trouble finding it again. Perhaps Anders should go ahead and see if he can see it from the air."

Brosca would use her first name, Freydis, since word might have spread about a Warden Brosca. The Avvars knew where the Wardens lived in Jader, and Brosca was instructed to stay as far from the place as possible, lest a fellow Warden sense her presence.

"What I want you to listen for," Loghain said, "are rumors of troop movements, of a fleet gathering, of any plans against Ferelden. It might come from the Orlesians, or from the Chantry itself."

"I don't give two hoots about the Chantry," Brosca shrugged. "I don't know what their problem is. Bronwyn's obviously got an in with that goddess of yours."

Ostap nodded, very seriously. "We have heard of this. We hold to the gods of our fathers, but clearly Andraste is powerful, and those who have earned her favor are to be revered." Bustrum glanced at Bronwyn and reddened, lowering his head in respect.

Bronwyn bit her lip, trying not to laugh. Loghain was totally unamused.

"I suggest you not say such things in Jader." he growled. "The

Chantry would arrest you."

"What's wrong with saying Andraste's powerful?" Brosca asked, confused.

Bronwyn tried to explain. "Priests are very, very particular about the words you use. Andraste is a Prophet, not a goddess. The Chantry only recognizes one god, and that is the Maker."

The two Awars rolled their eyes. Brosca still looked blank.

"And whatever you do, don't say that I have an 'in' with Andraste or the Maker," Bronwyn went on hastily. "The Orlesians don't like me. It would probably be a good idea if you didn't say anything nice about me."

Loghain snorted. "It would be best if you didn't mention her at all, in fact."

"Right, I get it," Brosca said, "The Orlesians are the bad guys, and their priests are full of shit. We are but harmless traders, looking for a good time in Jader. We hit the high spots and the low spots, pretend to be drunk, and see what's going on. I can handle it. Piece of cake."

It wasn't: not really. They had to get to the gates of Orzammar, where the Frostback Fair was closed for the winter. The tavern would still open for business, as well as the livery stable. There they would pick up a small wagon and a pair of mules. The Awars, fortunately, knew how to drive.

Once they had the wagon, they had a long way over rough roads to pass the Jader Bay Hills, get to the Imperial Highway across country, and reach the city. Anders agreed to go with them at least part of the way, and find the hunting lodge where they had held the Joining. Morrigan then insisted on going with him, which Bronwyn thought rather sweet, though the forbidding look on Morrigan's face prevented her saying so. It seemed that Morrigan was determined to protect Anders from any danger.

The mages, once some distance from the fort, flew in their bird forms, while the Avvars introduced Brosca to the delights of snowshoeing. It was a long walk to the Frostback settlement. The livery stable owner had a four-wheeled wagon rather than a two-wheeled cart, but they had to take what they could. The party spent the night in the nearly empty inn, and then moved on to the northwest.

"I was in such a daze those first few days on the surface, I'm not sure what I remember," Brosca admitted.

Anders was more confident. "I know I can find it. If all else fails, I'll spot it from above."

He and Morrigan rose up: their feather black and brown against the white of the snow. The hawk followed the raven, soaring through the hills. The fork in the road was still hidden by a thick pine wood, but the little wooden house and stable were still standing. They appeared to be vacant, as no smoke was rising from the chimney.

The birds alighted on a nearby tree and took a good look about. Morrigan flew to an open window, its shutter creaking in the wind. She hopped from the sill and then flew around to the door. Changing into her human form, she entered the house.

Anders dropped to the ground and shifted. "Morrigan! Wait!" He dashed to the doorway, and found Morrigan already inspecting the shabby interior.

"Someone was here not long ago," Morrigan pointed out, looking with distaste at the filth the squatters had left behind. "Hunters, I daresay, from the mess they made here." She went into the pantry and then walked out again. "Disgusting! They relieved themselves in there!"

She shouldered Anders aside and set about cleaning the ashes from the hearth. "Close the shutters," she commanded, "and see if there is any wood for a fire."

If nothing else, there were some broken boards in the stable. Anders used a force spell to shatter them into pieces. Once the fire was going well, he shifted again, and flew off looking for their companions. The wagon was moving far more slowly, and along one stretch of road, the Avvars were forced to get out of the wagon and help push it uphill. Anders swooped down on them, cawing, and shifted to human form. Brosca laughed out loud. The Avvars were impressed.

"That is a noble skill, mage," said Ostap. "If you weary of being a Grey Warden, you and your woman would be

welcome among our folk."

"Thanks!" Anders said, pleased with them and himself. "I'll bear that in mind."

By the time the wagon reached the hunting lodge, Morrigan had a good fire going, and the cold inside had lost its edge. She found a willow broom and furiously, muttering curses, she swept out ashes, bits of hide and bone, and other souvenirs of the last tenants' visit. She found the well, broke the surface ice, and brought in a pail of clear water. If not luxurious, the lodge was habitable for the night. If Flemeth had taught her nothing else—and she had—Morrigan knew how to work hard.

"Yeah, I remember this place!" Brosca beamed, looking about the lodge. "Good times had by all! We had a really tasty stew here, and hot cider. I'd never had that before. It was really good."

Morrigan fussed a little, annoyed at the lack of privacy. The lodge had a loft, but it was low-roofed and too creaky for safety. They camped for the night and prepared a substantial meal. The following morning, the Avvars agreed that it would be wise to clean the place somewhat, erasing the signs of their visit. Morrigan and Anders took to the skies, scouting out the rough road that led from the hills in the direction of the Imperial Highway. It was a circuitous route, but a dwarven trader would attract no notice there. The wagon trundled forth, and soon was a little toy-like image in the distance.

Their part of the mission complete, Anders and Morrigan flew back to Gherlen's Halt directly, taking the precaution to shift back into human form out of sight of the fort. They were able to report that Brosca was on her way.

Loghain was busy, planning yet more renovations to the Fort: novel, vicious improvements to standard defenses. Bronwyn had a different scheme before her, and by the time Anders and Morrigan returned and rested, she was almost ready to put it into action.

The access point they had used to reach Gherlen's Halt was close to Aeducan Thaig, which Bronwyn had previously explored and which was clear by the time she finished with it, some months ago. Admittedly, the darkspawn might have returned, but that would be contrary to their experience so far. Studying the map, she looked at the network of roads around Orzammar. The road to Aeducan thaig, of course, was south, and was the route taken by all dwarves striking out in the Deep Roads. However, there were other, more ancient pathways.

The road that led west from Orzammar was blocked now, and the barrier door never opened. However, it was possible to reach it from the other side by going west from Aeducan Thaig. When one reached the turn in the road that led south to Caridin's Cross, one could continue west, instead. A branch of the roads led up toward the Imperial Highway and stopped abruptly. One could also keep heading west toward another ancient thaig.

Rousten Thaug, so close to Orzammar, had not been lost in early Blights, but was abandoned now. At some point there had been an access point to the surface, which the dwarves used to deal with the elves of the Dales. Laying her onionskin map of the Deep Roads over her map of Thedas, it was indeed clear that the access point was not far from the ancient elven city of Halamshiral.

Bronwyn was not sure she wanted to go that far. Jukka thought it possible that they might find another, closer exit to the surface.

"This whole stretch is pretty close to the surface, anyway—see the elevation, Commander? Look here, right at the Solidor Pass, where the Frostbacks peter out. The Highway runs through it. I don't think they planned a way to the surface there, but there could have been a collapse, like the one at Kal'Hiol. Or we might be able to break through ourselves."

A secret route to the surface just over the Orlesian border would have obvious advantages. Bronwyn planned to take her Wardens and the Legion and look into it. Loghain was all for it.

"Wouldn't the *Orlesian* Wardens know about it?"

Bronwyn kept her smile unseen. It was impossible for Loghain to say the word 'Orlesian' without snarling it.

"I don't know. It depends on how diligently they've studied the maps in the Shaperate. That's where our information comes

from. I know nothing about any explorations made by Orlesian Wardens. When I was in Orzammar, no one spoke of having seen any other Wardens there recently, which I think is odd. One fellow at Tapster's Tavern mentioned Duncan. I get the impression that everyone goes through the front door at Orzammar, rather than looking for the old entryways, but of course I really know very little about how the Wardens actually function." She shrugged. "If I run into Orlesian Wardens, I have a perfect right to be in the Deep Roads."

"Well," Loghain sat back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the writing table. "See if you can find us a way into Orlais not too far from the border. I'd like it best, if we could get near Chateau Solidor. We could completely ignore the Rock: close it up, dry up its supply lines, starve it out." He saw her exasperated look and waved her objections away. "I'm not proposing starting anything. If the *Orlesians* do, we'll want options."

Brosca enjoyed the journey with Ostap and Bustrum. They were good, solid fellows, and she never objected to a lot of muscle on a man. They told her about the best taverns, and she told them about Tapster's in Orzammar and the snobby Gnawed Noble in Denerim. At the end of a long, hard day, they saw the towers of Jader in the distance, and beyond it, the flat grey expanse of the Waking Sea.

"Who runs this place, anyway?" Brosca wondered, drinking from her fine, looted silver flask, a trophy of Kal'Hirol.

"The Marquis of Jader... Marquis Bohémond de Mauvoisin-en-Fermin," essayed Bustrum, stumbling over the nasals.

Brosca snorted brandy through her nose. "You're kidding, right? What's a markee, anyway?"

Bustrum shrugged. "No, I swear by the Mountain Father: that's the bastard's name... or as close as I can get. A Marquis is like an Arl, I think. Some sort of rotten Orlesian noble. Korth knows the Fereldans can be bad enough! This one wears a fancy mask with jewels."

"Why? Is he that ugly?"

"All rich Orlesians wear masks. Too good to show their faces to the likes of us," said Ostap, shrugging.

"If that doesn't beat all!" Brosca marveled. "I like seeing new things. Are these jeweled masks... valuable?"

The men grinned, but Bustrum said, "It's worth your head to take a noble's mask."

"Is it now?"

As they came nearer, and the sun drooped lower in the western sky, Brosca admired the city walls. High, thick, and stony they were, with watchtowers spaced out at frequent intervals. The gate they were headed toward was heavily guarded with really big guards. In comparison, Brosca felt fairly small. It helped her put on her humble merchant

persona, which was all to the good.

Everyone entering the city was stopped and questioned. Everyone had to pay. Some poor folk—elves, peasants—were turned away, and when they protested, pleading the cold, they were driven back with fists and sword pommels.

"That's friendly," muttered Brosca.

"That's Orlais," grunted Ostap. "It's why we don't come here much." He drove the mules forward into the queue at the gate, and they waited to be questioned and fleeced in their turn.

"Eh! Baudin! Look at the little flower between the two great oafs—pardon, I meant 'oaks.'

His partner sniggered. "Good one, Thibaut!" He smirked at Brosca. "So, *Nainette*, you wish to enter Jader?"

"That's the plan. Can you bold soldiers recommend a good inn?"

Thibaut looked into the wagon, poking at the scanty contents: a few furs, rustic woodcarvings, and a skein of spidersilk.

"Business not so good, *hein?*"

"Could be better, could be worse. I need to rest the mules, have a long hot bath, and restock with trade goods for the rubes up in the hills."

The guards chuckled, not unsympathetically. Thibault said, "First you must pay the gate tax. Ten silver."

Ostap pretended outrage. "The last time I came here, you only charged me two!"

Baudin fixed him with a contemptuous smirk. "Did you have a cart?"

"Yes."

"How many wheels?"

"Two."

"Ha!" Thibault spread his hand. "The price is higher per head and per axle. Ten silver, or go back to the hills and eat snow."

"Fine, fine," Brosca had a separate pouch for silver, and kept her gold in a money belt under her apron. She counted ten silver into Ostap's vast fist. "Pay the man."

"Ah-ah," Baudin wagged a finger. "Perhaps you do not understand. It is ten silvers for *each* of us."

"You could give lessons to some Carta guys I know," Brosca sighed. "All right, another ten."

Thibault gave her a wink. "Try the Paragon's Cup by the Grand Bazaar. It is popular with dwarves, and the ale is not so completely piss as that of others."

They entered through a fortified gate area, and then to the gatehouse in the inner wall. Here they were held up again, this

time for only ten silvers. Brosca had decided that Jader was a very expensive city, but admired the wide avenue in front of them. Bustrum told Brosca that this was the famous Voie D'Or—the Golden Road—that led all the way through the city to the Grand Bazaar, and then to a huge courtyard called La Place Emeraude, with the Chantry on the south side and the Marquis' palace opposite on the north.

"And to east and west, some noble houses that'll make your eyes pop," grunted Bustrum.

"What's that noise?" Brosca asked, stopping in her tracks. Carried on the air were musical notes, like a giant hand plucking a giant harp. "It's kind of... nice. Like music."

"Bells," said Bustrum. "The Chantry has these big bronze bells, and every hour they ring them. They're like bronze bowls with a bronze thing inside that hits them. They make different pitches depending on the size."

"That's a neat idea."

As they rode on, there were fine stone buildings that Brosca took for nobles' houses, until Ostap informed her that they were barracks. Passing them the other way were some splendid warriors on horseback, wearing shining armor like Loghain's, but with gorgeous masks covering their faces. Some were silver; some were gold; some were like the faces of animals, and some modeled into expressions of laughter or fury. Some had jeweled eyebrows, or were plumed with feathers, or were enameled in vivid colors, giving them faces

that were half red and half blue.

"Don't stare at them," warned Ostap. "Those are chevaliers. If they think you're disrespectful, they've got the right to skewer you on the spot."

"Wow. Makes me feel right at home."

It was a good thing that she was well-supplied with coin, because the Paragon's Cup was not a cheap inn. Despite that, Brosca liked it, because this really was a dwarven inn. The furniture was mostly dwarven-scaled, the chairs and benches low enough that her feet were firmly on the ground, not swinging free like a child's. The tables also low enough that she had no fear of barking her chin on the edge. A few human-sized chairs were ranged around the walls for human customers. The innkeeper was a fat dwarf with an elaborately braided beard. His daughter worked the bar, and huddled by the fire sat the innkeeper's aged father, now past everything but lap robes and small beer. On the old man's withered cheek was a faded brand. Brosca's gaze paused at the sight of it.

What do you know? Another Duster who made it out!

Brosca looked around the room and saw other marked dwarves. Here and there she saw some who had tried to hide their brands. One dwarf woman wore heavy cosmetics, but they could not disguise the area around her left eyebrow. Nobody here seemed to much care. Certainly Brosca herself roused no particular interest: a blunt-faced, stocky woman in

unassuming garments. She sighed a little, imagining the reaction her beautiful sister Rica would arouse.

It cost plenty to put up the mules and store the wagon in the inn's stable, and then there was the matter of their own lodgings. Brosca insisted she only wanted one room, and that she and her 'guards' would share it. There were raised eyebrows and some shocked whispers, but Brosca sneered at them, and downed her fancy foreign ale, indifferent to the opinions of these Orlesianized dwarves. The food was pretty good, too. Her companions found sufficiently large chairs, and dragged them over to Brosca's table, sitting sideways, since their knees would not fit underneath.

Obedient to orders, Brosca kept an ear open to gossip. Right now, the talk was not about Orlais, but about Orzammar.

"At last we've got ourselves a new Paragon! Ancestors be praised! Paragon Astrid has cleansed the Deep Roads!"

Brosca resisted the urge to correct the drunk, since only one Road was clear, and Astrid had not exactly done it all single-handed. Brosca liked Astrid, but she was hardly due that much credit. It had been something of a shock to learn she'd been made a Paragon. Not that it mattered, as long as Bhelen was still king, and little Endrin was still the heir. Luckily, other voices were already challenging such exaggerated praise.

"How long do you think the Amgarrak Road will be free of darkspawn, Gorbat? Going to try your luck in Kal'Hiol?"

"Why not?" slurred Gorbat. "The Paragon has taken Dusters with her, and they will be given caste and clan as payment for good service! Why shouldn't she take surfacers?"

"As servants, I reckon. You want to go?" sneered the challenger. "So go. Guess you won't be needing that fine house in Forge Alley anymore."

"Or his fine wife, either," gibed another. "Leave her to me!" The dwarf made a brief, explicit gesture, and Gorbat lunged at him, spilling chairs, table, men and drinks to the floor.

"None of that!" roared the innkeeper, hefting a maul. "Boys! Throw the drunk out or I'll bash him!"

A pair of bouncers grabbed Gorbat by the arms and dragged him away from the bar.

"Hey!" he protested. "I paid for that drink!"

"Fine," said the innkeeper, "Here!" And tossed the brandy in his face.

Wet and angry, Gorbat was thrust outside, and the door slammed.

Into the laughter, Brosca said, "Ah, peace and quiet at last. Tell me more about this Paragon. I've been out in the boonies."

Some of the story was just about right. They knew that Astrid was an Aeducan, and the king's sister. They knew she was a

Grey Warden. Lowering their voices, they revealed that she was the best friend of the fabled Girl Warden, the Dragonslayer. Brosca made a face to herself at this part. Astrid wasn't a bit better friend of Bronwyn's than Brosca herself.

"Right," said the loudest talker. "It's the Stone's own truth. The Paragon is best friends with the Girl Warden, and *she's* now the Queen of Ferelden. I tell you, we've got better times ahead, now that we've got some people on top who know how to fight darkspawn!"

There were rumbles of agreement, while Brosca mentally headslapped herself.

Shit!

Shit! Nobody thought to tell the Wardens and Legion who went to Orzammar to shut up about Bronwyn becoming Queen!

Dwarves were the worst gossips in the world. Of course the Legion had told everybody about their adventures with Bronwyn. What Brosca didn't quite get was how news of Bronwyn had slipped over into Orlais.

But that would be the dwarves again. Orzammar was not far from Jader, and there would have been talk about Bronwyn when she was in Orzammar, settling the business of the King; and then again, as couriers went between the army and the King. The Orlesians must know plenty about Bronwyn. They

knew where she was when they sent assassins after her, anyway.

Apparently, it was gossip people had to be careful about. The innkeeper interrupted the story, sullen about it, since he liked a good tale as much as anybody.

"Sod the Girl Warden! Talking about her will just bring the Guard down on my inn."

"What's wrong with her?" Brosca asked boldly. "Aren't Wardens supposed to fight darkspawn?"

A dwarf woman sniggered. "Fereldans aren't supposed to be any good at it! They were supposed to come crawling to the Empress for help!"

"Right!" roared the innkeeper. "One more word, Myrta, and you'll follow Gorbat out the door!"

Myrta put up her hands in mock submission, and started a card game with the people at her table, grumbling. From outside came the muffled sound of bells again, playing another tune, and then striking the same tone repeatedly to tell the hour. Brosca could not remember if they had anything like that in Denerim. The Wardens' Compound was far from the Cathedral, and Brosca certainly had not heard beautiful tunes in the air.

Another handful of dwarves came in after the bell song, talking about their day. Apparently they were working down at the

docks, building something or adding to something, and there were a lot of technical problems.

"Hard to lay stone proper in the cold," one complained. "The mortar isn't drying right. I told that fool Thierry that we should wait until the end of Guardian, but he claims that it has to be *done* by then. Humans are idiots about stonework!"

Hearty agreement and hearty drinking followed. Brosca gave her Avvar companions a wink, and told them to move to a table of their own. If she was drinking alone, someone was more likely to come and sit down with her. Once again she sighed. If she looked like Rica, *everybody* would be wanting to sit with her. She might even get a free drink.

"Mind if I sit here?"

Brosca gaped at one of the stonemason crew. He was youngish, with a soft pale beard and mild blue eyes. He had stone dust under his fingernails that he hadn't quite succeeding in scrubbing away. A mason, for sure.

"Suit yourself."

"I haven't seen you here before."

"Never been here before. I've been trading in the hills. My first time in Jader."

"Well! That calls for a celebration. Let me buy you a drink!"

To Brosca's astonishment, he actually did just that.

"The name's Torvald."

She gaped at him again, before replying, "Freydis." Unconsciously, she touched the mark on her face. The young dwarf noticed it.

"Nobody cares about that, up here on the surface. Freydis. Nice name. Here. Jader brown porter, coming up. When did you get out of Orzammar?"

Brosca snorted. "Am I that obvious?"

"Pretty much," he said cheerfully. "This year, right? Deep down dwarves have that look in their eyes."

When lying, you should always stay as close to the truth as possible. "Yeah," Brosca said. "I'd managed to put a bit of coin together, and I was never going to be able to do anything with it in Dust Town, so I walked out the door. I bought a wagon off an old human guy, and tried trading for the past few months." She jerked her head toward Ostap and Bustrum. "Those two are my guards. I've done all right, but this whole weather thing kind of came as a shock. I mean, really—frozen bits of water coming down everywhere! The unfrozen kind is bad enough when it falls on your head."

They both laughed. Torvald said, "I'm surface born myself, but I've heard my grandfather complain about weather often enough. Actually we surfacers complain about the weather all the time. It's like a spectator sport, since we can't do anything

about it."

"So what's it like, here in Jader?" Brosca asked. "I've tried the countryside, but I thought I'd try a human city, too, and see if I can do better here."

He made a face. "Human city? I suppose you could describe it that way. The humans are in charge, for the most part. Actually, they're a minority. If you add everybody else together, there are more dwarves and elves in Jader than humans. You must have noticed all the dwarves on the street around here. The Paragon's Cup is on the edge of the dwarven quarter."

"Is Forge Alley in the dwarven quarter?"

"Yeah. You know somebody who lives there? That's expensive."

"No, I just heard people talking about it. I didn't see any walls or gates around this place."

"You mean like the Alienage? Stone preserve us! The humans wouldn't dare treat the dwarves like they do the elves! They need us to keep the city running. Without us the plumbing wouldn't work and the walls would collapse!"

"I can believe that," she agreed, her voice dry. "From what I've seen, the humans are good mostly for putting the screws to people for money. They got thirty silver off me at the gates!"

"Ouch! You must have looked prosperous to them. The City Guard are pretty greedy, but mostly they stay bought once you buy them."

"How about this Marquis guy? Is he all right, or is he like the usual deshy bastards?"

Torvald barked a nervous laugh. "Is not like I know him personally!" He lowered his voice. "Full of himself like all the nobility. Doesn't pay his bills on time—he ordered new armor from my cousin Jervyk two years ago, and still hasn't paid for it. But that's the nobles for you. I've heard of tailors and dressmakers who went out of business because the nobles wouldn't pay up. The best maskmaker in town tried to start a policy of cash on delivery, and the nobles raised such a stink about it that the Marquis ordered a mask, and then walked off with it, telling the woman to send him a bill. "

"Why do people put up with it? Why not go to another city?"

He shrugged. "It's Orlais. All the cities here are like that. It's a big deal to uproot yourself and your business and start over. I'm luckier than most. My uncle Magruk over there—he's got the contract for the improvements to the docks, and if he and his crew don't get paid, we down tools. The Marquis nearly ordered him beheaded the first time, but he really wants this project done, so the wages have been fairly steady. Afterwards..." he blew out a breath. "Well, Uncle is talking about Kirkwall."

"What about Ferelden? Isn't that closer?"

"I suppose. There's a lot of money in Kirkwall, though." The young dwarf turned red, embarrassed that he had let so much slip about his uncle's troubles. In fact, Magruk Showat expected to be arrested and his assets confiscated on completion of his work in the dockyards. It was the Marquis' default remedy when he owed anyone too much coin. The family had a plan in place to take ship just as they received the next-to-last payment. The work would be incomplete, and they would forgo the promised bonuses, but his uncle knew that those were a lie, anyway. And they had not the least intention of going anywhere near Ferelden, having heard was was headed in that direction next spring.

"So... 'docks'...." Brosca paused, as if unused to the term. "Docks are where boats tie up? By the sea? I've never seen the sea. Is it big?"

"Is it big?" Torvald was amused. "Look, it's not dark yet! I'll show you the dockyard where I'm working. It's not for little boats, but huge warships! It's the biggest dockyard south of Par Vollen... or so I'm told. Finish your drink. It's not a bad walk."

He paid for the drinks, which still surprised Brosca, and they pushed back from their chairs. So did the two Avvars.

"My bodyguards," Brosca said, gesturing. "Ostap and Bustrum."

Torvald's eyes widened. "They're... big. Hi!" he smiled weakly, waving at the huge Avvars. He whispered to Brosca.

"Do they have to come with us?"

She whispered back. "They're *guards*. They can't *guard* me if they're not *with* me."

"Do you trust them?"

"They haven't slit my throat yet."

This was not exactly what Torvald had pictured, when he asked an attractive young dwarf woman to go walking with him. Behind them, looming like golems, were two huge and tattooed Awar rangers. Torvald had seen Avars before—mostly in the process of winning barfights—and had no intention of offending them. And in a way, it was fairly reassuring, after all. Jader appeared civilized, but was hard as nails beneath the mask. Outside, The sky was shading into sunset colors of rose and gold, and it was not so cold that a stroll was unpleasant.

Torvald, a native of Jader, could show Brosca the sights far more effectively than the Avars. It was actually a lot of fun. From a street vendor, he bought a skewer of little spicy sausages for each of them, and they strolled along, munching.

"So," he asked, "Isn't it scary, traveling out in the hills by yourself with just those guards? I mean... don't you have... I mean, wouldn't it be easier if you had a husband... or something?"

"You're asking me why there is no man in my life?" The

memory of Cullen struck her hard and twisted her smile. "I did. He's dead."

"Sorry."

"It's the past. What's that?" she asked, pointing to a grate at her feet.

"Sewer drains. Jader has a big pipes running under the street to take the runoff when there's a heavy rain. The sewers also take the night soil and filth from the middens and dump it out into the sea."

"How big are these pipes?"

"Big," said Torvald. "They have to be big enough for dwarves to get in and repair them."

"That's interesting." Brosca found the fact that there was a maze of tunnels under the city very interesting indeed. "What's that gate down there?"

"That's the Alienage. You don't want to go there. The elves are practically feral, I'm told. Every so often the City Guard goes in there and thins them out."

Brosca threw him a glance. A nice guy, but somebody who believed everything he was told. He wouldn't last a minute in Dust Town. When Torvald turned back in her direction, she pasted a smile on her face.

He pointed out the Grain Exchange, and the Guildhall, and

took her through Forge Alley, to see the high-class dwarven houses.

"See? They're built just like Orzammar!"

"Er... Yeah." She rolled her eyes. Clearly, he had never been in Orzammar. This was a fantasy version. With a sky. And no lava. "It's nice." That much was true.

It was cleaner than Denerim, for sure. Coming through an archway, they found themselves back on the Voie d'Or. Within a few steps it abruptly opened up into a vast open square, dominated by a pair of huge, magnificent edifices.

"Whoa!" Brosca was genuinely impressed. "They're really... green..."

"Genuine greenstone," Torvald assured her. "Really old dwarven construction. That's the Emerald Palace, where the Marquis lives. Up on that tallest tower, they say the Marquis has a pleasure garden, when he can walk without have to look at common folk."

It was quite the tower, Brosca agreed. Nowhere as tall as Fort Drakon in Denerim, and in a far more decorated style, punctuated with balconies and bas-reliefs. The Palace boasted a pair of shorter towers as well, which were obviously used for keeping watch.

Torvald pointed in the other direction, at a massive structure crowned with a bell tower than soared over the city. This,

obviously, was where the bell sounds had come from.

"And that's the Chantry, where the humans worship Andraste. Masons come here to study the designs. Now and then it needs repair, too. My uncle's worked on it. There was a huge storm back in 9:24, and a lightning strike melted the lead sheathing up on the roof. " He pointed. "The lead poured down and killed two priests. Really... it coated them in molten lead, and smiths had to melt it again to get the women out to burn them. Not that they needed it by that time. We can go inside the Chantry if you like."

"Maybe later. I'm really excited about seeing the sea." For a moment, she felt an odd buzzing sensation, but it was weak, and she was too distracted by all the sights to worry about it.

Across the street, a pair of Grey Wardens stopped, puzzled, and looked about.

"Did you feel that, Constant?"

"Yes. But who—?"

The man's gaze wandered up and down the street. He saw no Warden brothers, but only a well-off woman and her young daughters, a pair of big Avvar barbarians, and a dwarven couple doing some window-shopping.

"Odd. I was sure I sensed another Warden."

Brosca peered into beautifully decorated windows. A lot of shops in Jader had glass windows and fancy goods displayed in them, which Brosca thought was completely crazy.

"What's to keep somebody from smashing the glass and grabbing that jewelry?"

Torvald was a little shocked.

"Well... at night they shutter the windows, and a lot of shops have guards. And in this part of town, the City Guard would come down pretty heavy on anybody who tried it."

"I see."

The sun had set by the time they reached the dockyards. Coming down some long, elaborate steps, they saw the vast extent of them spread out before them. Brosca did not have to pretend to be impressed. Many of the ships were in drydock, but some dared the cold. Nearby were merchantmen, broad and high-decked. Further on, beyond a low defensive wall, were a series of piers. To her right, jutting out from a retaining wall, were three large round stone tunnels, each of the mouths carved at the top with a coat of arms.

"Those are the sewer openings?" she asked Torvald. "What's the fancy design?"

"That's the Jader coat of arms. It's a drake breathing fire."

"Neat. What are all those wooden platforms the other direction?"

"Those are the naval dockyards of the Imperial Eastern Fleet," Torvald told her. "That's where we're working. They need berths for a lot more ships."

"Can I see? Can we get close to the water?"

Rica could have pleaded with a lot more charm, of course. Brosca tried to remember all the tricks Rica's teachers had drummed into her. They seemed to be working.

"I guess. I think I can get you in, but the guards, no."

"I'll be all right," Brosca said to her Awvars, her face innocent as a new-born nug. "You guys get some more sausages while you're waiting."

The guard at the sea wall knew Torvald, but raised his brows at the girl with him.

"She's with me," said the dwarf.

"She looks harmless," shrugged the guard. Brosca gave him Rica's sweetest smile.

Brosca rubbed her hands with glee, once back in the privacy of her room at the inn.

"Too bad he has to work tomorrow!" she said. "What a nice

guy!"

Ostap nodded sagely. "The Orlesians are building ships. Many warships."

"Not just warships!" Brosca sat on the bed, wrapping her arms around her knees, smug as a cat. "Lots of troop transports, too! I dithered and acted like a silly sight-seeking girl, and Torvald went on talking with that other dwarf at the docks. The guy said that 'everybody knows about the invasion.' And then they talked about improvements to the barracks to hold the troops they're expecting. Yeah, it's an invasion, and they're going to launch it from Jader!"

"We must report to Loghain right away!"

Brosca protested. "We just got here! I bet there's a lot more we can find out. Besides, Torvald gets the day after tomorrow off!"

But it was not to be.

"Brosca! Run faster!"

"I'm running as fast as I can! Turn here!"

It was always something. Just as she was eating breakfast, that pair of Wardens showed up, asking questions.

"Who are you? What are you doing in Jader?"

"I don't see that it's any of your business, pals."

Then it went downhill, with outraged squawks of "Spy!" and "Fereldan Dog!" And "Nug of a Dwarf!" which was actually pretty funny. Luckily, they had no idea that Ostap and Bustrum were with her.

Thus, it was no particular trouble to knock them in the head and throw them out the window. Brosca suspected that it was considered bad manners to kill other Wardens, but letting them catch a bit more sleep was only the friendly thing to do. The innkeeper lost his temper about the broken window, and Brosca and the Avvars took to their heels, dashing down the street, pursued by two bouncers, the innkeeper and his maul, and the yells of the innkeeper's daughter, wanting to know "who was going to pay for this?"

They rounded a corner, skidding on a patch of ice, and Brosca pointed, charging ahead.

"I've got an idea!"

It worked because Ostap had no problem lifting half his weight in wrought-iron. They lowered themselves into a sewer, pulled the grille down after them, and then it all depended on Brosca's stone sense underground to head in the direction of the sea.

It wasn't a tight fit, even for the humans. These were huge cylindrical tunnels, part stone masonry and part molded concrete. They stank, of course, though not nearly as badly

the Deep Roads. They were a lot wetter, but the water was never as high as the tops of Brosca's boots. They were not even particularly dark, because of the grilles set into the streets above at intervals.

The three of them moved as silently as possible, holding their weapons close against their bodies, pausing when they heard voices overhead. Rats squeaked, dashing across their path.

At length they saw a circle of light ahead of them, and hurried toward it. Up close, the sewer mouth, dribbling a thin stream of fecal wastewater, was simply enormous. Between Bustrum's rope and their own brute strength, they managed to lower themselves to the rocks below and make their way along the narrow strip of coast until they were past the city walls.

Then there was the rough scramble up a steep, snowy slope and a weary march ahead of them

"The innkeeper shouldn't be all that mad at us," Brosca pointed out, sniffing dubiously at herself. "He gets to keep the mules and the wagon."

Thanks for my reviewers: EmbertoInferno, Girl-chama, Blinded in a bolthole, KnightOfHolyLight, Enaid Aderyn, RakeeshJ4, Garm88, anon, Nemrut, Mike3207, Isala Uthenera, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, EpitomyofShyness, Kyren, le-maru, anon, Robbie the Phoenix, Zute, amanda weber, Have Socks. Will Travel, JackOfBladesX,

Phygmalion, PhantomX0990, Jenna53, KrystylSky, DjinniGenie, Costin, MsBarrows, Josie Lange, jnybot, dragonmactir, mr I hate znt nobles kill em, and Josie Lange.

I know that Gaider in the wiki and in interviews says that Orlesians don't have regular titles, because Emperor Drakon made them null and void. However, canon is completely inconsistent. We meet a Duke Prosper de Montfort, and in Asunder, there are standard titles right and left. For purposes of this story, I am throwing out the earlier claim that Orlesians only use strange and fanciful titles.

About the Orlesian language. I'm not trying to have the Orlesians speak French outright here. If it were a completely different language, I don't see why all Orlesians nobles would speak Fereldan. I'm going to pretend that it's a different dialect, with a heavy accent (to Fereldan ears), and some unique, archaic words and expressions. More like the difference between English and Scots (I don't mean Gaelic, but Scots, which is also a Germanic language), than the difference between English and French.

I'm still debating the next chapter. It's either going to be rest of the events at Gherlen's Halt and the nearby Deep Roads, or the Nevarran embassy. Perhaps the Gherlen's Halt chapter would make for a better flow. They happen concurrently.

94. Blood on the Track

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 94: Blood on the Track

Bronwyn was surprised at how well Loghain was taking the confirmation of the upcoming Orlesian invasion, but really, it was no more than he had expected.

He had much to be pleased about. Brosca had discovered the staging site of the upcoming invasion, and even given him some idea as to the timeline. In her eager, ingenuous way, she told him a great deal of interesting information about Jader itself and its defenses, since nothing much escaped the tough little dwarf's notice. His map of the city was further annotated. He now had a way to sneak people into Jader. Quite a few people, over time. Why had the Orlesians not put grilles over the sewer mouths?

Perhaps they had tried it, but it had caused trouble. Perhaps the sewer mouths became clogged if something as large as elven or human bodies were thrown into the sewers. There was an ancient sewer below Denerim—a primitive system designed when Denerim was far smaller—but it discharged its contents underwater into Denerim Bay. He honestly did not know if there was a grille over the mouth. Perhaps not. He

would have to look into it, but it was his understanding that it would be impossible to dive down to the mouth and survive the swim to the upper reaches of the tunnel. He would include that tidbit in his next letter to Anora. It would be difficult to examine in this weather, of course, which reassured him. Swimming for several minutes in freezing wastewater was not a viable prospect for any bard he knew of.

Bronwyn had been useful, as well. She had taken her Wardens to explore the area west of Orzammar and north of Caridin's Cross, doubling back to the ruined western road to Orzammar. There was only limited resistance there: darkspawn stragglers and some disturbing phantoms of dead dwarven warriors. A modest but worthwhile amount of treasure was discovered in the ruins, and Shale had hauled it back, while recounting tales of its checkered past with Wilhelm, as they scavenged the Deep Roads. Loghain did not particularly appreciate being described by implication as a "scavenger," but a hundred sovereigns was a hundred sovereigns, and would pay for the construction of three trebuchets and a great many explosive bombs to load into them.

Orlais had a huge standing army, especially if one counted the chevaliers, whose only real purpose was fighting Orlais' wars. They had not done particularly well against the Nevarrans recently. Loghain sneered. They had, in fact, done no better than they had done against Loghain himself. Heavy cavalry could strike like a thunderbolt, but there were all sorts of creative ways to counter them: massed archers, ditches, fire

bombs. A footsoldier with a billhook could drag a chevalier from his mount and beat him to death with the weighted butt before the chevalier could get to his feet. No doubt a great many chevaliers would be shipped to the targeted ports, but cavalry was also extremely vulnerable when disembarking. At that moment horse and man were not a formidable fighting partnership: they were cargo, being unloaded. Defensive walls at the harbor equipped with arrow slits were a must. The docks could be arranged to allow only a few horses to disembark at a time. Furthermore, there was no beach at the harbor at Amaranthine to allow the horses to swim to shore. It would be highly desirable to capture as many horses as possible. They were valuable; the chevaliers themselves were not, unless they were held for ransom. That was actually not a bad idea. Fort Drakon was large, and there was plenty of room there for guests.

Of course, there was also the possibility of catching the Orlesians whilst they were still in harbor. A few swift, agile craft, armed with ballista and explosive shells, or perhaps those fire-spouting devices... yes... they could wreak havoc within minutes.

His plans here were complete, and it was time to move on. Faraday and Haglin knew his mind and would do their part. It remained to tell Bronwyn that he was leaving.

She was quite surprised when he informed her, late that night. She had finished her preparations for her departure tomorrow. Early in the morning, she would lead her Wardens out—he hoped to a successful outcome. If her scouting of the Deep

Roads could lead to a way to take Chateau Solidor, Jader would be theirs for all time.

"Loghain, I need to talk to you—"

He interrupted her briskly. "Yes, yes. I need to talk to you, too." He stripped off his shirt and scrubbed energetically at his neck and chest. The accommodations at Gherlen's Halt were fairly spare, even for the King and Queen. They did not run to frequent baths. A basin of hot water, morning and night, had to do. "I'm leaving to inspect the coastal defenses the day after tomorrow."

"The day after tomorrow!"

Maker's Breath! She was looking at him exactly the way Celia had looked when he told her was going to Denerim and leaving her in Gwaren. Perhaps it was a woman thing.

"Your mission is not yet complete," he pointed out. "We need a way to cross the border of Orlais unseen. Faraday and Haglin are busy with the improvements, and now it's time for me to go east. I must deal with the coastal issues and call Frandarel to account for his double dealing."

"You want West Hill... and Frandarel's fortune."

"Of course I do. The man is a traitor and a greedy swine. I've sent a courier to Anora to have an agent search his house for incriminating documents. For that matter, we found quite a bit at West Hill itself. I intend to make an example of him. He will

be tried, attained, and executed. Those who sell us out to Orlais will not live to enjoy their gold. West Hill will become a royal domain and be fortified properly against the coming storm. His fortune will be deposited in the royal treasury."

It was ruthless. It was formidable. Bronwyn had no particular sympathy for Frandarel, who had shirked his duty and played a double game, but she could imagine Loghain doing just this to the Couslands, had Howe seemed more useful than she. To the Couslands or to anyone who stood in his way.

"I see." She set down her hairbrush and slipped into bed, sitting up, propped on the bolsters. "You won't be here when I return."

"Certainly not. I've got to get on to Highever and Amaranthine and see that harbor defenses are upgraded. For that matter, I need to get back to Denerim. See what you can do to get us into Orlais. We now have the route through the Jader sewers. Don't use that without good reason: I don't want to tip my hand too early. If the Orlesians strike, we'll infiltrate and seize the city. As to the Rock, I have plans to surround it with counterworks. We'd need an army of sappers to do it, of course."

"Of course. Perhaps we could hire casteless dwarves."

He splashed himself again. "A good idea. Keep the lines of communication open with Bhelen. I hope that Warden Paragon of yours hasn't soured him on the alliance."

She had something else on her mind, and tried again to tell him. "Loghain..."

Something else occurred to him. "I don't suppose you've had any more... dreams? Nightmares? Any idea what the Archdemon is up to?"

Thinking about something else entirely, she was confused for a moment.

"Plenty of nightmares, but no hint what the Archdemon is up to. I've been thinking about it, though. I think the horde is wintering in the Deep Roads."

He toweled himself off, frowning. "Wintering?"

"Yes. We're not the only ones hiding from the weather. Darkspawn are tough, but they can freeze in the cold just like anything else. The snow is just as great an obstacle to them as to us. The Archdemon isn't an idiot. I've done a bit of reading, too. There's some evidence that the darkspawn are never very active in cold weather. Of course, most Blights were further north, where it wouldn't be an issue. Still, I think I'm right about this. I think the Archdemon is waiting for the spring, or if not for the spring, for the first major thaw. The weather should break in late Guardian, and when it does, we'll see the darkspawn again."

Loghain nodded slowly...thoughtfully. It made a good deal of sense. A winter offensive in southern climates was madness. The winter had protected them from Orlais. That it had also

protected them from the darkspawn did not strain credulity.

"But there was something else I need to tell you, Loghain—"

There was a knock at the door, and it was a messenger from Faraday, to give Loghain a progress report on the work on the south wall. Loghain was distracted and asked the man a number of questions. Meanwhile, Bronwyn fumed, hidden behind the frowzy bed curtains.

Why bother to tell him at all? He *obviously* had more important matters in hand. She was not entirely sure herself. Her courses were late— *very* late. She felt a little queasy on occasion and her breasts were sore and swollen. Could it be? Avernus had promised that his improved potion would restore Warden fertility, and she had taken the potion—oh, when was it?

—The twelfth of Firstfall, when Danith returned from Soldier's Peak. Then the wedding had been two days later. It was now the sixth of Wintermarch. It was possible, she supposed, and sighed. It was very possible. How inconvenient, just as she was leaving on what promised to be a long and uncomfortable slog through previously unexplored Deep Roads.

The messenger was gone, and now Loghain was scribbling up some notes. Her resentment rising, she thought of Loghain, lording it over the port captains of Highever and Amaranthine—how much more easily with Fergus in Denerim and Nathaniel Maker-knew-where in the Free Marches. Lording it over them in comfort, too, with an actual bed to sleep in at

night. And then he would go back to the palace in Denerim and have everything his own way, without even having to make the pretense of consulting with such a person as the Queen Regnant of Ferelden.

Meanwhile, the Queen Regnant of Ferelden would be sleeping on filthy, Tainted stone, and eating rubbish rations. It was not Loghain's fault—not exactly—but he certainly seemed absolutely fine with sending his young wife into horrible danger. Not a word of concern... not a hint that she would be missed.

She was being childish, and Loghain was right not to insult her by doubting her ability... but... it would be so very gratifying to know he *cared*...

His notes complete, Loghain got into bed and snuffed the candle. Then he sighed deeply when Bronwyn's questing hand reached out for him.

"You should get some sleep," he said. "You're leaving early tomorrow."

Her hand paused. She was so angry with him that she nearly changed her mind, but her body wanted his most insistently, and turning over in a snit without love-making would probably punish her more than it did him. She fought down the impulse to ask him in a most acidic tone if he was actually refusing her, the night before she went into danger... the night before what was likely to be a long separation. In the same situation, if a woman did that to a man, she would be called a heartless

bitch.

Instead, she said, rather shortly, "Yes. I need my sleep, and I always sleep better afterwards."

She took the next answering sigh as a long-suffering assent to her outrageous demand, which ratcheted her temper up another notch. What followed was fierce and satisfying, because she resigned herself to doing all the work from the first. He seemed to like it well enough, and his last sigh was definitely one of pleasure, and not duty. Nonetheless, Bronwyn was still irritated, and did indeed turn over and go to sleep without bothering to kiss him afterwards. At the moment, sex was a vital necessity, but expressing affection was out of the question.

Her temper was no better on awakening. It was dark, bitterly cold, and wretchedly early; and while Loghain did get up to see her off, he irritated her by second-guessing her preparations.

She finally muttered, "*I have* done this before, you know." Never again would he silence or dismiss her as he had last night. Then again, now she had not the least desire to share her news with him.

Loghain gave her a look, but she refused to be bullied. Instead, she sat with her Wardens and had a good breakfast. Loghain joined her, and the conversation was at first sparse and general, since a number of the party—notably Anders—hated rising early. Brosca and Tara, however, were very

cheerful, and began bantering back and forth, venturing ideas about sneaking into Jader and pranking the Orlesians, or the Chantry, or anyone else who annoyed them.

Loghain found it so amusing that he only gave them a mild warning. "The secret route into Jader is too valuable to waste on mere pranks."

"What about sneaking in and burning up all their ships in dry dock?" Tara suggested. "Wood and tar... a stray fireball... and *'Whoosht!'*"

It was terribly tempting. "Maybe when more of the ships arrive," he said, thinking it over. "What are the barracks made of?"

"Stone," answered Brosca. "Too bad, isn't it?"

"Of course," Zevran considered. "Everything inside is very likely flammable. If they were gutted by fire, it would be difficult to find lodgings for the troops, especially the ones coming into the city. They would have to be billeted on the civilian population instead, which is always so very popular."

Loghain chuckled. "Not yet. It would be better to do it just before they enter the city, for maximum chaos." Even Bronwyn smiled.

"No, thank you," she said quietly, when the servant tried to serve her more eggs. "Just some bread, I think."

It was quite awful. Sitting here with Loghain, she realized that she was no longer in love with him. Not a bit. She did not even particularly like him at the moment. Something burning inside her soured and grew cold, like a candle blown out in the wind. She felt oddly empty.

Well, so much the worse for her. She was still Queen of Ferelden, and he was still its King, and they had plenty to unite them as they strove to defend this kingdom. He has his work, and she had hers, and perhaps it was just as well that she was leaving today.

They marched out into the stark brightness of a cold winter morning. The snow was soft and deep under a crisp crust. Scout waded through it, huffing. Loghain and a few of the officers were lined up to wish them a good journey. Ser Blayne kissed her hand respectfully. Ser Norrel had better than to attempt it, and bowed deeply instead.

She and Loghain gave each other the grave, formal kisses on either cheek that such an occasion demanded. He frowned a little, looking puzzled at the expression on her face, but after all said nothing. Amber whimpered, unhappy that Bronwyn and Scout were going away. Bronwyn gave the puppy a farewell pat.

"I should be back within a fortnight or so," she said, elaborately casual. "Perhaps I'll return with good news." She gave Loghain a long look, and then turned and headed east.

They were thoroughly chilled by the time they reached the access point. Anders and Morrigan had flown on ahead, and were smugly dry. It was enough to make Bronwyn wish she had been born a mage.

Aeducan Thaig was uneventful, except for a pack of deepstalkers that attacked them. They were newly-hatched, from their size, and absolutely ravenous. Being young, they were quite good eating. Bronwyn thought it best to save their rations as long as possible. They took a different route than the one used a few days before. Bronwyn wanted to cover as much new ground as possible.

They had not walked as far as she had originally planned in the first march. The fact was that she did not feel very well: her stomach roiled distressingly; her nose was unnaturally sensitive to the stink of the Tainted Deep Roads. And there was the embarrassing necessity of frequently stopping to relieve herself. It was alarming, the way that she could feel her body letting her down.

All things considered, it was not surprising that she knew no tales of pregnant heroes. No... wait... Andraste had given Maferath several sons. The exact number was still debated. Were they born before the great war against the Imperium? Or did Andraste go into battle after finishing her childbearing? Would a magister fear a heavily pregnant Prophet? More to the point in these days, would any darkspawn fear a heavily pregnant Bronwyn, however sharp her sword?

If this had not come upon her so suddenly, she might have

given some thought to delegating this venture to someone else's command... Tara... or... who?

Anders discreetly approached her and whispered, "Are you all right?"

"It's nothing. Perhaps a rejuvenation spell might help."

It did, for awhile. Those who had passed this way before—Anders, Tara, Brosca—enjoyed pointing out the sights. Since Oghren was not present, there was no reason to withhold their opinion of the late Paragon Branka.

"The Boss really gave it to her!" Brosca chuckled. "Branka thought she was all high and mighty, but the Boss took her down—in more ways than one. Can you imagine? That cow had killed all her people to please her pride—all except the women she left to be turned into Broodmothers!"

Aveline had heard the story before, and shuddered. Yes, leaders had to lead, and one did have to look at the big picture sometimes, but Branka's choices were cruel and perverse... and ultimately ineffective as Bronwyn had pointed out. And a woman who could cause another woman deliberately to be made a Broodmother was evil incarnate. Aveline would never forget the horror of the Broodmother chamber near Ostagar. In fact, she was beginning to believe that Wardens should be making a special effort to hunt down and destroy all darkspawn breeding grounds.

There were marches. There were sleep periods. At length,

they were back in Caridin's Cross, which was eerily silent.

"This is where we turn off," Bronwyn said, glancing again at her map. "We move west from here, not north." The two Dalish, Cathari and Darach, edged further along the corridor to scout. Bronwyn sat on a rock and frowned at the map, feeling slightly dizzy, trying to make sense of the scale. Scout sat down beside her, and put his head on his paws.

"So where are the darkspawn?" Toliver asked Aveline. "I mean, these are the Deep Roads, aren't they? They're supposed to be crawling with *darkspawn*."

"Toliver," Aveline said wearily, "I think complaining about it is completely inappropriate."

"And stupid," Brosca agreed. "The Deep Roads aren't bad at all without darkspawn." She tossed today's prize—a glowing, rough-cut sapphire—into the air and caught it deftly. She squinted to hold it in place over one eye and leered.

"Looks good," Sigrun remarked. "If you lose an eye you could wear that instead. It'd be a lot nicer than a patch."

"If you lose something vital, you might as well get fancy with your replacements," Brosca agreed. "Did you see Astrid's golden hand? That was pretty spiffy."

Tara lowered her voice. "If you want gorgeous green eyes like Bronwyn's, you could always ask a Broodmother to spit in

your face."

"Ew." Sigrun made a face at Jukka, who grimaced and shrugged.

"Cara, I do not wish to think of that very dreadful day." Zevran put an arm around Tara's waist, and led her aside.

"Yeah, Broodmothers are nasty," Brosca said, a little glum, not even cheered by her sapphire. "We're bound to come across more. I mean, it only makes sense. I've been thinking. How long do they live? How many darkspawn can they pop out? Does anybody know? If the fancy Wardens in Weisshaupt know, why aren't they telling?"

Morrigan fussed over her bag of herbs again. Something had put her in a temper. Anders moved away and watched Bronwyn from a distance, wondering if he dared a diagnostic spell without permission. Why not? He needed line-of-sight, for it to work, but perhaps if he stepped behind that boulder over there, he would be out of sight of everyone else, and thus avoid awkward questions. He dodged away, as if relieving himself, and cast quickly, hands blooming blue.

Ha! Now that was... well... it was what he had expected, but he wondered what Bronwyn was thinking. This was the last place she should be, and it was his duty, as the party's Healer, to tell her so.

"She is with child, is she not?" Morrigan's voice was right in his ear, making him jump.

"Maker, Morrigan! Don't do that!"

"Do not be such a girl. Bronwyn is with child, is she not?"

"Ssshhh! Yes. Yes, she is. Only recently. Only about six weeks along, I'd guess. Still, this is a bad idea. We should go back."

"And you think it likely, when she has been given this mission by the all-powerful great Loghain himself? She is to put her tail between her legs and trail back to that wretched grubby fort, her mission a failure?"

"Someone else can handle it. Tara can lead us."

"You have been with her all this time, and yet you know her so little?" Morrigan's eyes slid over to watch Bronwyn, and her face was not without compassion. "She is proud. If you do not know that, you do not know her." She shrugged. "And she is at odds with Loghain, and does not wish to lose face before him."

"At odds?" Anders looked around, to see if anyone could see them and conceivably overhear them. "What makes you say that?"

"'Tis perfectly clear to me. Bronwyn's romantic infatuation has crashed head-on into unattractive reality. The man she doted on has proved himself to be not all she hoped. Did you not observe her at breakfast? She is angry with him. He is leaving the west and going off to manage things in his own way. He

evinced no particular concern for her. Either he knows that she is with child, in which case he is a callous brute; or he does not know, which means that Bronwyn has not told him. If Bronwyn has not told him such an extremely important piece of news, it is because she is too angry to confide in him, and too proud to appear weak and pitiful. I could tell her I told her so—for I warned her—but 'tis most unlikely she would thank me for it."

Anders, as a man, saw things rather differently. "Loghain is reserved, but he does care about her. I've seen him look at her sometimes... well, I think he thinks a lot of her. It's just not his way to get all... sentimental." He sighed. "Of course, since Bronwyn is with child and all stirred up, she's likely to be unreasonable."

"I do not think," Morrigan said, frost in every syllable, "that it is unreasonable for a young woman who has given power, riches, and her body to a man to expect him to show her a certain degree of public regard. And that her feelings should be discounted simply because she is carrying a child—a child that may someday rule a kingdom—is the sort of odious, thick-skinned bumptiousness of which only your sex is capable."

With that, she turned on her heel, and strode away towards Bronwyn, her slim back radiating fury.

Anders winced. "That could have gone better," he muttered to himself.

"Do you intend to continue this mission?" Morrigan asked Bronwyn bluntly.

Bronwyn looked up at her in astonishment. "Of course. Why ever not?"

"Your digestion is not troubling you? Your stomach is not queasy?"

She knows. Bronwyn's face set into mulish lines. "I'm wonderfully well. This should not take more than a few days. I have work to do, and cannot take to my bed for such a small matter."

Morrigan laughed sharply. "A small matter now, indeed, but one likely to grow big enough for all to see! Perhaps some of my tea would not have gone amiss!"

"Morrigan..." Bronwyn bit her lip and looked away. "The two of us were brought up to regard this matter in very different ways. For a noblewoman, bearing heirs is the major and absolutely essential task. It is only since receiving Avernus' improved potion that I had much hope of producing an heir of my own. I cannot trifle with that. Using any contraception would be wrong and selfish. I admit that it is not very pleasant to find myself carrying a child in the Deep Roads, but it is all part of my duty. My mother was in hiding throughout most of the Rebellion, and was pregnant for part of that time. She could not refuse to produce an heir for Highever, simply because she was not living in comfort."

"I did not think your brother was that old," Morrigan said. "He cannot be thirty!"

"He isn't." Bronwyn felt ill, remembering the stories. "I am my mother's fifth child. Fergus is her fourth. They had no Healer with them during the Rebellion."

Morrigan did not reply in words, but simply raised her brows, giving Bronwyn a hard stare.

"Yes," Bronwyn said bitterly. "I take your point. However, I *do* have a very good Healer with me, and this is a mission of limited duration. We are to find a way to the surface beyond the Orlesian border, and then return with the news. Once that is accomplished, I promise to be prudent."

"You owe me no promises. Perhaps you should consider what you owe yourself—and this child. Furthermore, contrary to your belief, it is not only noblewomen who are called on produce children under inadequate circumstances; nor are those children in their eyes less precious than a Queen's."

Bronwyn blushed, quite thoroughly chastened. She knew it was no more than she deserved for her arrogant words.

"What I meant, I think," she said, "was to say that producing a child is so important that I never even thought about contraceptive teas and the like. I never needed them before my betrothal to Loghain, and so never had such a thing on hand. And ordinarily, once I married, I would never have used them, unless I rapidly produced so many children I needed no more. I suppose that happens, since most noblewomen stop

at two or three."

"Very well. then. Let us accomplish this mission as expeditiously as possible, and return you to the dubious comforts of Gherlen's Halt!"

At the end of the day—or a long period of marching—since there was no "day" or "night" in the Deep Roads as surfacers understood it, the companions sat down to a meal and a conference afterward that did not go entirely as Bronwyn had planned.

Anders and Morrigan were staring at her, and then Anders said, "Bronwyn has an important announcement."

The last thing Bronwyn wanted was her companions fussing over her, but perhaps it was best to get it out in the open, especially if she were to keep stopping the march because of all the ridiculous things her body was demanding.

"Er... yes... I suppose so. Anders performed a diagnostic spell on me today, and determined that I am expecting a child."

A fearful, unholy screeching rose up in the Deep Roads, as Tara, Sigrun, Catriona, and Brosca screamed in unison, and rushed to give her hugs. Aveline smiled kindly and enveloped her in a strong embrace as well, her good wishes a bit wistful and not nearly so noisy.

"I knew it!" Catriona told Aveline. "She was eating dry bread and stopping to pee all the time. I knew it!"

Shale seemed nonplussed and rather put off by the idea. "It is... *breeding*? Now? Here?"

"Maker! I hope not!" Bronwyn laughed. "Perhaps—if all goes well—the child will come in early Harvestmere. Perhaps in August. My mother always said that babies make their own time."

The reactions of the male members of the party were rather more subdued. Some, like Cathair and Darach, expressed kind hopes for a healthy child. Dalish women, after all, endured all sorts of hardships in their constant travels. Jukka and Toliver were more intimidated, and to Bronwyn's annoyance, began looking at her as if she had suddenly become a piece of rare porcelain. Zevran, to her surprise, was rather of this party, for he was open about his concerns.

"This place cannot be healthy for you in your condition, since it is not healthy for anyone," he said frankly. "It would be best for you to return to the surface."

"And so I shall," Bronwyn replied, "just as soon as we complete our mission." He still looked doubtful, so she pulled out their map.

"Look here. It is perhaps two days to the outskirts of Rousten Thaig. The elevation indicates that it is quite close to the surface in places. We'll look for any sign that we can access

the surface without significant effort. Remember than even in Ortan Thaig there were cracks in the stone that let in distant sunlight. We might well see something of the sort. If it can be widened into a place large enough to slip through, we will be finished, and we can return to Gherlen's Halt immediately. We've been lucky so far. The darkspawn have gone elsewhere, and this is our chance. We might not have another."

Everyone then began looking at Anders. "Bronwyn," he said, "we want to help you, but you've got to be careful. We've got to take it as easy as possible. You really don't want to strain yourself and risk a miscarriage."

Bronwyn saw their anxious faces. Their concern for her was well meant, so she did not dismiss them. Instead, they moved at a easy pace through the Deep Roads, while the scouts doubled their vigilance. They came across some newly hatched spiders and more deep stalkers, but the only darkspawn they found were dead.

The Deep Roads forked where Bronwyn had previously led her people up to double back to the closed west gate of Orzammar. They passed through high and silent halls for some time, until they came to a branch that led off from their path. As they passed it, a horrible stink drifted out: immensely vile, foul, and repulsive. Scout lowered his head and growled.

Bronwyn shuddered. "I know that stench."

"So do I," whispered Aveline.

"And so do I," said Anders. "Broodmother. But this is a bit different."

Darach looked at Tara first, as he always did, and she jerked her head toward Bronwyn.

Seeing his question, Bronwyn said, "Yes, we have to investigate. We can't leave such a creature behind us."

So they turned left, and moved down the tunnel, cautiously and repulsed. The stone was softened underfoot by dry and crumbling matter that felt almost like soil.

"Bring a light closer," Bronwyn ordered. "What is this?"

It was a very dark brown, and a nasty odor clung to it. Hesitantly, she reached down with her gauntleted hand and gathered a handful.

"Look at how it spread out up the walls," Morrigan remarked. "I think—wait. I know what this is."

Bronwyn did, too. She dropped the handful of filth instantly, and was on her guard.

It was Broodmother matter, but no longer wet and spongy and rank. This was dry and old. The smell was the same, though much fainter. A few empty sacs were present, and had slid down from the walls. These had long since opened to birth the young darkspawn. Rounding the tunnel, the area

opened out to a wide chamber, and there they saw the creature.

Definitely a Broodmother.

Definitely long dead.

It was difficult to determine the species. Deepstalkers had scavenged the immense, slumped corpse, and the head was little more than a skull. There were no new darkspawn—hurlock, genlock, or sharlock—to identify the mother. This was a vast lump of decayed, Tainted flesh that had once been the habitation of a lost soul.

Shale approached it without fear. "Ah, interesting. Substantial ribs there. Personally, I find a hard shell more satisfactory than a skeleton. Golems can be slain, but we do not rot."

"That's... very nice for you," Zevran replied, rolling his eyes at Tara. He was careful to touch nothing here; not even the tempting chests of shiny things that the darkspawn had collected out of instinct. Not, at least, until Tara had purified them thoroughly with fire.

"As far as I can tell," said Anders, poking gingerly through the remains. "She wasn't killed. She died, which indicates that darkspawn have a defined lifespan. I just wish I knew what it was."

"She was dragged down here," Bronwyn murmured. "She was dragged down into this darkness, and she spent the rest of

her life staring at that side of the cavern, unable even to look behind her. Then she died. How long *does* a Broodmother live? How many children can she produce?"

To that, no one had an answer.

They all had need of rest after that. They walked far enough to escape the dreadful smell, and made a camp and a fire.

"How about a story?" Tara suggested. "Something to take our minds off all that?"

"Let's see..." Bronwyn thought about it. "Whose turn is it? I suppose we'd have to go by precedence. I don't have my recruiting roster here."

Catriona said instantly. "I was the very last. I know that."

"Right," Bronwyn considered. "Sigrun, were you and Jukka Joined before Aveline or after?"

"After!" Sigrun chirped hastily, her eyes very wide. "Way after! Aveline was one of the first."

Aveline knew better, of course, but was not about to get into an argument, when Sigrun and Jukka were so clearly horrified at the idea of coming up with a story.

"All right, I'll do it. Sigrun will be next, though, and Jukka after her."

"That's fine," Jukka agreed, gratitude in his homely face. "I just... need some time to come up with something."

"All right, Aveline." Bronwyn said. Now that she thought about it, she was almost sure that Sigrun and Jukka had been in the group before Aveline's, but she would let it pass for now.

"Are you going to tell us about Ser Aveline, Knight of Orlais?" asked Toliver. "The one you're named after?"

"No," Aveline gritted out. "I'm *not*. I hate that story. Ser Aveline is famous for being defeated and slain in a tournament while disguised as a man. I've always failed to see what was so special about that. If she were really the hero she's cracked up to be, she would have killed that bastard Kaleva instead of letting him kill her, or at least whipped his miserable arse."

Leliana had told Bronwyn the story, and her own reaction had been somewhat the same. While she sympathized with the wish of the heroine of the story to prove herself a worthy knight, in the end Aveline had failed to win the contest of arms. Yes, Ser Kaleva had been a brute to kill her, but he was within his rights in that kind of melee combat. Those were the risks of battle, and a woman should not complain if she was treated like a man. Kaleva would likely have killed anyone in those circumstances.

Besides, Ferelden had produced earlier and greater female heroes. Haelia Cousland was vanquishing werewolves and claiming a teyrnir three hundred years before Ser Aveline. Her

accomplishments—especially as she had successfully protected her people—seemed far more worth emulating than the Orlesian girl's.

Aveline said, "I had an old servant who told me this story, and it's stuck with me. Don't blame me if it takes you by surprise."

Aveline's story of the Other Cinderella

You've all heard the story of Cinderella. Or maybe you haven't, since it's Orlesian. The stepdaughter is sent to the kitchens, she's helped by her mother's mage friend, she goes to the ball and wins the heart of a prince, and then her identity is verified by fitting into a glass slipper too small for any other woman in the Empire. My nurse knew that story, but she said that there was more to the story.

The fact is that Cinderella was not the only unhappy and mistreated young woman in Val Royeaux. Minette, the daughter of the Lord of Ghystaine, was sitting by the warm ashes of her uncle's kitchen hearth that very day the heralds proclaimed the slipper test.

"The human maid who can don the glass slipper shall be Prince Florizel's bride, and the future Empress of Orlais!"

"That is a prize worth winning," said Minette to herself.

She was bitter about her circumstances, for her uncle had stolen her inheritance, and she had been relegated to the

servants' quarters of his chateau. The chateau had been her father's, but the property was entailed on the heirs male. Thus, when her father died, her uncle, her father's younger brother, inherited everything. Even the gold and jewels that were Minette's dowry had been taken by him, and there was none to gainsay him, for he was the executor of his brother's estate. Now he was talking about sending Minette to the Chantry.

Naturally, the herald and Prince were going to the great estates first. Outside there was a great music of lutes and flutes. Minette ran up to the garret, to the topmost window the house, and watched the procession go by: the Prince on a white horse, his face concealed by a mask of silver and gold; a great train of nobles, also masked, walking with dignity; the High Seneschal carrying a dainty glass slipper resting on a cushion of rich purple velvet. Minette despaired when she saw how tiny it was.

"Does the Prince wish to marry an infant or an elf? Are women to be judged worthy of a Prince based on the size of their feet? Absurd!"

Of course, the world itself was absurd, or she would not be a servant in her own home.

"But how can I change the size of my feet?"

She pondered the matter desperately, for the procession had emerged from the house of the Lord and Lady de la Rivière, with no joy and no bride in sight.

"I still have a chance!" cried Minette. "Now, how—*how* shall I make my foot—my left foot— small enough to fit that glass slipper?"

Everyone had crowded into the street to see the Prince go by. The servants had run outside, too, and Minette was alone in the kitchen. Steeling herself, she reached for the butcher's cleaver, and with a shrewd blow, she cut off her toes. Swiftly, before she could faint, she bound up the terrible wound and covered it all with her stocking.

"It does not matter," she whispered, clenching her jaw against the pain. "When I am Empress, I shall not have to walk."

At length, the Prince came to the house of the Lord of Ghystaine, and Minette was commanded to come forth and be tested, as were all the young human women within. Minette hobbled out, keeping a brave face before them all. The slipper was put on her foot by the High Seneschal himself. The pain was worse than the tortures meted out to traitors. Minette felt like she was being stabbed by knives and flayed by rasps, but the slipper was on, and fit, after a fashion.

The Prince was not pleased. "I am quite sure that this is not the lady with whom I danced last night, for she removed her mask for me when we were alone."

The nobles trembled, for the Prince's anger was to be avoided. However, the Lord of Ghystaine, Minette's uncle, was elated. It would be a great thing to be uncle to a Princess

of the Empire. And then, too, the Prince had not worded the proclamation to say that "the lady with whom he danced last night would be be his bride." He had quite explicitly said that he would marry "the human maid who could fit the slipper," and Minette had done so.

There was nothing to be done: the Prince's word was pledged. Everyone bowed to Minette, and a great cloak of cloth of gold was laid over her shoulders, and a coronet of pearls set upon her hair. She was given a mask, too. It was shaped like a butterfly, and glittered with diamonds. Outside she was set upon a white palfrey and led through the streets, while all acclaimed her as the Prince's Bride.

Only one person, a little elf child, saw that something was wrong. In his small voice he cried out,

*"Prithee, look back; prithee, look back,
There's blood on the track.
The shoe is too small;
At home the true bride is waiting thy call."*

But the flutes shrilled and the lutes strummed, and no one could hear the child above the shouts of the people.

Minette was led before the Emperor, who indulged this whim of his son, as the girl was of good birth and not disfigured. The betrothal was made known to all, and magnificent apartments given to Minette. The wedding was to be within seven days, which was the absolute minimum necessary to stage the necessary spectacle.

But in the night, Minette was taken ill. Red streaks snaked up from her wounded foot. She fell into a fever, and the next day she died. The Prince took up the glass slipper once more, and the procession again went from house to house, searching for Cinderella.

"A clever tale!" Morrigan approved. "And a good touch, the ambiguity of the Prince. One suspects that there was nothing very prepossessing under the mask."

Anders groaned. "Morrigan, that was a bloody depressing story!"

"If all story had happy endings, the world would be dull indeed!"

Shale found it all inexplicable. "How utterly grotesque! Do squishy creatures often lop off inconvenient bits?"

"No, not *often*." Tara grimaced. "She probably would have been better off in the Chantry. Imagine *me* saying that!"

"She should have run off to the army," Catriona said. "If you don't like it at home, the army is the place. They turn you all creepy and perverted in the Chantry. And the Grey Wardens are best of all, if you survive the initiation."

Bronwyn gave a surprised, shocked laugh, glad that Leliana was not present to hear that. What kind of life had Catriona come from? Why would she say such a thing about the

Chantry?

"Chopping off her toes took stones, though," said Brosca. "Pretty tough of her."

"Yeah," agreed Sigrun. "But she should have cauterized the wound with fire, and then it wouldn't have bled and probably wouldn't have gone bad."

"That's right!" Jukka said, impressed by Sigrun's quick wit. "That would have done it! I've seen that in the Legion."

Cathair exchanged a glance with Darach. "The very idea of a maiden crippling herself to achieve a bizarre shemlen standard of beauty is truly staggering."

"It happens, though," Bronwyn admitted. "I heard of a noble girl who was so fixed on having a thin, fashionable figure that she corseted herself until her ribs were deformed. She was thin, true, but could hardly draw a deep breath."

Anders was disgusted. "Wynne told me about a rich family she was called on to serve. The mother wanted a classic, sunken-cheeked look, and bullied Wynne into removing her back teeth."

"Ow!" Brosca yelled, hand over her mouth.

Tara reassured her. "It wouldn't have hurt! Not a bit. I'll bet it felt weird, though."

"Antivan ladies," remarked Zevran, "have been known to dose

themselves with small quantities of arsenic, in order to enhance their radiant complexions."

"Maker!" cried Tara. And then she asked, "Does it work?"

They all laughed. Zevran said, "Yes, until it kills them. That, too, can happen."

In the northern reaches of Rousten Thaig, they found just what they were looking for, and they found it because of a bird.

"Whoa!" yelled Toliver, as a tiny winged body sped past him. "Was that a bat?"

"Creator!" cried Zevran. "It is a sparrow. How did a bird come to the Deep Roads?"

Wondering greatly, they had their answer as they entered the vast main cavern of the thaig. Thin, brilliant spears of light pierced the massive stone of the chamber ceiling. Looking closer, they made out three openings to the north that illuminated the dusty gloom of the thaig. They were high up—only a little lower than the top of the ceiling.

"Big enough for a bird!" cried Bronwyn. "We can climb up there!"

"I can't believe it!" Brosca grinned. "The top of the cavern is above surface level. Whoever built this must have been half a cloudhead himself!"

They had ropes, of course, because Bronwyn had learned that lesson beforehand. She knew she would be messing about climbing rocks and had come prepared. A ladder would have been even better, but they had no such tall ladders. Instead, they first sent up their own birds to scout out the openings.

Morrigan was off like an arrow, winging up to the light. Anders threw Bronwyn an anxious glance and then was in pursuit. It appeared that they were able to squeeze through the openings to the outside, and then they were gone for some minutes.

Jukka slapped his hand flat on the map, crumpling it in his satisfaction. "Right! We're at the surface here. Look at the old map... see the elevation? Since this was drawn, the valley has eroded... the soil's washed down that stream marked on it, and the the valley floor is lower than it used to be. Luckily, we've got some good bedrock holding the roof up, or this would have collapsed ages ago."

It was promising... it was all very promising. In a few minutes, Anders was back, and then Morrigan, who had been enjoying her brief escape from the Deep Roads.

"I could see a big castle near the Imperial Highway," Anders told them. "Or at least it looks like the Imperial Highway. It's in better repair than in Ferelden. Don't hit me for saying that, but it's true."

"'Tis surprising that more creatures have not found their way

inside," Morrigan added, alighting. "Or... perhaps not so surprising. No doubt the smell fends them off. The left opening is large enough for any of us, man or woman, to squeeze through. However, coming from outside, one would fall all the way to the stones. And from inside, 'tis a forbidding climb."

"We'll want to block up the entrance somewhat before we leave," Bronwyn said. "We don't want animals seeking shelter here or hunters pursuing them. But we'll worry about that later. Let's have a look!"

Anders winced. "Bronwyn, I really think you shouldn't do that. Let Morrigan and me do the scouting."

"Can you take measurements?" Bronwyn asked. "Can you sketch out the castle?"

"No, but..." He stood his ground. "Don't do it. I'm advising you as your Healer. Somebody else can climb this time."

"I can!" Jukka volunteered. "I've done a bit of rock climbing, when I scavenged mines. Give me the gear."

Bronwyn hesitated, torn between simple common sense and the certainty that she was a better climber than anyone else in the party. Anders looked so earnest that she decided not to refuse his advice.

"Give it a go, Jukka," she agreed. "I'll spot you from down here. I'll need you to describe what you see very, very carefully."

"We can come back another time," Aveline said. "With bits of a stout ladder we can assemble on the spot."

"Good idea. We'll do that the next time we're here." She thought it over. "All right. Some of us will stay here. Jukka, Anders, me... Morrigan, if you like. Shale, we'll need you, too, to give Jukka a boost. Tara, I want you to take the others around the thaig and map it out in detail. Take Scout with you. Yes, Scout I want you to go with Tara. If anyone can sniff out darkspawn, it's you! Look for any hidden tunnels or secret darkspawn nests. Oh, Tara—see if you can find the treasury, and if there's anything left in it!"

"With pleasure!" laughed Tara.

"Ummmm..." Zevran considered. "If I may, perhaps it would be best if I were stay here..."

"Zevran!" Bronwyn laughed. "I'm not going anywhere. You're the ones who may run into darkspawn. Go on, go with Tara. You know you want to."

A flash of white teeth, and Zevran joined the little mage. In short order, the party prepared to move out.

"I'll be back soon!" Tara called over her shoulder.

"Find something shiny!" Anders called back.

Jukka would need the pitons and the grappling hook they carried, and Bronwyn helped him harness up securely. The

wall had some cracks and outcroppings that would help, but the curve overhead made for an awkward ascent. Shale could lift him up to a rock shelf, but after that, Jukka was on his own.

The first part of the climb did not go badly. Jukka hammered in the pitons and made steady progress. Bronwyn felt he was rushing a bit.

"Go slow!" she called. "Take your time!"

The last third was trickier. Bronwyn fidgeted, wishing she were doing it herself. There were some precarious near-slips, but at last Jukka managed to reach the ledge just under to the side of the far-left opening. If he leaned over, clinging to the edge, he could look outside.

"Hook up a safety line!" Bronwyn shouted.

"I'm fine!" Jukka said. "See!" he pounded on the stones. "Solid!"

"Hook up a safety line anyway!"

"Yes, Boss." The dwarf gave a piton a tap or two and wrapped the slack of the rope around it. "Safe and sound!"

"All right! Be careful!"

With one hand he reached into the bag slung across his shoulders, and pulled out parchment and a graphite pencil. "I'm looking west-north-west," he announced. "I'll annotate

that on the sketch."

"I need the estimated distance to the Imperial Highway, and the estimated distance to the castle. Is it on our side or the far side?"

"Far side," muttered Anders.

"Far side!" yelled Jukka. "They used a lot of the local stone to build it up pretty high. Four towers around a keep. Kind of fancy. Doesn't look built for serious fighting. Could have some blind spots. When was it built?"

"After the fall of the Dales," said Bronwyn. "Maybe seven hundred years old. Maybe less. As far as I know, it's never been tested by combat."

"I'm not an artist, but I can sketch it out for you." Pressing the parchment up against the wall, and his tongue protruding with concentration, Jukka roughly sketched out the general appearance of Chateau Solidor, while those on the ground discussed future plans.

"We'll come back," said Bronwyn. "We'll scout it out very thoroughly. Let's use that barrier spell Tara learned to keep the curious out of here and disguise the openings a bit."

"We could do that somewhat from the outside," Morrigan suggested. "And leave enough space to slip through ourselves in our bird shapes. The barrier can be added afterward."

Anders said, "Why don't we have another look before we go? It's not all that far to the castle as the raven flies, so to speak. We can see what kind of force is there—"

"—and keep our eyes open for bored archers!" Morrigan said tartly.

"Obviously. I think—"

"Bugger it!" swore Jukka, above them. "I dropped my pencil."

Bronwyn glanced up, and was alarmed. "Jukka! What are you doing?"

"It rolled outside. I can reach it..." The dwarf leaned out precariously, groping out of the opening for the lost pencil. There was a faint cracking sound, and grit trickled from the piton securing the rope.

"Stop it! Come down now!"

"Give me a minute... I can reach it..."

There was another scrabbling of pebbles, and a terrible grinding. Abruptly, the piton came loose and the rope tore free. So did part of the stone wall of the cavern. Time stopped.

"Oh, *shit!*" screamed Jukka. A huge stone smashed him down from the ledge. Shale trundled forward, massive arms out to catch him, but too late. The dwarf was swept along in a thundering rockfall. In a moment, Jukka and Shale were

enveloped in rubble, dust rising in clouds.

Bronwyn turned to run, but stones came down on her helmet, bouncing and rattling. Flashes of light shot from the mage's staffs as they frantically cast shielding spells. Another rock bounced off Bronwyn's helmet, and she stumbled, her vision gone black. A blow struck her between her shoulders, stunning as a the stroke of a berserker's maul. Sense and consciousness fled. She went down, down to the trembling dust, and was buried.

The awful cramping in her belly roused her first. Scout was whining and whimpering. Then she saw Anders' distraught face, dirty and bruised, looking down at her. There was noise in the cave, loud and echoing. Voices. Her friends' voices. Everybody was trying to see past Anders.

Tara was shoving at him. "I've got my Ashes! Give them some!"

Bronwyn coughed. "I forbid it," she croaked. "I absolutely refuse."

Did anyone hear her? Possibly not. They were all shouting at once.

"She's going to be all right, elfkins," Anders was saying. "And the Ashes won't help poor Jukka now."

Bronwyn tried to sit up and gasped at the pain instead.

"Where's Jukka?" she whispered

"Dead and given to the Stone," Brosca told her. "Don't worry about him, Boss."

"He was Legion," said Sigrun. "Technically, he was already dead. This just makes it official. We're more worried about you."

"Lie still," Morrigan ordered. She looked strained, and there was a smudge on her nose. "We must remove your armor."

There was an ominously sticky wetness between her legs. Bronwyn tried reach down, but Morrigan caught at her hand, eyes fierce.

"Lie *still*."

"Oh, no..."

Oh, but yes. Anders could patch Bronwyn back up, but he could not repair what had torn loose. The cramping rolled over her in wretched waves. From the corner of her eye she saw that Shale was there, clearing away rocks. She might have known that a rock slide was only a temporary inconvenience to a golem.

Scout settled down beside her and licked her face.

"You're going to sleep now," Anders told her, his voice tender. "Sleep..."

"Wait..."

She slept quite a long time, evidently, while her body healed. They had cleaned up her up quite thoroughly, and she was rather glad to have been unconscious at the time. They had food and a warm mug of tea for her, when she awakened. Scout clung to her side like a ghost, not letting her from his sight. Morrigan helped her while she went off to relieve herself—a painful process—and was comforting in her hard-headed, pragmatic way.

"At six weeks, it could hardly have been called a child, anyway. Anders sees no permanent damage from the miscarriage. It is unfortunate, but rest and proper food will see you right. Tara and Zevran have been attempting to slip you their Ashes of Andraste, but Anders does not like the idea. He thought you would not wish them forced upon you without your consent. Perhaps you should please Tara by taking a little. I suspect that every grain has a value."

Bronwyn knew that she meant well, and tried not to show how much the witch's words hurt her.

"Are *you* all right?"

"In the end, I flew to the ceiling and avoided everything but the dust. Anders was beaten about a bit, despite his spells. Everyone else heard the noise, and came running. We have been busy while you slept, knowing that it would worry you if you mission were incomplete. Shale was able to retrieve the drawing that the dwarf had begun. I went out for another look

at that castle, but I am no engineer. Two of the openings here in the roof have enlarged into one. Rubble is piled up in front of them, and all is sealed with the barrier spell. Now, that is enough of work and worry. You must lie down, and we will manage the rest. Some of us are actually quite competent, you know."

"I know." Very carefully, she lay back down on her blanket, and was asleep again in seconds.

The next time she awakened, she did indeed take some of the Ashes Tara and Zevran were pressing on her: the tiniest bit from each, a few grains clinging to a fingertip. She washed them down with tea and was astonished and rather awed by the effect.

"Better?" Their beautiful elven faces were so anxious and hopeful that tears welled in her eyes.

"Much, much better. Thank you, my friends."

"We found some nice things," Tara told her. "Quite pretty. We're so sorry we didn't get back in time."

"There wasn't a thing you could have done. It all happened so suddenly. I think Jukka might have been dead before he hit the ground."

Zevran gave her a mild, stern look. "We have done here all that can be done without stout ladders and perhaps even some carpenters to make a proper scaffolding. As soon as

you are able to move, we should return to Gherlen's Halt."

Bronwyn managed a smile for them. "As soon as possible."

Anders was so concerned about Bronwyn that he wanted Shale to carry her, and Bronwyn at first submitted to this briefly, though it was grotesque and humiliating. Shale said nothing at all, after Anders' took the golem aside and made horrific threats. Scout disliked Bronwyn being so high up and far away from him, and was suspicious of the Walking Rock Thing.

Half a day's jarring was so distressing that Bronwyn put a stop to it. Instead, she walked, and agreed to let her companions carry all of her gear but her personal weapons.

Anders hovered insufferably, but Bronwyn had not the spirits to order him away. Nor would it be wise, for she truly felt terrible, though more in spirit than in body.

She had made a mistake; a terrible mistake born of anger and pique. She should have delegated this mission. She should have told Loghain outright that she was with child, and that she would stay behind. Now she must bear the consequences for the rest of her life. Her innocent child was lost, and there was no guarantee that there would be others. She walked, head down, one foot in front of the other, not wanting her companions to see the tears in her eyes. Not looking at them, she could not see that they were also grieving—grieving for their dead companion and for Bronwyn herself.

She remembered little of the march back. The mission had been, from the military point of view, quite a success. They had found a secret way into Orlais, near the fortress of Solidor. They had even seen Solidor and speculated on its weaknesses. A future scouting party could watch the Imperial Highway and little would go into or out of Jader that they would not know about.

Loghain might well think that all this was quite worth the loss of one Grey Warden. Bronwyn could not allow herself to consider what else he might say. At the moment she did not much care.

Blinding white air and shocking cold greeted them when they unsealed the access point.

"What a wind!" said Catriona. "It'll knock us over if we go out."

"It's late, too," agreed Tara. "We couldn't make it back to the fort until after dark. Bronwyn, I think we'd better stay here until morning."

Distracted from her thoughts, Bronwyn need Tara to repeat herself before coming up with an answer.

"Yes. Yes... of course. We'll camp here and leave at dawn tomorrow."

"Good idea," Anders said at once. "You need to lie down, and I need to see how you're doing."

It was quite touching how kind her friends were about giving her privacy and support. Anders pronounced her to be healing well. Bronwyn suspected a great deal of it was due to the minute amount of Ashes she had consumed, but Anders, too, had done his part.

"But you still need a lot of rest, Bronwyn. We'll have a hard day tomorrow, and once we get back to the fort, you need to stay in bed a few days and then take it easy after that. And..." he hesitated.

"And?" she prodded.

"Er... it would be best if you didn't indulge in any... marital relations for at least a month. Grey Wardens heal fast, but you can't risk any further injury or infection."

At the moment nothing could sound less appealing than what Anders, in his gentlemanly way, was referring to as "marital relations." She shuddered. Revulsion blended with the anguish of loss and failure.

"I think I can safely promise that. Loghain told me he was going off an inspection tour of the northern port defenses. Very likely we won't see one another for some time anyway."

"Well, that's good." Anders said, happy to drop the subject. "Try to get some rest now, and we'll be out of here before you know it."

That was not entirely true. Time seemed to drag. Bronwyn

tossed restlessly, sleeping and dozing and waking by turns. Her companions talked softly around the fire, and Bronwyn tried hard not to eavesdrop. Her dreams were unpleasantly near the surface; not buried in deep sleep as usual. Darkspawn cackled and gabbled, pleased at some trick or other.

In the morning, they found that the snowfall had been heavy, and Shale walked in front, making huge footprints for them to step in, shoving masses of snow before him. It helped a good deal, though it was still miserably cold. Plunging and snorting, Scout leaped from footprint to footprint, ears laid back.

"I think the inside of my nose is frozen," Sigrun complained. "It feels funny."

Aveline and Catriona tore strips of cloth and showed the dwarven girls how to bind them over their faces, leaving just their eyes showing. Everything was incredibly crisp and clear, and it was not long before they reached the narrow pass and saw the battlements of Gherlen's Halt.

"My feet are cold," Brosca grumbled. "And wet. I hate snow. I wish we had snowshoes. Maybe Bustrum and Ostap can make us some more."

Morrigan flew off to apprise the fort of their imminent arrival. Anders refused to leave his patient, and insisted on walking next to Bronwyn, watching her like an anxious mother hen. Bronwyn thought it kind of him, but incredibly irritating.

She was a *Cousland*, and she was Queen of Fereldan. She could not falter now. The loss of the child was a constant pain, but she had work to do, and perhaps that would be the best remedy. Loghain had departed this place, and she could manage things here as she saw fit while her body recovered.

At the gates of the fort, she was met by both Ser Blayne and Ser Norrel, who bowed in greeting.

"Good day to you, Your Majesty, and welcome back to Gherlen's Halt," said Ser Blayne. "I hope your mission was a success."

"It was, Ser Blayne. I thank you." Her eyes slid to Ser Norrel, and she was unable to restrain her frown. "My companions and I are in need of food and a warm fire. Tomorrow, we shall meet, and take counsel together."

Thanks to my reviewers: Nemrut, Chandagnac, EmbertoInferno, Gir-chama, Koden21, KnightOfHolyLight, Kyren, Phygmalion, MsBarrows, Mike3207, Anon, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Blinded in a bolthole, , darksky01, Guest, Tirion, JackOfBladesX, dragonblade3200, amanda weber, le-maru, almostinsane, jnybot, Jenna53, sizuka2, guardian1165, dragonmactir, Have Socks. Will Travel, Nix's Warden, patchworker, and mille libri.

After consideration, I hold to my idea that the darkspawn go underground in cold weather. I think it's supported by canon,

which permits you to visit Ostagar-Blight Central-when the snow is on the ground. You are opposed only by a small force, composed mostly of stragglers, with only one very strong boss, the Necromancer. The March to Denerim obviously happens after the spring thaw. We know from canon that darkspawn can be frozen. Thus, the Archdemon would protect her forces by keeping most of them underground, save for a small garrison, which is sheltered by the commodious ruins of Ostagar, with plenty of snug stone rooms and fires. It also explains why Blights can be so long and dragged-out.

I know that the wiki goes on about how free and casual the Thedosians are about sex. Yeah, yeah, total fan service, in my opinion. This is a feudal society. Thus, inheritances are the primary means of transferring wealth. In such circumstances, female chastity is always valued. The Thedosians may not expect their brides to be virgins, but they certainly expect their wives not to give them some other man's children as their heirs. Perhaps things are more relaxed among the commons or the lower merchant classes, but I am convinced that standards must be much stricter among noblewomen—at least until they've produced an heir and a spare.

Aveline's story uses a rhyme from the Brothers' Grimm version of Cinderella.

95. Ladies of Nevarra

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 95: Ladies of Nevarra

The men on horseback rode fast, the rugged outline of the Vimmarks shrinking and fading into the southeast. Two of the riders were engaged in hot debate.

"I don't believe you."

"But it's true!"

Fenris rolled his eyes at Carver Hawke. "I do not believe that your Queen Bronwyn rode a dragon. According to you, she has slaughtered darkspawn, defeated werewolves, vanquished demons, and slain dragons. She crowned the dwarven king of Orzammar and raised armies of elves and mages. She found the lost Tomb of Andraste and survived incredible dangers to retrieve a pinch of the Prophet's Ashes. Now you wish me to believe that she flew on a dragon's back. My suspension of disbelief has snapped like a rotten slave tether."

"She did so ride a dragon! I saw her! She rode it right in front of everybody. Then she killed it. And it's not the first dragon

she killed, either. She's not called the Dragonslayer for nothing! Besides, she's a Grey Warden, and Wardens used ride griffons. It's the same thing!"

"A dragon is not the same thing as a griffon."

"Well, she rode it anyway, and it flew!"

"Jowan," asked Fenris, "did you see this?"

"No..."

"Ha!"

"But I did see her kill a huge High Dragon in the Korcari Wilds. She jumped on its back, and stabbed it at the base of its skull. It couldn't fly because its wing was damaged."

"That's as may be," Fenris said, stubbornly holding fast to reality. "It is not possible to ride on a dragon. And your Queen sounds like an invention. I find it difficult to believe that there is any such person."

"Adam!" whined Carver. "Fenris doesn't believe in Bronwyn!"

Adam had been talking in a low voice to Nathaniel, but that tone and pitch always caught his ear. He gave his arl a rueful smile. Nathaniel, not amused, scowled and looked behind him. He slowed his horse to join the other riders.

"What's this?" he asked sharply. "What do you mean, he doesn't 'believe' in Queen Bronwyn?" He gave Fenris a dark

stare. "Her Majesty Queen Bronwyn is the ruler of Ferelden. That is a matter of fact, not belief."

"I do not mean to disparage your Queen. Carver has been abusing my credulity with fantastic tales, in which she is always the heroine. It is clear that you all regard her highly, and that she is a just and virtuous woman. All the more reason not to tell ridiculous stories about her."

"What ridiculous stories?" Adam asked, raising his brows.

"The latest is that she was pursuing a Master Darkspawn into the Deep Roads, and rode a dragon about a vast and palatial cavern."

"Oh, that," Nathaniel agreed, with a shrug. "She did that. I was there. The dragon kept trying to scrape her off against the walls, but she killed it first. It was terrifying. I thought she was going to fall to her death."

"See?" said Carver, smugly triumphant.

"She rode a dragon?" Fenris repeated, somewhat dazed.

"I don't think she meant to," Nathaniel admitted. "She leaped on its back to better dig her dagger into its spine, and it took off. She held on, though, so yes: it definitely counts as flying on the back of a dragon."

"I see."

Carver went on, singing the praises of the Girl Warden, the

Dragonslayer, the Red Queen of Ferelden. "Red," not for the color of her hair, but for the color of her dragon armor, which was a deep crimson. Bronwyn was kind and clever; she was brave and just. She was a good friend to dwarves and elves, and hated oppression and slavery. Her brother was a very good man, who had put a stop to the enslavement of elves in the north of Ferelden.

There followed a lengthy story about a band of Tevinter blood mages who had infiltrated under Denerim. They had built their own secret compound, and used it to kidnap and enslave people. Bronwyn had gone in and cleaned them out from end to end. Usually she was merciful, but she had not spared the slaver blood mages. Fenris approved greatly of that.

Carver declared, "She's worth a hundred of Empress Celene, who only knows how to dress up for balls and play politics to gain power. I'd like to see Empress Celene face a dragon!"

Adam overheard and grinned at Nathaniel. "Actually, I really would. I would love to see Empress Celene facing a dragon."

Nathaniel thought that over. "I'd prefer to *hear* of the Empress facing a dragon. If we were present, it would be our duty as gentlemen to try to rescue her."

Nathaniel had not been prepared for Nevarra. He thought he had. He had lived in Kirkwall and Markham, He had seen lofty Ostwick and sunny, white-cliffed Hercinia. He paid visits to Tantervale, Hasmal, and even Starkhaven, which was a large

and rich city indeed. He had read books about foreign lands, and heard detailed descriptions of the magnificence of Val Royeaux and the Grand Cathedral. He was fond of his home city of Amaranthine, and was devoted to Denerim, though anyone who had traveled at all would recognize its limitations. Not one of those things had actually prepared him for the alien grandeur of Nevarra.

Skirting the edge of Wildervale, his party had remarked on the fine inns and the prosperous-looking villages. The growing season was longer this far north, and some fruits could be grown here that were unknown in Ferelden. Of course, it was still winter, but winter here was quite a different matter from the harsh cold of home. Here, summer greens had faded to greys and browns, but the breezes were mild and fresh.

Most startling was just how well-kept everything here was, especially once they crossed the border into Nevarra.

Nevarrans were great lovers of beauty; more obviously, they were great lovers of paint. Houses in the villages were mostly timber and plaster, with the timbers set in elaborate patterns. The plaster parts were whitewashed and in places painted with primrose yellow and that special shade that was justly called Nevarran Blue. It was a product of the root called woad and was widely used. Even the poor wore it, in its unrefined version: their garments like pieces of summer sky.

Every village had a statue of some local hero; every village had its Chantry with fine images of Andraste and her disciples. Rubbish was cleared away into walled middens; one

hardly saw a beggar on the street. When innkeepers were queried about such oddities, they were informed that Nevarra had something called the King's Poor Law.

Apparently there were institutions called "workhouses," when the poor could go to live. They were given work to do in exchange for food and shelter, which the Fereldans thought was remarkably generous. These workhouses were paid for by county taxes, for Nevarra was divided into a number of counties, each ruled by a count or countess, and each county had its own workhouse, its own orphanage—allowing children to remain until they were twelve, or otherwise apprenticed—and its own hospice, where the poor went to die. Its own prison, too, for many malefactors were thriftily put to hard labor for a period of time commensurate with their crimes. Such a degree of civilization was somewhat awe-inspiring. If there was time, Nathaniel hoped to inspect such institutions.

And the food and drink were very good, if different from anything to which they were accustomed. The wine was delicious, but pale yellow—sometimes almost greenish yellow—rather than red. The kind of grapes grown in this part of the Minanter Valley were called "white" grapes, though it sounded like they were actually pale green. The ale—or rather beer—was very good and very substantial. The food was hearty and not as fussy as Orlesian *grande cuisine*. The locals made a dark bread of mixed grains that was excellent with their good butter and mild cheeses; they made a tasty pork stew seasoned with red pepper and garlic—the latter was not widely known in Ferelden; and they served all sorts of

dumplings: apple dumplings, plum dumplings; dumplings containing potatoes, pureed vegetables, or finely chopped pork. Nathaniel was not tired of them yet, and doubted that he ever would be.

They reached the Imperial Highway and were impressed by its high degree of repair. The road could have been built that very year, for there were no broken stretches, no collapsed pillars, and no crumbling ramps. No one dared to take stone from the road to repair their own homes, for such a crime was harshly punished.

Nathaniel wanted to see the famed necropolis, too, but first he must present himself and his credentials to the Court Seneschal, and apply for an audience with the king. And he really must have a bath.

They rode, they saw the sights, they reached the city gates, and were there directed to a fine and expensive inn, which had a bathroom worthy of the entire journey.

The next day, the letter of introduction was presented to the court seneschal. This was a tricky process that occupied most of the morning for the two knights and half the guard. Nobles could not risk the loss of face that waiting on palace steps would inevitable involve, and so spent the morning cleaning themselves up and having the servants make certain that their best shirts and doublets were fit to be seen.

Carver and Jowan were more forthright in their own mission.

The innkeeper of course knew where to find the Nevarran Grey Wardens, and even sent one of his boot boys as a guide. It was something of a walk, and so the two men took their horses from the stable and Carver, not caring what these foreigners thought of him, let the boy ride— behind him—since the puppies were draped over the front of the Wardens' saddles. This generosity paid dividends, since it made the boy all the happier to point out the sights. At the end of a long, tree-lined avenue, they approached a wide plaza, dominated by a magnificent edifice that resembled nothing they had seen before. It was not a fortress, certainly. It was wide and fronted with carved pillars; and a long staircase, as wide as the building, led up to the great bronze doors of the entrance.

Two long buildings, also colonnaded, were on either side of the big plaza. To their astonishment, the building to the left was a stable, but grand enough for a noble's house. The plaza itself was inlaid with a mosaic depicting griffons in flight.

"There!" Their young guide pointed. "Griffon House!"

Carver paid him and let him slide down. The boy dashed away, happy at the prospect of a leisurely stroll through the city, with coin to spend. The two Wardens stared about them in disbelief.

"Well, we've found Grey Wardens," said Jowan, thoroughly intimidated.

Carver felt like a country bumpkin himself, but was greeted in a friendly enough way by a group of Wardens who were

lounging on the steps. These men—and one woman— nudged each other and pointed, already aware that the newcomers were Wardens.

"What a darling puppy!" said the woman, who saw Jowan's Lily first. "Oh!" she said noticing Magister, who was struggling to get down. "You have one, too!"

Carver liked her at once. She was not a pretty woman, nor very young, but she had a warm smile and liked dogs. Her long arms and lithe movements suggested that she would be useful in a fight.

"Greetings, brothers!" said a short but muscular fellow with a luxuriant moustache and a Warden tunic of embroidered silk. Carver could barely understand his accent. "Where are you from?"

"Ferelden," Carver declared, and swung off his horse. "We're supposed to deliver a letter to the Warden-Commander."

One of the Wardens whistled for a groom, who hurried from the stable, bowing.

"Your horses will be cared for," said the short Warden. "Ferelden, you say?"

"They have dogs, Borthus," shrugged one of his friends, grinning. "I thought they'd be bigger, though."

"They're *puppies*, Garamis!" the woman rebuked her

comrade. "And they're quite lovely. You want to see the Warden-Commander? I'm sure he'd be delighted to meet brothers from afar—once he's finished with sword practice. I'm Athis. Senior Warden Athis. Come on."

They passed some casual young Warden-recruit guards, who waved them through in friendly fashion; and then were ushered through a pleasant anteroom, where a fountain played. A huge bas-relief of Wardens, twice life-size, was softened by tall green plants. Down a corridor, they heard the distant sound of voices and wood clattering against wood. Another door opened, and they stepped into a huge inner courtyard. Carver was surprised that they could so ignore the winter weather, when he looked up and saw the vast skylight overhead.

It was an immense practice yard, and it was full of Wardens. Carver and Jowan felt a pleasant buzzing under their skin; an embrace by scores of their brothers and sisters. People looked up, interested in the strangers and the inquisitive dogs trailing at their heels.

"There must be over two hundred Wardens here!" Jowan whispered, excited and impressed by the beauty of the Warden headquarters. This was a Warden palace... a Warden temple. In contrast, Soldier's Peak and even the Denerim Compound seemed primitive and shabby.

"Maybe more," Carver agreed, trying to count them. It was difficult. Everyone was in motion. Wardens were practicing archery, fencing with every kind of practice sword. They were

dicing and card-playing, and drinking, and talking, and laughing, and flirting, and one appeared to be writing a poem and reciting bits of it as he worked. A more staid group of men and women in robes were listening to one of their number as she displayed a complex diagram of a magical glyph. Jowan had no idea what it was, and longed to eavesdrop.

Along one side of the courtyard were elegant marble statues, and to the Fereldans' astonishment, not one of them was of Andraste. Nor were all of them fully clothed—even the female figures. Jowan found himself blushing. Carver thought it was something Ferelden would do well to emulate.

More and more Wardens were looking their way. Most were human, but there was a sizable minority of dwarves and a smattering of elves—mostly archers.

At last, they were led before a tall man with keen amber eyes and salt-and-pepper hair cut short. The man set aside a practice sword and raised a quizzical brow at the puppies.

"Fereldans, Warden Commander," Athis announced.

"Fereldan brothers, come all the way across the sea to deliver a letter."

"Then I suppose I'd better read it." The man put out his hand to Carver and then Jowan. "I'm Hector Pentaghast. Let's go and have a talk. And bring the dogs."

Carver and Jowan left the meeting feeling that they had been

wrung out and left to dry... but in a *good* way. Certainly they had never meant to give the Nevarran Warden-Commander so much information, but it seemed perfectly natural at the time. Hector Pentaghast now knew the names, ranks, and numbers of the entire embassy and the complete history of the Blight in Ferelden. At least Carver was able to include the Bronwyn-riding-the-dragon story. It was his favorite, after all.

Pentaghast listened in silence, not betraying how horrified he was by the episode with the Architect, and how even more shocked he was by the knowledge that there was—or had been—however you looked at it—a prison established by Wardens in the Vimmark Mountains, and subsequently deserted, which had contained an ancient magister. It must be true. These two innocent lads simply did not have the wits to make up such stuff.

They were given some wonderful brandy and a delicious snack, while Pentaghast read Bronwyn's letter.

He nodded over it, his face a courteous mask, and then offered the hospitality of Griffon House to his visitors.

Jowan and Carver felt they could not accept it, even though they really wanted to.

"At least not tonight," said Jowan. "Arl Nathaniel and Carver's brother would worry about us. We'd love to come back and see more, though."

"An excellent idea!" Pentaghast approved, encouraging and genial. "Come tomorrow. I think you will find our lodgings

more pleasant than any inn. Warden-Queen Bronwyn wishes you to learn all the Warden lore you can during your stay. Our library will be at your disposal, and our scholars will be happy to share their findings with you."

As soon as the Fereldans were gone, Pentaghost called in Senior Warden Athis.

"The Fereldans are part of a larger embassy. Very likely they will return tomorrow. Make friends with them. Get them to talk. Things are happening in Ferelden that we need to know about." He gave his trusted officer a significant look. "The Acting-Warden-Commander... that Girl Warden who wrote a few months ago... she has gone and made herself Queen of Ferelden!"

Athis nearly burst out laughing. "The Empress won't like that!"

"I'm not sure anyone will. Weisshaupt, possibly. The First Warden might approve of it as a precedent. However, it's done. The prior Warden-Commander should have been more careful about recruiting too near the royal line of succession. Between the Orlesians and the Blight, the Theirins have been thinned out." He passed the letter to Athis. "Have a look at it. It's not badly written. Perhaps this young barbarian queen has a good secretary. Perhaps she is a prodigy. Perhaps our understanding of Ferelden is outdated. Her Wardens certainly regard her as a hero. I shall think on it before I answer."

Athis glanced through the letter. "The darkspawn have withdrawn from the southern offensive. She thinks they are

inactive in very cold weather. The observation that Taint can be destroyed by freezing is interesting."

"Very. There has never been a Blight so far south, and so we are seeing new phenomena. Sensible of the girl to pass on the information. Freezing spells might not be as destructive as fire, when it comes to clearing Taint. You never know when you might need to know such a thing."

"They do seem to have pushed the darkspawn back."

"Well done, of course. Whether they've defeated an actual offensive or thwarted a mere feint, the girl has been doing her duty. It's a shame we've been forbidden to do ours. However, since the Fereldan Wardens are here, I see no reason why they should not learn all sorts of useful things. No official communications, you understand. Nothing that would outright defy the Orlesians'—I mean to say, the First Warden's orders. No. Just some brother and sister Wardens chatting in a friendly way about common interests."

"I imagine a great deal of information could slip out that way."

"Make sure that it does."

Carver and Jowan did not leave Griffon House immediately. After a whispered word from the Warden-Commander, Garamis used the pretext of some errands to take them on an impromptu tour, passing by the library, the mage's study room, the potions laboratory, Garamis' own pleasant

quarters, and the inviting Great Hall. They also stopped for a look at the incredible marble baths, which included a pool large enough for swimming, and which was kept warm enough for the purpose even in the winter. Then they had another snack. The puppies were admired, and the Fereldans were happy to answer endless questions about them. With one thing and another, it was mid-afternoon before they returned to the inn, bickering a little about how to retrace their route.

The innkeeper was waiting for them, and came out to speak to them before they could dismount. With him were four official-looking guardsmen

"You're to go to the Royal Hostel, Wardens. The rest of the party left a little while ago. They took your gear with them. These guards remained here to escort you."

The man was good enough to explain that the Royal Hostel was a residence for distinguished visitors. Their credentials had been examined, and the King had commanded that His Excellency the Fereldan Ambassador Count Nathaniel Howe and his party were to be a royal guests, and under the protection of the Nevarran Crown.

Carver muttered to Jowan. "That means they want to keep an eye on us. I wish we'd stayed with the Wardens!"

"So, Van Antem... what do you think of our Fereldan guests?"

"More civilized than I expected, Sire," the First Minister replied

instantly to King Baltus, with a little shrug. In the Privy Chamber, they could speak frankly.

"They are certainly what they claim to be," he continued. "I had an agent identify Count—or rather Arl, as they say in his country— Nathaniel Howe. He was educated in the Free Marches. Very likely he is the most polished they have to offer. Brave, courteous, and not without a certain innate decency. He is a high noble of the kingdom. Ferelden has five counties—or arlings—as well as two principalities, and a number of free lordships. Amaranthine is the richest of the counties. As you know, the town of Amaranthine is a substantial port city, trading extensively with the Free Marches, Rivain, and Antiva. The young noble with him is the lord of that city, and Howe's chief vassal. An attractive and not witless young man, if inexperienced in diplomacy. Howe's principal seat is a castle called Vigil's Keep, and it is quite ancient, even by our standards, though I daresay it is crude and poor enough."

King Baltus smiled. "They brought their dogs."

"They did, Sire, and fine beasts they are. Lord Adam's mature specimen evinces some of the remarkable intelligence rumored of the breed. The two Wardens have puppies, though they are as large already as our gaze-hounds."

"Lord Adam's brother is one of the Wardens, I take it."

"Indeed, and the other is more scholar than warrior. They have gone to meet with Hector. I daresay he will find them

refreshing."

"What is it that they want... what is that they *really* want?"

"I believe it is as straightforward a matter as they say. They wish us to continue to oppose Orlais. For us, it is a matter of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Ferelden is still deeply embittered by decades of harsh occupation. Our sources indicate that Orlais is looking to take advantage of the darkspawn incursion in the far south."

"Our dear Hector insists that it is a Blight."

"He knows best, I suppose." The First Minister shrugged. "Though why the darkspawn would trouble in the savage wildness south of a barbarian land is indeed a puzzlement. At any rate, it is clear that the Fereldans are worried about Orlesian pressure. There was a very flagrant attempt on Queen Anora's life a few months ago: an attempt that killed a number of nobles at a wedding. There have also been attempts on Loghain Mac Tir, and the 'Girl Warden' who is now Queen."

"What does Hector think about that?"

"I think we should summon him and find out. The Fereldans speak of their queen quite freely and favorably. My people have been busy making friends with the servants, who gossip like all servants. They tell some wild tales, and some of the stories are clearly old folk tales refashioned for a new heroine. On the other hand, she is clearly remarkable and

charismatic enough for folk like the servants to credit such tales, and what she accomplished in Orzammar is beyond question. A great many people claim—including those two young Wardens—to have seen her kill a High Dragon, though as part of a larger expedition. Loghain was also there, and he appears to have successfully used mobile ballistae against the creature in the course of the fight. Explosive bolts could be useful out west where the dragons are making a comeback."

"Young Cassandra will enjoy hearing about all that."

Van Antem huffed. "That young spitfire may not approve of the Dragonslayer. There are rumors that the Fereldan Queen and her consort Mac Tir—that's an ill-assorted pair I'd pay good coin to see!—are tolerant of mages, and are encouraging them to serve as healers and battlemages in the army. Of course, ages ago during Blights, the Grey Wardens called up on the mages to serve, but under their own aegis. This Bronwyn Cousland has set a dangerous precedent, not just in taking the throne, but in her relationship to the Chantry."

"The Chantry should stay out of international politics!" Baltus said, rather testy about it. "It's well known that the Orlesians used the Chantry in their seizure of Ferelden. They've tried the same rubbish in the western cities we've captured—preaching about the will of the Divine. They'd best not overreach themselves!"

"Our own Grand Cleric Alexandra is loyal, Majesty," soothed Van Antem. "She does not tolerate treasonous talk among her priests. The troublemakers have been sent to cloisters."

"Quite right! So... what can we actually do for Fereldan? Is it worthwhile to do anything for them at all?"

Van Antem rubbed his beard. "Yes. Absolutely. And we must move quickly, since any help must reach the Fereldans before the Orlesians are upon them. We cannot risk that Bannorn or theirs falling to the Orlesians. That would produce grain enough to fuel a renewed assault against our western borders. They are not asking for troops, after all, which would be inconvenient. We can keep the Orlesians occupied for our own sake. Indeed, we have little choice with the chevaliers champing at the bit to regain lost lands. We can give the Fereldans a bit of gold. Really, a trifle will seem a fortune to those southern barbarians. Perhaps some other material assistance, like a ship or two. Some pretty trinkets to keep the Queen and her ferocious spouse happy. And establishing some ties between our two nations is not at all a bad idea. We can spread our culture and influence in the time-honored way: by disposing of some surplus females in marriage."

"What is this Court of Love, anyway?" Adam asked, tugging at his doublet. He took another look at himself in a huge, gilt-framed mirror hanging in the common room of their quarters. Quarters, which were, frankly, more opulent than anything he had ever seen or imagined.

Nathaniel shrugged. "I'm informed that it's the Queen's salon, held at the full moon every month. The important ones are the ones in the spring and summer, but she holds them every month without fail. It's largely a social event, in which noble

daughters are put through their paces, and noble ladies display their own accomplishments. Nevarran women are very well-educated. We're mostly accessories. If the ladies want to dance, then we're there to dance with them and pay them compliments."

"I can do that."

In fact, barbarians or not, the foreign count and his vassal lord were looked upon as attractive additions to the rather thinly-attended Wintermarch Court of Love. That they were both good dancers was greatly in their favor. There was a definite shortage of men at this time of year. Most of the ladies present were royal, or their poor relations. Van Markhams, Pentaghasts, Rosenthals, and Van Antems were represented, but not many ladies from the more far-flung fiefdoms.

One dark-haired young girl of about fifteen years scowled at them from the sidelines. She had fine amber eyes and a smooth olive skin, but was coltish and awkward, and snarled at anyone who tried to dance with her. Someone had dressed her in an expensive gown of coppery silk, but she seemed uncomfortable in it, and fidgeted as if encased in scratchy wool.

"Who is that young lady?" Adam asked of his partner.

"Oh, Poor Tragedy!" whispered the girl. "That's Cassandra Pentaghast. Don't trouble yourself about her! She's a ward of the Crown, and pestering the Queen to be permitted to take Chantry orders."

"She wants to become a priest?"

"My lord, she wants to be a Seeker! Or at the very least, a Templar! Yes, she's training to be a warrior... Of course, I understand that's not uncommon in Ferelden. Your own Queen... Forgive me if I offend."

"Not at all. Not all ladies are suited to such a life. Queen Bronwyn manages to be at once a great warrior, a beautiful lady, and a splendid dancer, but she is unique."

"Oh, I'm sure! So many rumors have reached us. She's very tall, I understand. Is she as tall as you?"

Adam grinned charmingly, and cocked his head, thinking it over. "Almost. But my voice is deeper."

His partner trilled a laugh, well pleased with him. "Well, I was talking about little Cassandra. She's only a fourth cousin of the Queen, but still a Pentaghost. Her brother was killed by mages! Isn't that horrible? Anything can happen in the borderlands, I suppose. That's why I prefer the Court."

"I rather like the Court myself," Adam admitted, "though one is just as liable to be killed here— though by a pair of pretty eyes, rather than a mage's spell!"

Nathaniel's dances were carefully arranged by Queen Melantha, who was always interested in young nobles of good estate. Very properly, the foreign count danced first with Princess Sophia, and then with Princess Porphyria—because

Melantha was very interested in what her clever Porphyria would make of the young man. His appearance was dark but comely, his manners polished. He really was not at all like a barbarian, which disappointed the girls somewhat. Nor was that Lord—or Bann—what an odd term!—Adam likely to cause a disturbance. Very handsome, very eligible. Her sources told her that there was noble Kirkwaller blood on the mother's side, which explained his civil demeanor. He had brought a very large dog with him, who appeared to understand everything said to him. Queen Melantha wondered if the dog could do tricks.

Porphyria took her seat by her mother, and whispered in her ear. "Very nice. Serious, but quite nice. Not stupid, and brought up to respect women. Very devoted to his Queen Bronwyn. He'd be a nice husband, I think. Can we keep him?"

"Of course not. We want to send him home married—and married to a high-born, well-educated Nevarran lady. No, my dear, not you. A Fereldan count is not sufficiently exalted for a Nevarran princess."

"Pity. I think I should quite like him."

"Now if the heir-presumptive were available, we might arrange something for you with *him*. I have heard of the Couslands, and the man is a prince, which is far finer than a count. However, Count Nathaniel says that Prince Cousland is already betrothed to Mac Tir's daughter, who was queen to the last king. Not surprising. And he is only an heir-presumptive, after all. Nonetheless, we shall find someone

charming for Count Nathaniel. It is an opportunity to build ties with another nation. Of course, the girl we send will likely never return to Nevarra."

"A hard fate. Still, there are those the King might wish were far away."

"Very true, my dear. I already have someone in mind. Your father suggested her. I see you've already guessed the name. An honorable marriage for her, and less friction for us here at home. I shall not send her alone, for all that. We shall find someone for the young lord, too, and then there will be the servants. Tell Callista I wish to speak to her, and then, I think, you must dance with Lord Adam."

"A dangerous business, but someone's got to do it!"

Nathaniel was in due course formally presented to Lady Callista Pentaghast, the Queen's niece, and they danced a slow sarabande together, which permitted them to converse and look each other over thoroughly.

There was nothing for Nathaniel to complain of in the lady. She was much like her Pentaghast cousins: black-haired and fine-boned, with large and expressive amber eyes. The black brows over said eyes met in ironic amusement at the sight of the foreign noble, for she was not a slow-witted girl, and grasped immediately that he was to be her fate. She was dressed to very great advantage in the deep jewel-like colors favored by Nevarrans in the winter months, and on her head was an elaborate circlet of gold, pearls, and amber, the latter

of which exactly matched her eyes.

"So, my lord... I hope you have found this city agreeable?"

"Very beautiful, indeed, my lady; and the people most gracious."

"And have you visited the Cathedral?"

"Yes, yesterday."

"And the Royal Armory?"

"The day before yesterday."

"And the Necropolis?"

"That is scheduled for tomorrow."

"Then we are done with the sights and may begin upon the weather, I suppose. Do you think it will rain?"

Nathaniel smiled. "You are very brisk in listing your country's beauties. I believe there must be much more to see."

"Perhaps if I visited Ferelden, I would find much of interest there that the inhabitants take for granted."

"True. I am looking forward to seeing the Necropolis, but I would also like to visit some of your charitable institutions. I might have much to learn there."

He really was very nice, and not at all savage. Perhaps he had taken on the coloration of his company, and would revert to wearing skins and smashing skulls when amongst his own people. He might look rather good in skins, actually. He had the broad shoulders and slim hips to carry them off with a certain style.

"Lord Adam has his great mabari with him, but you do not. I thought all Fereldans had dogs."

"Many of us do. I had the honor of a mabari's companionship when I was a young boy. She died bravely, saving my life from a bear."

"I am sorry. I don't mean to speak lightly of such matters. I once had a hawk of which I was very fond, but one day he flew away and I never saw him again. I should have kept closer watch on him."

"He might not have deserted you. Perhaps he met with a misadventure."

"I would rather he be alive and free, even if he left me, than dead."

Nathaniel looked at her keenly. "Many would choose differently."

The Queen watched the two young people with great complacency. They were talking easily, which was a good sign. The Fereldan knew his dances, and moved well. The two

of them made a handsome couple. Their colors should be better coordinated. Queen Melantha liked to see couples dressed to complement each other. She would send the noblemen Nevarran court garments, as a mark of favor. The lace collars would set off their muscular throats. Yes, if they could exile Callista permanently from Navarra, Baltus might forgive Melantha's brother's treachery, and provide Callista a dowry from the confiscated estate.

Now, who for Lord Adam? An idea came to her. The Fereldans did not wish to prolong their stay. If they left quickly enough, they might never find out about the Aestragon girl's mage brother! Quickly, she spoke to a lady-in-waiting, who passed on the summons to a guard officer. It should not take long for the young lady to make her appearance. Berenice was not as good-looking as Lord Adam, but not many were. Callista was friendly with her, and the Aestrasons knew Berenice had few prospects since the scandal. Considering Lord Adam with an artist's eye, she was glad she had commanded the girl to wear green. It might make the girl's unfortunate red hair—very unfashionable among Nevarrans—almost tolerable.

There was a pause in the dancing, and Queen Melantha addressed Lady Callista.

"My dear, it has been long since I heard you sing. I beg you to indulge me. Lord Nathaniel, your charming partner is quite the musician."

"I look forward to hearing her, Your Majesty."

A lute was brought, and Callista sat on a little stool at the Queen's feet. She disguised her nervousness by carefully tuning the instrument, and then sang a song that was a favorite of her late, lamented, beheaded father's.

Callista's Song

In Love, if Love be Love, if Love be ours,

Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers:

Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.

It is the little rift within the lute,

That by and by will make the music mute,

And ever widening slowly silence all.

The little rift within the lover's lute,

Or little pitted speck in garner'd fruit,

That rotting inward slowly moulders all.

It is not worth the keeping: let it go:

But shall it? answer, darling, answer, no.

And trust me not at all or all in all.

She had quite a pretty voice, luscious as ripe plums. Nathaniel had heard many fine musicians, most notably Bronwyn's Warden bard and the Nevarran minstrel who had been summoned to the Palace. Callista Pentaghast was not a professional, but she was very well-trained and talented, and would not be embarrassed to perform anywhere. Clearly, the Queen knew of her talent, and wanted to show it off to Nathaniel.

So, she is to be the one.

He could live with that. He had come here knowing that he would likely leave Nevarra a married man. Callista Pentaghast was attractive, high-born, very well-spoken, a graceful dancer, and now he found she was an excellent musician. She seemed to be capable of real feeling, as far as he could tell on such short notice. No doubt she would be a very good Arlessa. He sighed a little, wishing he had more to offer of himself, but this nice girl would never be Bronwyn Cousland. He could at least, however, treat her better than his father had treated his mother. Come to think of it, his father was a perfect model as a husband, if Nathaniel's behavior was the complete opposite.

What would she think of Ferelden? He would not apologize for his home, but there was no reason that he could not make it more comfortable. She would likely have a very good dowry, and that could go to improving her apartments at Vigil's Keep and upgrading his Denerim townhouse. As far as he could arrange it, she would have a good life in far-away Ferelden.

A large and distinguished party visited the Necropolis, traveling in state carriages. Such visits were not rare, for it was customary for Nevarrans to pay calls on their dead. Queen Melantha enjoyed showing off the grandeur of the royal tombs as much as the First Minister, who had ostensibly been given the duty. A luncheon was served in the state dining room within the palatial tomb of Queen Electra II, which proved to be a miracle of mosaic floors, painted frescoes, and lily-shaped columns. The furniture was carved and gilded, and the tomb's kitchen was equipped with every convenience. To the Fereldans, it was nothing short of bizarre, but the food was good, and they all smiled gamely.

Nathaniel escorted Callista, and Adam escorted Lady Berenice Aestragon, whom the Queen intended he should marry. Adam would have preferred some choice in the matter. He thought Lady Berenice good-looking enough, since Fereldans had no cultural prejudice against red hair. Hers was very red indeed: blazing red and wildly curly. She had the classic redhead's stone-pale complexion, too. She did not have much to say for herself, and seemed not to want to talk about her family. She was perfectly polite to him, and perfectly polite to Carver, once he was introduced as Adam's brother. Her only genuine smiles, however, were for the dogs. It occurred to him suddenly, as he watched her push her meal about her plate, that perhaps she would have liked to have had some choice, too. It was something of an epiphany.

There was nothing wrong with her, of course; and certainly nothing wrong with her dowry, which was simply staggering

by Fereldan standards. It was all happening so *fast*. Rumors had reached him that her wedding dress was nearly ready. Some clauses in the marriage contract were odd, especially the one setting aside a portion of her dowry for construction of her tomb. Lady Callista had such a clause as well. The clauses for dower properties were nothing unusual, but the idea of large sums going for a place to put a rotting dead body struck Adam as rather macabre. The tombs were not intended to be such marvels as the one they were currently dining in. They were more likely to be stylized versions of a Nevarran house, with a vestibule, a reception room, and a bedroom, where the sarcophagus was placed. And there would have to be guards. Yes—there would certainly have to be guards in Ferelden, or squatters would move in and *live* there.

It was annoying that Carver had taken it into his head to be jealous of the marriage. He was so jealous, in fact, that he was taking the trouble to flirt with Lady Berenice, and worse, he was encouraging Magister to be winsome and *cuddly*. Adam exchanged a look at Hunter, who rose to his four feet, sighing deeply, and went over to the red-haired female to ingratiate himself.

Carver and Jowan were staying with the Grey Wardens, and had gone on insufferably about the facilities there, until Adam had shut them up with the equal glories of the royal hostel. A plunge bath, large enough for swimming, was a very agreeable thing. Perhaps some of Berenice's dowry could go for that, once they were back in Amaranthine.

Queen Melantha was talking. "Yes, I understand, my dear Count. You must return to Kirkwall for your own ship. That can be arranged very easily. But gently reared young women cannot be expected to gallop through the Vimmerks with their dowry in their saddlebags! Instead, carriages can carry people and their possessions so much more easily and comfortably down the Imperial Highway to Cumberland. A royal transport can convey everyone to Kirkwall, protected by an escort of three warships. The vessels will then sail all the way to Denerim, once your ship joins with the rest. Is that not a good, prudent, *sensible* plan?"

It really was—and generous, too. Nathaniel thanked her, only suggesting Amaranthine as the ultimate destination. This was immediately agreed to as a tremendous improvement, and the Queen praised Count Nathaniel's good sense. Understandable that he should wish to end the journey swiftly, since those four ships, along with a considerable amount of gold, were being made over to Ferelden as a belated wedding present from King Baltus and Queen Melantha of Nevarra to their respected friends, King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn of Ferelden.

For himself, Adam was relieved at the prospect of not traveling with a new bride on the same ship as Captain Isabela. They must stop at Kirkwall, certainly, and the *Siren's Call* would carry some of their cargo... but Berenice and Isabela in close proximity? Er.... no. But Queen Melantha's plan involved spending day after day on a ship, and Adam felt rather queasy at the prospect.

He whispered to Nathaniel, "Do you suppose Queen Melantha has even been at sea?"

Nathaniel nearly sighed. "I shouldn't think so." He had reservations about the Queen's plan, but those ships were too valuable to reject.

They walked down wide avenues, admiring the monuments to past heroism or beauty or fantastic wealth. They spent some time at the Pentaghost tombs, which were filled with tributes to the dragon-hunters. Carver and Jowan nudged each other, the reliefs and mosaics filling in what they had been learning from the books in the Wardens' library. Some dragon-hunters relied on missile weapons; some used nets; some lured dragons up to towers or hills; some used a combination of the various tactics.

As for the betrothed couples, there was no opportunity for privacy. They would have to become friends as husbands and wives... if they could.

Another day saw a visit to the Princess Corinna Orphanage, named for a long-ago royal who died in childhood. The orphanage took children of all races, gave them a rudimentary education, and arranged employment for them... usually as servants. They were neat and clean and carefully well-behaved—at least on the day of the royal visit—and were not learning petty crime on the street. The hospice seemed a worthy institution. The workhouse was grimmer than Nathaniel had expected, and he did not approve of the way that the genders were separated, and husbands and wives kept apart

—and their children were taken away to the orphanage— but it was certainly better than starvation.

As for the prison, he thought it a far better incentive to honesty than hanging, since the manifest misery of the chained and shaven-headed felons, working on a road gang, struck him as far worse than death. They certainly kept the highways in superb condition.

Other visits were paid to more pleasant establishments: to libraries and schools and the Merchant's Exchange. They paid visits to the headquarters of the Royal Army and saw their drill, which was crisp and admirable, but no more polished than that instilled by Loghain. The days passed quickly, and almost before they knew it, they found themselves in Nevarra Cathedral in front of the Grand Cleric, who performed a ceremony between Nathaniel and Adam on the one hand, and two noble ladies dressed in traditional Nevarran bridal costume on the other.

"Look, Berenice, they are returning. You really should tell him."

Within four days of their weddings, the embassy party was being hosted by Callista's cousin, the Prince of Cumberland, heir to the throne. Everything was being conducted civilly, but with dispatch, for the Fereldan lords were anxious to return home as quickly as possible. The two young Nevarran women stood looking out over Cumberland's harbor, watching the activity below, as the ships were prepared for their departure

the next day. The people were hardly bigger than ants, but Arlessa Callista Howe had no trouble making out Nathaniel's long figure.

"It's too late," said Lady Berenice Hawke. "I didn't dare tell him before. If I tell him now, he'll probably kill me, once he gets me back to Ferelden. Or he'll toss me overboard, when we're at sea. If only I were prettier! If only I weren't cursed with this awful hair! Remember the old song about the lady and the knight of the Southland? Once he had her alone by the sea, he made her take off her wedding clothes so he could sell them after he drowned her like his other brides."

"And if *you* remember, the lady threw the knight in the sea instead, when his back was turned! Lord Adam would never do such a thing. And even if he wanted to, Nathaniel would not permit it."

It was like whistling in the dark. Everything seemed to be going well enough. Nothing, surely, could be as embarrassing and frightening as their weddings nights, each of them put into bed naked in bedchambers at the royal hostel, sheets pulled up to their chins; each with a strange young man—a handsome young man they hardly knew—beside them, equally naked. The Grand Cleric had offered prayers, and the priests had sprinkled them with holy water. Then the guests—including the King and Queen in Callista's case—had departed in formal procession, and the door was shut.

It could have been quite horrible, and had been rather the opposite. Nathaniel was a gentle lover, and Adam's charm

was not laid aside in private. Nevertheless, both girls wondered if all this courtesy and consideration were assumed for the benefit of the alliance. They would be alone and unprotected in the wilds of Ferelden. There was no end of stories, like the one Berenice mentioned, telling what happened to such girls. And if Lord Adam were to discover that there was magic in Berenice's family...

True, the Fereldans were all perfectly friendly with Warden Jowan, who was an actual mage himself. Of course, he was a Warden, and this was a Blight; but it was a little frightening to see him performing magic. The King and Queen had Healers among their servants, but they were carefully guarded by Templars, and were never seen in public. Life among the Fereldans was certainly run on very different lines than in Nevarra. After tomorrow, nothing would ever be the same.

Callista and Berenice were glad that the journey to Cumberland had been undertaken under heavy guard. Twice the party had been attacked, the second time by a very strong force. The two girls and their maidservants had clung to each other in their carriage, listening to the clash of swords and the screams and curses of fighting men. Once, someone had rattled the door latch, and then there had been a horrible chopping noise, and a gurgle, and a thud. The elven guardsman, Fenris, spoke to them from outside in his beautiful soothing voice, assuring them that they were perfectly safe. For all that, they noticed the blood on the carriage door when they next stepped out of it.

Nevarran noblewomen knew politics, and they knew that their

attackers were no mere bandits. There were Orlesian agents in Nevarra, even though there was currently no Orlesian ambassador, since a state of war existed between the two countries. There might even be ships waiting to attack them at sea. It all depended on how quickly the agents had ridden south, how large a force they could muster, and if they had managed to cross the Waking Sea and persuaded anyone to give them ships.

In case of such pursuit, the story being told was that they were sailing to a Ferelden fortress called West Hill, while actually they were going to Amaranthine. Berenice had heard their husbands talking, and so knew that they had not thought it wise to insult the Queen by refusing her plan to ride to Cumberland. However, sailing from Cumberland meant that Orlais was on the other side of the Narrows of the Waking Sea. They must pass the great port of Jader on their way to Kirkwall, and the voyage would last at least three days. Much could happen, between the weather and hostile warships.

The Prince gave them a festive dinner, and his best wishes. His good humor was no doubt enhanced by the prospect of the daughter of an attainted traitor leaving her homeland forever. Callista smiled dutifully, but something in her face caught Nathaniel's notice, and he took her hand in his.

It was a slight gesture, but at the moment it meant all the world to her. She managed a better smile for her husband, and for the first time believed that a new start in a new country might really be the good thing that Queen Melantha had told her it was.

Berenice was not so hopeful. She did not tell Adam Hawke about her brother that night; nor did she tell him the next night, as Nevarra faded into the horizon behind them.

Thanks to all my reviewers: Girl-chama, sizuka2, almostinsane, anon, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Nemrut, Blinded in a bolthole, NIX"S WARDEN, mille libri, brrt, KrystylSky, Phygmalion, Mike3207, darksky01, Have Socks. Will Travel, JackOfBladesX, KnightOf HolyLight, Robbie the Phoenix, Costin, jnybot, Josie Lange, amanda weber, GLCW2, Chandagnac, Jenna53, anon, Guest, Herebedragons66, and bladerunner12-57.

*All right. I have now read Asunder and seen Dawn of the Seeker. I won't get started on their relative merits—except to point out to all those who think my Bronwyn is super-powered that she is absolutely nothing—**nothing** in comparison with canon goddess Cassandra Pentaghast, who can cut through twenty blood mages, none of which can even get off a spell, and who can kill a half-dozen dragons in a single battle... single-handed. I truly, truly dislike Cassandra as presented, but not as much as I dislike Tallis, another canon goddess blindly worshiped by many. For those of you who like Cassandra, be apprised that Callista, as her cousin, somewhat resembles her—at least as far as the complexion, black hair, and amber eyes.*

However, Cassandra's existence calls me to establish some canon dates. My story is now in early Dragon 9:31, in the

month of Wintermarch. Based on remarks in Dawn of the Seeker, it is apparent that the final events of Dragon Age II in Kirkwall have already recently occurred before the events of the film (the default outcome is that the Circle of Mages was annulled. I pause in near-silence over the crime against humanity which is the mass murder of every man, woman, and child in the Kirkwall Circle, collectively punished for the crime of a foreign apostate mage who was never a member of said Circle.) and go on to further observe that since the fall of the Kirkwall Circle is dated as 9:37 and the Circles have not been dissolved, I would date Dawn of the Seeker as happening in late 9:37 or early 9:38, since we do not hear of the Orlesian Civil War, which play an important part in Asunder, and which we know begins in 9:38. This is all important because I am attempting to guess the age of Cassandra Pentaghast, who interrogates Varric Tethras in 9:40. She appears to be quite young in Dawn of the Seeker, and so I guess her age in that adventure as no more than 23, tops. That would give her a date of birth of 9:13-14. I am thus putting her age at 15 in my story, which makes her just a bit too young to be interesting to Nathaniel or Adam. Besides, she already ardently wants to join the Chantry in some capacity, in order to fight mages. She would be 25-26 when she meets Varric, which seems about right. Thus, no romance for Cassandra with either Nathaniel or Adam.

The poem is from Merlin and Vivien in Tennyson's Idylls of the King. Berenice references the ballad "May Colvin."

96. Wintermarch

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 96: Wintermarch

Fergus and Anora announced their betrothal at a dinner party on the eighth of Wintermarch. The wedding was to take place on the twelfth of Guardian, and had scandalized many people by its early date. The two most concerned, however, agreed that the marriage could not wait. Either the darkspawn or the Orlesians could be upon them at any moment. If they did not marry now, who knew when they would?

Arl Leonas Bryland and his arlessa were not yet back in Denerim to attend the dinner, though they were expected within a few days. Arl Wulffe was also down in his own fiefdom. Arl Teagan had taken his young bride to his manor at Rainesfere. Loghain had left orders for all his nobles to muster for duty on the tenth of Guardian. Some, either too old or unsuited to arms, would be sending the captains of their militias instead. Fergus and Anora had set the date for the wedding to take place during the muster, since this would allow more people to witness their wedding than would ordinarily be present in the capital.

In preparation for this, most nobles were out in the country,

giving last-minute instructions to their stewards and seneschals. Thus, the only other great nobles at the dinner were the Arl and Arlessa of Denerim. Anora would not have chosen Habren as a companion at any time, but on this particular occasion it was especially unsatisfactory. Habren certainly appeared to be satisfied with herself. It was harder to read her husband's face. It was unbelievable to Anora that he could like Habren, much less be in love with her, but she had to give him credit for tolerance. Whenever Habren said anything that could reasonably be expected to raise a blush, Kane wisely did not seem to hear her. What was more unpleasant was the expression on Habren's face when any woman dared to speak to her handsome husband... or even to look at him.

Two new nobles were at the table, looking desperately uncomfortable. Bann Alistair and Bann Cauthrien at least were properly dressed. Anora had sent Cauthrien a gift of two gowns, so her childhood companion could not make the excuse of having no clothes. Anora had no idea where Alistair had found his own finery, but he looked quite nice, and just as he should. Some young ladies tried to flirt with him, but he stared at them all in exactly the same way: like a deer run down by hounds. He managed to exchange a few, nervous words with Cauthrien, whom he knew. Anora could not hear what they were talking about.

In the end, Anora and Fergus focused on each other, which was the nicest outcome, anyway. It was growing harder and harder to resist their mutual attraction and keep faith with their

plans. Nothing must cast a shadow on the legitimacy of any prospective heir. Yes, there were herbal teas, but Anora had never before used them, and she began to now, there would inevitably be talk. They were public figures; they had no reasonable expectation of privacy.

"I predicted the match," whispered Lady Seria Mac Coe, immensely smug. "Didn't I?"

"Most of Denerim predicted it," her daughter-in-law whispered back. "Who else could she marry? If a man climbed a tower to rescue me from poison and carried me all the way down, he'd deserve proper thanks for it!"

"Another match between Gwaren and Highever," muttered Bann Ceorlic to his mother. "That's a lot of power for just two families."

"At least," his mother, the Dowager Lady Rosalyn sneered, "that peasant girl can no longer Queen it over us. She'll be a subject, like the rest of us. And the poor King's ashes hardly cold..."

"A subject married to the heir to the throne!" grunted Ceorlic. "And for that matter, she was a more civilized choice than her father! There's nothing to choose between Loghain and Bronwyn and Anora and Fergus: both ways we've got a Cousland and a commoner. You'd think the Couslands would have more pride."

Their conversation was attracting attention, so Rosalyn gave

her son a hard nudge, and began talking loudly of the weather.

Teyrn Fergus had engaged a very fine musician for the evening, who brought with her a little elven apprentice. The Nevarran woman played quietly throughout the meal, and then sang songs and told stories. The little elf danced charmingly, dressed in a costume that evoked a delicate snowflake. Afterwards, some of the guests politely called a servant with a silver platter over, and put coin for the performers on it. Other guests, less considerately, threw the coins at the child's feet, and chuckled to see her scramble for them. Mistress Zoe bowed, thanked the nobles for their generosity, and afterward used the experience to teach her apprentice something about noble titles not guaranteeing noble behavior—a lesson that Amethyne already knew too well. In the end, coin was a good thing, and one could despise the uncouth in private. Between the Queen and her brother the Teyrn, they were better protected than other musicians who had no powerful patrons.

During a lull, Anora spoke to Arl Kane, on her left.

"And how are your dear little sisters faring? It is so fortunate that they have each other's company."

"My thanks, Your Majesty. They're well and happy. They've got a clever governess and they're very good girls to begin with. They never give me a moment's trouble."

Habren bridled at his words. She had told Kane, again and

again, all the wicked, mischievous things those wretched little brats had done, but he never seemed to hear her. It was so infuriating. He was her husband, and should believe whatever she said. What difference did it make whether what she said was true or not?

And those girls... they schemed together and tattled on her behind her back. Habren just knew it. Worse yet, one of the bitches in the Denerim kennels would whelp soon, and Kane had said that the brats would have the first go at imprinting the puppies. Clearly, Habren should have precedence.

She glared at Lady Clemency, who was leaning over the table, staring at Kane. What a slut, and her husband right there beside her. It was disgusting, how women were always leering at Kane. He was Habren's, and they would do better to chase after that bastard of Maric's, though he was a hopeless bumpkin. Really! His mother must have been a washerwoman.

And that governess of theirs was another sore point. The girl was nothing more than a servant, when all was said and sifted, and Kane paid entirely too much attention to her. Why did she have to be young and pretty? Why couldn't she be old and ugly and a good disciplinarian who would whip the little brats when they deserved it? Habren had asked Kane to get rid of the girl, but he always changed the subject; giving her compliments or presents, smiling at her in the way that was so distracting. Sulking, she did not bother to listen to the rest of the Queen's conversation.

Kane had to, and was faintly annoyed. The Dowager Queen expected him to preside in the monthly judicial sessions, overseeing the civil and criminal cases and hearing petitions. So far, the seneschal had done that for him, but everyone seemed to think it was his duty to make an appearance at some point. Kane hated debate and discussion and nitpicking. His brother was always suing someone or other, and going on and on about the wording of the laws. To this day, Kane was bored witless even thinking about it. If the Dowager thought it all so Maker-blessed important, why didn't she do it herself?

She anticipated his objection, being a horribly clever woman.

"It is a duty I would undertake myself, but my office as Chancellor makes it impossible. I must hear cases at a higher level—for example, if one noble has a claim against another. I cannot hear the city cases as well. I think you would find it interesting, my lord; and you would learn much about the city in such a way."

This was worse than Loghain telling him that he should take an interest in harbor defenses. Much worse. Kane could see the point of defending his property against an attack by foreigners, but he could not care less about slum dwellers pilfering small clothes off a laundry line or elves knifing each other. Maybe he really ought to have a fine suit of armor made, and walk down to the harbor with his officers. If he did that, he'd have an excuse to avoid the law court.

"I say it's time to go," Alistair declared, thumping the long

table in the Wardens' Hall. "We've had plenty of rest and spent enough coin here in Denerim. I want to have a look at Soldier's Peak, and then go west and help Bronwyn."

"And you should have a look at that land of yours," Petra advised. "Maybe it's nice."

"Maybe," Alistair muttered, looking hunted, trying not to imagine the horror of presenting himself as a *nobleman* before the people of Stonehaven. At least he would have a mabari beside him. Fondly he rubbed Scrapper's ears. Imprinting his very own mabari was an honor and a privilege beyond any he had ever dreamed. One being in all the world put him first. It was better than being a bann. For that matter, he thought Scrapper would be a more impressive bann than Alistair himself. But why worry about that that? There were the darkspawn to hunt down, first of all.

"Let us go then," Danith agreed, rather tired of the shemlen town. "But perhaps we should leave a few here in case there is word from any of the other parties."

"And nobody who hasn't already been to Soldier's Peak," suggested Maeve. "Everybody should go there at least once."

"I'd like to *live* there," Quinn said wistfully. "I could go hunting."

Nuala and Steren exchanged a glance. They could not agree more. The boy was a good, sensible boy, even though he had, unfortunately, been born a shemlen.

"I'd like to go," Niall said quietly. "It's a better, safer place for mages. I know that Bronwyn's done wonders, but Uldred and his people are either locked up in Fort Drakon or traveling with army units. It's out on the street that I feel uncomfortable. The soldiers are friendly, but plenty of the common folk are still suspicious. And the Templars are watching."

"But up at Soldier's Peak there's that horrible old blood mage," Petra objected. "I can't say I'm looking forward to meeting *him*."

"He knows a lot, Petra," Niall said, mild and soothing. "He knows more than just blood magic. And it's like speaking to a history book. *Avernus* is really *interesting*. Besides," he added, for her ears alone. "Being up at the Peak.. in the Mage's Tower... it's like having our own Circle, far away from all the rubbish of the Chantry. The other Wardens have no trouble with us. We could—" his voice dropped to a thin whisper "I've been thinking that we could take in some apostates... maybe some children with magic. Really run an independent Circle. No Templars at all."

Petra looked at him in astonishment, and then remembered that he was an Isolationist. "We can't do anything until the Blight is over."

He bit his lip, and sighed. "Right. After the Blight is over."

Ketil and Idunn agreed to stay at the Compound. Both the dwarves enjoyed the city life of Denerim, and were not thrilled at the idea of a march through the snow, even though most of

the journey would be underground.

"We'll pass on any messages," Idunn assured Alistair. "It looks like most of the action is in the west anyway, out by Orzammar."

Ketil shrugged. "And if I never see Orzammar again, that's fine with me!"

The party had the maps and the notes. Alistair could hardly wait to escape from Denerim, with its fancy dinners and the pressing attentions of strange young ladies. Nonetheless, he knew he could not simply slip away and disappear. Anora made him nervous, but Fergus was a friend, and so it was to Fergus he went.

"All right. It sounds sensible. Better to find your way before spring, certainly," the Teyrn of Highever agreed. "I'll let Anora know. You can be excused from the general muster, since you're a Warden, and you've never had a chance to raise a levy on your bannorn. We'll want to write some letters to Bronwyn and Loghain and send them by you. Maker only knows what they're up to. Go to your Warden fortress and see if you can watch the sea from it. Bronwyn didn't tell me about that. We're worried about an invasion fleet this spring."

Feeling wretched, Alistair wished he had the nerve to tell Fergus that Wardens were supposed to be neutral. They should be totally focused on the Blight. It was hopeless. He had since heard how the Orlesian Knight-Divine and that Duke

had come and threatened everybody. Couldn't Riordan and the other Orlesian Wardens make them understand that what they were doing was wrong?

Fergus had originally planned for Bann Cauthrien to go with Alistair, taking along a strong unit of Maric's Shield with them. Fergus and Anora agreed that at this point Loghain would want to be reinforcing the west. However, now there was a task for Cauthrien and her soldiers to undertake in Denerim. All things considered, it would be best for Cauthrien to handle it, and then wait for Loghain's arrival. If he wanted to take her west, there would be plenty of time then.

Anora had shared with Fergus and Cauthrien Loghain's secret message about Bann Frandarel. She had not been slow to act upon it. Agents had already been dispatched to make a discreet search of the premises and to bring back anything incriminating they found. For that matter, there were some scraps and notes concerning him among the documents that Bronwyn had discovered among the papers belonging to a notorious Orlesian bard. Altogether, Anora was confident that they would have plenty of evidence against Bann Frandarel, that notorious sybarite. Father was furious at the state of West Hill. He might well be furious at the luxury and the secret treasures in the bann's Denerim mansion.

By the time father was back in Denerim and the nobles assembled, the evidence against Bann Frandarel should be enough to satisfy even the most suspicious noble. And within a day or two, Cauthrien would make the arrest. Frandarel's estate was heavily guarded. In case of a fight, the City Guard

was not adequate.

At that very moment, Loghain was in West Hill, stiffening the defenses of the ancient fortress in a way that brooked no opposition. Lackadaisical guards now stood at attention, their drill much smarter, their appearance less disreputable. His people were spreading out, scouting the bannorn, making new maps. They had found the old building Tara had declared to be the location of the Aeonar prison. Loghain went out himself to take a look, and was unimpressed. If the time and necessity came, there would be no problem locking the place down.

He was more concerned with the general condition of West Hill itself. Aside from the dilapidated fortress, the whole bannorn was seriously underpopulated, and it took time for Loghain to understand why.

After a thorough perusal of the bannorn's accounts, it became evident that Frandarel had been demanding excessive tithes and taxes of his freeholders, and then when they were unable to pay, he was evicting them and seizing their lands. Part of his motivation was to eliminate inconvenient witnesses to his secret dealings with foreign powers. Then, too, he had decided that he needed a great deal more pasturage for his flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Destroying the freeholders created great swathes of land for said livestock. It had not been evident at first, since the animals were being sheltered for the winter, but now Loghain knew. It was difficult not to dash back to Denerim at once, since what Frandarel

had done was exactly what the Orlesians had done to Loghain's family, decades before. It would not stand. A large prosperous freeholding class was the backbone of Ferelden. It was the foundation of its productivity, and the source of its war-time levies. Frandarel's livestock would be seized along with the rest of his holdings, and it would feed the army very well indeed.

He tasked a clerk with making a list of the dispossessed freeholders. Perhaps some would return and be repatriated. West Hill would be a royal desmesne, its coin flowing into the kingdom's treasury. Frandarel was unmarried and childless, so there was unlikely to be a blood feud.

What to do with the man's sprawling Denerim estate? That would be seized by the Crown, too. Anora had an idea in her head about some sort of school. What was it called? A college... a university? It sounded like nonsense to Loghain, since Anora only wanted such a thing because the Empress had one. It would be useful only for the idle children of the nobles, who had better things to do. However, if there was some sort of school to teach real, practical things, *that* might not be such a bad idea.

He thought about it at length, alone in the rooms he had made his in West Hill. Sipping his wine and scratching out some ideas on parchment, Loghain became more and more reconciled to the concept of a school.

Why should the Chantry have a monopoly on education? As they taught, they taught lessons in obedience to the Divine

and her priests. Maybe another school, teaching loyalty to the kingdom and respect for its traditions might be a very fine thing. The children of freeholders and merchants and artisans could go there for a year or two, and learn their numbers and letters and the history of their country with a minimum of twaddle. They would go home and spread their learning, like yeast in bread dough. Educating a young woman was tantamount to educating all her future children.

A library was not so bad, either. Loghain disliked the idea of other kingdoms keeping knowledge from Ferelden. They could have a collection of books for people to study, and some guards to keep the books in the library, where they belonged.

But the estate was so large. Surely only a few rooms were needed for the school and the library. Perhaps a portion could be given to Cauthrien or Alistair for a townhouse. Perhaps there was enough for both of them. He must think it over. Bronwyn might have some ideas.

Now that she crossed his mind, it occurred to him that she had not been in good spirits when they parted at Gherlen's Halt. Something was troubling her, poor girl, but he had not had time or leisure to discover it. When she was in the mood to talk, she would talk, and no doubt inform him that he had forgotten some important date or anniversary. Come to think of it, he realized that he could not remember her naming day. Was that what had put her in a temper? He must give her a nice present. That had always worked fairly well with Celia.

Of course, it could be something far more serious, and if so,

he was sorry for it, but there was no way he could put off defending the Coastlands.

Thinking of Bronwyn caused him to think of Highever. In a day or two, it would be time to go there. Fergus had set people to work repairing the damage, but Loghain wanted to make sure they were following their teyrn's orders.

He must get Cauthrien out here, and some of his other first-rate officers. For that matter, Alistair needed to come out and survey his new lands. Loghain wanted someone watching the Jader Bay Hills.

Alistair enjoyed the journey north, glad to be away from the nobles. Scrapper trotted along sturdily at his side, sniffing here and there. Alistair had been given the story of the Architect and the taking of Kal'Hiol. He knew about Soldier's Peak and how it had been cleansed of its plague of demons. It was a quiet journey, full of cheerful talk and reminiscences.

He had wondered if Adaia would ask to stay behind in Denerim, but she had not. Months in the south had changed her, and she felt herself to be a warrior among warriors. And so she wished to remain.

"I want to see Soldier's Peak, too! It's supposed to be great! I wonder if the mountains by the Coastlands look like the mountains by Ostagar. Maybe we should set up a workshop at the castle like we had down south."

"Not a bad idea," Emrys remarked. "If there's an explosion, we won't bother the neighbors."

"Oh, you!" Adaia laughed. "Anyway, it's good to be on the move again. If we'd stayed any longer in Denerim, my father would have arranged another marriage and had me washing pots and some man's dirty shirts, Warden or not!"

Alistair smiled tightly. Whatever ideas he had cherished about Adaia had been proved delusional. It embarrassed him now. He had been as silly as Cullen over Tara. Why would an elf be interested in a human—someone from a race that had oppressed and humiliated elves? Adaia would do nothing that would hurt her father and her people, and they would be horrified if she took up with Alistair. For that matter, he now realized that she had never given him any real encouragement.

All he wanted was someone of his own. Well, an actual female, since he already had a dog. Grey Wardens were not forbidden to have families, and a family would be worth more than some fancy title and a bannorn—or even the name "Fitzmaric."

Fitzmaric. Alistair understood that Loghain wanted to reward him for good service. Bronwyn and Teagan meant well, too. They simply did not understand him. Being a Warden was the best thing in the world... as long as he could be a Warden with a wife... and maybe a child. Maybe two, but he didn't want to push his luck. He wanted to be the best Warden he could. He'd also like to be the best husband and father

anybody had ever seen. As long as he did things as differently as King Maric had, Alistair figured he would do all right.

Not that he could say that in public. Everybody always went on about how great King Maric had been, but Alistair had not exactly been allowed to see the "great" part. Loghain seemed to have done the heavy lifting for the king, as far as ruling was concerned. Queen Rowan had died young, and from what was rumored, not very happy in her marriage. Maric had raised Cailan, and while Alistair disliked thinking ill of the dead, it was impossible not to recognize that his half-brother had been spoiled and self-absorbed: a bad king and a bad war-leader. Maric had tossed Alistair away like an unwanted kitten. Maybe Alistair was not very important in the grand scheme of things, but he knew he would never treat any child of his the way Maric had treated him.

He wished he could have chosen his own name. Bronwyn had told him that they had considered Fitztheirin or Fitzroy. Alistair liked either of those better than Fitzmaric. Or maybe he would have preferred Fitzwarden. Fitzduncan...

Fitzfiona. Wouldn't that be a kick in the Landsmeet's flabby, collective arse? He couldn't blame his mother for what had happened. The Wardens in Weisshaupt and Orlais had been hard on her. All she could do was get her child to Maric and ask him to help her. If Maric had felt anything for her, he certainly had not felt enough to do much for her son. Probably it was one of those whirlwind romances, born of shared danger and hardship. Petra said that was not a good basis for a relationship. Petra was fond of giving him advice. She

thought that shared interests and similar views and backgrounds were a more reliable grounding for a relationship. And then Niall pointed out that nobody in the Circle was actually allowed to have a real relationship. unless she counted hasty, furtive couplings out of sight of the Templars, so she was not exactly speaking from experience. Alistair grinned, remembering. Petra had got so *furious*...

Maybe he should be looking somewhere else for a special someone. All the female Wardens seemed to have their own goals and their own agendas. Or they were too intellectual or too bossy. Or they wanted to keep to their own kind. It would be really nice if someone would put Alistair first. Just once. Other than Scrapper, of course. He glanced fondly at the mabari.

First there was Bronwyn, who Alistair had thought must be the girl of his dreams: beautiful and brave and kind to him. That last should have been a clue. Bronwyn had always treated him like a kid brother. She thought she knew what was best for him, and expected him to do as he was told. She might even love him, but it was a big sister's love. Bossy? That was too weak a word.

Leliana was really pretty and really sweet, but she had never given him any encouragement. At all. Morrigan—in that nasty way of hers—had once remarked that Leliana probably fancied Bronwyn more than Alistair.

He had thought Astrid was interested in him. She had helped a lot and really encouraged him when they were down in

Ostagar together. There had been times when she had put her hand on his arm and stood close, and it had made him feel sort of... warm. Maybe if he had paid some attention in return it would have been different. Now she was off in the west, and he had no idea what she was even alive.

Adaia. He wasn't even going to think about that. He was an idiot.

Petra was really smart. Good-looking, too...

No. He wasn't going there. It was time to accept that his Grey Warden sisters were really like... *sisters*.

They walked, and kept walking. Alistair followed the map, proud of his acquired skills. He was getting really good at this, and traveling underground was not bad at all, when they weren't being attacked by darkspawn.

A party of Legion of the Dead was at Kal'Hirol, cleaning and repairing. Word had been sent to Orzammar, giving the specification for two sets of barrier doors. If they could be manufactured and installed, Kal'Hirol might be fairly defensible.

"*Atrast vala*, Wardens!" a Legionnaire greeted them.

It was a real success, the retaking of this thaig. The Grey Wardens had achieved something really important here. Bronwyn had felt that the Wardens were not doing enough to help the dwarves, but the Fereldan Wardens were making up

everyone else's deficiencies. They set up camp in what used to be the market district. A lot of the Taint had been burned away already, and the dwarves were proud to point out some of the restored art work that had survived.

And all the Wardens were getting on fairly well. Alistair had not worked with Danith a great deal, and had been warned that she was touchy and hostile to humans. However, he had not had any great problem with her. She preferred the company of the other elves, but everyone had special friends among the Wardens. Nobody could claim that Danith favored the elves to the point of giving them easier duties. She certainly wasn't behaving in the way that Aeron had complained about in Velanna, whom Alistair hardly knew at all.

Best of all, it was not snowing when they made the easy walk outside to Soldier's Peak.

"Well! This is not bad!" Oghren rumbled. "Not bad at all!"

"Not bad?" Alistair burst out. In the clear winter air, the massive outline of the castle soared up to the roof of the world; every stone, every tower realer than real. A pang of tender anguish tugged at his heart, imagining Duncan at the gate, master of the Warden's keep, at home with his brothers and sisters. *If only...*

He mustn't, mustn't think that way. Duncan would be proud of them, and that was no reason to be sad.

He flung out his arms, and yelled. "It's beautiful!" Scrapper jumped and barked, happy his human was happy. People began emerging from the building surrounding the open courtyard; people with friendly faces and words of welcome.

"An impressive fortress, if antiquated," Sten agreed, with measured approval. "The approach is particularly defensible. I understand that Bronwyn has ordered that steps be taken to make it self-supporting. That is wise, given the unsettled nature of this country."

The rest of the party dissolved into pleasant conversation as they made their way to the castle.

"I can't wait to see Leliana's improvements," Maeve said to Quinn. "She's already done so much!"

"I hope our quarters are nice," Adaia whispered to Siofranni. "They'd have to be pretty amazing to beat the Wardens' Compound."

Siofranni agreed. For a place built by shemlens, the Wardens' Compound was extremely comfortable—almost unnaturally so. "I think it will be pleasant to live here in the mountains," she said softly. "How blue the sky is!"

Niall touched Petra's arm. "That's the mages' tower. It doesn't have all the beautiful details or colored windows that we had at the Circle," he said, almost apologizing. "But no Templars will be watching us sleep! And we'll have private rooms... with doors."

Petra smiled. Blood mage on the premises or no, *that* sounded good to her.

The double doors opened.

"Alistair?" called Leliana. "Is that you? Oh, it has been so long since I saw you! You have a puppy!"

She gave him a hug, but she gave everybody a hug. It was warm inside, and Leliana immediately began showing them the place, promising food and warm drinks.

It was a good day.

Alistair liked the meal and the prospect of a decent bed. He approved, half hearing Leliana, all the plans and schemes for improvements. He let her show him the Peak, including, it seemed, every pot, every length of rope, and every barrel of apples.

"We have done all we can do before the spring," she nattered on. "The weather is too bad for glaziers and lumber wagons. In the spring we shall set to work, and in no time the Peak will be quite a different place. We have not yet gone to the Mages' Tower. You must meet Avernus, of course, but I shall let Niall make the introductions. I cannot bear that dreadful old man, and he always keeps to his tower..."

"Tower!" Alistair almost shouted. "Leliana, I saw that really tall tower. I need to go there. Can you see the sea from there?"

"I suppose so," she answered, a little confused. "The staircase is very rickety and must be repaired in the spring. It is too narrow for anything practical. There seemed little reason to go up there, and it is so dusty..."

"Humor me."

From the upper level of the main keep one could access a door. A narrow winding staircase spiraled up and up to shafts of light overhead. Startled bats squeaked and flapped out of the way. Scrapper barked and dashed after him. The tower stank of droppings and small dead animals. Alistair paid no heed to any of that, and ran up and up, round and round, chasing the elusive sunlight, until he was almost dizzy.

Abruptly he burst in bright sunshine again, stumbling on rough stone. The conical roof of the tower was almost skeletal. The battlements here—the most exposed to wind and weather—had deteriorated badly: mortar was crumbling in places, and the whole thing looked ready to collapse. Alistair noted it absently, entranced by the view, looking in every direction. He picked up Scrapper, so he could see, too.

"This is amazing!" he shouted down into the black cylinder below. "I can see everything!"

He should have brought the map up here. Another time. The northeast stretched out over a great broad plain, the rightful domain of the Wardens. He could see the Coast Road, as it curved to the south: a thin grey line against the dark green of the pines. Further south he could make out what must be a

village, the nearby fields a dull patchwork of brownish squares. The west was a wild and snowy mountainscape, but in the foreground were the remains of orchards, the bare trees set in neat rows. And due north—

"The sea! The sea! I've got to tell Bronwyn!"

Beyond the mountain peaks glittered the Waking Sea, reflecting sunlight like a warrior's shield. Sea met sky: grey to burning blue, misty at the horizon. Alistair realized that he had never actually seen the sea before. Even when he was in Denerim, the Warden Compound was on the other side of the city, and Alistair always had work to do. There had been no reason to go to the docks, and no one had ever mentioned that the sea was so *beautiful*. No wonder people wanted to be sailors.

"Alistair!" Leliana's voice was faint and echoing. "Are you all right?"

"Yes! You should see this!"

"Come on down! You need to meet Avernus!"

Reluctantly, craning his neck to catch a last bright glimpse of the view, Alistair put down his puppy and went down the stairs, turning and turning. If this tower was not on Leliana's repair list now, it would be just as soon as he got down to her and added it himself.

His visit with Avernus was not so agreeable. Interesting, yes,

but not very pleasant. The old man was creepy: creepier than Sten, even, which was saying a lot. The newcomers were given a new version of the Joining potion, and Avernus explained its advantages in detail. Maybe too much detail. Petra, on the other hand, was listening, and even asking questions. The old man wanted to keep a mage with him. He seemed really pleased with the recent crop of Wardens, which was nice, Alistair supposed. What he didn't like was the hungry gleam in the old man's eyes. If he had needed one, here was another reason for Alistair to be glad he hadn't been born a mage.

He was given a cursory tour of the big workroom, and various doors were pointed out to him. Apparently there was space for quite a few mages, and Petra and Niall vanished down a staircase to claim their own quarters. Alistair was led back to the main keep and down to the barracks and given his own, a nice little private room.

To his embarrassment, it was clear that everyone at the Peak regarded him as their Senior Warden, and—unfortunately—*in charge*. He supposed he was. Bronwyn had named Danith a Senior Warden, but he had nearly a year on her as a Warden. Right. He had practiced up a bit, down at Ostagar, and was not so completely hopeless as he had once been led to believe.

He *was* in charge, therefore. What should he do? He loved Soldier's Peak. It was a great place, and a true home for the Wardens. It would be very pleasant to lay about here at the

Peak, eating and drinking and sparring, and talking about all the things they would do when more materials and craftsmen visited. But what should he do *now*?

There was no doubt in his mind. He should go find Bronwyn. Somewhere, out in the west, whatever was going to happen would involve her. He needed to get out there and do his part.

And so he said at breakfast the next morning. There were murmurs and whispers, but Leliana supported him.

"You are right. We have done here all that can be done for the time being. We need to look for the Archdemon. I think we should all go with Alistair."

"What?" Quinn blinked. "Already?" He had planned to go hunting today: a long walk through the white and silent forest.

"Well..." Alistair allowed. "Not this minute. The day after tomorrow we'll go to the Deep Roads. I guess some people should stay here..." He left his next thought unsaid, but it hung suspended in the air, for all sensible Wardens to understand.

...In case the worst happens.

Anders was hovering again.

"Are you *sure* you're up to this, Bronwyn?"

She was so irritated that she nearly punched him, but that would have been rotten of her.

Instead, she got a grip on her temper and squeezed his shoulder, with a laugh.

"Yes. I'm up to this. Moping alone in my room would be far, far worse."

Very quietly, with maximum secrecy, the Wardens were building a staircase and a wide platform at the chamber in Rousten Thaig where they found the openings to the surface. Once everything was built, they could put a regular watch on the Imperial Highway and Chateau Solidor. It was painstaking work. The stairs must be sturdy, since a large number of soldiers might well be using them someday. The rockslide had been mostly cleared away. Jukka's broken body had long since been given to the Stone. It made Bronwyn sad to be here, but it was better to face up to the task at hand and get it done, than shrinking away like a coward. Her body had healed rapidly; her spirits were still low.

Anders face assumed a most disgusted expression. "I understand the importance of keeping occupied, but these are really not the most pleasant surroundings. How about reading a nice book? Listening to music? Taking up embroidery?"

"Don't speak of embroidery to me," she warned him. "If you knew what I went through in my misspent youth..." She laughed again. "I'm a horrible seamstress. I absolutely loathe embroidery and I'm no good at it at all."

Catrina was passing by, carrying lumber, and stopped in

surprise. "Really? I love to embroider. I do blackwork. It's so relaxing."

Bronwyn blinked. Catriona's family must have been quite well to do, for her to have learned a skill that was generally the preserve of young ladies. "Well, to each her own. If I need any blackwork done, I shall call upon you."

"Do. I really love it."

Toliver was enjoying his time to shine. He actually knew quite a bit about carpentry, and thus had designed the project and was supervising it. Supervising in the sense of doing much of the work. Cathair, too, knew how to work with wood, and his contribution had been to make the staircase good-looking as well as functional. The rest of the team carried lumber and nails, held the joists in position, and were occasionally permitted to hammer, once Toliver was convinced they could manage it. He had a growing regard for Aveline's skill.

The various pieces had been cut out and numbered back at the fort by sappers and civilian craftsmen, without telling them where this was to be installed. Not even Ser Blayne or Ser Norrel knew exactly where the Queen had taken the load of lumber.

Well, of course Ser Norrel knew nothing. Bronwyn hoped it was as unpleasant for him as it was for her to live under the same roof. In fact, it was a major factor in her going back into the Deep Roads. The project was important, and it got her away from a man who had dared to call himself Bann of

Highever City. And not only that, but who had supervised the looting of her home and had not given a decent pyre to her family. How very nice that he had been so loyal to his liege lord. Bronwyn would never forgive him.

He was playing his part, however; that she must admit. She had ordered him to see if he had any mountaineers among his troops, and he had found some excellent men. Someday, they might find a way into the Rock, and it would not happen by storming the castle from below. No. Perhaps the way could be achieved by ropes and grappling hooks on a moonless night.

Morrigan much preferred flying, as she put it, "to grubbing about in the Deep Roads like a worm." Nor was she interested in learning carpentry.

Because of this, Bronwyn found her a task far more to her taste: the minute scouting and infiltration of both Chateau Solidor and Roc du Chevalier. There were few places that a hawk could not penetrate. She would return, report what she had seen, and correct Bronwyn as the latter made detailed schematics of the buildings.

Sometimes Anders went with her; sometimes she went alone. She was shot at a few times, and once a young hopeful falconer tried to catch her. It was amusing to tease the youth, but she had serious business.

The wind rushed past, lifting her up, up. Icy air was foiled by fluffed brown feathers. She soared and looped through lofty

towers, she discovered sally ports and hidden defenses, she looked down on open courtyards and secret gardens. No one was in the gardens, due to the cold weather, but they might still be interesting.

Today she visited the Chateau. and decided to penetrate to the place that Bronwyn said must be the ladies' bower. Large windows looked out upon in, and thus Bronwyn thought that the windows must belong to the solar. Morrigan thought it would be interesting to see who lived in such a place. She dropped like a stone, and then alighted easily on a bare mulberry branch. A door was nearby, which would let out into the private little pleasure ground on warm days. Unusually large windows let in the sunlight.

This was the top of one of the bigger towers. There was a watchpost beneath them, since apparently soldiers were not permitted to ascend to the very top. Very likely this was a safe and secure haven for the lord of the castle.

Edging forward on a twig, she peered in through a mullioned window.

Not the lord, then. His wife and daughters? Or sisters? The frosted panes hid details, even from the keen eyes of a hawk. The room was opulent: filled with glittering knickknacks and draped with rich silks. Two of occupants of the room were well-dressed elves, certainly servants, who were attending four gorgeously attired human women, one much older than the others. Three of the women sat in throne-like carved chairs, heaped with velvet cushions. A fire was blazing,

framed by a marble mantelpiece. One woman was reading, one was sewing on a huge embroidery hoop, another—the old lady—was feeding a fat little lapdog sweetmeats from a painted box. The fourth, who appeared to be the youngest, was walking restlessly about the room. It was not long before Morrigan was noticed.

"Oh, look!" cried the young lady, pausing in her pacing. "The poor bird! It must be so cold!"

Hawks, alas, could only smirk inwardly. Morrigan fluffed up her feathers to the puffiest degree, and shivered pathetically. Instantly, bolts were thrown and the door was cracked open.

"Here, you poor little thing! Come and get warm." Morrigan was annoyed by the simpering, high-pitched Orlesian voice. And she was not a 'little thing.' The girl was speaking to her as if to a babe in arms. Still, a warm fire was a warm fire. Morrigan cocked her head as if considering the matter. The girl opened the door further.

"Eglantine!" complained the embroideress. "You are making a draught!"

Seizing her chance, Morrigan flew in and perched on a gilded lampstand. Aside from the girl at the door, every female in the overdecorated solar shrieked in alarm.

"Ah! A bird!" screamed the reader, dropping her book. "It will dirty the portières!"

"It will tangle its horrible claws in my hair!" screeched the embroideress.

The old lady squawked, "It will eat my poor little Chou-chou!"

Morrigan had no idea what "portieres" were, but the rest sounded like fairly good fun. The dog was certainly just the right size. Perhaps later. She was here to spy, not to terrorize useless females, so she demurely hid her head under her wing, looking put-upon.

"How can you be so cruel?" cried the young girl. "It is a perfectly beautiful creature." She gave a little curtsey to Morrigan. "*Bonjour, Monseigneur Faucon.*"

Amused, Morrigan lowered her wing and stretched out her neck, almost bowing in her turn. The girl laughed in delight. It gave Morrigan a chance to study the occupants of the room. The three girls ranged in age from no older than seventeen to perhaps twenty-seven. They were not bad-looking, if one liked golden hair and hands that had never done labor. The old lady was not so comely: corpulent, daubed with heavy cosmetics, and wearing an immense—and immensely curly—red wig. She glittered with some quite nice jewels. Morrigan eyed them with a touch of envy. Something else to pursue later, perhaps.

The youngest girl cautiously reached out and stroked the hawk's head with a delicate forefinger. Morrigan permitted the caress, aware that it would be the easiest thing in the world to snap the finger right off the silly girl's hand.

"You see? The poor creature simply craved shelter. *It* is not screaming and crying, though who could blame it, enduring such a noise!"

The old lady's jowls quivered with fear and rage. "Eglantine, I command you to get rid of that filthy creature immediately!" The lapdog, used to echoing its mistress, uttered a wheezy little bark. Morrigan cocked her head. She could wolf down the creature in a flash. As if sensing its precarious situation, Chou-chou cowered among vast purple velvet skirts.

"No, I will not!" the girl replied, saucily defiant. "You might have robbed me of my kitten and you might have had my white ferret killed, Madame la Comtesse, but I shall make a pet of this beautiful hawk, even if only for a moment."

"You will do as I say!" snarled the old woman. "The Empress gave you into my care, and put you under my direction. She has no use for traitors, cousins or no. You should thank me on your knees that you have not been kneeling to the headsman instead, long ago!"

"I'm not a traitor, you miserable old cow!"

"Eglantine, don't!" whispered the reader, a girl some years older. "You'll just make it worse."

"I don't care!" Eglantine shot back. "I'm sick of her petty tyrannies and little cruelties. The hawk stays!"

"Then I," said the old lady, glaring at the girl, "shall send for

the captain of the guard and he will make short work of this creature! I shall have it killed and plucked and roasted for your dinner! How will you like *that*, Your Imperial Highness?"

More screaming. The girl who had been embroidering knocked her frame over and began pleading with the old battleaxe.

"Please, Madame Coquelicot, the bird has done nothing. Eglantine, apologize to Madame la Comtesse."

"I won't!" shouted Eglantine, "Celandine, she is foul and vile and I hate her! I hate her!" Her voice broke, and she began crying.

"You! Wench!" the old woman pointed at one of the frightened elf girls. "Fetch Monsieur le Meurtrier at once!"

The girl fled, calling for the guardsman. Spurred to action, Eglantine rushed to the door and flung it wide.

"Fly! Fly away, Monseigneur Faucon! Fly before it is too late!"

Absurd theatrics, really, but it was certainly time to be off. Morrigan had learned all she would today from this pack of dithering imbeciles. She took off and flapped around the room, creating maximum chaos. Women shrieked and clutched at their hair, their jewels, their hearts; they made little futile gestures with lily-white hands. The embroideress, overcome, slumped fainting among her cushions. The lapdog wheezed out a series of shrill barks. Morrigan dived at him and sent him

fleeing under a chair.

"Chou-chou!" wailed the old lady, but Morrigan was not done with her. The hawk's talons extended, and a furry object was snatched away, to the horror of all. Morrigan banked and speeded through the open door. Just past the battlements, she dropped the furball with careless malice.

The girls all shrieked with horror, thinking that Chou-chou would be dead before he hit the ground below. The old Countess was shrieking too, but not with any fear for her dog. Chou-chou was quite safe under the chair.

The Comtesse Coquelicot's wig, however, was doomed.

Her spirits much lifted by Morrigan's tales of high adventure, Bronwyn thought about the story, and tried to dredge up bits of what her tutor Aldous had taught her about Orlesian genealogy. It had been a long time since she had thought about it. The Empress had trounced a number of her uncles in her successful bid for the throne. Who was this Eglantine? If she was an Imperial Princess, she must be the daughter of one of those quondam uncles. Bronwyn had heard that they were dead. Celene had not killed all their children, of course, since they were useful as pawns or playthings.

Eglantine. Had she read that name somewhere? Possibly, but there were quite a few Imperial princes and princesses, and their names ran together in her memory. She remembered Prince Florestan, of course, the one that Howe had believed

she was going to marry. Bronwyn's imagination failed—in epic fashion—to imagine a world in which she herself was a mask-wearing, Game-playing Orlesian Imperial Princess. I

This girl was, though, which could make her a useful hostage. What of the other young women? They had addressed her by name, which suggested that they must be sisters or at least close relations. In the privacy of their solar, the ladies had not worn masks, which enabled Morrigan to describe them in detail.

Of course, the Empress might also consider herself well rid of them if they were taken. Perhaps she would smirk and tell the Fereldans to do as they liked. No, Bronwyn set aside the exciting plan as impractical. Solidor was worth a great deal, a captive princess was not.

Jader was worth more than a double handful of Orlesian princesses. Loghain's plan so far simply involved infiltrating Jader and damaging its facilities, making it unusable as a base from which to attack Ferelden. The more she thought about it, however, the more Bronwyn wished they could simply annex Jader. Brosca's stories about made it sound so very rich and glamorous. It would round out their west border so very nicely. A foolish dream, of course, but a beautiful one.

She returned to Gherlen's Halt to unarmor and wash, with the new information churning in her mind. As long as Morrigan was willing, she had an unparalleled opportunity to find out more about the enemy's strongholds. She must send Morrigan to the Rock again. Tomorrow, perhaps.

The cressets were lit, and they were summoned to dinner. The unappealing stodgy food was gobbled down by hungry Wardens, Bronwyn among them. Her people were cheerful enough. They did not speak openly of what they had been up to, but there were grins and winks and smug looks. For that matter, the morale of the garrison as a whole seemed fairly good. Some of that was certainly due to Loghain's appearance. Bronwyn hoped that some was due to her presence.

Her mind was too awlirl to sit and listen to jokes and stories. As soon as her dinner was complete, she retired from the hall. Everyone rose and bowed, and she gave them a grave nod of acknowledgment. Anders watched her anxiously, not entirely reassured by her wry smile. She was not alone, after all. Scout was at her heels, keeping pace with a mabari's natural dignity.

Her quarters were the best the fort afforded, but they were spare and gloomy enough. A narrow window looked west, giving her a fine view of Roc du Chevalier: splendid and ominous. The castle was too primitive for fireplaces, and thus her room was heated with a brazier filled with charcoal. There was a bed with a lumpy mattress, and a rough table with a candlestick and two unlovely chairs set opposite to one another. A trunk for her clothing, a weapons stand, and another stand for her armor composed the rest of the furnishings. At the moment the red dragon armor was displayed on the stand, like another Bronwyn, keeping watch by the door.

A servant lit her candle and added charcoal to her fire, and was dismissed.

She paced around the room, vaguely uneasy. The window drew her, and she gazed out for some time at the Rock, white in the moonlight. She paced a little more, her thoughts in thorough disorder. After some time she paused, studying her armor. Scout raised his head from his blanket in the corner, and then got up and padded over to her. His human needed companionship and attention.

"Scout, you are absolutely my best friend," she said, her hand falling comfortingly on the silky head.

That was too true for comment, so the mabari simply stood alert, pressing warmly against her leg.

"We mustn't let ourselves be distracted. It would be too easy to focus on the Orlesians and forget about the darkspawn. I hate both of them, of course, but there are some good Orlesians, like Riordan, and no good darkspawn at all."

She drifted back to the table, Scout at her side. and picked through the platter of snacks she had commanded to be provided whenever she was in the castle. She tossed Scout a rind of smoked cheese—his favorite—and then a piece of venison sausage. She popped another piece in her own mouth and munched, thinking.

"On the other hand, the Archdemon did not choose to be hunted down and Tainted, while the Empress *does* choose to

be vicious and underhanded and greedy. Then, too she could, I suppose, repent of her evil ways—not that I expect it— while the Archdemon cannot free itself of the Taint. If one looks at it that way, one could say that the Empress is actually *more* evil than the Archdemon, since she harms others of her own free will."

Another piece of sausage. It was quite good. Why could they have perfectly nice cheese and sausage, while the cook could only make the same undistinguished stew, night after night?

"And I'm simply wasting my time," she continued, explaining her thoughts to Scout. "I'm wasting my time trying to choose between them. They're not likely to give me a choice. Each of them is equally my enemy, and I can only hope they don't attack simultaneously. That would be... unfortunate."

Scout regarded her gravely, and then gave a slow blink. Then another.

"And yes, we should go to bed! Off with you!"

The mabari found his blanket, turned around three times, and settled down with a grateful sigh. Bronwyn blew out the candle and undressed in the dim firelight of the brazier.

"Ugh!"

The bedclothes were freezing. That was one thing Loghain was good for: warming her bed. Literally. Still, this time alone would clear her head of nonsense and regrets. She composed

herself for sleep, brushing aside tomorrow's tasks with grim resolve, slowing her breathing, until sleep came to her...

That night she dreamed that she was once again in Highever.

The castle was so much larger than she remembered, and full of friends and smiling faces. Mist clung to corners and tangled in her hair. Bronwyn moved from room to room, absently answering greetings from people she knew well. In the guest quarters Lady Landra smiled at her, for once not tipsy, though she lifted a silver chalice in salute. Iona reached out, touching her shyly.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for caring for my child."

She was gone, whipped away as Bronwyn descended a staircase. In the library, Aldous was tutoring those two little squires. He looked up, faded eyes crinkling, pleased at the sight of her. In the study, Dairren was reading. He glanced at her, his smile a little rueful. He lifted up the book for her to see.

"The Dragons of Tevinter. It's really interesting. You should read it again. Carefully."

"Have you seen my parents?"

"They're in the Great Hall."

She found herself in the kitchen first, though. Nan stared at

her, and then crushed her in her arms.

"You're not supposed to be here yet. What are you up to this time?"

"Oh, Nan! I'm so glad you're not really dead!"

"Of course I'm not. Nobody's ever really dead. Pass me the flour. Now you get on to the Great Hall, and don't keep people waiting."

Bronwyn whispered, pointing at the door to the larder.

"They're not in there, are they? I can't bear to look."

More gently, Nan replied, "Of course they're not there. Why would they want to be in there?"

She was abruptly at the door to the Great Hall, and gave it a tentative push. It was very bright inside, and far more beautiful than it ought to be. Cheerful talk and laughter drew her to the great hearth. Her people were expecting her.

Oriana said, "We have a visitor!" Next to her was a handsome young man, painfully like Fergus.

"Oren?"

"Did you think I'd be a child forever?"

"You're taller than I am!"

"That I am, Auntie. Our time is not your time."

"Pup," said her youthful, carefree father, his hair as dark as her own, smiling in mild rebuke. "Did you have to ignore absolutely everything I told you?"

"It wasn't you," she whispered. "it wasn't you I spoke to in the Gauntlet."

"It was and it wasn't, but I was certainly there, and I hold to what was said. Still, becoming a Queen of Ferelden is a very great accomplishment. We're very proud of you. But now you need to meet Trystan."

Her mother, radiantly beautiful, kissed her, and drew a young man near.

"This is Trystan."

"Trystan."

Bronwyn stared, bewildered, at the tall figure. He was broad-shouldered and lean, his long hair dark brown and waving, his eyes glittering like pieces of sky. He looked at her quizzically, almost teasing. He had a strong nose, and his dark brows drew together in a way she knew well.

"He came to us," said Eleanor, "and we named him. I've always liked the name Trystan. He was never alone, you see."

The boy touched her cheek, and spoke, his voice warm and mellow. It seemed that she had known this voice all the days of her life.

"I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."

They were not alone in the Great Hall, nor was this really the Great Hall. It swelled and soared, higher and wider, and was filled with people with her nose or her jaw, or with her father's smile. They were her grandmothers and great-great-grandfathers; her great-great-granduncles and distant cousins. There were other people, too, more and more of them: a tall man with his arm around a pretty woman with Loghain's eyes. Sitting by their feet was a beautiful mabari with a shining chestnut coat. Against the wall leaned a young woman with a silverite sword and a roguish grin. Bronwyn recognized her from a picture as Bryn Cousland, a heroine of the early Rebellion. There was Princess Deirdre Therin and King Darlan himself. And there was an elf! He winked at her and put his fingers to his lips for silence. There were more elves, taller and fairer than she had ever seen before. Everyone was here, elves, dwarves, and humans: people she had never known; people she had killed; people who had tried to kill her. She shut her eyes briefly, frightened at what she might see next. The Hall grew and swelled, and encompassed all the world.

Wynne's voice whispered in her ear. "It's going to be all right.

In the end, everything is always all right."

And just as the ceiling cracked open, and a great golden light suffused them all, Bronwyn felt something tremble under her feet; and she fell, down, down, down, into darkness, grasping futilely at the roots of Heaven.

Time passed endlessly as she hurtled down; past mountains and sea, past the limits of the upper world. At length she thudded onto hard stone. Furious, she hissed, and flames licked at Tainted walls under the earth. Her tail flicked out, and rocks cracked and splintered.

The Archdemon, triumphant, gazed down into the abyss. Thousands of lights glittered in the chasm; torches held by her minions. The horde was gathered...it was hers... it was ready. Her scouts were climbing, up to the hated and desired surface, shivering under the waning moon. Scabby hands pawed at the snow; hideous faces lifted into the icy wind. They listened, expectant, for the liquid song of melting water. In vain.

So. It was not yet time. But it would be, very soon.

Thanks to my reviewers: Evil-Overlord, Nemrut, RakeeshJ4, Phygmalion, EmbertoInferno, Ellyanah, Chandagnac, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Blinded in a bolthole, reality deviant, Tirion I, dragonblade3200, MsBarrows, Mike3207, darksky01, KnightOfHolyLight, sizuka2, mr I hate znt nobles

kill em, shywriter413, Zute, Herebedragons66, JackOfBladesX, brrt, have Socks. Will Travel, Halm Vendrella, EpitomyofShyness, almostinsane, anon, Jenna53, Psyche Sinclair, Girl-chama, jnybot, zeitlos, bladerunner12-57, mille libri, and RB23G.

Trystan Mac Tir quotes the Canticle of Trials, 1:10.

RB23G: I'll compose a reply to your very interesting review for the next chapter, since I didn't have your reply link. Publishing deadlines make it impossible to get it out with the current chapter.

97. The Water is Wide

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 97: The Water is Wide

Three days out of Cumberland, the Nevarran ships were attacked by an Orlesian squadron from Jader.

Three Orlesian agents had ridden hard to Cumberland. One paid a fortune to hire a ship to take him to Val Royeaux to make his report. The second waited in Cumberland, looking for an opportunity to infiltrate. The third bought passage to Jader. It took a combination of honeyed flattery and threats of the Empress' signal displeasure to convince the Marquis to lend his assistance, but by the next day three ships set out to find and destroy the Fereldan embassy.

Even so, the Orlesians could not quite credit that the Fereldans were shrewd enough to make common cause with Orlais' other hostile neighbor. Perhaps if they had, they would have launched an even more formidable force against them.

The opponents crossed ways a little north of the Waking Sea Islands. Taken aback to find themselves outnumbered, the Orlesians relied on their greater size and amount of canvas they could raise to try to run down the Nevarran vessels. The

plan was to seize and sink the slow-moving, largely defenseless transport that was thought to be carrying the Fereldans. There was no way that the Nevarrans could make the port of Kirkwall before the enemy was upon them.

The seas were heavy, and there were plenty of those aboard, sailors and passengers alike, who were wretched with seasickness. Most of them found that there was nothing like deadly danger to take their mind off their nausea.

"Jowan!" shouted Nathaniel. "Get up here!"

Glad of the splash of the salt spray, Jowan staggered up on deck, clinging to anything in reach: rails, ropes, and cursing sailors.

The Arl of Amaranthine was drenched, and likewise his friends and soldiers. Over the wind, he shouted. "What can you do about *that*?"

Jowan gulped. Behind them, and a little to starboard, a big Orlesian man-of-war was bearing down on them. Another trailed behind at a short distance, and the third rather farther away. Slowly but inevitably, they were closing the distance. Jowan could see the men on the closest ship crowding forward, preparing to board. Archers were arrayed on the high forecastle, ready to fire down on them.

"Well..." he thought about it. "I suppose I could try a fireball..."

"Good man!" Nathaniel snapped. "You do that!"

"I need to be a little closer," Jowan confessed.

"Don't worry! They're getting closer all the time. Darrow! Keep Warden Jowan covered!"

A big shield covered his face. Jowan gave Darrow a sickly smile, and pushed the shield aside—just a little—to see. More spray smacked him in the face, and he wiped his eyes, sneezing.

"It would be really great," yelled Carver, "if you could do something *before* we're within crossbow range!"

"Er... right."

Everyone was looking at him. It was worse than his classes at the Circle. Still, he could do this. He focused on long, slow, deep breaths, and gathered his mana...

Meanwhile, it was pandemonium in the luxurious stern cabin, where the women could see their doom approaching through the wide, wide windows.

"Ah, my lady!" wailed a maid. "Must we die?"

"Don't scream," Callista ordered her, forcing her voice down from hysteria. "It doesn't help a bit. Pray to the Maker."

The girl sobbed, "*O Maker, I am heartily sorry for having*

offended you..."

The other maid joined in, her voice high and panicked.

"...and I detest all my sins, because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, Maker..."

Berenice was red-eyed and trembling. She whispered to Callista, "I've been thinking about what will happen if they break in here."

The maid broke off their prayers, and began screaming.

"Stop it!" Berenice shouted, her hands over her ears. "Stop it!"

Her maid shrieked back at her. "You will be ransomed, but we will be raped and murdered!"

Berenice lost her temper completely, and slapped the girl's face. "Shut up! Shut up! Screaming doesn't help! It just makes men want to kill you!"

Callista grabbed the two maids, an arm around each, and made them sit with her on the bed. "We're going to be quiet," she urged in a low fierce voice. "We're going to be quiet as mice. If we're quiet and dignified, they'll be ashamed to harm us."

Berenice rolled her eyes, and Callista glared at her.

"We're not dead," she insisted, with a semblance of calm,

"until we're actually dead. We have brave men on deck who will defend us. If the worst happens," she went on, almost babbling, "we are valuable hostages and will be permitted to have you as our servants. We're going to be fine."

She was relieved when Berenice sat down heavily with them, her head in her hands. Her own assumed calm was on a knife's edge. She was not so much afraid of the Orlesians as she was of sinking. The voyage had been a nightmare for her. She had been seasick, and all of Nathaniel's kindness did not relieve her shame at appearing so ugly and useless and stinking before him. She had leaned over the rail, and seen the sea creatures below as she vomited. How vast the sea was, and how little and insignificant she was herself. The cold, angry waves could sweep her away, and she would go down into the depths, drowning and helpless, scavenged by the vast monsters of the deep. She pressed her lips together, her nausea reawakened at the thought.

If only she could do something to protect herself! She had thought Cassandra ridiculous, but at the moment she infinitely regretted never learning to use any kind of a weapon. She did not have so much as a dagger. Perhaps, if they lived through this, Nathaniel would teach her to shoot with a bow. He was supposed to be a great archer.

Nathaniel! What if he fell, defending her? What if he died in the first sweet glow of their marriage? It struck Callista like a knife to her heart, the realization that she did not want to be without Nathaniel. She wanted him to live, and to live with her. She wanted him to take her to see his castle. The idea that he

might be killed, and that the Orlesians might heave his long body into the sea was simply beyond endurance. Tears burst forth, and ran hotly down her cheeks.

Berenice clenched her fists. "If I live through this, I will never again go to sea. Hear me, Maker!" She made herself look out the window, and thus was a witness to a shocking, astonishing sight.

It was a good fireball; a really good one. It was the sort of fireball that not even Enchanter Torrin would have criticized. Even Tara would be impressed.

So bright that it dazzled their eyes, the fireball exploded a little further back than he had aimed. The forecastle dissolved in a roar and a flash, spars and splinters from the shattered timbers as lethal as a thousand arrows. Men were tossed into the air like toys. Many were already dead before they struck the water. The foremast sagged and swayed, and the foresail ignited, tongues of fire licking up and spreading into a sheet of flame.. The entire ship shuddered and wallowed. Tortured screams came to them over the water. Sailors whooped and cheered at the sight. Even the nobles cheered at the impact. Only Fenris watched in silence, inscrutable, as scores of men perished by the power of magic.

"Well!" the Nevarran captain managed, blinking. "That's... very... Do it again. Warden," he added, with careful courtesy. "Aim at the waterline. "

Jowan stared at his handiwork, sickened. This was worse than anything he had done with blood magic. Still, they were the enemy, and would do the same or worse to them if they could. What were his powers good for, if not to protect his friends?

"I need a minute," he said. It took a minute or so to recharge the spell. Everyone was watching breathlessly. The distance to the Orlesian ship had widened. Jowan took another deep breath and cast again, timing the fireball to strike when the ship was at the crest of the next wave and most completely exposed.

It was not perhaps as impressive as his first effort, but it did the job. An Orlesian warship was too solidly timbered for Jowan's fireball to blow a gaping hole in the bow. Not quite gaping, no; but the hull was breached, and the ship juddered violently. The bow dipped lower at every wave; nodding in submission to its fate. The Orlesians were quite past attacking. They were beyond everything but trying to save themselves, and it was quite a desperate business. The Fereldans and their Nevarran seaman watched the spectacle with little sympathy.

Below, four women watched in awe.

"Was that," gasped Callista, "*magic?*"

The other two Orlesian ships were slowing, their pursuit

slackening, as they tried to improvise some new strategy against this overwhelming menace. One Orlesian captain suspected magic; the other, even more horrified, wondered if the Nevarrans somehow had gained access to Qunari gaatlok. That was a terror weapon that no one wanted to confront. The closer ship moved in to start picking up the men in the water.

Grinning triumphantly, the Nevarran captain shouted to the steersman.

"Two points to north east! We make for Kirkwall!"

Behind them, the wounded Orlesian vessel was going down by the bow. Flames had spread to the rest of the sails. Little dark heads bobbed in the water, pleading for help.

Nathaniel watched the disaster unfold, his face stern. A few were saved; more slipped away beneath the waves. He turned aside, and went to reassure Callista, guiltily certain that she must have been terrified. Adam followed him a moment later, grinning. Perhaps their maidens fair would grateful for their salvation from the big, bad Orlesians. Their welcome was better than they could have imagined.

The next day, their little flotilla arrived intact in the City of Chains. The only unfortunate thing about their arrival was the awful truth that they would have yet another voyage. The women did not take it particularly well.

Berenice mustered her courage to face Hawke.

"But *why* must we go to *Kirkwall*?"

"Unfinished business, fair IBerenice." He gave her a kiss and a bewitching smile. "We had to meet up with our own ship and retrieve some of our belongings. We'll be on our way tomorrow."

Her expression, poor girl, was indescribable.

"I suppose there's really no way to get to Ferelden just by... walking?"

"No. I'm sorry. But it's a really, really short voyage to Ferelden now. We'll pick up some fresh water, and have a good meal and a good night's sleep before we set out again. All things considered, the Arl and I think it best for you to stay aboard here. Ordinarily, we'd pay a state visit to the Viscount, but things are too unsettled."

Dangerous, he meant.

"But you're going," she said, jealous of the chance to walk on dry land, and worried about his safety.

"Yes, I'm going ashore," he told her, discreetly emphasizing the correct terminology. "I must. We'll be back soon, I promise."

Leaving the ships under heavy guard, Nathaniel and Adam gathered their knights and men-at-arms—and their Wardens — along with them to find the Hanged Man, and Varric

Tethras.

And then Isabela arrived.

"Permission to come aboard!"

The Nevarran captain actually knew Isabela. Why was Hawke surprised? Isabela very likely knew everybody.

"Isabela! You're looking..."

"I know. So, where are the—oh, Hawke! How was Nevarra?"

"Splendid," Adam said easily. "It's a wonderful country, and the people were... very friendly. The Arl will be up shortly, and then we're off to meet Varric. Coming with us?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"My lord?" Berenice heard his voice, talking to someone on deck. Perhaps he had decided not to leave, after all. She climbed the few steps carefully, holding her skirts out of the way.

Her handsome husband was chatting with a woman. An extraordinary-looking woman. Nearby was the elven guardsman, Fenris, and their captain.

And what sort of woman was this? Berenice wondered, with a thrill of delighted horror, if she was seeing... well... a *bad* woman. She wore very little, despite the brisk weather. But

rather than having a painted face, the smooth dark skin was warmed by a great deal of heavy gold jewelry.

And on her back were sheathed a pair of wicked daggers.

"My lord?" she repeated. Hawke's smile grew a little fixed.

"My lady," Adam put out his hand to her. "Lady Berenice Hawke, this is Captain Isabela, skipper of our other ship, the *Siren's Call*."

Isabela looked like she might burst out laughing. "Lady... Hawke?"

"Yes," Hawke said with perfect ease. "Lady Berenice did me the great honor to consent to be my wife. We were married seven days ago."

"That's... very nice," Isabela said, her eyes wickedly bright. "My sincere congratulations."

"Thank you, captain," Berenice said faintly. There was something there. Adam knew her. Had there been something between them? Surely not. He was a noble, and she was a ship's *captain*.

"And you seem to have picked up quite the fleet."

Here the discussion turned to the Nevarran's donation, and Isabela, who knew this particular transport, had to stride across the deck and have the warships pointed out to her, while she sized them up with keen dark eyes. She and the

men began a brisk technical discussion of their merits, and Berenice felt, once again, completely at sea.

Nathaniel and Callista came up on deck, talking about their plans for tomorrow. Captain Isabela was presented to the new Arlessa, and bowed, giving her felicitations with almost mocking grace.

Callista, like Berenice, was not entirely pleased to be left on the ship herself, but Nathaniel felt strongly that she would be safest there. The guards were enjoined to be particularly watchful, and the Fereldans departed, talking and laughing among themselves in the twilight. They rounded a corner, and the flash of Fenris' white hair was the last they saw of them.

"I suppose it's for the best," Callista sighed. "Everyone knows that Kirkwall is a haunted, corrupt place. We're much safer here. The cook tells me our dinner will be served directly. It is not unpleasant, being on a ship, when it is swaying gently like this."

Berenice stared out into the dockyards. "They weren't worried about *that* woman's safety. Did you see how she was dressed? I could see..." she sputtered and lowered her voice. "I could see her *bottom!*"

Callista began giggling. "She must not care what anybody thinks! It's rather admirable, in a way. A ship's captain." She thought about that. "I think she must be incredibly brave, going to sea and ordering the men about."

"I wish I could order *Adam* about," Berenice agreed, rather grumpily.

Isabela waxed hilarious at Adam's expense. She did not go so far as to tease Arl Nathaniel, but Bann Adam was fair game.

"And now," she nudged him, "we see Adam Hawke, the married man. Looks like they paid a fair price for you! What does a Fereldan bann fetch these days?"

"Isabela!" he muttered, rather chagrined. If only she knew. Yes, you could say that the Nevarrans had bought him. He would have been mad to turn down the dowry, even if there had been no question of the alliance.

"Seven days married," she sighed. "She still has the shine on her, I noticed. You've done very well for yourself."

"Don't."

Carver had overheard only part of the exchange. "Mother and Bethany will like Berenice. A honeymoon at sea is pretty romantic, Even with the part about being attacked by Orlesians."

"Believe it or not," Isabela said, with a curiously hard smile, "I know all about 'honeymoons at sea.' I'd much rather hear about how you dealt with the Orlesians."

So they talked about that, and slapped Jowan on the back.

Isabela was intrigued.

"I have totally got to get a mage for myself. You'd think I could find one in Kirkwall, of all places. A good-looking one would be nice."

Fenris spoke into the merriment. "A mage without Warden discipline might be more a danger than a defense!"

They argued the point for most of the walk. Fenris granted that Jowan's skills had been more than welcome during the battle with the Orlesians, but maintained that this was a situation of a mage contained within a command structure—much like mages within a Circle.

Jowan found it impossible to swallow that. "Fenris, the Wardens are *nothing* like the Circle. And even before I joined the Wardens, I wasn't running rampant, summoning demons. I was out defending people from the darkspawn on my own!"

"That is admirable," Fenris said stiffly, "but the fact is—"

A shout interrupted their debate.

"It's the Fereldans!"

"Get 'em!"

Kirkwall was full of gangs. Varric had warned them, and he should know. The Coterie and the dwarven Carta were the biggest and strongest, but there were dozens more: The

Guardsmen Pretenders, the Invisible Sisters, the Redwater Teeth, Sharpe's Highwaymen, the Bloodrangers... New gangs cropped up every month. And if the local gangs weren't bad enough, you had the Tevinter slaver gangs, the Antivan Crows, and incursions of apostate mages. Supposedly, Kirkwall had a City Guard, but their function appeared to be entirely decorative.

Nathaniel had no idea who these people were. They were not Orlesian, but they very likely had been hired by an Orlesian sympathizer. How could such a person know they were in Kirkwall, not three hours after their arrival?

"Don't kill them all!" he shouted, his bow twanging. He brought a man down by an arrow to the back of the knee. Without magical healing, the fellow would be lame for life. Too bloody bad. He was unimpressed by the quality of his attackers. Whoever had sent them must think Fereldan noblemen were as gormless as their Kirkwaller counterparts.

His people were mopping up. Adam and Carver had caught one of the gang between them, and were gleefully going in for the kill. Adam's dog Hunter was worrying a man's throat. Fenris was mowing the fools down like weeds. Captain Isabela appeared to be having a glorious time, performing some sort of throat-cutting dance.

Darrow and Kain had pounced on the wounded man, and dragged him along by his wounded leg, ignoring the screams.

Where were the good people of Kirkwall? Nathaniel glanced

about him. Where they always went at the first hint of trouble, evidently. Far away, and behind locked doors, their hands over their ears.

He stalked over to their prisoner.

"Who hired you?"

The man grinned up at him through bloody teeth. Adam grew impatient and kicked him where it would hurt. Nathaniel snarled.

"Who? This can take all night if you want."

"Boss... sent us out. Just the usual. Kill the marks, and loot the bodies."

"You knew we were Fereldan."

"I'm not Fereldan," Isabela declared, eyes sparkling. "I just go to their parties. Such lively occasions! "

Nathaniel gave her a look, and she responded with a saucy wink, but subsided.

"What exactly did your 'boss' say about us? How did you know who we were?"

"Boss told us what you looked like. Said you were a tall sort with black hair and a big nose..."

Nathaniel scowled.

"... and that you had a weird elf with you with white hair, and you let him carry a sword..."

Fenris scowled.

"...And that you had a couple of Wardens with you with a pair of mangy mutts."

Jowan and Carver scowled. Lily and Magister growled.

Nathaniel considered kicking the man himself.

"Where is this boss of yours? I'd like a word with him."

"What?" gawped the thug. "Take you to our secret hideout?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't do that!"

"I think you can."

Carver suggested, "Why don't we start with the small, unnecessary bits, and work our way up? Magister's hungry after that fight."

Magister yelped a quick bark of agreement.

In the end, they got a location, and then dragged the thug along, threatening him horribly. Their path led to a Lowtown hovel, which was briskly cleared of defenders. Sadly, their informer perished in the course of the dispute.

The 'boss' was a broken-nosed bruiser with a lisp from missing teeth, and quite exceptional weapons. He, in turn, had an interesting tale to tell.

Their next stop was a posh Hightown mansion. Nathaniel was quite beyond good manners, so as soon as the butler opened the door, he was shoved aside, and the entire party trooped in to pay a call on the Comte de Launcet.

His lordship, it seemed, was busy. In the study. So the Fereldans walked in and found the nobleman sharing pleasant chat over some fine brandy with an able seaman from their own ship. This able seaman was the third Orlesian agent who had ridden ahead of them out of Nevarra, and who was now deeply regretting his brilliant plan of going to sea with the enemy.

Things, unsurprisingly, went downhill from there. Before the sailor could bolt, he was disarmed, bound, and gagged. Their ship was destined to be short a crewman, but there was important information to be had from the fellow. The Marcher nobleman, who had enjoyed a long-term retainer from the Empress, had all his papers confiscated.

"I shall complain to the Viscount!" he blustered.

"Complain all you like," said Nathaniel. "Complain to the Empress, for all I care. I'm sure your Viscount would be pleased to know how busy you've been, working for Orlais. Your friend here is a spy, and you wasted quite a bit of coin trying to kill us tonight."

Nathaniel thought it impolitic to kill the men outright, since he did not intend to murder de Launcet's family and every servant in the place. Ferelden did not need a major breach with Kirkwall. On the other hand, he did not need to have the pathetic City Guard attempting to impound his ships, so he proposed a middle way. The spy was rolled up in a rug, and slung over Carver's shoulder, looking like nothing so much as a purchased household furnishing. Then Nathaniel turned to the Comte.

"Put on your cloak, your lordship. We're all going to the Hanged Man. You'll be in our company until we set sail tomorrow."

"I shall go nowhere with you, Dog Lord!"

"All right, *don't* put on your cloak."

They frog-marched the man to the door, pressing a dagger to the small of his back, where they were accosted by his blonde and dim wife, the Comtesse Dulci.

"Guillaume! Where are you going at this hour?" Her eyes widened. "With such people?"

Nathaniel swept her a bow. "Pardon, Comtesse. There is an urgent political matter of great delicacy that only your husband can resolve. Good night."

Guillaume de Launcet was carried off, and the Fereldans gave a series of nods, grins, and little waves to the befuddled Dulci.

Isabela crowded close to the Comte, and while he was distracted by the exquisite discomfort of a dagger's questing point, she picked his pocket with practiced skill. Then she faded back to the rear of the party, contemplating her latest acquisitions.

"That's nice." She tossed the ruby from hand to hand and slipped it into the little pocket sown into the top of her heavily-boned corset.

On the way back through Hightown, Fenris paused, gazing up at a tall facade.

"I... shall be along later. I have business here."

"Friend of yours?" asked Adam.

"Not exactly. The house belongs to my... former... master. I wonder if he has arrived in Kirkwall yet."

"You can't go alone," said Carver. "Why don't we call on him, too?"

Guillaume de Launcet's eyes nearly popped. "Messere Danarius is a respected Tevinter noble!" he protested.

"Right," scoffed Nathaniel, "A respected slave-trading Tevinter blood-mage. I am in awe. How could I leave Kirkwall without paying my respects?"

Isabela picked the lock and got them in, unable to stop laughing. De Launcet and the spy were kept under guard by

Mapes and Dudgeon, while the rest of the party went to introduce themselves to the man who had enslaved, tormented, and pursued their companion.

Magister Danarius, alas, was not at home. It was an imposing mansion, boasting a labyrinth of large rooms, but it was derelict and abandoned. Danarius had not lived there in a long, long time.

But he had left demons to fight for him. Clearly, he had not expected Fenris to return in the company of a mage, and a strong party of warriors. The demons were nasty, but dealt with.

"He left quite a bit of good stuff here, too," said Kain, poking at a chest with his boot. "I reckon he owes you for services rendered."

"I want *nothing* of his," snarled Fenris.

Darrow shook his head pityingly. "That's not looking at it the sensible way. Leaving the stuff is high-minded, right enough; but it sort of plays into his hands by not doing him any *inconvenience*."

"He's got some nice books," remarked Jowan. "He might miss them."

Ashamed to confess that he could not read, Fenris said. "By all means, take anything that you wish."

Darrow picked up a fat-bodied lute. "I've always fancied the idea of learning to play music."

They paused to gather more choice items, though Nathaniel's instructed them to give any coin to Fenris. Before they left, Isabela obligingly sprinkled the fine magisterial robes in the wardrobes with a very nasty and unnoticeable powder. She smirked at Fenris.

"If he puts on any of this lot, he'll flay himself bloody, scratching."

Fenris gave her a long, admiring appraisal.

"That is... a pleasant thought."

They galloped downstairs, retrieved their captives, and marched cheerfully to the Hanged Man.

They took a room, and proceeded to lock Guillaume de Launcet in with his guards, who promptly demanded that he play Wicked Grace with them. Understandably, considering his state of mind, he lost, heavily and repeatedly. The guards checked to see if the spy had suffocated—he had not—and left him on the floor, to be retrieved and taken to the ship later on. The rest of the party went to look for Varric, who greeted them in his expansive way, wanting their stories. That Guillaume de Launcet was being held in the next room until the Fereldans sailed was sufficient for him to stand them all drinks. He was amused and delighted to find that the single

noblemen he had bade farewell to so recently were returning as sober married men.

"The classic way to contract an alliance. Practically a living, breathing metaphor," the dwarf chuckled. "I hope, for both your sakes, that they are reasonably good-looking?"

"They are lovely ladies," Nathaniel informed him, rather starchily. A true nobleman did not discuss his wife in a tavern.

Adam, not so practiced in the art of nobility, had no such reservations. "She's a redhead. Quite pretty. I like her, thank the Maker."

He did like her. She seemed to fancy him, and was taking to the more intimate aspects of their relationship with pleasant enthusiasm. He had once promised himself that he would marry for love, but he had been given little choice in Nevarra. They could have married him to a prune-faced horror, but they had not. He had got himself a pretty redhead, with plenty of spirit and a fine fortune. His luck had held.

It was not so lucky, true, that they had carried an Orlesian agent on board all the way from Nevarra. Varric found that interesting, too.

"De Launcet can't be the only Orlesian sympathizer in Kirkwall. At that, I think it's only a part-time gig for him, currying favor with the Empress. What the whole chapter shows is that there are also Orlesian agents in Nevarra, which is not exactly shocking. The Empress has people

everywhere."

Hawke snorted a laugh. "Well, she won't have this one much longer. We'll have a talk with him once we're at sea tomorrow."

"Serves him right for being caught. I take it, then, that you don't need to have me put you up in the old family mausoleum?"

Nathaniel blinked, having recently come from Nevarra, where, he supposed, someone might actually spend the night quite comfortably in one of the great tombs. In fact, many of the great tombs were far more comfortable than Vigil's Keep. It was an embarrassing realization.

"Er... we are staying on our ship. The Nevarrans gave us a transport and an escort of warships."

"Quite the dowry," Varric approved. "If you don't mind being seasick."

They discussed the political situation as freely they could with someone who was not Ferelden. Carver and Jowan mentioned that they had learned a great deal from the Nevarran Wardens, but were not at liberty to reveal details.

"Nobody wants the Blight to spread," Varric snorted. "Nobody *sane*, anyway. Bad for business. My brother Bartrand wants it to be over as soon as possible, so he can go on a scavenger hunt in the Deep Roads."

That was interesting. Varric explained that there was a short window of opportunity at the end of a Blight, before the darkspawn retreated underground to breed again. During that time, ancient thaigs could be rediscovered, and their treasuries plundered. Jowan and Carver glanced at each other, wondering if anything had been found in Kal'Hiol or Amgarrak Thaig.

Their party had long ago created the story they would tell everyone but the King and Queen of Ferelden about their curious adventure in the Vimmark Pass.

"There is an abandoned fortress in the Vimmark Mountains," Nathaniel told Varric, his tone elaborately casual. "The Grey Wardens used it, long ago, but no one even remembers it. The Nevarran Warden-Commander had never heard of it. Quite the fortress in its time, but empty now. No doubt some robber band will move in and make use of it."

Varric spread out his map, and the place was duly marked. The dwarf shook his head.

"Strange. It's not supposed to be there."

Jowan swallowed, and said, "There might have been magical protections that finally wore off. It's there, all right."

Caver added, "It's got a big tower. With griffons on it."

Nathaniel made arrangements to contact Varric for information on a regular basis, using the cover of more lumber shipments.

Varric could offer them a proper Merchant Guild contract, which was then signed by himself, the Arl of Amaranthine, and witnessed by the Bann of the city.

"And next," said Nathaniel, "we leave on the dawn tide."

It was dark and late by the time they returned to their ships with their prisoners. The spy was chained up in the brig. The Comte was held in polite captivity on one of the warships, to be released when they weighed anchor. Isabela gave them all a wink, and went off to the *Siren's Call*, to make ready for the voyage.

Fenris watched his companions, irresolute, and then followed them on board. In the men-at-arms quarters in the forecastle, he set about collecting his belongings. They amounted to a great deal more than they ever had before. The others watched him as they began settling into their hammocks, and then Darrow grabbed Mapes.

"Fetch the bann," he growled. He approached Fenris, and asked, "Pushing off, are you? Why?"

"You are returning to Ferelden," Fenris said quietly. "You can have no further use for my services."

Kain rolled his eyes at his friends. "We reckoned you were going back home with us."

"It is not my home."

Adam came down the ladder and squinted at them, puzzled. "What's going on?"

Darrow jerked his thumb at Fenris. "He reckons you don't need him any more."

Adam, tired and wrong-footed, gaped briefly. Then he said, "Fenris, could we talk?"

"Of course, Lord Hawke."

The men-at-arms leaned in, listening breathlessly. Adam grimaced at them.

"Alone?"

He must tend to Berenice, who had not gone to bed, but had waited up for them with Callista. Still, this man was a veritable jewel in the dust, and must not be made to feel superfluous. Adam liked him, too, and had his own ideas about what would be best for an escaped Tevinter slave who was also a prodigy with a greatsword.

They climbed up on deck and Adam shepherded the tall elf forward, away from the stern cabins. Hunter saw them, and trotted in their direction. Maker curse it, Nathaniel had already vanished, gone to join his Arlessa.

"Fenris..." he began. "I thought you did not dislike our company. We certainly have come to respect and value you."

The elf was taken aback in his turn.

"You and the Arl have been most... generous. It has been a most interesting adventure. You, however, are going home to Ferelden across the sea, and I still have accounts to settle with my former master."

"Oh, to the void with Danarius!" Hawke burst out. Hunter whuffed, a bit startled. "Sorry, boy," muttered Hawke. "Look here, Fenris, why waste you life and your skill waiting for someone who may never come? And if he came, and you succeeded in killing him, what then?"

Fenris looked away, out into the harbor toward the darkly glimmering shapes of the colossal Twins; eternal slaves wracked with eternal anguish.

"If I live long enough to kill him, then I have lived long enough."

Hawke wondered what he could say to someone who had suffered so much. "We have a saying in Ferelden: *'The best revenge is living well.'* Do you understand what we mean by that?"

"I am not sure. In Tevinter, we say: *'Revenge is a dish best served cold.'*"

Hawke found himself laughing. "Well, yes. We say that, too. Everybody says that, and it's true. But you can be more than Danarius meant for you to be. Your whole being at the moment is focused on Danarius; I think it's very likely that he doesn't think much about you at all. He sent some mercenaries, yes; but hasn't come himself. Why let him rule

your life, however far away he is? Come with us to Ferelden. Make a new life for yourself. I know for a fact that Arl Nathaniel looks upon you with great favor. You'd be a free man-at-arms, with good wages. With talent like yours, you might even rise higher. If the Queen met you, she'd probably want you to Join the Grey Wardens. She certainly has plenty of elven friends in it!"

Fenris, at least, was listening, his silvery head bent. Hawke caught at a flicker of memory, and went with it.

"You heard about how Queen Bronwyn cleared out those Tevinter slavers. She's furious with the Tevinters, and believe me, they're no match for her. Carver tells me she and the King have put a watch on the coast for Tevinter vessels. They know that there's a regular ship that comes in to relieve the slavers every six months or so. Queen Bronwyn's planned an ambush. Unlike Kirkwall— this overpriced snakepit— we don't tolerate slavers and Tevinter magisters in Ferelden. I've got people watching the harbor in Amaranthine, too. Instead of facing magisters alone, why not come to Ferelden, where we stand ready to give them a short, sharp lesson? Your knowledge could be crucial." He leaned forward, a smile playing across his handsome face. "Imagine the looks on their faces. That would be a cold, cold revenge indeed."

Fenris was tempted. "It would be interesting to see Queen Bronwyn the Dragonslayer with my own eyes, " admitted Fenris. "Though I have no great desire to be a Warden. I do not share your brother's enthusiasm... well... for *anything*."

"No one says you have to. You'll always have a place in my guard, as long as you like. Or the Arl's, which is grander. Look here: why don't you sleep on it? I have got to see to my wife, poor girl—"

"I apologize," said Fenris, deeply embarrassed. "I did not mean to keep you from your lady."

"No, I'm glad we talked. I'm just a bit tired. I promise we won't let you oversleep and carry you off with the dawn tide. That would be cheating. None of us want to force you to do anything you don't want to do. We haven't the right anyway. You're a free man. It's just that you owe it to yourself to do the best for yourself that you can. Marchers and Orlesians—and Tevinters—might call us barbarians and Dog Lords, but Fereldans love freedom. You'd have a good life with us. Sleep on it. Don't let Danarius—or his memory—tell you what to do."

"You've been fighting," Callista said to Nathaniel. She was not accusing, but merely observing. At the moment she was already warming their narrow bed. The slow sway of the ship was quite relaxing. Quite seductive... She was so glad she had pretty nightwear among her trousseau.

"Kirkwall's certainly the place for it," Nathaniel agreed. "We found out we had a spy on board. He ran off and told his employer, but we've dealt with it—and him." His armor was laid aside, and he scrubbed off with a basin of lukewarm water. Callista admired the lean body, wishing she had the

nerve to offer to help him. Even in the best cabin the ship had to offer, it was rather close quarters. Once they were settled on land, however, perhaps it would be easier.

"Did that woman captain fight, too?"

"Captain Isabela?" Nathaniel chuckled a little. "That she did. She's very impressive."

"I feel so useless," she blurted out. "I can't do anything like that."

"Nobody expects you to."

"Would you teach me to shoot a bow?"

He paused, and then smiled. "If you like."

He stripped off the rest of his clothes, and slipped into bed with her, dousing the lantern. Moonlight flooded in, casting shadows on the planked floor. He gathered her up in his arms, and she smiled as she nestled close, listening to his heart quicken.

Someone was strumming a lute on one of the other ships. The music drifted over the harbor, sweet and sleepy.

*"The water is wide, I cannot get o'er
Neither have I wings to fly
Give me a boat that can carry two
And both shall row, my love and I."*

*A ship there is, and she sails the sea
She's loaded deep as deep can be
But not so deep as the love I'm in
I know not if I sink or swim..."*

The sun rose, pink and fresh. It was a fine day for a new adventure. With the dawn, the tide turned, and Nathaniel and Adam were up early, giving orders.

Heavy-eyed and sulking, the Comte de Launcet was set ashore. He had the nerve to complain about the lack of breakfast, and was handed a mug of small beer by a sailor.

"You can keep the mug, too," called out Carver, with a mocking salute.

Fenris came out on deck and watched the sailors make ready. Signals flickered among the ships. The elf gazed out to sea, and then back to the towers of Kirkwall, and out to sea again, struggling. At length he went down below to join the others for a quick meal, and made no move to leave when they cast off. Hawke gave him a smile, and whispered a word to Nathaniel, who nodded, very pleased. Slowly, they moved out of the harbor, those on deck shivering a bit in a cold wind, while the seabirds wheeled and shrilled overhead.

Carver joined his brother, looking eagerly ahead for the first glimpse of open sea beyond the long chasm-like passage out of the harbor.

"So," said Adam, looking back at the docks. "That's Kirkwall. Maker's Breath, I'm glad Mother didn't talk us into immigrating."

"As I recall," Carver said, with a snort. "Mother *did* talk us into immigrating. Or at least you. I was already a Grey Warden, lucky for me. If Charade and Uncle Gamlen hadn't shown up, you would have turned up on the docks with no home and no prospects. I think I would call the current situation a big giant escape."

Hawke laughed. "So do it. I think it also calls for a drink, early morning or not."

Carver leaned in, and murmured, "You need to tell Berenice about Bethany. Let her get used to the idea."

Adam grimaced. He knew he should. He should tell her before she was miserable with seasickness, too.

"I'll go find her."

Nathaniel had overheard. He needed to talk to Callista about the Howes and their current political status, including his father's shocking crimes. Someone was bound to say something cruel, and she needed to be prepared.

Callista said to Berenice, "You need to tell Adam about your brother. Let him get used to the idea."

"I know I should. I should tell him before I start throwing up." She blushed, rather nervous about facing the men on deck. "I hope," she ventured, "that I did not... wake you up last night."

Callista turned pink with laughter, remembering the cries of rapture that had penetrated the thin walls of their cabin. "I wasn't asleep at the time. You sounded very happy."

"I was. That's all going very well. I mean," she added in a rush, "it's very different than I expected. It's quite fun, really."

"Yes, it is. And it shows that Adam is unlikely to throw you over the side. So go to him now, when he's in a good mood."

They went out on deck together, determined to enjoy feeling comfortable, clean, and well fed before the inevitable nausea. A few pleasant words were exchanged, and then Berenice said, "My lord? May I speak to you privately?"

They went off to the port side, talking in low voices. Nathaniel gave Callista a quizzical look.

"Berenice needed to tell Lord Hawke more about her family. We ought not to keep foolish secrets from one another."

"You're right," he sighed. "I should tell you more about Ferelden, for that matter."

He gave her the awful story of Rendon Howe. How he was enthralled by blood mages. How he murdered his liege lord and the man's family. How he had engaged in slavery. It was

an ugly story, but Callista listened, not horrified or disgusted. She knew none of the people involved, and Nathaniel was not his father. If the Queen and her brother the Prince could make that distinction, so too could Nathaniel's own wife. Yes, there would be enemies, and it was good that Nathaniel told her who they were, so she would not make foolish mistakes.

"After all," she said softly, "my own father was killed as a traitor. My mother died of grief soon after. Yet I am no traitor. Your Queen is wise to make the distinction between the innocent and the guilty. I wish my own aunt and uncle could have been so fair-minded."

"No one is nobler than Bronwyn," Nathaniel agreed. "You'll understand how we feel about her when you meet her yourself."

Now that the worst was past, Nathaniel could tell her more about the nobility of Ferelden itself, and coach her in the first things she must learn.

"After the King and Queen, the teyrns are the premier nobles of Ferelden. The Teyrn of Highever is first: Fergus Cousland. The King is also the Teyrn of Gwaren. After the teyrns come the arls. The Arl of Amaranthine is first in precedence, and then Denerim, Redcliffe, South Reach, and West Hills. That means that only the Queen and the Queen-Dowager take precedence over you in Ferelden. The last I heard, the Queen-Dowager was likely to marry Fergus Cousland, which would make her the Teyrna of Highever. After you in precedence is the Arlessa of Denerim, Habren Bryland. She

won't like you taking precedence of her, but don't let her bully you. Originally the Arl of Denerim was first, but there are historical reasons why that changed. Habren is definitely after you."

Callista laughed lightly, "No woman is going to 'bully' me out of my proper place, I assure you. Who are some of the other Court ladies?"

"Arlessa Kaitlyn of Redcliffe is next: a very sweet young girl. Arlessa Leandra of South Reach is Adam and Carver's mother. She and Arl were recently married. Arl Wulffe is a widower, and it's likely that Adam's cousin Charade will marry the heir. And there's something about Adam's family you should know. Er... he has a sister..."

"Your sister is a *mage*?"

"You brother is a *mage*?"

A moment of consternation, and then Adam Hawke burst out laughing: rich, musical laughter. He flung his head back, unable to stop. Berenice had clapped her hand over her mouth, and then she too began laughing helplessly. It was awful; it was embarrassing; it was likely to cause all sorts of messy complications in the future.

"And the Queen allows her at Court?" gasped Berenice. "She is not locked up in the Circle?"

"Bethany has never lived in a Circle. We kept her free, but she's a trained mage. The Queen proclaimed her free after Bethany saved a lot of lives during an Orlesian assassination attempt. The Chantry isn't happy with Ferelden at the moment because we're being reasonable about individual mages, and because we've made use of the ancient Grey Warden treaties to bring mages into the fight against the darkspawn."

"But of course mages must help! You cannot tell the Grey Wardens how to the fight the darkspawn!"

Pleased with her, Adam said, "The Orlesians think they can. We've said no. So yes, Bethany is free. She's a sweet girl and a wonderful sister. She's also a brilliant Healer, and she feels it's important to use her talents to help people."

Berenice was torn with any number of conflicting feelings. Mages were to be dreaded and quarantined; other people feared and hated them. Her own brother's high birth had not saved him when he was discovered. Instead, the Templars had come and dragged Troilus through the streets from their mansion to the Circle of Magi. Since then, they had not been permitted to know if he was even alive. For a moment, she longed to beg Hawke to turn the ships around and save him; to storm the Circle and free her brother, as his sister was free.

Obviously, that was impossible. The ships must go to Amaranthine, and Ferelden could not afford to so grossly offend Nevarra. She was silent a moment, collecting her thoughts.

Finally, she said, "What if we have a child who is a mage?"

He took her hands, and gave her a crooked, endearing smile. "Then we will love that child, and no one will take him—or her—away."

In his heart, of course, he decided simply to trust to his luck, which had not yet failed him.

As the sun rose, the Twins were passed, and then left behind. The waves grew choppy, and the ladies retired below. Through grey sea and under greying skies they sailed, the weather worsening. It grew colder.

The spy had to be dealt with. After questioning, it was clear that he was a low-level but long-time agent of Orlais. Some names were extracted, and the Nevarrans would be informed eventually. The man knew more names; obviously of contacts in Kirkwall, but also in a few other cities in the Free Marches. He had the name of a contact in Denerim, too; a woman named Marjolaine.

Afterwards, there was nothing to be done but to drop his body over the side after dark. A disagreeable business, but necessary. While the man had offered to turn his coat and serve him, Nathaniel saw no reason to trust him. Yes, having an agent of his own would be useful, but not a man like this. In a sense, Varric was their agent in Kirkwall, and a better man they could not find.

A fierce squall sprang up out of nowhere, and they were harried by high seas and foul winds. Those prone to seasickness hoped only for death. Those who were not were rather more concerned about the ship sinking. From arl to servant, every capable person was pressed into service, manning the pumps. Their escort was scattered out of sight. Hawke hoped that some higher power was not trying to teach him a lesson about pressing his luck too far.

Berenice had sunk into unconsciousness the night before, hardly expecting to awaken in the world of the living. Her eyes opened to sunlight, and hardly any rocking at all. To her surprise, Adam's dog was sleeping peacefully on his blanket by their bed. Berenice stretched awkwardly to avoid stepping on him as she eased out of bed. Adam was nowhere to be seen, and her maid was either in her little bunk nearby, or dead. Rather than start pounding on doors, she set about trying to dress herself. Her hair she would simply comb through, and leave down.

The dog awakened and looked up at her, giving himself a slight shake.

"I see that you're alive," muttered Berenice. "Since you're not howling, I presume Adam made it, too."

The dog responded with a low '*whuff*,' entirely at his ease. Berenice found it very odd to share a room with a dog, especially a dog who appeared to understand everything said to him. Hunter rose and padded to the door, looking back at

Berenice.

"Yes, yes, we'll go find him. Just let me tie my belt..." She took another look at the dog. "I suppose you don't mind sharing him with a wife?"

Hunter stared at her. Why would he object to Adam having a mate? Mating was a very pleasant thing. Hunter himself mated whenever the opportunity arose. If his person liked the red-haired bitch, than that was all to the good. Hunter himself was training her in the arts of ear-scratching and treat-giving. She seemed to be not without a certain aptitude.

They stepped out of the cabin, and once on deck, found themselves surrounded by a sea as smooth as glass, the countless little waves reflecting back brilliant sunshine. Adam was on deck, talking with Nathaniel and Callista. To port was a long, gray haze.

"Good morning!" she greeted them, and then pointed to the horizon. "Is that Ferelden?"

"More or less," Nathaniel answered. "It's Fair Isle, a large island north of Amaranthine. All we have to do is follow its coast to the south. The storm hurried us along last night, though we were lucky that it calmed when it did. The Amaranthine Archipelago is lined with reefs and filled with bandits and wreckers."

Seeing her frown of incomprehension, he explained. "Wreckers are bandits who prey on beached vessels and

castaways."

"Well!" Berenice managed. "I'm glad we won't be meeting them, especially before breakfast!"

Adam laughed. His eyes were dark-circled from the night's exertions, but his charm was still in evidence. "You feel up to eating something, then?"

"I'm starving!"

"So am I," agreed Callista. "Let's see if the cook's skill is equal to our appetites!"

They ate, and then watched Fair Isle go by. A speck in the distance grew into a ship, and was the *Siren's Call*, catching the wind with clever sailing. They slowed to let her catch up, and eventually Isabela herself was seen, waving at them from the bow of her ship. Over time, two of the Nevarran warships joined them. The last of them, a tiny dot, was visible but still distant in the mid-afternoon, when a smudge appeared on the southern horizon, stretching out as far as they could see.

"There now," said Adam. "That's home."

Thanks to my reviewers: *Adventfather*, *Blinded in a bolthole*, *Tirion I*, *Anime-StarWars-fan-zach*, *Nemrut*, *Mike3207*, *EmbertoInferno*, *KnightOfHolyLight*, *Trishata96*, *Have Socks*. *Will Travel*, *almostinsane*, *darksky01*, *Isala Uthernera*, *Psyche Sinclair*, *Phygmalion*, *JackOfBladesX*, *brrt*, *Jenna53*,

Guest, MsBarrows, reality deviant, dragonmactir, Fastforwardmotion, Tsu Doh Nimh, AD Lewis, jnybot, Robbie the Phoenix, NPC200, mille libri, Girl-chama, RB23G, PsychoLeopard, and Josie Lange.

In later medieval shipbuilding, a ship of war was usually equipped with a tall, multi-deck castle-like structure in the bow of the ship. It served as a platform for archers to shoot down on enemy ships, or as a defensive stronghold if the ship were boarded. A similar but usually much larger structure, called the aftcastle, was at the aft end of the ship, often stretching all the way from the main mast to the stern

Having such tall upper works on the ship was detrimental to sailing performance. As cannons were introduced and gunfire replaced boarding as the primary means of naval combat during the 16th century, the medieval forecastle was no longer needed, and later ships such as the galleon had only a low, one-deck high forecastle.

To RB23G: I appreciated your review, and thought you made some interesting points. I'm glad you like my antihero Hawke. He's not at all interested in being a hero: merely getting ahead and taking care of my family.

The darkspawn don't seem to have much to them, agreed, other than the Taint and sheer numbers. They are called mindless, but that it obviously untrue, or they would not understand how to forge weapons and armor and then use them. They can build and set traps, and lay ambushes.

There are darkspawn, like the Architect, who are quite intelligent. Since Bronwyn killed the Architect, there will be no Mother, but the Archdemon has plans for her upcoming offensive.

As to Ostagar: there is plenty of blame to go around. The plan was imbecilic, granted, on a number of counts. According to David Gaider, the head writer, Loghain was not in on the Cousland massacre. My take on it is that once they were gone, Loghain saw no point in further bloodshed over a moot point, and since Howe was as anti-Orlesian as Loghain himself, he looked upon his alliance with Howe as making the best of things.

98. Treason, High and Low

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 98: Treason, High and Low

There is unpleasant domestic punishment in this chapter. Some might find it disturbing. And other violence as well.

Loghain's impressions of Paragon Astrid were very different than Alistair's. On his way to Highever, he stopped at Amgarrak thaig, and found the admirable dwarven princess hard at work at creating a self-sustaining, highly defensible fortress. Her people were clearly devoted to her, and her unique take on dwarven customs enabled many casteless to find purpose under her aegis. She seemed to have plenty of gold as well, which roused a bit of curiosity, but which was clearly none of Loghain's business. Just as Loghain was strengthening his own land against attack, she was doing likewise, with impressive single-mindedness.

Alistair, on the other hand, was impressed during his own, separate visit, by how very superfluous he was to Astrid's current agenda. He met her as she was on her way to Kal'Hirol and he coming west from Soldier's Peak. She was friendly, of course, and perfectly happy to see fellow

Wardens. She was full of information about the current state of the Deep Roads and the current political situation in Orzammar. She could point out all the little twists and tunnels where darkspawn had been found and killed, and she had her golems repairing and building without rest. That special interest that he had once sensed in her down in Ostagar, however, seemed to have evaporated.

Was it the loss of her poor hand? Alistair's heart clenched at the pain she must have suffered. Her new... tools, he supposed he must call them... well elegant, or useful, or even terrifying. She seemed to have become part-golem herself. She was on her way to oversee some activities in Kal'Hiol, which needed immense work simply to clean it out. She bade them all farewell in a brisk manner, and did not look behind her.

Alistair discussed those changes with Loghain, whom he met east of Amgarrak Thaig. Loghain was on his way from Highever to Amaranthine, and using the Deep Roads to speed his journey. They made camp together and had a long talk. Loghain noticed Leliana among the Wardens. He frowned, and led Alistair far enough away that they could not be overheard.

Their dogs, Scrapper and Amber, renewed their acquaintance: cheerful litter mates, exploring and playing in the deeps underground. Alistair himself had come to be comfortable with Loghain, who spoke his mind and gave clear orders. The only thing he really had against his new king was that he had made Alistair a bann, though some of the blame for that must be the Queen's.

"And how is Bronwyn?" Alistair asked. "For that matter, *where* is Bronwyn?"

"Hard at work in the west. I left her based at Gherlen's halt. She's scouting out more of the Deep Roads there, trying to sense something from the Archdemon. She's had her share of nightmares, poor girl. What about you?"

Alistair made a face. "Nightmares, of course. Do they mean much? I'm not sure. Recently I saw the Archdemon in the Fade looking smug about something. The horde is certainly gathered, but nobody's sensed a large body of darkspawn anywhere. Maker only knows where they are. One thing I'm positive of. They weren't near Ostagar, and they're not anywhere here in the North. Of course, there are probably tunnels and caverns unknown to us. Maybe deep under the mountains..."

"I suppose that's another reason why Bronwyn's out there in the Frostbacks," Loghain agreed. "Look here, lad, I'll tell you a bit of what's going on, so you won't be surprised. I'm making my way back to Denerim, once I've done inspecting the northern ports. I've called a muster of Fereldan nobles. You're exempt, since you're already heading out on duty. While we're organizing our forces, there will be a trial. There's no harm in telling you, since the man's already in custody. Bann Frandarel's been playing games with the Orlesians and I want him out. The Crown will take West Hill as a royal domain and I've got people working on strengthening the fortress there. When the Orlesians come, we'll be ready."

"Maybe they won't."

Loghain barked a laugh. "And maybe the winter will last forever! They're coming, all right. The Knight-Divine said as much outright. We sent little Brosca into Jader, and she saw where they're building onto the dockyards to accommodate the rest of the invasion fleet. It's an open secret. Bronwyn will likely send more agents into the town, one way or another. They're coming, and it won't do you Wardens any good to try to be neutral. The Orlesians won't let you."

Alistair refrained from saying that the Orlesians weren't the only ones who wouldn't allow anyone to be neutral.

"You'll be wanting to see Bronwyn of course," Loghain went on. "She'll be glad to see you, too. She needs her friends with her. See what she wants of you, and if nothing else, have a look at your bannorn—especially on the western borders. Keep an eye on Jader. They're going to strike just as soon as they can trust the weather. Maybe the darkspawn, too. Bronwyn thinks they're likely to be active as soon as it thaws."

Alistair shuddered, imagining being attacked by Orlesian chevaliers on one side, and savage darkspawn on the other. "It's so wrong in so many ways for the Orlesians to attack us during a Blight! I wish we could just back away and let the two of them fight each other instead."

Loghain's laugh was more genuine. "And so do I! If there's any way I can see my way to manage it, I'll try to arrange just that!"

Some nobles refused outright to attend the muster. Most had the sense to send a representative in their stead to captain the levies they could manage to raise. Loghain noted the uncooperative. Some were old or otherwise unfit, and a proxy leader was simply a good idea. Some were too lazy or too intent on trying to play a double game to want to commit themselves to combat. Everyone was about to have a short, sharp lesson in what it meant to be a traitor.

The trial of Bann Frandarel was to be held in the Landsmeet Chamber, before those nobles who had come to Denerim. The arls would all be present, even Nathaniel Howe, returned from his Nevarran embassy, which had proved something of a triumph.

Bann Adam Hawke, too, brought home a Nevarran wife. The two girls were presented to the king, who thought them quite comely and well-behaved. They seemed taken with their husbands, and the feeling was apparently mutual. Anora was pleased with the new noblewomen, especially with Arlessa Callista, who of course would be in close company with her. Loghain thought pretty girls all very well, but three sound warships and a transport were far, far better. And the chest of Nevarran gold was best of all. Arl Nathaniel brought back a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance with him. Fereldan's obligation was to resist the Orlesians, which Loghain had every intention of doing anyway.

Unsurprisingly, not everyone was pleased with the Nevarrans. That two eligible noblemen should be snapped up by

foreigners did not sit well with many. Spiteful remarks were made about accents and fashions. The most vocal of these critics was one who hardly would have been in the running to marry either of the gentlemen.

"What hideous clothes!" sneered Arlessa Habren at a dinner held by Bann Sighard. "I wonder that they have the shamelessness to go out in public with their throats exposed."

Kane thought the two Nevarran girls quite pretty, and he had no problems with fashions that showed a bit of skin. Habren was in a foul mood these days... even more than usual.

While it was hard to put up with her, at least her temper had a reason. She was with child, so all his hard work had paid off. And since she was with child, he need not sleep with her, since he had paid off a Healer to tell her that such things could cause miscarriages and other gruesome outcomes. And she was sick quite a bit, which meant that she stayed a great deal in her luxurious apartments. She had managed to come out tonight, but judging from her expression, the experiment would not be essayed again very soon.

A number of nobles were stirred up about the arrest and upcoming trial of Bann Frandarel, but Kane had no sympathy with that.

"If he didn't want to be arrested," Kane told one grumbler plainly, "then he shouldn't have had dealings with Orlesians. No good ever comes of that. And Orlesians always cheat."

These words were duly reported to Loghain, who was more or less satisfied with them. Arl Kane was not good for much, but at least he had the sense not to make deals behind Loghain's back. He showed up in a very pretty set of armor from the workshop of Master Wade, looking the part of the handsome warrior, though Loghain doubted he knew much more of swordplay than that the pointy end went into the other fellow.

Habren was bored. Her stupid elven maid was huddled in the corner, nursing her slapped face, sniveling.

"Dallena! Stop that noise, or I'll have you whipped bloody! Can't you see that I don't feel well?"

Being pregnant was hideously dull. Some of their vassals—or their women—came to call, but Habren found their insipid talk hard to bear. It was mostly about their own childbeds or their own ugly, useless children. Lady Parna told gruesome stories about children born without legs or arms... or without heads... or about twins born conjoined who died gruesomely within a few days. Or she would talk about labors that had lasted days and had killed the mothers. It was sickening and terrifying, and Habren had finally screamed at her to shut up. The lady had done so, but had not called again.

At least she wouldn't have to see those horrible Nevarrans again very soon. They had called, oh so sympathetic and kind, bringing gifts for the baby... some of which were quite nice. It was a humiliating thought, that now there was someone else

she had to give place to: an Arlessa of Amaranthine. The redhead was nobody—the wife of Habren's stepbrother, a mere jumped-up bann—but Arlessa Callista had precedence of Habren herself. How could that be right or fair? Denerim was the most important place in Ferelden. The Arlessa of Denerim should be next to the Queen in importance. Habren had dropped a few hints about what she thought of foreigners getting above themselves. The women hadn't been back since.

There was nothing to do but have shopkeepers come to the estate so Habren could buy their wares. Silks, furs, jewels... it was pleasant to see all her things piling up around her. Kane was giving her odd looks, as if he disapproved. Well, too bad!

Father was coming soon, and he would see that people treated her as they ought. He'd give Kane a talking to about neglecting her. Kane was always going out, either to take his place in the Council, or to take to talk to his captains—though he did look very handsome in his new armor. The captains should come *here*, so Kane could spend more time with her. There were plenty of things that Kane could do to please her that wouldn't harm the stupid baby. He could use his mouth, his fingers... he could surely come and talk to her and flatter her!

At least she didn't have to see his horrible little sisters. They were far, far away, upstairs and on the other side of the mansion. They had their meals there, for Habren had got her way about that. They were too young to be permitted to dine with their elders and betters. Father, of course, had allowed

Habren to dine with the grownups from the time she was thirteen, but she was a born lady and a special case. Those common brats would not be fit for decent company until they were at least fifteen... er... sixteen or seventeen. Or quite possibly never.

And now that Loghain was back in Denerim, Habren saw even less of Kane. Couldn't that uncouth peasant manage things without bothering them?

"I'm *bored!*" she shouted at the walls. She stalked over to the cringing maid, and yanked on her arm. "You! Dallena! Get up and help me change. I want to wear the new pink gown."

"My lady," whimpered the maid, "it is not finished."

Of course that was absolutely the wrong thing to say. Habren was not interested in excuses.

"Then you'll just have to finish it *right now!*" she screamed. "Get those worthless knife-eared wenches here and get to work. If it's not done by dinnertime, I'll throw the lot of you out!"

Dallena fled, shaking. Habren followed her to door, shouting down the hall.

"And I'm hungry! I want honeycakes with almond milk!"

A guard looked her way, irresolute.

"Get them!" Habren snapped.

"My lady," he said, "I'm not permitted to leave my post."

Habren reared back, her mouth working. "I am your Arlessa, and I command you to go to the kitchen and fetch me honeycakes with almond milk, or I will have you hanged for treason!"

The guard winced. He did not believe for a moment that the arl would permit any such thing, but that bitch would keep yammering at him until he did her bidding. He would have to report it to the officer of the day. He might even be flogged, but on the other hand, everybody knew about the arlessa. He gave her the most cursory of bows and turned his back on her, hurrying down the hall. On his way he passed one of his mates.

"You're supposed to be on duty in the family quarters!"

"*She*—" the guard jerked his head behind him "—said she'd have me hanged if I didn't fetch her honeycakes. She's been screaming all day. Her maid ran out of there, looking like she'd seen a hurlock."

"Don't know how the arl puts up with her," said the other, disgusted. "My woman had a hard time when she was expecting our first, but I've never heard of anyone acting like that."

"The arl's not a bad bloke," agreed the guard. "I've got to get on, before Her High-And-Mightiness pops a vessel."

His friend snorted. "Right. Too bad if she did the world a favor."

Back in her chamber, Habren was lashing herself in a fury, since she had nothing better to do. Pacing back and forth, she admired how the train of her dressing gown whipped around when she turned. She felt powerful, fearsome, in command. Within her own estate, there was no one to keep her from doing whatever she liked.

Her maid Dallena crept through the door, followed by the seamstresses, also all elves. Habren preferred elven servants, since she towered over them. She glared at the girls as they curtsyed.

"What are you waiting for? Get to work!"

"If you please, my lady, we'll take the dress to the sewing room..."

"You will not! You'll work right here where I can see you. I won't have you slacking off!"

So the pieces of the gown were distributed, and the quaking women sewed in dead silence, while Habren hovered over them, criticizing every stitch.

"You have too much thread on the needle! Must your stitches be large enough to span the Drakon River? Do it over!"

The tirade paused when the guard appeared, accompanied by

a footman carrying the arlessa's snack. It was beautifully arranged on a tray. Framed by her favorite silver bowl, the honeycakes were plump and round, half submerged in the sweet almond milk. Her special gold spoon lay on a pink silk napkin.

"Put it down on the table and get out," Habren ordered. She seated herself, ready for a treat, and set about greedily devouring the cakes, licking her lips in satisfaction.

The elves kept on with their sewing, desperate to finish the dress before sundown. The youngest of them, only thirteen years old, was still shaking. Tear quivered on her lashes.

An older girl whispered, "Don't cry. You can't cry, no matter what. You mustn't get tears on the silk!"

Habren snarled, "I hear whispering! I'm not paying you to talk!"

Enraged that they would dare talk about her—for what else could vacant-minded elves be gossiping about?—she pushed angrily away from the table and stalked over to oversee the work.

"Your hand is shaking!" she fumed at the young girl. "Are you some sort of *cripple*? What use is a palsied knife-ears to me? I don't think you know how to sew at all! Let me see what you're doing—

She yanked at the sleeve in the sobbing girl's hands. The

needle slipped through the girl's fingers and pricked Habren. With a startled cry of pain, the arlessa flinched away.

"You stupid wench! You stabbed me with that needle!" She put her finger in her mouth, sucking at the pinprick, and then looked at the sleeve, where a tiny drop of blood stood out; red clashing with the pale pink.

"You've ruined it!" she shouted. "You've ruined my dress, you little whore! You stabbed me and then ruined my dress. I'll have your ears for this..."

The sewing maids' cries and pleas rose, counterpoint swelling against Habren's shouts. Most threw themselves on their knees, begging for mercy. Habren clouted the luckless girl over her ear, and then grabbed furiously at her hand. Her rage rising like flames, she fumbled for the needle, still hanging by its thread to the sleeve, and rammed it into the girl's hand.

A shriek, shriller than a bird, cut through the stone walls like a beam of mage fire. The rest of the maids screamed out, wild with terror. The girl struggled helplessly against the bigger, stronger human. Habren twisted the needle, her face contorting with something like ecstasy, a voluptuous sensation warming her belly. She pulled the girl's hand fast against her, and push hard against the needle, forcing it all the way, until the point emerged from the screaming girl's palm.

The guard burst through the door, wondering if the arlessa was being murdered. His first impression was that the arlessa was trying to kill her maid. He did not dare lay hands on a

noblewoman, but threw the door wide open, hoping the poor silly girls would have the sense to run. They did: crying, stumbling, half-blind with tears.

Habren shoved the screaming girl at the guard.

"This knife-ears attacked me! I want her whipped!"

"Yes, my lady!"

The guard dragged the elf away, and Habren sat down suddenly on a chair, winded and rather nauseated. The honeycakes, so enticing before, now seemed sickeningly sweet.

"Take this slop away!" she ordered, and then realized that she was alone.

Where had they all gone? Where was Dallena?

She felt dizzy again, and threw herself onto her bed, watching the ceiling spin above her until she dropped off to sleep.

Outside in the corridor, the guard, unable to stand all the hysteria, tried to calm the girl, and then, when he saw what was hurting her, took the trouble to wrench the needle out of her hand.

"It wasn't my fault," the girl sobbed. "The arlessa grabbed up the dress and pricked herself with the needle!"

"That's as may be," the guard replied, not doubting her for a

second. "But she's still the arlessa. Here, bind that up with your kerchief." Once that was done, he grabbed the girl's wrist and pulled her along to the upper dungeon.

There, the portly, unshaven jailor was unsure what to do with her.

"Wants her whipped?" the man asked. "With what? The cane, the quirt, the horsewhip, the knout, the scourge? How many lashes? And where on the body? This is all very irregular!"

"Dunno. She just said, 'I want her whipped!' Just like that. Pricked herself on a pin—"

"—a needle," whimpered the girl.

"And flew into a passion about it. Ran the needle through the girl's hand, but I pulled it out."

"Does she want her locked up, too?"

"Didn't say anything about locking her up..."

The girl began crying again.

"Stop that sniveling, or I'll give you something to cry about!" The jailor turned a professional eye on the hapless girl. "All right. Here's what we're going to do. Twelve to the bottom with the cane for a simple domestic offense, and it's into the cells for you, my girl."

The guard hesitated, "You could let her go after," he

suggested mildly.

The jailor scoffed at that. "If her ladyship's in a temper, she'll want to make sure this knife-ears learned her lesson. You, wench, strip down and bend over that bench there. Get on with you! Strip down, or I'll rip your dress off myself. I'm doing you a favor, using the cane. If her ladyship had said 'flogged' I'd have to use the scourge, and that would," he chuckled, "*mark* you."

Sick with fear, the sewing maids huddled into the little cubbyhole they shared. Habren's maid Dallena huddled with them, dismally aware that she would have to return to the arlessa's apartments and her own dark little closet there. One girl had crept out to hear the news, and slipped back in noiselessly.

"They've taken Tessa to be whipped. She's in the dungeons."

One girl muttered. "That's where we'll all end up someday. I hate that shem bitch! I wish I could kill her!"

"Don't say that!" Dallena hissed. "They could hang you for those words!"

A dull, miserable silence followed.

"I've got to go," Dallena groaned. "If she can't find me, Maker knows what she'll do to me!"

Another girl whispered, "Better you than me! I hope she dies in childbirth!"

Dallena hissed again, terrified. You never knew who might be listening. For that matter, it was far from unlikely that one of the maids might tattle on the rest, hoping for favor or at least milder punishment. She glided down the halls, trying to make herself invisible. No guard stood in the corridor. She pushed at the arlessa's door with trembling hands.

The inner door to the private bedchamber was open, just as they had left it when they ran. Dallena peeked into the room, and glimpsed Habren sprawled out on her bed. She came closer, hoping that the arlessa would not wake anytime soon. On the table by the bed was the silver pitcher of pale, cool wine that the arlessa demanded be kept filled. A half-filled goblet was near at hand. Dallena wondered what she ought to do. Surely anything was better than this. It was useless to go to the Alienage. Her people were gone; sold to the Tevinters. Her cousin, though...

Yes, her cousin liked her work at the Wardens' place. Dallena would go there, and even if they wouldn't take her on, it was a place to hide. Dallena darted into her poky, windowless cell, and threw together her few belongings. Before leaving the arlessa's apartments, she paused, and then spat, full and heavy, into Habren's silver goblet.

Leonas and Leandra Bryland, Arl and Arlessa of South Reach, called at the Arl of Denerim's estate just as soon as they

arrived in the city and could wash off the travel stains. They had had a wonderful time in the south. Bethany and Charade were in cheerful spirits and very good looks. The two young boys were markedly less pleased about visiting their sister the arlessa, and trailed after the others as if going to their doom.

Kane, of course, greeted them politely, and said and did all that was proper. Habren was pleased to be the center of attention, once her announcement was made.

"What wonderful news!" Leandra said kindly.

"How are you feeling, my dear?" Leonas asked his daughter.

She shrugged, a little sulky. "Mostly terrible. Nobody understands what I'm going through."

Leandra smiled. "Well, I certainly do! I'll be happy to help you in any way I can."

Habren glared at her, and did not bother to respond.

Charade, sensing trouble on the way, asked, "Have you picked out any names?"

Habren rolled her eyes. Kane answered for her. "I was thinking about Annawyn for a girl; but Habren likes—"

"It's going to be a boy," Habren said. "I don't want to waste my time on girls. It's going to be a boy and I'm going to name him Rupert."

Kane smiled suavely, determined not to saddle any child of his with such an awful name. Still, there was no reason to pick a fight in front of Habren's father. Things had been tense here at the estate. Habren was having trouble keeping a maid. One had run off, and Habren had told him that the elf had robbed her of some jewelry and coin. At the moment the City Guard was looking for the girl on the charge of petty treason, and Habren would insist on Kane hanging her when she was taken.

He had not missed the looks of terror cast in Habren's direction by the remaining elves. Something was wrong there, but no elf was worth Kane's domestic peace. Habren was going to give him an heir, after all. Habren disliked human maids, but would have to make do with them. Likely they wouldn't let her bully them as she'd want. Kane had no illusions about Habren's temper. Her father was an important man and Kane's ally, and must be kept on his side.

And the arlessa was a good sort, who asked after the girls. Kane had them sent for directly. The girls and their governess entered, pretty and well-mannered as ever.

"The last time I saw you," Leonas teased, "you were trying for a puppy. Did you imprint?"

"No, my lord," said Faline. "There were only two puppies that time, and they were darling, but they liked other people. But another litter was whelped not long ago, and we're going to try again."

"Well, good luck to you!"

"I hope you get a mabari," said Corbus. "Look how big Killer's grown. If you had a mabari, it could be friends with mine!"

Kane glanced at Habren, willing her to do the polite thing and invite them to dinner. That was hopeless, so he issued the invitation himself, and they agreed on the next evening.

"We'll be busy all day at Council," said Leonas. "The King wants Frandarel's trial to start as soon as possible. I'll be interested in looking over the evidence."

Kane knew something about that. "Cousland thinks the evidence is pretty clear. Frandarel has more coin than he ought to and he's been corresponding with the Orlesians. The King was furious when he discovered that the bann had a golem in his treasure vault. It's been confiscated."

"Any word about the Queen?" asked Leandra.

Habren huffed a quick, rude noise. Her father could not ignore that and gave her a level look.

"No," said Kane, who could and did ignore Habren. "She's still in the west, shoring up the defenses in the mountain passes. Adam and Carver are in town, though, back with Howe from his trip to Nevarra."

Leandra stared at him. "Nevarra?" she gasped. "Nevarra? They went to *Nevarra*?"

Leonas Bryland winced. With an attempt to be debonair, he merely asked. "And was it successful?"

Kane began to grin. "So it seems. Howe and Adam brought home a pretty pair of Nevarran wives."

He was unsurprised when visit ended abruptly. Leandra was desperate to track down her errant sons and see them—and Adam's new wife—for herself.

"Did you know about this?" she asked Leonas.

"My dear, it was a state secret."

"And Adam is married!" Bethany cried, thrilled at the idea.

"You won't like her," Habren scoffed unhelpfully. "She's perfectly hideous, and you can barely understand a word she says."

"I think she's a charming girl," countered Kane. "Do bring them all to dinner tomorrow, won't you?"

Jowan and Carver returned to a nearly empty Wardens' Compound. It made for sleeping late and no trouble using the bathing facilities, but after a few days they were growing restless.

Ketil and Idunn were living there quite happily, more or less playing house. Ketil's usual grumpiness had dissipated. Idunn, whom Carver had always thought of as the usual plain-faced

dwarven woman, looked much prettier, now that she and Ketil had come to an understanding.

"The Senior Warden left us here to keep the place running," Idunn told them. "He took the rest and went north to see Soldier's Peak. I don't know what he intended past that, though I think he might mean to go west and find the Commander."

"Sounds good," Carver said, joining them at the long table in the Hall for the midday meal. "I want to go too, but I can't, not right away." He gave Jowan a gloomy look. "I've got to see my mother and the rest when they get back into town. She'll rake me over the coals for going overseas without telling her."

"We were under orders," Jowan comforted him. He sat down himself, and reached for the bread basket. "We *had* to go. I do think we should leave to find Bronwyn fairly soon, though."

Cups of mulled cider were served, and a pitcher put on the table. Carver looked up to thank a pretty elven girl with a honey-colored ponytail. She bobbed a timid curtsy and hurried away, eyes averted.

"She new?" Carver asked.

"Niniel's cousin," Idunn told them, munching contentedly. "Good girl. Quiet. Never goes out. Didn't notice her myself until a few days ago."

"So what were those foreign Wardens like?" Ketil rumbled.

That was a rather exciting topic of conversation. Carver described the magnificent Nevarran digs in detail, with Jowan adding his own observations.

"I guess you could say," Carver concluded. "That they're rich. Really rich. They don't get down the Deep Roads a lot. They spar and train and swagger around the city. It's a good life. They've got a lot of traditions. Their commander is a decent sort. *Very aristocratic.*"

"Don't say it like that," Jowan rebuked him. "Bronwyn's very aristocratic, too."

"Yes, but—"

Mistress Rannelly bustled in.

"You've a visitor, Wardens!"

Fenris was once again at loose ends when they arrived in Denerim. Up to that time, he had been part of a small, elite team that had pulled together and become close. He had been accepted among the Fereldans as one of them—as a friend, even. It had been a unique, and uniquely wonderful experience. The noblemen and the knights had treated him with courtesy and respect; the men-at-arms and servants with good-humored camaraderie.

However, here in Denerim, it had all changed. The men of the embassy had been chosen by the King, and were not the arl's

men. Arl Nathaniel resumed his place as a great noble, busy with great affairs. Lord—no, *Bann* Adam Hawke—he must accustom himself to these Fereldan terms— had his own life and a new wife. Fenris' comrades, like Darrow and Kain, had returned to their barracks at Fort Drakon, since they were soldiers of Maric's Shield, the best of the king's army. The knights had gone to visit their families, and the rest back to their duties at the Palace. Fenris could claim a place among the arl's guard, but he was unknown to the men here, who looked askance at a foreigner and an armed elf. A few remarks had been made, though the sergeant had come down on the troublemakers.

"If he did the arl good service, that's good enough for me!"

"But he's an *elf!*" protested a guardsman. "Nobody's saying he shouldn't have a place, but let him stay where he belongs, in the servants' quarters with the elves!"

In truth, Fenris had expected no better, and had feared a great deal worse. Sleeping in the barracks... feeling so much an intruder... was thoroughly uncomfortable. In time it might become dangerous.

He had been assigned no duties, and therefore his time was his own. Hawke had counseled him to buy a money belt, back in Amaranthine. Fenris had done so, and so his small fortune was on his person at all times. Leaving his little chest with his personal items at the barracks, he decided to go out and see this strange southern city for himself.

The other things he had purchased in Amaranthine had been a warm hooded cloak and a pair of stout fur-lined boots. Fenris had never worn such things before, and found the sensation odd. The sensation of ice and snow on bare feet, however, was worse.

To one who had seen the wonders of Minrathous, greatest and wickedest of cities, who had traveled among the Qunari, who had seen Antiva, the Free Marches, and the splendors of Nevarra and Cumberland... well, to speak plainly, Denerim was a poor and squalid place. The kingdom of Ferelden itself was poor, and thus had been the victim of constant attacks by its rich and powerful neighbor. Such was the world: the powerful preyed on the weak; and the weak must defend themselves or submit and be made slaves. Fenris granted that the Fereldans were determined on the former. He respected that.

Where could he go? He could fight for a place in the arl's guard. He could return to Amaranthine, where the captain had been told about Fenris at length. Neither prospect was particularly appealing. He was a warrior, and would go where the war was. It was clearly not in Denerim. There was another option, however...

Everyone knew how to find the Wardens—even rather confused people who insisted on also telling him how to find the Alienage. Fenris had not the least interest in the Alienage. He had never lived in an Alienage, and had felt no connection to the city elves he had come across. The Wardens, however... Carver and Jowan had been friendly, and did not

seem to think themselves above his company. Yes, Jowan was a mage, but he was first a Grey Warden, and had shown no signs of any craving for power or any need to inflict suffering for its own sake.

Fenris knocked at the thick, rugged door. It opened, and he was greeted by a pretty elven maid and a friendly, middle-aged human woman. Neither woman blinked an eye at him; they were supremely unsurprised to see an armed elf at their door. He was immediately admitted to the Wardens' Compound. This was a good sign...

"You've a visitor, Wardens!" called the woman.

"Fenris!" called Carver. "Come on in!" He turned to the other Wardens. "Hey, everybody! This is Fenris! He met up with the Arl's party in Kirkwall, and he's amazing with a greatsword."

The two dogs, knowing Fenris well, did not bark, but trotted over to renew his acquaintance.

"Hello, Fenris!" waved Jowan. "Come and have a bite with us."

Idunn narrowed her eyes, considering. "You're not a Warden."

"No, he's not a Warden," said Carver, a little sarcastically. "He's a friend... like Zevran or Sten." He explained to Fenris. "They fight with us, but they're not Wardens."

"Ah," replied Fenris, for lack of anything better to say. He sat

down and directly found a cup of mulled cider and a bowl of savory stew set before him by a shy young elf girl. Still, this was interesting... and rather promising. One could fight alongside the Wardens without actually joining the mysterious Order. Fenris wanted to belong to no one but himself.

"Would you like to stay with us?" asked Jowan. "I know that the Arl and Carver's brother must have made you offers, but I think, since this place is so empty, that we could actually give you a room of your own. Isn't that right?" He appealed to Rannelly. "Isn't there a room for Fenris?"

"Of course, Warden dear," soothed the housekeeper. "We always have a place for friends of the Wardens. Just give your things to Niniel or Dallena, Master Fenris, and we'll get you settled in a wink."

"I left my trunk at the Arl's," said Fenris, "but I can retrieve it..."

"We'll go with you!" said Carver. "I should find out if my Mother's come back to town yet."

"I need to pick up some things at the Wonders of Thedas," said Jowan. "A shop," he explained to Fenris. "It's the nicest shop in Denerim."

"Actually," Carver contradicted. "That would be Master Wade's. He's the best armorer in Fereldan. Really talented."

"We can go there, too," Jowan compromised.

"After we eat!"

Fenris hesitated, and then dug into his stew. Where everything else had changed, these Wardens still treated him the same as ever.

It was pleasant to be staying together at the Howe mansion in Denerim. Callista and Berenice still felt very odd and out-of-place here, and the companionship of a familiar face was very welcome.

Berenice sighed, as they sat and sewed together in the privacy of a little parlor that Callista had claimed for her own. Sewing might ordinarily be a mere pastime for ladies, but today they were sewing with definite goals in mind. Something must be done to make this place liveable. The walls were rough-cut stone, softened only by a few threadbare hangings depicting dogs. The chairs were plain and uncushioned, and the windows small, grudging any passage of light into the room. The fireplace was crude, a mere recess in the wall with a earthenware flue. Most of the smoke scorned to travel up it, rendering the room unpleasantly hazy. Unappealing as the place was, it was the best prospect for a sitting room in the entire house. The lack of luxuries the young women could accept; they had not quite expected the lack of comfort and even sometimes what they regarded as basic necessities. Did Fereldans really not understand how to build a working fireplace or to construct decent furniture? The women had each brought a few pieces, but those had been left in Amaranthine.

"It's not as if we weren't *warned* that Ferelden is a rude and barbarous country."

Callista gave her a look. "Are you saying, rude and barbarous or not, that you would prefer to be an outcast in Nevarra?"

"No," Berenice said, very decisively, stitching on a cushion cover. "I'm not saying that at all. I adore Adam, and it's all a great adventure. However... oh, Callista really! It *is* fairly barbarous. Or poor. What have you. I didn't mind Amaranthine. It's not a bad little provincial town, taken all together. The view of the sea is magnificent. It's much smaller than I pictured, but it's not bad, and Adam likes my ideas for making something of his keep..." She gave Callista a significant look.

Callista clicked her tongue, annoyed. "Yes, I know. Vigil's Keep really is quite primitive. The Great Hall is handsome, but the rest needs work. Nathaniel *knows* that, my dear. He traveled for many years in the Free Marches, after all. He's going to live in a very different style than his late, unlamented father. No... no don't quote me. Nathaniel really does mourn his father. While no one else has much good to say about the man, Nathaniel seems to have loved him. Setting that aside, however, Nathaniel has seen the world and has broader views than the other nobles we've met. His housekeeper Adria is a sweet woman, and understands what I want for my own apartments. One room at a time, I shall set in order our bedchamber, a family parlor, a dining room, the solar, and a few rooms for guests. And... a nursery, of course. I see little

point in complaining about the rest. After all, Berenice, Vigil's Keep is above all a *fortress*."

Berenice thought that over. "You could say the same about Denerim! It looks shabby and mean, but I can see that whatever coin the kings have had has gone into the military. Not surprising, after being conquered by Orlais. King Loghain clearly care only about the army. I suppose nothing here makes sense without the Orlesians."

"That's very true," Callista agreed. "Compare the magnificence of Fort Drakon with that dismal little 'cathedral' of theirs! It's no better than a village chantry at home! Or compare it even with the Palace, such as it is. Nathaniel is hoping to open Ferelden up to the world and make it more civilized, but of course that cannot happen until the darkspawn are destroyed and the Orlesians thwarted." She glanced about her, at the unlovely little room with the smoky little fire. "And as for *this* place..."

A short time later, a maid told them their presence was requested downstairs, for the Arl and Arlesa of South Reach had come to call. Berenice looked and Callista and swallowed nervously.

Introductions were made. Both Nevarrans instantly recognized the Arlessa of South Reach as a fellow civilized woman. Better yet, she was warm and kind, and eager to make them feel welcome. The presence of the Arl's two little sons, children from his earlier marriage, made everything cheerful and easy. There was a half-grown mabari who seemed to

know Adam and Carver and their dogs as well.

For Carver was present, too. He had come to visit his brother and was in time to see the rest of his family. He looked rather exasperated at his mother's remonstrances about going on long, dangerous journeys without telling anyone. Arl Nathaniel was faintly amused.

The little boys made their bows like proper gentlemen, first to the Arlessa of Amaranthine, and then to their stepsister-in-law, Lady Berenice Hawke.

Berenice was pleased to be able to recognize everyone from Adam's excellent descriptions. That pretty dark-haired girl was Bethany, the mage. The other, with the cloud of brown hair, was the cousin, Charade, who had grown up in Kirkwall.

"What beautiful hair!" Bethany burst out, admiring Berenice's flaming locks. Berenice blushed, but heard no mockery in the girl's words. Adam liked her hair, too. Fereldans did not share Nevarra's view on red hair and its possessors.

"We just called on Arl Kane and Arlessa Habren," Leandra told them. "The Arlessa is expecting! Such exciting news."

"Yes," Callista said politely, with a carefully pleasant smile. "We have met Arlessa Habren."

The two boys, knowing the real Habren better than anyone, immediately caught the undertones of the arlessa's reply. They nudged each other.

Adam glanced at Nathaniel, who kept his face blank. Both of them had had an earful from their wives about the shocking rudeness of the Arlessa of Denerim. To avoid that particular topic of conversation, Adam launched into a recounting of the Nevarran adventure, beginning with their journey to Kirkwall, since the information about traveling the Deep Roads was to be kept as quiet as possible.

Leandra was horrified and indignant to hear about the current tenants of her family estate. Adam did not mention that they had actually slaughtered the slavers: he simply produced some family souvenirs he was able to lay his hands on. Arl Leonas filled in the blanks for himself. As far as he was concerned, slavers deserved everything they got.

Adam excused himself briefly, and brought back the little portrait of Leandra they had liberated.

"What a lovely picture, my dear," Leonas approved. "We'll have to display that next to the new portrait of the two of us."

Carver glanced anxiously at his brother, but Adam skipped over the Warden prison. That would unnecessarily frighten their mother, and did not need to be made public. Most of the time was spent on their time in Nevarra. Nathaniel and Carver added some remarks about the beauty and grandeur of the city, and the new brides happily contributed their own stories about meeting their dashing husbands for the first time.

The skirmishes on the road and the final battle at sea were done full justice. Nathaniel smiled grimly, remembering it all.

"Warden Jowan proved himself that day, if he hadn't before!"

Leonas listened, and smiled his assent, but tucked the information away to discuss it further with Loghain. He must have already taken the young men's report. Had he heard this part? The use of mages at sea would be innovative and shocking to some, but if the Orlesians were building an invasion fleet, this would put paid to it, and be great fun to watch in the bargain.

The treason trial of Bann Frandarel was quite the social event. Seats were provided in the Landsmeet, and everyone appeared, dressed in richest raiment to witness the ritual disgrace and condemnation of one of their own.

Some nobles were rather nervous about Loghain's assault on the nobility—and the accompanying attainder and confiscation of wealth—and whispered that it smacked of tyranny. Still, the evidence against Frandarel appeared genuine, and the growing fear of an Orlesian attack earned Frandarel no friends.

Loghain, however, had won a few. In her search of the treasury Cauthrien had found a remarkable holy relic, a vial containing the reputed Tears of Andraste. These Loghain had tendered to the Chantry. They had no known powers, but were still a rarity. The Grand Cleric had been very grateful. It had given Loghain's prestige a boost.

And so had the Nevarran embassy. The gift of four ships and

substantial financial support had bolstered the newly-made king's reputation. The alliance reassured many who were apprehensive about the future.

There were those who were not particularly happy about the current situation, however, and some of them were unhappy because they regarded themselves more as partisans of the Queen. Where was she? Why was she sidelined in the wilds of the Frostback Mountains, while Loghain laid down the law in Denerim? Quite a few nobles had been deeply impressed by the revelation of her special relationship to the Prophet herself. Then, too, there were those conservatives who regarded her as the true monarch by blood, and Loghain only as her consort. Bann Alfstanna was the most vocal of this group, which included most of the northern banns. Nathaniel Howe himself had tenuous ties to the faction.

Fergus Cousland was not exactly of that party, but he understood that those individuals considered him his sister's proxy at the current time. Petitions were being addressed to him in his sister's place, most notably by the city elves, who looked to Bronwyn as their patron and protector. Some ugly things had occurred at the Arl of Denerim's estate, and while a nobleman had special authority over his domestic staff, Fergus was looking for a favorable moment to take Kane aside and tell him the harm that Habren was doing to his public image.

But that whole family party was together and looking quite happy. Arl Leonas looked as content as an father of a fine family should be. The boys were with him, their growing puppy

well-behaved. Corbus was growing, too; in no time he'd be a man. Perhaps everyone was looking happy because Habren had to stay home due to ill-health. That aside, word was that Arlessa Leandra was delighted with the young noblewoman her son Adam had brought home from Nevarra. She certainly looked it today, leaning past her son to converse with her daughter-in-law, both of them smiling. Rumor was that the dowry had been splendid, though it probably did not compare with the princely sum that Arlessa Callista had brought to her marriage with Nathaniel.

Nate was looking happy, too. You had to know him to see it clearly, since he was one who had always kept his deepest feelings to himself. He was not grinning toothily like that ponce Kane, but his face was relaxed, his posture comfortable, and he was sitting as close to his bride as good manners allowed. Fergus admired Callista: a pretty girl, her exotic coloring distinguishing her from the other ladies; her manners proper and her demeanor sweet and pleasant. Anora had taken a liking to her, which was a good thing, since they would be seeing a great deal of one another.

It was interesting to see her, anyway, since if Fergus had not been committed elsewhere., he likely would have found himself married to her himself. The Queen of Nevarra's niece was certainly well born enough for the Teyrn of Highever and the heir-presumptive of Ferelden.

A fanfare rang out: the crowd quieted, voice hushing to murmurs as Loghain stalked in, wearing his armor and followed by his daughter, the Queen-Dowager. Anora looked

for Fergus and gave him a quick smile all his own. She, worse luck, was being worked to the breaking point. hardly given time to help plan their own little wedding.

Only three more days. The wedding, perforce, would be very small and private. Quite a few people were scandalized that a full year of mourning was not being observed. Too bad for them. Only the high nobles and their families were invited, since obviously such an important dynastic union must be witnessed. At least their relations with the Chantry had thawed sufficiently for the wedding itself to be held in the Cathedral.

Some might consider an event with only twenty-five celebrants a small matter, but to Fergus and Anora it was crucial to their happiness. They had debated whether the children should be invited or not, but Fergus carried the day there. The children were uniformly good people; better than some of the adults. Anora, with a sigh, had agreed that it was so. If it came down to it, she would rather see Faline Kendalls at her table than Arlessa Habren. That the adult children should be invited was simply good manners. Bann Adam Hawke and his new bride were not invited for their own sakes, but because Bann Adam was the son of the Arlessa of South Reach.

Loghain was enthroned; Anora took her smaller chair a step down on the dais. The Queen's throne stood empty, but Fergus knew that she was hardly forgotten. And stepping out from behind a hanging was the golem that Loghain had claimed from Frandarel's treasury. It was a formidable-looking guard.

The king made a peremptory gesture to the herald, who called for order. Fergus fixed his attention on the proceedings.

"All here attend to the King's Justice! Bring in the accused, Frandarel Holcombe, Bann of West Hill!"

Fergus spared a shard of pity for the man, who looked quite undone. Loghain must not be holding him in comfortable confinement. He was escorted to the open center of the Landsmeet floor, and given a three-legged stool to sit upon. A good idea, for the bann appeared close to collapse.

Loghain spoke, his dark glare focused on the wretched man opposite him.

"Read the charges."

The herald held up a scroll and declared: "Let it be known that Frandarel Holcombe, Bann of West Hill, is accused of various crimes against the Crown and Kingdom of Ferelden; to wit: that he has corresponded secretly with foreign powers, offering aid and comfort to the same; that under pretense of loyalty and honor, has laid his demesne open to plunder and decay, and has thus undermined the security of the kingdom; that he has falsely and dishonorably used his subject, impoverishing and evicting him to their ruin for his own enrichment and for the purpose of further unpeopling and unguarding his demesne from our enemies. For these reasons and under proof before the Maker and His Prophet Andraste, let it be known that Bann Frandarel is to be tried for the crime of high treason and for the lesser cause of malfeasance in

office."

Loghain let the words sink in, and then abruptly addressed the defendant.

"Bann Frandarel Holcombe, how do you plead?"

Another pause, as the man stared at Loghain, panicking. Finally, he cried out, "I am innocent!"

Whispers rustled from stone wall to stone wall. Loghain's voice rang out above them. "We shall see.'

It was a long morning. Clerks read out the appropriate statutes, and the confiscated letters were presented as evidence. Frandarel did not deny writing the letters, but claimed that they were being taken out of context; that they were being deliberately misunderstood; that *he* was misunderstood. Bann Cauthrien testified about her findings at Frandarel's estate, her testimony clear and soldierly.

The bannorn accounts were presented, and people yawned at the sums from the wool trade, and the wheat trade, and the charcoal trade. They yawned yet the more at the evidence that freeholders' taxes had been inflated and the people evicted in a pattern that suggested that Frandarel wanted certain areas open and unwatched. Loghain sensed that most of the nobles cared nothing for the fate of the freeholders, and were not pleased at the idea of any restrictions on a nobleman. Fergus had warned him that this was not a popular cause, and would get them no sympathy, but Loghain had

hoped for better. Seeing that Fergus, irritatingly, was right, Loghain returned to the treason evidence, and presented his own assessment of the deterioration of West Hill; of its scandalous lack of preparation in the face of the Orlesian threat that the entire Landsmeet had heard only a few months before.

This point carried more weight, since it involved the security and well-being of the nobles themselves. Besides, Loghain clearly wanted the man dead, and very few were willing to risk anything for the sake of Frandarel, who would not have risked anything for them.

The children were not the only ones growing restless. Anora whispered something to her father. Loghain snorted and gave her a nod. He immediately opened the case to the Landsmeet for questions and debate.

This was more agreeable and interesting, to the adults at least. Grudges and feuds decades old were brought up; like opening musty trunks of moth-eaten garments. Fergus was called on to speak, and had no trouble giving witness to the fact that this vassal of Highever had given no assistance after the massacre, in itself construable as a form of treason.

Corbus whispered to his father, "Are they going to kill him?"

Leonas frowned, but did not want to lie. "Yes. In the end. He has failed to do his duty, and chosen to be greedy and selfish instead of brave and loyal."

Frاندarel tried to save himself, but he had few options. He might demand a trial by combat, but he had the loyalty of no one who would dare lift a sword against Loghain, whom everyone assumed would act as his own champion. He could request a trial by ordeal, but apparently did not consider himself sufficiently pure in heart to hold red-hot metal in his hands and be unscorched. His only other option was to plead guilty and throw himself on Loghain's limited capacity for mercy.

"Maybe that's why this is happening when the Queen is on the other side of the kingdom, eh?" wondered Bann Sighard to his son Oswyn. "She might show the man a little forgiveness, and at least allow him to take orders as a holy brother in a cloister. Loghain won't, though."

So it proved. The Landsmeet judged the attainted bann guilty. As to his punishment—mercy had no great part in Loghain's character. The farthest he would go—when urged by his daughter—was to condemn the bann to beheading, rather than the statutory punishment for high treason of hanging, drawing, and quartering.

And it was not mercy that persuaded him, for that matter. Loghain knew that while the nobility might submit to the execution to a wayward member of their own caste, they would be roused to rebellion by his lingering public torture. With a show of magnanimity, Loghain agreed to the lesser punishment.

"Frاندarel Holcombe, in consideration of your noble birth, you

are to be taken from this place, and at dawn on the morrow are to have your head struck off. May the Maker turn His gaze on you."

The condemned man, senseless with terror, was carried away, and the Landsmeet rose, ready for its dinner. There was a general feeling that they had done a good day's work, coupled with a minority view that Loghain had no right to tell a Fereldan noble what to do on his own land.

"But it wasn't simply limited to his own land!" argued Bann Alfstanna. "By plotting with the Orlesians, he was harming us all. I would think that *that* would be obvious to the meanest intelligence!"

Leandra whispered to Leonas, "Surely you won't take the boys to the execution!" A horrible thought occurred to her. "Surely you don't expect *me* to attend?"

"No, no, of course not, my dear..."

Leonas had wondered what to do about the boys, and was of two minds. It was not as if his sons had not witnessed violent death. The Orlesians had done them harm, and Frandarel, by plotting with them, might as well have done the deed himself. Lothar was perhaps too young to witness a beheading, but he would not understand if Corbus went and he did not.

His son-in-law solved the problem for him.

"I was thinking of asking the boys over tomorrow. Faline and

Jancey would like to see them. Maybe a few other children could come..."

"What a wonderful idea!" Leandra exclaimed, with a grateful look at Kane. "That will take the children's mind off this dreadful affair. I know you will have to go, and poor Habren needs her rest, but I could stay with the children and keep them entertained."

Kane blinked, not realizing until that moment that he would be expected to go to the execution. Not that idea bothered him in the least, but it seemed the waste of a perfectly good morning when he could be having fun with the girls. Another stupid ceremonial performance.

"That's very nice of you," he answered. "I'll make the arrangements. Maybe Teagan's little brother-in-law would like to come, too."

Habren would not have missed the beheading of Bann Frandarel for the world.

She did not feel so ill this morning. The event gave her the opportunity to wear her gorgeous ermine cloak. With it was a matching muff and a little hat, ermine trimmed with a kind of coronet of gold filigree set into the crown. It was very becoming. The event would be comparatively short—not like the trial which Kane had told her was hours of boring legal precedents and speeches about duty and honor and country. Kane said he'd had a long talk with Teyrn Fergus, but he

wouldn't say what it was about. Sometimes he gave Habren odd looks, but if he wasn't going to tell her, Habren wasn't going to worry her head about it. It was likely just dull politics. Today was too enjoyable an outing to waste. Not many ladies were here, so Habren stood out in her finery in contrast with the men's somber appearance.

Best of all, the dreadful children were locked up in the nursery with her horrible stepmother and the other poor relations, and Habren was here, beside her gorgeous husband. They were the handsomest couple in Denerim—in all Ferelden. On a day like today, she did not even resent his chestnut-coated mabari bitch, standing up so proudly on his other side. The mabari avoided Habren, which was offensive, but even Habren knew better than to try to come between a man and his dog. Today the dog made them look even more striking. If Habren could just imprint a dog of her own, it would be perfectly symmetrical.

Such a grim affair. Too bad they couldn't put off the execution for a month or two when the weather was better. People talked about how gorgeous Anora was, but Habren could see that the cold had rendered the Dowager's nose unattractively red. How awful if she should come down with a cold only two days before her wedding. Habren bit back a grin, and pitied poor Fergus Cousland even more.

The King made a long, boring speech, and then Bann Frandarel made a speech too, though it was hard to understand him because he *would* burst out in tears, now and then. Really, how ridiculous. They should just kill him and get it

over with. And then the crowds in the Landsmeet courtyard were so loud and smelly. At least Bronwyn wasn't here. For that matter, Habren was a bit surprised that Loghain wasn't wielding the axe himself. He must have learned how, back in the days when he was a farm boy, slaughtering pigs.

Finally, they had come to the entire point of the event. The Grand Cleric made everyone pray, and said a blessing; Frandarel knelt down, trembling, at the block, and the headsman raised the great double-axe, up, higher... higher... My, this was thrilling! Habren clutched excitedly at Kane's arm, eyes sparkling.

The axe thudded down, well-struck. The head bounced away and rolled, and jets of blood pumped from the neck. The crowd screamed in unison; women fainted. Habren herself cried out at the sight, unable to take her eyes away. The headsman held up the dripping, severed head and declared:

"Behold the head of a traitor!"

A hearty roar of approval echoed from the walls. After that, it was rather anticlimactic: some holy brothers put the body in a wagon to take it away to be burned, and the head was taken up to be displayed above the door of the Landsmeet. Habren craned around to see the head better. At the moment, Bann Frandarel looked quite horrified. It would be interesting to see how his face changed, over time.

Her good mood lasted until she returned home, and learned that the children had gone out to the kennels in her absence.

Her stepmother happily informed everyone that Faline had imprinted on a mabari puppy.

Anora studied herself in the mirror for a long time. With what different feelings she had gone to her first wedding. It had been a fairy-tale wedding—of a sort—shadowed by the disappearance of King Maric and the Landsmeet's decision that he must be deemed dead.

But she was young and beautiful and about to marry a handsome prince who—in his own way—was in love with her. Their wedding night was all a girl could wish. But after the fairytale wedding came the real work of living together, and that had not gone very well in the long run.

She would make the most of this second chance. Fergus, for one thing, was far more intelligent than Cailan, and he respected her without resentment. He found her beautiful, too; but did not desire her only for her beauty. Their marriage would be a partnership; a true team of equals. Anora had seen that kind of marriage before in the union of Bryce and Eleanor Cousland. Fergus had grown up with that, and that was his expectation of a wife.

There would be great changes after today. She was moving out of the Palace and into Highever House. Fergus had showed her the charming rooms that were to be hers. There was little she wished to see changed, for Eleanor's taste was exquisite. She had asked to go to the rooftop garden, where she had many memories of private chats and heart-to-heart

confidences. The garden was deep in its winter sleep, but Anora still smiled, anticipating the spring, when the roses and lilies would burst forth into new life. Her things had already been transported by wagon to her new home. It would be strange, finally not to be living under the same roof as her father.

Her dark blue gown became her. The hood of the fox-trimmed cloak framed her face and would keep her warm. After the ceremony in Cathedral, they would go to Highever House for a dinner. Fergus was disappointed that his sister would not be here to see him married, but everyone had to make sacrifices at this time. Truth to tell, Anora was a bit disappointed herself.

Her maid sighed, "Oh, Your Majesty! You are beautiful!"

Anora laughed and thanked her. After today, she had decided to set aside the style of "Majesty," and be satisfied with the title of Teyrna of Highever. "Your Grace" did not sound like a woman desperately clinging to lost opportunities. Besides, she hated being a "Dowager" anything. The very word brought to mind ferocious old hags with more jewels than sense.

Father arrived to escort her to the Cathedral, and not in armor, as she had requested. This was not a day for warlike posturing. An honor guard would ride with them, and wait outside, since the ceremony would not last long. Smiles and bows met her everywhere, accompanied by the kind wishes of staff and soldiers. Outside, crowds were gathering; eager for a spectacle despite the weather.

It was a cold, cold ride through the streets. Anora was glad of her cloak and boots. A few snowflakes drifted down from a pearly sky. At her side, Father was silent, apparently sunk in thought; but Anora saw his eyes shift watchfully.

Poor Father. So suspicious of everything and everyone.

He must be missing Bronwyn, too, though he had said nothing about it. But when did Father ever discuss his personal feelings, unless they were personal feelings of hatred toward Orlais?

In fact, Loghain was indeed thinking of Bronwyn at that very moment, and his thoughts were fairly unhappy. They each had their duties, but it seemed that for all Bronwyn was giving, she was getting precious little in return. While the ladies of Ferelden—and their lords—played politics and slept in soft beds, Bronwyn was out at Gherlen's Halt, sifting through the Deep Roads, and eating the slop fed to the rest of the garrison. For that matter, he was living in luxury himself.

That would change, of course. He comforted himself with the fact that with the completion of the muster, he would return to the west and rejoin his young Queen. His plan was detailed and exacting, and he had shared some of it with the Council. Cousland would go north to Highever; Howe would bring his people to West Hill, while his young bann defended the city of Amaranthine. Loghain was most concerned with the far west. The Orlesians would want their force at sea for as short a time as possible; sea voyages were notoriously hard on horses. That was why they were staging in Jader, after all.

Were he the Orlesian commander, he would strike at West Hill, so close to the North Road. With an attack through Gherlen's Pass and another at West Hill, the Orlesians might believe they could roll up Ferelden, from west to east, with terrifying speed.

Those ships—those wonderful Nevarran ships—would be sent to patrol the Narrows. Leonas Bryland had been struck by the tale of how Warden Jowan had sunk an Orlesian vessel single-handed. Loghain had taken it to heart as well. He had given orders to Uldred to find a mage for each of the new warships. Two, if they were available. Captain Isabela, who had proved reliable, had been given her letters of marque, but would also be ordered west. Perhaps they should find a mage for her, as well.

Fergus was already at the Cathedral, talking over strategy with the noblemen. Bryland's two boys insisted on standing with their father, intent on seeming manly and well-versed in military matters. Loghain's elaborate plan was a sound one. It was certainly far more detailed than the one presented against the darkspawn last year. Cailan's strategy had largely been, "Ride like the wind, confront the uttermost evil of our time, then destroy it in a single glorious battle that will echo down the ages."

Without the input of a young and wayward king, Loghain's plans contained no uplifting appeals to heroism and deathless fame. They were based in exacting logistics and made use of the remarkable weapons developed by his dwarven

engineers. Loghain, as far as Fergus could see, planned to defeat the Orlesians by sheer attention to detail.

Teagan would hold the west shore of the lake, watching the Sulcher Pass, while Wulffe and Bryland would bring their men up to the Neck and support Maric's Shield. Kane—with the guidance of some of Loghain's reliable officers—would garrison Denerim.

"You'd think, Fergus," Bryland laughed, "that in consideration for his daughter's marriage, he'd leave you in Denerim!"

Fergus smiled and shook his head. "I'm needed in the Coastlands. If anything, I'll try to persuade Anora to join me. If we bring a wagonful of clerks, we can run the kingdom from Highever as easily as from Denerim!"

Kane arrived, accompanied by his pretty little sisters.

"Habren's sick this morning," he told them, not expecting any disappointment, especially after hearing from Cousland about Habren's goings-on with the elves.

"Where's your puppy, Faline?" Bryland asked kindly. "Little... Jewel, was it?"

"Home, my lord. It's too cold for her today. She was having a nap by the fire when I left."

Kane gestured to the group of ladies not far away. "Look, girls, there's Arlessa Leandra. You go visit with her."

Corbus stood puffed up importantly by his father. Faline tossed her head and skipped off, dragging Jancey along with her. How silly boys were, she thought. The big ones, too.

Without Habren, the ladies were having a very pleasant time while they awaited the arrival of the bride and her father. It was warm in the Cathedral, and the air was perfumed with incense. Callista and Berenice exchanged looks as they once again took in the inelegant interior, but they could not complain of the company. Berenice had found Adam's mother to be everything she could hope for in a mother-in-law. Callista thought Arlessa Leandra cultivated and gracious. Leandra's motherly charm had quite won over Kaitlyn Guerrin, too, and the young girl loved to hear the Nevarran ladies talk about their strange, distant homeland. Altogether the two Nevarrans felt quite accepted in this rarified circle, though Berenice still gaped occasionally at Bethany Hawke: so pretty, so sweet-natured, so *normal*. Why had the Templars been so harsh with her own brother, when Bethany was proof that a mage could live in the world and do no harm?

The noise at the doors of the cathedral heralded King Loghain and the Dowager Queen Anora. The Grand Cleric welcomed them, and without delay they were before the holy fire and the vows were being exchanged.

There were nudges and discreet smiles from the witnesses, as they saw how Fergus and Anora looked at each other; so happy—so *seriously* happy—and so earnest. Loghain did not smile, though he entrusted his daughter and her happiness to Cousland with far more sanguine hopes than he had to Cailan.

Anora was no doubt glad to catch the greatest man in the kingdom after himself. Now if Cousland could do his duty and get Anora with child, Loghain would like him better yet.

The vows were spoken, a hymn was sung, a prayer recited, and the blessing given. The bridal party fell into a procession, and moved out the doors into full winter. The Grand Cleric was coming with them to dinner, and a priest arranged a heavy cloak over the old woman's shoulders. The snow was coming down heavily. Despite it, there was a mob at the front of the Cathedral, shouting and cheering, pushing and shoving to see the bride and groom. Bunches of fragrant evergreen were thrown. One struck Anora in the face. She smiled graciously, brushing away pine needles.

"Guards!" shouted Loghain, "keep those people back!"

There were more bouquets: of snowdrops and holly, of wintersweet and balsam. A young woman broke through the cordon of guards and pressed one into Anora's hands, as she walked to her horse. Before she could be caught, the girl gave another to Callista Howe, startling her. Nathaniel scowled, and instinctively pushed Callista behind him.

A man dashed out of the crowd, his hands full of flowers, his face wreathed in smiles. He rushed up to Leandra Hawke, beaming, and with his left hand thrust a handful of holly at her, pricking her fingers though her gloves.

"Oh!" she cried. "Thank you, but—"

Still smiling, the man, with his right hand, buried a dagger to the hilt in Leonas Bryland's heart.

"Magic exists to serve man!" declared the assassin, his face radiant, *"and never to rule over him!"*

Thanks to my reviewers: Phygmalion, Chandagnac, Tirion I, Blinded in a bolthole, Enaid Aderyn, anon, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, dragonblade3200, Girl-chama, KnightOfHolyLight, EpitomyofShyness, darksky01, Robbie the Phoenix, Raxiselic, Mike3207, JackOfBladesX, Nemrut, Jenna53, Verpine, dragonmactir, Have Sock. Will Travel, jnybot, Adventfather, Josie Lange, and patchworker.

Dallena is the slumped, wretched elf girl seen with Habren in the Denerim market in canon.

Raxiselic suggested that I post a chapter-by-chapter summary of this monster story. That will take a bit of time, but once it's done, I suppose the only useful place to put it would be on my profile.

99. Rough Justice

Victory at Ostagar

Fairly graphic violence in parts of the chapter.

Chapter 99: Rough Justice

Death struck quickly. Stabbed in the heart with a sharp steel dagger, Bryland had only time for a gasp of shock, a moment of regret, and a glance at Leandra's terrified face, before he slid down the doorway of the Cathedral, and sat there, propped up, his eyes open, his life over.

Leandra screamed, falling to her knees, clutching desperately at Leonas' shoulders. His head lolled, and his body fell sideways, blocking the doorway.

"No! Daddy!" cried Lothar.

In the ensuing pandemonium, Bryland's attacker might have escaped. He made no such attempt, but stood there, holding his dripping dagger as if posing for a commemorative statue, babbling the same text, until Loghain lunged at him and slammed his fist into the smug fool's face. Corbus had been frozen with horror until then. Loghain's blow broke the spell, and the boy threw himself on the assassin; pummeling at him,

shouting, cursing, sobbing.

The roaring crowd surged forward, causing Anora's horse to rear. Fergus made a grab for the reins and held on. Nathaniel drew his sword, and edged back, Callista behind him. He made a grab for Lothar, pulled him close, and Callista wrapped her arms around the terrified boy. The Kendalls girls uttered the ear-splitting shrieks of little girls, rushing back into the Cathedral, jumping over Bryland's feet, shoving past the confused mass of guests and priests. Kane ran after them, nearly knocking Arl Wulffe down.

Teagan Guerrin had been directly behind Bryland, and yanked Kaitlyn to the side, behind the safety of the Cathedral's walls. He caught hold of Corbus and gently pulled the boy away from the unconscious murderer.

"What's happening?" cried Bethany, hearing her mother's screaming amidst all the rest. "What's happening? Let me through! Mother!"

The order of precedence had relegated the younger Hawkes to back of the procession. The Grand Cleric was behind them, still fussing with her cloak pin. The girls saw nothing but the back of men's heads.

"Bethany!" wailed Leandra. "Bethany! He's been stabbed!"

The stunned guards finally did their duty, and pushed the crowd back. The jammed confusion at the doorway sorted itself out. Adam and Carver plunged through, making a path

for Bethany to get to her hysterical mother.

The Grand Cleric fumbled for her pocket. Stabbed? Who? She tried to push past the men, while her hand dug deep in her robes, trying to find the little envelope of Ashes.

The men in the doorway stepped out of her way, and Bethany gasped with shock at the scene. Instantly she was at the arl's side to offer help and healing, but it was clear that it was simply too late. She put her hand over Bryland's staring eyes, and gently closed them.

"He's gone, Mother. There's nothing to be done."

"No! No! It's not fair! Leonas!"

Orders were shouted, and gradually some sort of order prevailed. The scene cleared, and snow fell, hiding the blood on the Cathedral doorstep.

Kane blew out a breath, exhausted. It was a relief to get the girls home in one piece. They had cried in the carriage after Kane detached them from poor Arlessa Leandra. They needed their own beds and a good night's sleep. So, for that matter, did he.

It was a damned shame about Bryland. The Arl had been a good friend to him and treated him right. Loghain would get to the bottom of it, though it already seemed clear the fellow was an Orlesian hireling. Something needed to be done about

the Orlesians. Nobody was safe.

"My lord!"

The captain of the household guard rushed up, wild-eyed.

"My lord! Thank the Maker you're back! We've got a situation."

Kane blinked at him. "The Orlesians attacked here, too?"

"What? I mean—" The guard stared at him, flummoxed. "No... I mean. My lord, there's been trouble here. The arlessa is locked in her room." The man turned red, and looked frightened. "I ordered her carried there. She was carrying on so, and she tried..." He glanced at the little girls. "My lord, could we talk privately? This isn't for the young ladies' ears."

Something bad had happened. What had Habren done now?

"All right. Girls, go up to your rooms and have Mistress Manda see to you."

"Er... my lord... Mistress Manda's not there." The guard leaned closer, and whispered. "She's in the dungeon."

"What?" Kane glared furiously at the hapless man. "Girls. Stand over there. I need to talk. "

Teary-eyed and exhausted, the girls crumpled up by the door. Jancey began sniffing again.

"All right. What *happened*?"

Pulling himself together, the guard said. "There was a fight. The arlessa was in one of her moods, angry about being left behind. She felt better after a bit, and went upstairs to have a look at Lady Faline's new little pup."

His heart sinking, Kane's thoughts raced ahead to horrible possibilities.

"Mistress Manda and the maid were up there when she came in. I don't know exactly what happened, but the guards went in when they heard the screaming. The ladies were fighting over the puppy, and the window was open. The arlessa... tried to throw the poor little pup out the window."

Kane's face hardened. "Go on. Was the dog killed?"

"No, my lord. Hurt, but not killed. The arlessa's the mistress here, sure enough, but the guards knew you wouldn't like the little girl's pup dashed down on the stones."

"I *wouldn't*," Kane growled.

"We got the dog away, whimpering and crying as it was. The arlessa told us we'd all be hanged. Fair out of her mind she was. In her condition it couldn't be good for her. I was there by then, and I... ordered two of the men to carry her to her room and lock her in. Gently. The young lady... the governess... well, she'd hit the arlessa in the face, so we didn't know what to do except put her and the elf in one of the

cells till you got back and decided what to do to them."

"Where's the puppy?"

"The kennelmaster's looking after her. He thinks she'll recover in time, but she might be lame. I know we disobeyed the arlessa, my lord... but... a *puppy*..."

Kane rubbed his aching forehead. "You did right. Look... it's been a bad night. Arl Bryland's just been killed, and my sisters saw it."

The captain gaped in horror.

What to do? If Bryland hadn't just been killed, Kane would have sent for Bethany to cure the puppy. Considering everything going on, that would not go down well. Who could help?

"Send a man to the Wardens' Compound," he finally said. "See if they've got a mage there. Tell him he's needed here, and I'll pay plenty. Do we have a respectable maidservant *left* in this place? Or what about that guardswoman I saw the other day? Dishwater blonde? She spoke nicely to Jancey."

"That's Loveday, my lord. She's a good sort."

"Get her here right now, and have her take my sisters upstairs and help them get to bed. With all that's going on, maybe they need a guard of their own, anyway. I'll go to the dungeon once she's got them and have a talk with Manda."

Then he had to go to the girls and lie, telling them that the puppy had a little fever and that Manda and Kyriel had taken him to the kennelmaster. If anybody told them the truth, he have them skinned.

His mind racing, he wondered what to do about Habren. She could not allowed to run wild, thinking she could hurt his sister's own mabari. Bryland wouldn't like it if he came down hard on her. And then he remembered that poor old Bryland was dead.

Well. That makes things a lot more simple.

Kane thought a little more, trying to come up with anybody who would make a fuss over Habren. No. No one. She had alienated just about everybody. The guardswoman came. Kane gave her harsh, brisk orders, and then stalked off to hear the rest of the story.

Kane liked Manda Everly. She was the poor relation of a minor noble family, and came highly recommended as a governess. She was not beautiful, but "pretty enough" as people said. She was not at her best at the moment, with a torn gown, a scratched face, and her hair in tangles. The elven maid, Kyriel, hid behind her in the shadows. There was another elf girl in the next cell, and the girls were whispering when the door was unlocked and Kane came in. The jailor carried a torch, and slid it into a bracket. Before their arrival, the place must have been in pitch-darkness.

Manda got to her feet, her hand up to shade her eyes against the light. The two elves followed suit, bowing low.

"My lord?" Manda quavered. "Is the puppy all right?"

It was just the right thing to say at the moment. Manda had proper priorities.

"I've sent for a Healer. The kennelmaster thinks she'll be all right. I've told the girls that the puppy had a fever and you two took her to the kennelmaster. I don't want them upset. They just saw Arl Bryland stabbed to death right before their eyes."

"Arl Bryland!" cried Manda, horrified.

"Bloody Orlesians," grunted Kane, already thinking about something else. "You." He jerked his chin at the little elf in the next cell. She was a mess, and no mistake. "Who are you?"

"Tessa, my lord," the elf whispered. "Sewing maid."

"Why are you here?"

"My lady... pricked herself on a needle."

"The arlessa, you mean?"

"Yes, my lord."

"How old are you?"

Surprised, the girl stared at him, and then replied, "Thirteen,

my lord."

"Just my sister Faline's age. All right, you can be my sisters' sewing maid. Kyriel already has plenty to do keeping their rooms." He turned to the jailor. "Unlock the doors. I'll have them wait in my study."

"Right you are, my lord."

Warden Jowan arrived, blinking and confused by the rumors in the streets, more than a little startled when he discovered that his first patient was a mabari pup. Not that a puppy was beneath his notice. Lily, his own mabari, nosed at the hurt puppy sympathetically. Jowan, working with the kennelmaster, analyzed the injuries, and then set about healing them.

"Wish I could do that!" the kennelmaster declared. "Fixed her up a treat, you did! That your mabari? Fine bitch."

"She is," Jowan agreed proudly. "The best friend anyone could have."

Arl Kane gathered up the puppy carefully, and carried her himself, his own mabari trailing at his heels. Jowan followed, for apparently there was more work for him to do.

In the arl's study were three women: a human lady and two elf girls. All needed help. Jowan quickly healed their injuries, lingering over one of the elves, whose hand was infected.

"All right," said Kane to the women. "Go on up to my sisters.

Here, Manda, take Jewel with you. I hope the girls are asleep by now. We'll eventually have to tell them the truth about what happened, but not now, for Maker's sake. Warden, come with me, if you please."

They moved quickly through the long, carpeted corridors. Something was wrong, but Jowan knew better than to ask questions.

"My wife, Arlessa Habren," Kane began. "She hasn't been... right... lately. She's with child, and everything upsets her. She attacked my sister's mabari... yes, that was her, all right... and she attacked those women you just healed. She flies into rages, like she was..." he lowered his voice, looking shamed. "Just like she was *mad*. It must be the baby, but I'm afraid she'll do herself... or someone else... an injury. It's reached the point I'm afraid to leave my sisters with her."

"That's terrible, my lord," said Jowan, genuinely horrified. He hoped the arl wasn't going to ask him to heal the arlessa's mind. He would have no idea how to do that.

"Now," Kane said heavily. "I've got to break the news to her that her father's been killed. Yes. Didn't you hear? A crazy Orlesian stabbed him just as we were leaving the Cathedral. Killed him on the spot. Terrible. The king'll sort the fellow out, but it'll just about kill my wife. Worshipped her father, she did."

Jowan longed to ask questions about Arl Bryland, whom he had thought a very fine man, but they had reached the arlessa's apartments. Kane was looking worried. Jowan had

heard plenty from Carver—and ever some from Adam—about Habren's horrible temper and general nastiness. And now her husband thought she was getting worse? Jowan wondered if it could be some sort of brain lesion. That would be a disaster, for he knew no one who could cure such a thing. Even Anders had failed, during the Grand Cleric's conclave.

"Aren't there some medicines that would keep her calm and quiet?"

"Yes, but you can't use them all the time," Jowan explained. "Especially when a woman is with child. They could harm the baby."

"Oh," said Kane, disappointed. "Wouldn't want that." He brightened. "I suppose I'll just have to keep her to her rooms until she's better. Come on in. She might have got herself hurt when she attacked the puppy."

There was a sitting room first. It was littered with shattered crockery. The hangings were ripped down from the walls, and the furniture was knocked over.

"She *was* in a passion, wasn't she?" remarked Kane. Jowan glanced up, not liking the man's tone. There was no time to consider this further, for they entered the arlessa's private bedchamber. This, too, seemed to have been struck by lightning. The only things undisturbed were the bed itself, where the arlessa was snoring, and the bedside table, with a pitcher of wine and a goblet.

"Does she drink a lot of wine?" Jowan asked, greatly daring. "Not that I'm criticizing her... but a lot of wine isn't good for babies either. Many new mothers don't know this. Cider is better, or small beer. Something not so... strong."

"Really?" Kane looked at him with great interest. "I didn't know that either. My thanks, Warden. I want this baby to be born happy and healthy. What else does she need?"

It was a very odd scene, standing in the confusion of the arlessa's bedchamber, giving a basic lesson in prenatal care to a concerned young father, while the mother herself was sprawled on the bed, oblivious and reeking of wine. She had a bruise on her cheek, a split lip, and other bruises on her wrists and ankles where someone must have restrained her. Jowan described what he knew about proper diet and hygiene, and Kane even took some notes.

"Just a small cup of red wine at night, then. Plenty of fruits and vegetables. Go easy on rich sweets. I think I've got that. I'll give orders to the kitchen. I'll see she eats right. She's got a bruise or two. Maybe you'd better go ahead and heal her."

"It's likely to wake her," Jowan warned.

"That's all right. Hit her with one of your sleep spells if she gets rowdy. Heal her, and then I've got to tell her about her father. Bloody shame, that. I liked Arl Bryland."

That certainly sounded sincere. Jowan gathered his mana and spread a general healing spell over the arlessa, concentrating

on her visible, minor injuries. He sensed nothing else. At the burst of healing light, Habren opened her eyes and sat up.

"Kane!" she cried. "Thank the Maker you've come! The servants are revolting!" She touched her cheek. "That bitch Manda struck me! She struck me!"

His voice mild, Kane said, "You shouldn't have tried to throw the puppy out the window, Habren. That sort of thing gets people stirred up. Now, you need to be quiet. Warden Jowan here just fixed you up, and I need to talk to you."

Habren staggered to her feet, her skirts hiked up scandalously, ignoring Jowan as she would any underling.

"But Kane! You need to *do* something! The guards locked me up in here. They put their hands on me. Every one of them needs to be flogged and hanged! They should be racked until their joints—"

Kane shouted, trying to be heard above her ranting. "Habren! Your father's dead!"

That silenced her. Jowan winced in sympathy. Habren's jaw was hanging. She stared at Kane.

"That's not funny. Don't say that."

"I'm sorry, Habren. It's true. He was killed by an assassin just as we were leaving the Cathedral. The king knocked the killer down, but nobody could do anything, not even your stepsister

—"

Habren's eyes stretched wide, and she let out a shrill scream. Jowan flinched away from the screaming, the worst and wildest he had ever heard. Habren shrieked again and again until she was hoarse. Her eyes rolled up and she fell backwards. Kane caught her and eased her onto the bed. Jowan checked her vital signs, but she was only unconscious.

"See what I mean?" Kane asked Jowan, looking down at his wife. The force of her screaming had broken blood vessels around her eyes. Jowan set about healing them, while the arl watched.

Kane mused, "I don't think she's right. I'll give orders to keep her here, locked up, until she's herself again. We can't have her wandering about like this."

Jowan had been shaken by the arlessa's behavior. Something really was wrong with the young woman. "I can mix up a calming draught for her. Just for the next day or so, until she gets over the shock. As I said, more might harm the child, but just now she needs rest... I'll go now, and send the potion to you right away. She should take it with something to eat."

"What if she won't drink it?"

Jowan bit his lip. The woman seemed genuinely unhinged. "If she won't drink it voluntarily, you can pinch her nostrils shut. She'll swallow it then. But she should still have something to eat."

Kane patted Jowan on the back, sincerely pleased. "You've been a great help, Warden. I said I'd pay plenty, and I wasn't lying. Let's stop at the treasury, and I'll give you a purse of twenty sovereigns."

"Really, I couldn't ask..."

"A donation to the Grey Wardens. And I'm sure you fine fellows deserve that and more..."

Rather than going to a wedding feast, Loghain, Fergus, Nathaniel, and Wulffe accompanied the prisoner to Fort Drakon, taking care that no co-conspirator should kill the fellow out of 'vengeance' before he could be thoroughly questioned. He was tied to the back of a horse, submitting rather docilely. Loghain had already identified the guards who had failed to guard the wedding. They would be flogged and cashiered, if they were not guilty of worse than incompetence. He had also ordered taken into custody the woman who had given flowers to Anora and Arlessa Callista, as well as a number of the crowd who had thrown things. Some might be innocent well-wishers, but no one could afford to take the risk.

Kane had already gone home with his sisters. The ladies took Arlessa Leandra to Highever House, guarded by Teagan and rothgar, and by Bann Adam and his brother Carver. Bryland's body was loaded into a wagon and taken with them. Teagan's estate was closer, but Highever House was already prepared to receive guests. They took Bryland's two distraught boys with them as well. Seeing their father murdered before their

eyes roused Loghain's strongest feelings of empathy and anger. Just boys, and forced to witness this...

The Grand Cleric went to Highever House as well, tears in her eyes, the useless Ashes still in her pocket. Who ordered this crime? That Bryland was the specific target was perfectly obvious. She recited prayers and soothed the women as best she could, while her mind raced, considering the possibilities. Her conclusions were ugly but inescapable. There was someone in Denerim who very likely knew quite a bit about Orlesian agents, and he was a prisoner in comfortable confinement in Denerim Cathedral. He would know, because he probably brought them here in his own ship. He might possibly have seen something of the scene from his narrow window. Yes, she must talk again with the Knight-Divine, but perhaps the conversation should not be so private this time.

In a big chair softened by cushions, and covered warmly by a fur cloak, Leandra fell into the sleep of deep shock. Bethany sat at her feet on a little stool, miserable. Charade squeezed her shoulder lightly and whispered comfort in her ear.

"She didn't mean what she said in the carriage. You know she didn't."

"She meant it. How can I blame her?"

Her mother was distraught, but not out of her mind. Of course she was bitter that Bethany, for all her magic, could not save her husband.

"What is it good for, all the magic? What is it good for, then?"

Bethany had sometimes wondered that herself.

Anora had work to do, undertaking her duties as hostess, feeding what was supposed to be a wedding feast to shocked and grieving people. So far, she was quite pleased at the conduct of the noble ladies who had rallied around Arlessa Leandra.

And those poor boys, too. While they evidently loved Leandra, at the moment they seemed to need the company of men, and were clinging to Rothgar Wulffe and their Hawke stepbrothers at the far end of the table. Teagan had gone, off to join Father and Fergus at Fort Drakon to sort out that murderous lunatic.

Chairs were rearranged by the big dining table so the ladies could sit together and talk quietly.

"What will happen to the arling?" asked Callista. "Who is the heir?"

Anora hoped Arl Bryland had left clear instructions in his will. All the kingdom needed was Habren stirring the pot of civil strife, angling for South Reach in addition to Denerim.

"As far as I know," she hazarded, "his eldest son is the heir to the arling. His daughter is a grown woman, but already the Arlessa of Denerim. Of course Corbus is young and will need a guardian. I presume the guardian of his body will be his stepmother the arlessa. The regent of the arling might be the

same, or might be different. For all I know he named my father the king, or perhaps my lord husband."

She felt very self-conscious saying that word. She and Fergus had exchanged only quick, businesslike words since the awful event. Would they even see one another on this, their wedding night? It was useless to repine. There would be other nights... many more.

"We should find out where we stand," she said, rousing herself. "I shall send to Arl Bryland's house and have his secretary send the will to me at once."

Those orders given, she felt more herself, and less like a mere housekeeper. The arling's succession would be established; order maintained. The City Guard was on alert, and a curfew had been declared, to keep people off the streets and stop them from attacking the houses or shops of those known or thought to be Orlesian.

Corbus forced down his food, his misery swelling at Lothar's soft sniffing beside him. Tears burned in his eyes, but he was turned fourteen now, practically a man in every way that mattered, and he hated to shame his father by crying like a baby.

"Come on, Lothar," Carver urged him. "Eat up. A soldier always eats when he has the chance."

"My stomach hurts," Lothar whimpered. He kicked at his chair,

and wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve.

"Try some of the almond pudding, then," said Rothgar Wulffe. "It'll go down easy. Carver's right. You have to keep up your strength."

Corbus chewed mechanically, the tender roast beef dry as ashes in his mouth. Killer put his head on Corbus' knee and looked up at him soulfully. Corbus rubbed his mabari's ears. This would all be so much worse without Killer.

A black anger surged through him. He snarled, "I hope they torture him to death! I hope they *kill* him!"

Killer whined and licked his hand.

"Oh, he'll be executed," Adam said smoothly. "But you do understand that the king did the smart thing, don't you? They've got to talk to him— find out if anyone was helping. Maybe there was a conspiracy. They've got to find out everything first."

"I understand," Corbus said, with a sharp jerk of his chin. The almond pudding did look good. He pulled the dish between himself and Lothar, and they dug in with their spoons. "But when they kill him, I want to be there."

Most of the Council was gathered at Fort Drakon, solemn as judges—which indeed they all were—while the assassin was put to the question. Teagan arrived later than the rest,

whispering that the ladies were at Highever House, and safe. Loghain gave him a nod, while also noting the absence of Kane. Fussing over those sisters of his, no doubt, who could easily have been left in the ladies' care so the arl could discharge his responsibilities. The man was useless. Loghain's lips thinned, filing away this offense for future retribution.

The prisoner had been shown the instruments first, as prisoners always were. To their disgust, it was clear from the first that the man was half-witted—almost childlike. A pawn, then, or rather a puppet; carefully primed and trained for this particular attack by an agent working behind the scenes. He shrieked at the first turn of the rack, babbling inanities. He showed no resistance whatever; he was perfectly willing to tell them everything he knew, which was not as much as they would have liked.

He wanted to protect Fereldan from filthy mages, he said. The Wicked Arl was working with mages and darkspawn to destroy them all.

"The Wicked Arl!" Nathaniel exclaimed. "You call Arl *Bryland* 'the Wicked Arl?'"

The assassin stared at him, his watery eyes blue guileless. "Everybody knows about the Wicked Arl. He sold elves as slaves, and has a blood mage whore as his mistress." Leaning forward, he confided. "He might even be a mage himself!"

If the Wicked Arl were killed, their eyes would be open to their

danger and everyone would be safe. Andraste would bless them, and they would sit at the Maker's right hand.

A good man had advised him... a wise, good man who had treated him kindly and taught him what he needed to do.

"Take him down from the rack," Loghain ordered, muttering. "Talking will work better than torture at this point."

The trembling fool was set on a bench, and the nobles, forcing themselves to be calm and reasonable, set about interrogating him. It was slow, uphill work.

After some questioning, it appeared that Goodman was the name the fool had been given. He did not understand them when they asked about an accent. He did not know what that was. Goodman spoke beautifully, yes, and taught him what he must say when he killed the Wicked Arl. He had learned words from the Chant of Light that he was to recite when the Wicked Arl lay dead.

Loghain was not surprised that it had taken some time to find such a useful catspaw. To find someone so gullible, to train him... it must not have been easy.

Teagan drew a deep, indignant breath, but was silent. Trying to remonstrate with a madman or a fool... trying to make him see reason... it was pointless. Fergus was doing best with him, talking in a low, calm, reasonable voice, asking about Goodman, and how he had discovered the Wicked Arl's evil deeds.

In this way, they discovered quite a bit. Goodman had traveled from far away to choose a helper... a hero who would free the people of Denerim. Goodman had given him a room and good food, but he had not seen anyone else, for Goodman had sent him to his room when he had visitors. They were able to discover where he had been living, and Loghain instantly sent men to search the place, even though it was likely that the mastermind behind this crime was long departed.

What they could not discover is if this so-called "Goodman" had trained any other assassins. It was a disturbing thought.

"We know that there were some who slipped off the Orlesian's ship before they appeared at the Landsmeet," said Loghain. "Burrowing like maggots, working their schemes. I'll put out a bounty for information."

"We're likely to net quite a few harmless immigrants as well as spies," Fergus pointed out. Then he shrugged. "We'll have to sort them all out, I suppose. I daresay the worst of the spies might well have made themselves look the most honest."

It was late and dark by the time they finished. As to the guilt of the assassin, there was no doubt: he had confessed outright. Loghain briefly declared him guilty of the crime of high treason, as he had drawn weapon in the king's presence; he was guilty also of murder, assault, conspiracy, mischievous use of a knife, and making a public disturbance. His limited mental capacity would not protect him. His execution was set

for noon the following day.

"That will allow us all to actually get some sleep," said Loghain, with grim satisfaction. To the head jailor, he said, "I want him alive and conscious tomorrow. I do not, however, want him making excuses or reciting religious texts!"

The Jailor saluted. "I see to it, Your Majesty! This one won't be able to say anything after I'm done with him."

"Good."

Leandra awakened, shut her eyes in absolute misery, and then forced herself to get up and see to her children and stepchildren. She knew she must apologize later to Bethany... she must make things right between them... but she simply could not at the moment.

"Your Majesty... Your Grace," she said to Anora. "I am so deeply grateful for your sympathy and forbearance. I must take my family home now, and see that they go to their beds and that I see to my dearest Leonas."

That was a consideration. The Arl's body must be prepared for the pyre before it stiffened so much that handling it was another trauma.

"You would be most welcome to stay," Anora assured her. "I shall have the servants prepare rooms"

"No. I thank you, but no. I would be easier at home." She did not say that she wanted to sleep in the bed that she and her husband had so briefly shared, while something of his scent might remain on the pillow.

"Carver and I will come with you, Mother," said Adam.

"Of course," Carver agreed. "I'd better send a message to the Compound, so they know where I am."

"A good idea," said Anora. "I will send one of my own men to the Palace—or Fort Drakon, if necessary— so my father will be apprised of everyone's situation."

Anora thought about telling Leandra the contents of the will, but decided against it. Leandra would hear the provisions when she was more rested and collected. Anora, as Chancellor, had already sat down with the rest of the party and gone over the will, and Bethany could take it back with her. According to the contents, Leandra was to act as executrix of his will, and was to be entrusted with the guardianship of the two boys. If she was unable to act due to death or ill-health, the secondary guardian was Fergus Cousland, as a close cousin. The Arl's testament made clear that under no circumstances were the boys to be put under the guardianship of their elder sister or her husband. Bryland had loved his daughter, but had not been so blind as to miss her hostility to her younger brothers.

Likewise, Leandra was to act as the regent of South Reach, as its Dowager Arlessa, exercising the votes that the arling

held in the Landsmeet. Corbus was named as the heir, with Lothar his heir-presumptive. Lothar was willed the bannorn of Pryce Valley, a decent holding. In the event that Leandra were to bear a child or children of the marriage, those children were to be given specified manors and coin in the amount of five hundred sovereigns each, at the time of their majority or their marriage, whichever came first. Leandra's dower properties were carefully specified. Habren was also bequeathed a life interest in a small manor of her own, "just in case." The case was not specified. Bryland had evidently considered the possibility that Kane might force a separation, if she became utterly impossible.

There were other bequests. Charade was left jewels and some elegant furnishings. Bethany was given an annuity and a modest house in Denerim in the Market District. Both his stepsons were to have keepsakes, and then the will continued, making provisions for friends, old soldiers, and faithful servants.

It was a thoughtful, detailed document. It showed care and consideration for all the parties involved. It was everything that Cailan's will should have been, but was not. Anora sighed, and then smiled, a little ruefully. Surely Fergus would come soon, and the new chapter of her life could begin. She would not let Orlesian plots rule her heart or happiness.

The group broke up: Callista and Berenice to go to the Howe townhouse; Kaitlyn to the Guerrin estate, deeply grateful that Bevin had seen none of this; the Grand Cleric, after a brief word to Anora about her own suspicions, to her quiet refuge in

the Cathedral.

The South Reach carriage was called, and the Hawkes' horses. Rothgar, as Charade's fiancé, rode with them back to their home to give support. The men talked quietly about the funeral. Something must be arranged, and the Arlessa must have the main voice in that. Who would give the funeral speech?

Leandra might be too overcome. Spouses generally did not attempt such an effort. Who was the most appropriate person? Kane, as Arl Leonas' son-in-law? Adam, as his stepson? Fergus Cousland, as his most distinguished cousin and friend? Carver shivered in horror at the thought of putting himself up in front of everyone, preferring to face a score of hurlocks. They moved off, deep in discussion, leaving Highever House quiet once more. The servants came in to clear away the feast.

"Set the table in my sitting room for two, if you please," Anora directed. "The Teyrn and I will dine privately."

At length, there was the clatter of hooves in the forecourt, and the doorkeeper opened to the master of the house. Fergus had come; tired, but smiling at the sight of her. Anora, her heart racing and her blood fevered, welcomed her husband to their home, and for a little time at least, they could set all else aside but each other.

The execution was well-attended, despite the heavy snow.

Bethany, after conferring with her brothers and cousin, slipped the boys and her mother a calming draught, with some herbs to help settle their stomachs. She herself had resolved to see as little of the hideous proceedings as possible. Today the execution; tomorrow the funeral.

Everyone who was anyone was expected to attend; it was a way for the nobles to show solidarity against the foul assassin who had lifted his bloody hand against his natural superiors. The condemned would be put to death on the Landsmeet steps. Chairs were provided for the noble witnesses; hanging, drawing, and quartering the man was going to take some time. Among the distinguished guest was the Knight-Divine, Chrysgon de la Crue, under guard, but permitted to see the end result of Orlesian scheming.

Kane arrived, sombre but dashing, winning the hearts of the Denerim washerwomen with his handsome face. Habren's condition was considered a legitimate excuse to stay at home. A number of people—especially women, unhampered today by Habren's glares—offered their condolences to the Arl. Bryland had been a popular man.

An execution for treason, carried out with the full penalty of the law, was not something to which most would bring young children. Corbus and Lothar, however, attended, the elder boy fierce and red-eyed. He seemed to have moved from child to young man overnight, and had surprised his family that morning, as they debated the matter of the funeral speech, by his decision to perform that duty himself.

"He was my father. I'm his eldest son. I'll speak for him, and I'll light the pyre."

After some anxious looks, Adam laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "I'm sure your father would like that."

The death of the assassin was a memorable spectacle. There had not been an execution for high treason in some years. A hastily erected scaffold held the necessary short-length gallows, the bench and manacles, and the block and axe. The crimes and the sentence were read out by the royal herald, to the horrified edification of the public. The pitiful wretch, his mouth still bloody from the loss of his tongue, was hauled up to the masked executioners. He was stripped naked in the cold: necessary, because of the task at hand.

He was hanged first; flailing, screeching, voiding urine and feces in his rigors. He was not allowed to strangle to death, but was taken down, and the butchery began with his castration and continued with his evisceration. There were cheers, yes; but also groans and quite a few people sicking up. Even a few noble ladies, who had overestimated their nerve, swooned away. Even after his intestines and stomach were removed, there was still life left. That was ended with an axe blow, decapitating him, and then further blows to render the corpse into the requisite quarters. The head was displayed to the crowd, and then sent away to hang over the Great Gate. One quarter of the corpse would be sent to South Reach, to assuage the mourning of the arl's own people. Amaranthine and Highever would receive a quarter each. The last, well-packed in salt, was put on a trading ship

as a present to Her Imperial Majesty, with a note from Loghain.

The following day, at sunset, was Bryland's funeral.

He had a fine pyre. His friends and many well-wishers gathered. Arlessa Leandra, pale but calm, was ready for this, dressed in mourning, her arms around Corbus and Lothar, with her daughter and her niece on either side to support her. With Leandra were her tall sons and her pretty red-haired daughter-in-law. A fine family. The calming draught of the day before made the horrors of the execution seem a vaguely-remembered bad dream. A lighter draught today made the arlessa able to answer condolences with dignity.

Anora stood with her hand in the crook of Fergus' arm. She had been obligated to watch the execution yesterday, and it had been terrible. She knew that her father and Fergus had seen even worse things in battle, and she did not want to be a coward. It was to be hoped that such an awful punishment would act as a deterrent, and make whatever agents remained in Denerim think twice before making any more such attempts. There were scores of people in Fort Drakon at the moment, arrested by the City Guard or denounced by informers. It would take time to sort through them. She had ordered that transcripts of the interrogations were to be forwarded to her office. Nothing must slip through the cracks; neither should innocents suffer due to malicious false testimony.

If only they did not have to work so hard, at this time in their lives. She and Fergus could be so very happy, if they simply had more peace and privacy. *That* part of their marriage was going... very, very well. Anora smiled a little to herself, happy and proud, and squeezed Fergus' arm. He patted her hand, looking down at her fondly, a little snow dusting his dark hair. He was such a lovely man, and he had made manifestly clear that he found her desirable...

Kane's little sisters were clearly grieving for Arl Bryland, who had been kind to them; and even more for Arlessa Leandra, whom they loved. The older girl was carrying her new little puppy in her arms. It was a particularly endearing creature, all fluffy, pale gold fur and big brown eyes. Fergus smiled kindly, and could not resist scratching the silky ears.

"What a pretty little girl," he said.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Faline replied gravely. "Jewel should pay her respects, too."

Habren had not come to her own father's funeral. Kane said she was not up to it, and perhaps she really was ill. According to her husband, she was having a very hard time with her pregnancy, and with that and the shock of her father's murder, had retired to the seclusion of her apartments. Anora spared a moment's pity for her, imagining what she herself would feel if something were to happen to her own father.

He was looking fit and healthy as a prize stallion—as usual—and was in armor, glaring at the Knight-Divine, whom the

council had interrogated today. At length. The session had been unsatisfactory. So far, Ser Chrysgon was refusing to tell them anything at all. Racking a Knight-Divine was a step too drastic even for Father, but there were other, more gradual ways of working on a Templar. Those would be undertaken. At least the man was not looking quite so smug at the moment. Quite tired, actually. Most likely they would get little of any value from him, because two months had passed since his arrival, but they no longer felt much need to treat him with respect. He certainly had none for them. Breaking him would take time.

Time of course, was something they could not waste. The further interrogation of the Knight-Divine must be left to others. Father was ready to march west, and the rest of the lords with him, to their respective deployments.

It was something of a surprise that young Lord Corbus—no, Arl Corbus—had decided to speak his father's funeral oration, but perhaps the boy needed to do this to help purge his grief. It seemed to Anora a healthier way than watching the torturous death of a cat's paw.

The boy was in armor today... a light but well-made suit of leathers, made warm by a fur-trimmed cloak. Beside him was his fine mabari, who trotted smartly at his boy's heels, ears alert. Corbus took his place by the pyre, and raised his young voice against the light wind and the torch's smoke.

"When the Orlesians attacked us back in Harvestmere, my father wasn't afraid. It didn't matter that we were at a

wedding. It didn't matter that he wasn't in armor. He drew his sword and did what had to be done. He saved a lot of lives. It was a terrible day, but at least I got to see my father fight. He was good at it. I'm not surprised that this time they didn't give him a chance to fight, because he would have beaten them again. The only way they could kill him was by a dirty trick. The killer gave my mother flowers with one hand, while he hid a dagger for my father in his other.

"The Orlesians want us to be afraid. They want us to grovel and beg. And even that wouldn't be enough for them. They won't be satisfied until all of Ferelden is theirs again, and every one of us ground down under their boots or dead.

"They didn't care that my father was a good man and a good arl. They didn't care that his two sons and his wife were there to see him killed. They didn't care that we loved him. They probably thought that was *funny*. All they wanted was to get him out of their way. All they wanted was for us to be afraid.

"Well, I'm *not* afraid of them. I'm going to live my life with courage, as a freeborn Fereldan, just like my father. He taught me that the only way to deal with Orlesians is to stand up to them. I'm not afraid of their chevaliers or their bards or their sneaking, vicious ways. I'm not afraid of them when they hide behind the Divine and act like they have the right to rule us because the Grand Cathedral happens to be in their country. I'm not afraid of the Empress either, because she's a coward who wouldn't be caught dead in anything so unfashionable as armor. The Orlesians have had a long run,

but their time is *over*.

"Last year was a hard one for Ferelden. We faced a Blight, and pushed back the darkspawn. Instead of helping us, the Orlesians tried to undermine us and attack us. By doing that, they've shown us what side they're on. They've allied themselves with the darkspawn: with the Taint, with the proud, ancient magisters who tried to seize the Gold City. They stand for everything wrong and evil in our world.

"It's a new year. I don't what it will bring. I don't know what's going to happen. What I do know is that I have the power to face it as my father's son. I know that we're going to fight and that we're going to survive. I know that my father is at the Maker's right hand at this very moment, and that he watching all of us, wishing us well, hoping that we'll make him proud. I won't let him down.

"Farewell, my lord Father, until we meet again. I love you."

The army began moving out the next day. Various components had differing schedules. In many cases, non-combatants traveled with spouses. There was music; there was pageantry; there were more than a few passionate farewells.

Corbus insisted on leading—at least as a figurehead—the South Reach troops. Arl Wulfte agreed to take him along. The West Hill and South Reach men were going to be working in conjunction, anyhow.

"First, though," the old man gruffly advised the boy, "you'll have to do your share of soldiering before you do any generaling!"

Corbus bid farewell to his brother and his stepmother, calm and dry-eyed. Lothar hugged him, promising to join him just as soon as he could comfortably sit a full-sized horse. Leandra kissed him goodbye, and prepared to depart for South Reach, to take over administration of the arling. Bethany and Charade went with her. Leandra was trying to be strong, but was still in a fragile, traumatized state, and would need support.

Loghain departed, the first among many. In his host were the dwarven engineers and a collection of wagons carrying some remarkable war engines, all wrapped up tightly. Along his way he would leave some of these personnel with their toys: in Amaranthine, in Highever, in West Hill. And then, in parts west.

Anora and Fergus quietly waited for Loghain to depart. Neither of them was ready to say goodbye to the other, for their marriage was too sweet and new. Once the king was gone, there was nothing to prevent them doing what they wished. Loghain would be informed, but not until he was far enough not to make his displeasure felt. There was absolutely no reason why the kingdom could not function with Anora in Highever. Her office was wherever she and her secretaries were.

Certain arrangements were made. The Knight-Divine had been quietly transferred to Fort Drakon, and his lyrium supply

stopped. When he was desperate enough, he would talk. Meanwhile, they could not delay all operations waiting for his information. Anora left some very good people to deal with him.

The fact that many of the units would be traveling under the earth was revealed in due time and startled many a soldier. It startled some of the nobles as well, who had been conditioned to believe that to step into the Deep Roads was to experience death by darkspawn. There was some hesitation, overcome by main force and by the manifest fact that the way was clear.

While Berenice would be with Adam in the city of Amaranthine, Callista would not be staying in Vigil's Keep. She saw no reason that she could not go with Nathaniel to his posting at West Hill. He agreed, glad of her company, though privately ready to send her home at the first hint of danger.

Within a few days, Denerim was becoming a ghost town, drained of most of the soldiers crowding its barracks and taverns. Arl Kane settled down to an easy life, taking the occasional stroll—heavily guarded—about town in his new armor, while Loghain's men ran things as they pleased. He moved his bedchamber to another part of the mansion, tired of the screaming and door-pounding from Habren's apartments. She did not seem to like the two servants he had assigned to her. They were tough-minded women and would stand for no nonsense. Kane directed his attention to finding some good ponies for the girls. When the weather turned in—probably in a few weeks— they would like riding out into the

foothills below Dragon's Peak.

The last troops to leave Denerim were those of Redcliffe, under Arl Teagan. They marched through the Great Gate, where the head of Bryland's assassin might have seemed to watch them, had not the ravens already picked out his eyes.

Thanks to my reviewers: JTheClivaz, RakeeshJ4, Charcolt, Chandagnac, Tirion I, Phygmaliiion, NIX'S WARDEN, butterflygrl, Mike3207, Girl-chama, riverdaleswhiteflash, Nemrut, MsBarrows, anon, Sarah1281, BandGeekNinja, KnightOfHolyLight, EpitomyofShyness, Massgamer45, Suna Chunin, Trishata96, Psyche Sinclair, Anime-StarWars-fanzach, brrt, Chiara Crawford, Robbie the Phoenix, mille libri, RB23G, Guest, Tangyman, dragonblade3200, Spoit0, Jenna53, JackOfBladesX, Halm Vendrella, Have Socks. Will Travel, jnybot, Silverscale, almostinsane, Raxiselic, Costin, Distraught, amanda weber, AD Lewis, Herebedragons66, and Josie Lange.

I was thrilled by your response to the last chapter. Many of you had wonderful ideas. Remember, however, that I can't respond to you if you're not signed in. I had a lot of "anon" and "Guest" reviews. And wow—seven hundred people have placed this story among their favorites.

The point of the assassination attempts is to destabilize Ferelden, and soften it up for the Orlesian invasion in the spring. Bryland had made himself a target, by defying

Chantry law about mages (ironically, because he was a good guy). Many nobles really will be quite frightened, and want to make a separate peace, but they're equally afraid of Loghain, who is right there, ready to come down on them if they shirk. Parties and weddings are great for assassinations because they're not secret, and the assassin is given a place and time.

Somebody suggested that the prickly holly leaves could have been poisoned, and that is an interesting idea, but no. It would have been too complicated for the assassin, and the minor pain of the holly would have created a sufficient diversion.

Do I think that hardened Fereldan warriors would rescue a puppy, when they would lock up an injured, innocent elf girl without a second thought? Yes. And so do you.

People really did sometimes survive the evisceration portion of their execution. In one 16th century case, an executioner asked a condemned man if he would like a drink of water, and the poor man said it was pointless, since he had nowhere to put it. And I was not really very explicit about some of the details of the execution. I'm not really George R. R. Martin, after all. I base the execution on English usage for male prisoners: if you want to read about an even more horrific event, look up the execution of Robert-Francois Damiens, who slightly wounded Louis XV of France. Casanova was a witness at the death, and utterly horrified.

He left a full account in his memoirs. The execution was controversial. Both Thomas Paine and the legal philosopher Cesare Beccaria cited it in their works: the former, as an example of the cruelty of despotism; the latter as a case study in his arguments against judicial torture and the death penalty.

100. A Waiting Game

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 100: A Waiting Game

"The Marquis is not in Jader at all," Zevran told Bronwyn, on his return from his latest spying expedition. "He has not been in Jader since before Satinalia. He is, however, expected on the first of Drakonis, along with a mighty host."

"How mighty is 'mighty?'" Bronwyn asked, wanting to know the worst.

"I cannot give you exact numbers, my Queen, but the levy barracks can accommodate five thousand. The chevaliers' quarters and stables have room for one thousand, both men and horses."

"Maker!"

With thirty Wardens under her command alone, Bronwyn would ordinarily have considered herself to command a powerful force. They were not all she had, however. There were seven hundred men at the Halt, and an auxiliary force of two hundred dwarves, mostly Legion of the Dead. Stationed at the Halt were a score of clever scouts and rangers, mostly

Avvars, who were not at all hindered by the weather, but were out and about, probing the borderlands. Cavalry she had none: there were no more than two dozen horses at the Halt.

From time to time, more came to join her: volunteers from the hill country, attracted by her fame, some farmer boys and girls from the Neck, small bands of mercenaries with no better prospects in view, a handful of surface dwarves hired on by her engineers, and some rag and tag that might include a few apostate mages. Altogether, her complement might actually number a thousand, though it fluctuated slightly with the weather and the irregulars' resultant mood.

However, if her thousand tried to confront the Orlesian's six thousand in open battle, things might not go well, unless she was very, very clever, and very, very lucky. And very well prepared.

The ground here, fortunately for her, was not well-suited to the deployment of a large force of cavalry. The pass had too many bottlenecks to admit more than a few dozen at once. Theoretically they would crush all before them, but not if massed archers were positioned to fire volley after volley down on them from cover. And now Bronwyn had ballistae and some of the new trebuchets, which could launch explosive missiles. Horses would not like explosives. If she could create enough of a panic, any Orlesian assault might end in a disaster for the enemy: knights and untrained levies trampled underfoot by frenzied, armored warhorses.

Working under cover of night, mines had been laid in the pass,

set to go off by the touch of levers concealed in the bluffs. More explosives had been set above ledges and outcrops: man-made rockslides that could be set off with a touch, burying an invading force under tons of rubble.

Of course, the Orlesians might not choose to go through the Pass. Bronwyn hoped they would, but the possibility remained that the Orlesians might try to be tricky, and would take the hill trail out of Jader: the same rough road that Brosca had taken when she infiltrated the city. It connected with the Imperial Highway. If the Orlesians took the hill trail, they would be slow, but they might hope to surprise the Fereldens, and thunder down, besieging Gherlen's Halt, and sweeping east across the Neck to the Fereldan heartlands.

And of course, Zevran was only giving her information about the kind of garrison Jader itself could support. If the rest of the Imperial army attacked, it could mean another ten... another fifteen thousand troops. They could not strip the Nevarran border, but they had immense reserves.

Loghain was mustering the Fereldans. If the Bannorn provided decent levies and the numbers were made up from those lost in the spring and summer campaign against the darkspawn, Ferelden could field here in the northeast, maybe... another four thousand. For Ferelden, also, could not strip its cities of protection and its coastline of guards. For now, it was a waiting game.

If the Orlesians looked like they would make their move before Loghain arrived, Bronwyn would have to make a

preemptive strike that would knock them off balance. The dockyard would be fired, and the barracks demolished. Bronwyn had a large store of explosives, which had grown larger since Alistair had arrived with Adaia and Siofranni. Those explosives were being quietly planted in the cellars of the barracks, cleverly concealed. In a few daring mission to Jader, some of their loyal surface dwarves had moved through the sewers, following the maps drawn from the information given by Brosca, by the Avvar scouts, and now by Zevran.

Zevran was an immensely useful spy, because he was not an actual Warden, and none of the Jader Wardens could sense him. Morrigan too, had slipped into Jader, part of the time as an inquisitive hawk, and part of the time as a modestly-dressed and masked woman. Anders sometimes went, but only in his animal forms, since he was undetectable as a Grey Warden that way: flying in as a raven, and now that he had mastered the shape, prowling about as a cat. A neat-whiskered ginger tomcat found good pickings and plenty of friendly folk in Jader— talkative people, too, in the Marquis' Palace, in the Chantry, in the barracks, in the market. On one occasion, all three of them explored Jader together: a lady with her elven servant and her pet cat.

"Tis utterly ridiculous," Morrigan said, after her that mission. "Do these Orlesians not understand that people in masks cannot be trusted?"

Yet it was the custom of the country: a perfectly absurd custom that permitted hostile foreigners to walk among them,

undiscovered and unafraid.

"I like Jader," Anders declared. "Good food. The seafood stew is something special. And the sausages. Jaderites have sound ideas about spicy sausages."

They kept a succession of lookouts up at the hunting lodge, walking down to watch the Imperial Highway. They kept lookouts at the secret rock openings near Solidor. They patrolled the Deep Roads, senses straining to catch any darkspawn movement. And they patrolled the Neck, that vulnerable territory between the Orlesian border and the River Dane. The weather was not their friend on some of these ventures, but it was not the Orlesians' friend, either.

Once Alistair had arrived at the end of Wintermarch, Bronwyn had reorganized her Wardens into four teams, trying to rebalance the groups according to abilities and temperament. All the teams needed a mage and archers. They needed at least two heavily armored swordsmen or axemen. They needed someone good with locks and traps. Some wished to stay with the people they had grown fond of: Danith's team was remarkably cohesive.

Ultimately, Bronwyn wanted to have a dog in every team. Her delight when Alistair arrived, accompanied by darling little Scrapper, was great indeed. She knew, of course about Carver and Jowan's dogs, and planned to integrate them into her arrangements if they survived the Nevarran embassy. If she ever saw them again.

There was a small kennel at Gherlen's Halt, and she liked to include men with dogs in her missions. Bronwyn had ideas about new uses for dogs. A dog could not reasonably be used to break up a chevalier's charge. A dog was simply not a match for a horse and man in heavy armor. For that matter, using the dogs against massed darkspawn at the Bloomingtide Battle had not worked very well. A dog was a splendid asset in a skirmish, but not in a pitched battle.

However, Fereldan mabari were smart. Very smart. She had them running messages now. They knew people by name, once they were properly introduced, and they never forgot those people's individual scents. A dog could find anyone, given time. And they could sniff about in the woods, playing the stray, slipping through the underbrush: or they could trot along a dirty alley, pissing against the walls. As dogs, they were both above and below suspicion.

Restless, in need of exercise and air, Bronwyn rode out with some of her people to have a look at the Imperial Highway. Winter often damaged the roads, even the Imperial Highway, designed and constructed by brilliant Tevinter magisters long ago. The extent of damage caused by frost heaving was no worse than usual, and certainly would not be a barrier to troop movements. The sun shone down, melting snow on the stones and on the naked branches of the dragonthorn trees. The ground itself was still very cold, and remained shrouded with white.

Once out, she took advantage of the cloudless day to ride to

the outpost at the hunting lodge, to see how Danith and her people were faring.

Well, as it happened. The site was very agreeable to them. There was shelter and warmth, but also open air and the opportunity to hunt, when it was not snowing heavily. The Dalish among them found it pleasant compromise between proper elvhen accommodations and shemlen luxury. Their Avvar ranger, Bustrum and Ostap, spent a great deal of time there, and could take others with them when they scouted over the border. Quinn, of course, bundled in furs, looked like an Avvar himself—though a very young, beardless Avvar.

Bronwyn liked the change herself, and sent a messenger back to the Halt to tell them she would be out overnight. She was not too grand to sleep on a blanket on a rough wooden floor.

Nuala and Steren went out to stand guard. The rest settled down around the fire, while Aeron plucked lazily at his lute. It was a quiet night, and Bronwyn cherished it. This all reminded her pleasantly of her early days of adventure, when she did not live in the grubby grandeur of Gherlen's Halt.

"Who's got a bed-time story for us?" Anders asked. "This is all so cozy and friendly that a little entertainment would be just the thing. Whose turn is it?"

Bronwyn honestly could not recall. Danith said, "My group was first, but Nuala and Steren are outside."

"What about it Quinn?" asked Maeve.

The boy was red in a frenzy of blushing. "I can't... I can't... I don't know any stories. You tell one for me, Maeve... you or Aeron."

Aeron shrugged. "I know heaps of stories. Most of them end very badly."

"I have a story," Maeve said, after a little hesitation. "Maybe I should tell it now."

Maeve's Tale of the Shoemaker's Sweetheart

There was a poor girl, and there was a poor boy, and they were in love. So many stories start like that, but it's a truth of life, that there are more poor young couples than rich ones. They wanted to marry, for the girl loved her boy more than anything in the world. He was all she had, for her parents had died, and she was alone.

But they had nothing to live on, and must keep their love secret. The boy was only a shoemaker's apprentice, bound to his master, and the girl lived with her second cousins, who grudged her house room. They hated the boy, and had forbidden the girl to have anything to do with him. So it was. The boy's only wealth was his cleverness, and the girl's only wealth was her strong body and her shining hair.

They met only at the dark of the moon behind a corner of the chantry, and there they kissed and shared their troubles. "Even once my apprenticeship is over," the boy said, one night

, "We'll still need capital for me to set up shop. And the town doesn't need another shoemaker. We'll need to move to Gwaren or even Denerim. Moving is very expensive. So is furnishing a home." He shook his head sadly. "I don't know where the money's to come from."

"I can help!" said the girl. "I'm strong! I can milk the neighbor's cows and help with the butchering. I work for my keep already at my cousin's, so every copper I earn will go to our future."

The boy told her she was wonderful, and kissed her. He showed her one of his old socks, where everything she earned would be saved. The boy promised to keep the sock under his pillow at his master's, since he pointed out that she had to share a room, and he could better keep their nest egg secure.

So the time passed, and the girl worked, very, very hard to earn money. Other boys noticed that she was pretty and hard-working, and they came to court her, but she always refused them, for her heart already belonged to another. Her cousins grew nastier and nastier, and her life harder and harder. She worked on, but she earned only coppers, and they had less than a hundred of those.

One day, a rich merchant came to call. He had the best house in the village, and he was looking for a new housekeeper. He was old and fat, but amusing and full of stories. He told the girl's cousins that that the girl would suit him very well, and he promised her a fine wage for taking care of his house.

Indeed it was such a fine wage that it was perfectly clear that he was engaging her as more than a housekeeper. The merchant already had a wife, but she was sickly and kept to her room. What the merchant wanted was a pretty young girl to cook his meals and sleep in his bed. The cousins thought it a good way to get rid of the girl, and gave her no peace, telling her why she should be grateful for such a good opportunity.

In the dark of the moon, the girl met with her sweetheart, and told him that her family wanted her to be the mistress of the rich merchant. Instead of being horrified for her, or indignant, the boy rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You know," he said, "this might be the chance we've been waiting for. No, don't look at me like that. I know it's a sacrifice, but look at it this way: I'm sacrificing too, by honoring my bond to my master. I'm learning the trade that will bring us a living. It's only fair that you should earn enough to get us started. The merchant isn't a bad fellow. He'll be kind and generous, and we'll save money more quickly than ever. My bond will be over in a year. With luck, we'll have enough to leave and make our start in life by then.... If you take advantage of this great opportunity!"

The girl did not like it, but the boy was very clever, and made more sensible arguments in favor of his plan. Thus it came to pass that the girl went to the house of the merchant, and gave him the thing she had been saving for her wedding day. And she gave it again, and again. The merchant was pleased with her, and gave her fine clothes and plenty of coin. And the girl

gave every piece of silver to her sweetheart, and he put it in the sock.

Time passed. At Summersday his bond would be fulfilled. Surely they had enough money to start their new life by now. One day, in the last month, the girl was walking near the chantry when she heard the boy's voice, coming from their secret meeting place behind the corner of the Chantry. Before she could call out to him, she realized that he was not alone.

"In a month my master will release me! We'll be married and start our new life!"

"Oh, how wonderful!" replied the voice of a young woman. "My family will be so happy, too. They've always liked you. They think you're so clever, the way you've saved so much coin."

The boy's voice was smug. "And there's more where that came from yet."

The girl stood still as if turned to stone, her heart racked with anguish. After a time, she crept away, not wanting to hear their words of love. too ashamed to speak to anyone.

At the dark of the moon, she hardly knew what to do. Part of her never wanted to see her boy again, and part of her wanted to plead with him not to betray her, to try to make him see how much she loved him and that all she had done had been for him. At last she decided to go. It was difficult to wait. Quiet and still, she endured the merchant's attentions, until he

was satisfied and snoring. Then she slipped from the bed and dressed quickly, taking with her the coin that the merchant had given her that month.

She slipped along the walls, hidden by the shadows, until she darted behind the corner of the Chantry. There the boy waited for her. He kissed her, and admired the size of the purse in her hands. The girl fumbled with it nervously, making the silver jingle.

"We're going to have plenty to start our new life," he promised her. "Let me see what you brought!"

"If only I could see it," she whispered. "If only I could see the coin we've saved all together. I know it's only a month, but sometimes it's so hard..."

"Wait here!" Greed gave wings to the boy's feet. In no time he was back, carrying the bulging sock. The girl put out her hands, and reluctantly the boy let her hold it.

Suddenly she slammed the sock into the boy's face with all her strength, breaking his nose. She hit him again, and he went down in a heap, groaning. Then she spat on him.

"I know about you and your *real* betrothed, " she snarled, overflowing with bitterness. "And this coin is *mine*, earned with my shame and my foolish love for a cheat and a pimp!"

Her skirts swirled around her as she turned and left him. Quickly she went back to the merchant's house. There she

gathered up a cloak and some food. She put the sock of silver in a bag, and at dawn she left the town. She walked, and kept on walking. When she reached Gwaren, she bought armor and weapons, and cut her lovely hair. She enlisted in the army, and never looked back.

There was a silence, since a number of people guessed that this was not simply a story.

Quinn, less knowledgeable in the ways of the world, scowled, and said, "I'd punch him in the face, too! That was rotten, cheating on his girl like that! And making her live with somebody else... I'm glad she got away!"

Bronwyn gave Maeve a wry smile. "So am I."

They were mounting up for the return the following morning, when a warbling birdcall alerted them to danger. One of the Avvars on guard duty had spotted strangers approaching. Bronwyn dashed down to the cover of the surrounding pines, and followed Bustrum's pointing finger. A quick glance reassured her that these were friends— or at least, not enemies. Two riders, heavily cloaked, but who wore blue and grey under their furs. She stepped out from cover to greet them.

"Senior Warden Riordan," she said, feeling rather wary. "And ___"

"Warden Fiona!" Danith said, giving a slight, courteous bow.

"Well met," Bronwyn said, wondering what they wanted. There was no harm in being polite, unless they made that the untenable option.

Riordan inclined his head. "Your Majesty." Fiona looked very displeased, but gave Bronwyn a brisk nod.

"Just a Warden in this company," Bronwyn replied. "I am glad to see you well."

Immediately, she invited them into the lodge to rest and join them in a meal. Any meal. The Wardens' more-or-less-never-ending-meal. Naturally, they accepted. There was a warming stew of venison, barley and forest mushrooms. With pan-bread to sop in it, it was hearty enough even for Wardens. They spoke of inconsequential things: the weather, the scarcity of game, of their horses. Bronwyn introduced her Wardens to them. It was useless to try to hide their existence, when they were clearly Wardens, and Riordan, from his expression, had already sensed them as such.

Once they had eaten, Bronwyn knew it was time to hear what they had come to say.

"You are bold to ride out to meet us."

"Everyone knows you're here in the west, it's true," Fiona said. "Everyone. Jader is uneasy."

"Uneasy?" Bronwyn scoffed. "*Ferelden* is uneasy. I don't recall that *Ferelden* occupied and oppressed any part of Orlais for over eighty years! The Knight-Divine all but declared war on us for the sake of our mage allies. Blight or no, we have little choice but to ready the border for what everyone knows is coming. Why is *Jader* uneasy?"

"Sister," Riordan said, slightly emphasizing the word. "We know that one of your Wardens was in Jader not long ago. A dwarf. She was not one of ours, and thus she was one of yours."

Maeve and Quinn snickered, nudging each other. Anders and Morrigan smirked.

Bronwyn glanced at them in quick reproof, and then looked down her nose at the Orlesians. "She might have been Nevarran. They are no friends of Orlais, either. Or a Marcher. Just someone who had heard of the beauties of Jader and wished to see them for herself."

Riordan grimaced. Fiona, caring nothing for social niceties, was more forthright.

"It is useless to dissemble. Based on the description, we guessed it was Warden Brosca. We met her! We performed the Joining for her! A Warden should not be scouting for anything but darkspawn!"

"The presence of a foreign Warden could not be kept secret," Riordan said heavily. "Others know she was there. Word

spread through the city, that the Red Queen sent one of her Wardens to infiltrate Jader."

"Brosca's not afraid of anything!" whispered Aeron, with a light laugh.

Bronwyn did not feel she owed the Orlesians any apology. "Hmmm. And why do you suppose I might think it a sound scheme to have a trusted friend enter Jader? What might be happening in Jader that might hinder my own efforts to fight the darkspawn? Everyone in Jader knows what's going on. I presume you do, too. I think an Orlesian invasion is going to be quite the problem, personally. And we've had fair warning. The Empress has tried to kill me, long before I became Queen. She tried to kill me while I was merely a Warden. Look to your own ruler, if you want to blame someone who cares little for fighting the Blight."

"You do not think claiming the throne of Ferelden was a provocation?"

The Fereldan Wardens rolled their eyes. At least the humans. The dwarves were bored. The elves looked on impassively. Fereldan shemlen were bad enough. Orlesians were far worse. And Bronwyn had given them a homeland after all, something which they knew the Orlesian Empress would never have done.

Bronwyn actually laughed. "I suppose it was at that!" She fixed her poison-green gaze on the her guests. "And I really don't care. I believe she would have attacked, whether I took

the throne or not. And the Empress disgusts me. She knows what she did to my family. It took some time, but now I know, too. If she had not them murdered them to further her other schemes, my father would have been alive to take the throne that should have been his five years ago."

Riordan, all at sea, shook his head. "I do not understand what you mean."

"The Empress sent a bard to coordinate an elaborate plot against my family, tricking a friend into thinking them traitors, forging documents that launched a massacre. You might say that the Empress... made me Queen of Ferelden. But I shall never thank her for it." Bronwyn's good humor dissipated, reminded of that night. "No, my brother Warden, I feel I've done as I had to do. We know the darkspawn will rise soon. They are not dead or defeated, but merely taking shelter from the winter's cold. With the first thaw they will be upon us again. And Ferelden can expect to be attacked not just by them, but by our neighbors. Words cannot convey what I think of those who would in effect ally themselves with the darkspawn."

"I could think of a *few words*," growled Niall under his breath.

Bronwyn sighed, and then cocked her head. "What it is you want of me? What are you asking?"

"The Wardens of Jader..." Riordan paused, and then steeled himself. "The Wardens of Orlais sent us to talk to you... to remind you of your oath and your duty... and to urge you to

remain neutral in any war between nations." He gave an elegant Orlesian shrug. "I told them it was useless."

"Of course it is," Aveline said, backing Bronwyn up. "Orlesian Wardens can stand back because *their* country isn't under attack. They don't have to worry about their friends dying. They can be neutral because the Imperial army is so huge that nobody's going to ask them to join in the attack."

Fiona scowled at Bronwyn. "And *you* gave Alistair a noble title!"

"He didn't like it," Anders was blunt to the point of rudeness. "He was ambushed! He'll get used to it, though."

"Alistair is the son of a king," Bronwyn said coolly. "His paternity deserves to be recognized and honored. In my opinion, Maric was wrong to keep it secret. And Alistair has done Ferelden worthy service. If I can be Queen, I could hardly be so hypocritical as to say that Alistair could not be a bann."

"Neither of you should be either!" Fiona snapped. "The title of Warden is good enough for anyone!"

"Ordinarily, I would agree," said Bronwyn, for the sake of civility; though she actually hated being a Warden, and bitterly resented Duncan's high-handed behavior in forcing her to Join the order. "However," she continued, "this is a Blight, and everything is different. The King of Ferelden was killed by darkspawn, leaving no child. The succession had to be

resolved, and leadership was needed. As both a Warden and a Queen of Ferelden, I can make the Blight my first priority. Which it is, whether you choose to believe me or not. If the Empress had not attempted my assassination, Loghain's assassination, Anora's assassination, and the assassination of every lord and lady conveniently available, we would not need to be here, watching the Orlesian border. If the Knight-Divine had not threatened us, and attempted to arrest the Grand Cleric of Ferelden, we would not need to be watching the Orlesian border. If Duke Prosper de Monfort had not told us that our only safety was in accepting the status of a conquered people, we would not need to be watching the Orlesian border. But all these things have been done. And so, in order to fight the darkspawn, we must also watch the Orlesian border, lest we be overwhelmed and can no longer fight the darkspawn at all."

Scout gave a bark of approval. Riordan smiled ruefully.

"And what will your watching accomplish? What can you do against the fury of the Imperial Army?"

"I can..." she hesitated, not about to give them useful military intelligence. Instead she said. "...I cannot lie down and die. I *will* defend my people, and that includes the *mag*es," Bronwyn said, glaring at Fiona. "Yes, the mages, who have rallied to fight the darkspawn according to the ancient treaties. The Divine seems to have a problem with that, though it has been done in Blights past without opposition. All we can assume is that the Divine's devotion to Orlais and its interests outweighs all else: her responsibility to a Thedas beset by a Blight; the

traditional precedents; even the decency of letting the mages come forward and fulfill their obligations."

Riordan was sympathetic. It was obvious from his posture and his tense expression. Bronwyn pressed him.

"It seems to me, that you should be siding with me, in fact. I've been actually fighting the darkspawn. I think the lot of you Orlesian Wardens should ride over the border and stand with us. You must have had the dreams; you must have seen the signs. The darkspawn will rise soon."

"If only we could!" said Riordan. "We might indeed ride over the border and join you, but riding *back* might be a matter more difficult to accomplish."

"And who knows where the darkspawn will attack?" Fiona pointed out. She pulled herself together, and managed a reasonable tone. "It could be in Ferelden, but it could be in the Anderfels... or in faraway Rivain. Who can say?"

"Yes," Bronwyn nodded. "I understand the argument. I have read it in the letters I have received from the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra and Antiva, who were good enough to respond to my queries." She laughed suddenly. "I wrote to the First Warden, too, since I thought he would like to know about how I killed the Architect."

Fiona's jaw dropped. "You slew the Architect? But..."

"I really must return to the Halt now, " Bronwyn interrupted.

"My Wardens can tell you about it, if you wish to remain, but I am expected elsewhere.. But yes, the Architect is dead. He was hiding in a deep mine in Amaranthine. Now he is no more."

"We'll tell them them!" Aveline promised. "Every detail... including the part about you riding the dragon."

The Orlesians paused, staring at the red-haired Warden in shock. Bronwyn smiled to herself, and got up to do.

"I would be grateful," said Riordan, following Bronwyn to the door. "We must leave ourselves, very soon, if we are to be back in Jader before dark. We swore to our Wardens that we be as discreet as possible. The civil authorities know nothing of this meeting."

They stepped outside, and Quinn and Aeron hurried to saddle the horses. Bronwyn tugged her cloak around her, thinking.

"Then tell your Wardens..." she said. "Tell them that instead of urging me not to defend my country, perhaps they should be urging their 'civil authorities' to have the decency not to take advantage of a neighbor under attack by darkspawn. It's despicable and cowardly. If they thought about it clearly, they would see that I cannot do other than I am. I do not know from which direction the darkspawn will attack, but I definitely know from which direction Orlais is going to attack, and thus I am here, rather than patrolling the Deep Roads."

There seemed little more to be said. Bronwyn wondered if the

Orlesian Wardens knew anything about Riordan and Fiona's prior venture into Ferelden—one that now seemed to have come back to haunt them. However, even if they had not come to perform the Joining, Bronwyn believed it would not have been the end of the world for her. She would still have gathered her recruits, and when they reached Soldier's Peak, they could have been Joined at that point. Very likely, more of the recruits would have survived, since they would have used Avernus' improved potion. Bronwyn considered mentioning the potion, and decided not to muddy the waters. Once the Blight was over and the Archdemon dead, she might be inclined to be generous.

"I thank you for telling me of your concerns, and for the pains you took to come here," she said, after a silence. "It is growing late, and I was pleased to see you again. You have done your duty to us."

"Then I wish you well, Queen Bronwyn," said Riordan. "For while we are Orlesian and Fereldan, we are also brother and sister."

"And I wish you well also, Riordan of Jader." Bronwyn shrugged. "And you, Fiona. We are all in the Maker's hands." She and her party mounted up, and prepared to move out.

"Wait!" called Riordan. Bronwyn turned in her saddle.

The Orlesian asked, "Did you really find the Ashes of Andraste?"

Bronwyn smiled. "I did."

She kicked her horse into motion, and cantered away. Behind her the Orlesians watched her out of sight, until Danith cleared her throat, and led them back into the lodge.

A long cold walk it was, exposed to the harsh southwest wind. Tara pulled her hood down further over her face and trudged on. If she did not investigate the Aeonar now, there would be no time later.

Only one of her party was human, and Catriona very vocally did not give a dead rat for the Chantry. It made things convenient. Why Catriona disliked the Chantry Tara was not sure, and the archer did not volunteer information. It involved her family in some way, and when she did speak of the Chantry or the Templars, she sounded bitter.

But it was certainly convenient. If Leliana were here, there would be some awkwardness. There might even be a crisis, just as there had been when Danith's loyalty had been torn between the Wardens and a Dalish Keeper, and the Wardens had come off a distant second.

Her own party had no such divided loyalties. Darach treated her with more respect than Tara often felt she deserved. As for the dwarves who made up the rest of the party, they found the power of the Chantry inexplicable and rather absurd. Brosca and Sigrun joked about it. Ulfa and Soren considered it proof positive of the mental inferiority of humans.

Bronwyn had given her considerable latitude when she sent her out on this long patrol. Tara traveled both on the surface and by the Deep Roads. She had spent a pleasant, nostalgic two days at the Spoiled Princess Inn, looking across Lake Calenhad at Kinloch Hold, home of the Circle, and her own home for most of her life. Now and then Tara felt a curious desire to see the place again, but that was not going to happen: not unless she managed to master shape-shifting, and flew there as a bird, unannounced and undetected.

Those days at the Spoiled Princess had given her and her party the energy to undertake this last leg of her journey, back up to the coast and to the Aeonar. Tara was determined to see it for herself. All the excuse she needed was that she was tracking darkspawn. The Templars would have little to say to counter that.

Still, there might be a fight. Too bad. She would not lead her people into any fight she was not sure she could win, but at this point, Tara was fairly confident of her party's ability to win even against great odds. They would penetrate into the prison—or whatever it was—and get some answers. What were the Templars up to? Tara suspected that at least some of them would support the Orlesians when they came. The Aeonar might well be a supply depot waiting for an invasion force.

Smoke rose from the nearby cottage. Tara led her people around to the other side, sheltered by the slope. The little docks at the shore were completely iced in. It was likely that no vessels had come since Tara was last here.

And no guards were at the entrance, either. Why would there be? There were few travelers this time of year, and the structure was imperceptible from the road. The ancient doors had long since caved in, and clutter filled the entry. The weather, however, had betrayed the occupants. Dirty tracks in the snow were evidence, even to Tara's limited skills, that numerous people had been in and out of here since the most recent snowfall. The tracks wended around artfully strewn rubble and tree branches to the hidden entrance—the real entrance. The inner doors appeared at first, and even second glance, to be a stone wall, but closer examination revealed the long cracks and the hinges.

"Watch out!" whispered Catriona. "They're rigged."

"Sneaky bastards," grunted Brosca. Between them, the dwarf and the human laid bare trip wires and triggers. Once you knew they were there, they were not that hard to spot, since the Templar guards must be able to access the doors in safety.

It took some time. The massive entry afforded them shelter from the wind, at least. Tara hoped the doors were not barred from the inside, but she thought that unlikely.

Nor, when opened, did they creak. Warmer air flowed out, smelling strongly of damp and stone..

"Ahh!" sighed Sigrun. "Just like home."

"It does smell like Dust Town, at that," whispered Brosca,

grinning. "Or like Dust Town would smell, if humans lived there."

They opened the door just enough to slip through, one at a time. Inside was a broad hall, with a pair of corridors leading off from it. In the center, an elaborate spiral staircase twisted down.

Faced with three choices, Tara went right, down the straight corridor, lit by crystals.

"Those are old," Tara whispered, pointing at the curious lights. "Really old. I've read about the Tevinters using them."

The crystals lent the corridor an eerie green light. The party opened doors cautiously, and found nothing but large storerooms packed with supplies. Tara made note of them, and considered coming back here to restock before they left.

They retraced their steps, moving silently, hearing indistinct echoes rumbling from the central staircase. Tara led them down the left corridor, and opened the first door.

And found herself in a well-appointed office, staffed by three priests, and a gangly and very young Templar recruit. All four shrieked girlishly at the sight of strangers.

"Maker's Breath!" Tara shouted. "We're Grey Wardens!"

The oldest of the priests clutched her heart, gasping. "What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"We've been tracking darkspawn," Tara told her, a bit glibly. "They hide in old tunnels and buildings, and lay traps just like the ones we found. We thought this was a nest."

Brosca forced back a grin, and poked Tara in the back. "You are such a liar!" she whispered, hand over her mouth.

Tara smiled sunnily. It was so much fun to lie to priests. Now they'd worry about darkspawn sneaking in. Good.

"So what is this place, anyway?" Sigrun piped up. "It's not a Chantry, is it? I thought those were above ground."

"No," Catriona said loudly. "It's not a Chantry. What are you ladies doing here, with only one Templar for protection?"

"It's not just us!" the youngest priest burst out. "Knight-Commander Parrish has a full complement of—"

The other priests shushed her. Tara came forward, shamelessly peering at the documents on the writing tables and files boxes. She paused at a roll that was headed "*Tranquilizations of 9:30.*" Her amusement soured.

"Interesting place you've got here? What is this?"

"This is a legitimate Chantry holding," the elder priest told her haughtily.

"I'll bet it's not," Tara shot back. "I'll bet the King and Queen don't know about it. I'll bet there's no record of the Chantry owning property here. " Her teeth curled back in a mirthless

smile. "This is the Aeonar, isn't it?"

"Look here, Warden," the boy blustered. "You'll have to leave now. There will be a formal complaint to the First Warden!"

The Wardens burst out laughing.

"Good luck with that," snorted Brosca. "The First Warden doesn't even seem to know where Ferelden is. I think we should look around. The darkspawn could have tunneled into the lower levels."

This was greeted by the chantry folk with horror, for all sorts of reasons. Tara led her people out and then barricaded the door with a heavy storage case, trapping the office's occupants inside. The party then continued their examination of the rooms along the corridor. One, protected by intricate locks, contained an astonishing collection of magical items. Tara tried not to squeal aloud at the case containing a pair of genuine elven Sending Stones.

"What are they for?" Ulfa wondered.

Tara tossed one from one hand to the other, admiring its satin-smoothness. "Supposedly, you can send messages by them, if you have one and someone else has the other. The Chantry probably couldn't get them to work. These might not be usable anymore. I read that they were supposed to glow."

Darach was in awe. "I have heard of these. They were used in ancient Arlathan to connect the great lands of the elvhen."

"Let's take them along," Tara said, popping them into her pack. "Maybe Marethari or Merrill might know how to fix them. They're not doing any good here."

There were rare grimoires; there were crystals and statues, and a menacing little totem with long hair and creepily red eyes. There was no time to even go through the meticulous inventory that sat on a reading stand. Tara snatched up some items at random, and shared them out among her people.

"Let's have a look below."

It was not as huge as Tara had imagined it, or perhaps there were many levels below this one. There appeared to be quarters for no more than fifty Templars at a time, and about ten priests. There was a big kitchen and a refectory. A chapel, too, of course. They peered in, and slipped past. Most of the Templars were having a meal. The two that stepped out in front of the Wardens were struck with a sleep spell, and deposited in the empty chapel, behind the pew closest to the back wall.

And where the hall forked, there were cells. Down a short flight of stairs, there were more cells, and the voice of one in the last stages of anguish.

"Maker... Maker... oh please... no...not that...not that... no... please... I'll do anything... I'm not a mage... oh, Maker, help me...Aaaagh! Aaaaaaaagh!"

Tara jerked her head, and the Wardens followed at a stealthy

run. The door was half open, and was marked "Interrogation Room." A fancy title for a torture chamber.

A man was strapped to a chair, his head held unmoving in a metal frame. His jaw hung slack, and he was obviously either dead or unconscious. From the blood oozing from his ears and nose, Tara's guess was dead. A pair of Templars were wiping and putting away their implements. At a small table, a priest was writing rapidly, her quill scratching along the parchment at great speed.

Catriona gave Tara a hard nudge, her face contracted in rage. Tara put up a hand, and then gave a start, when she realized she recognized the priest.

"Hello, Lily! I haven't seen you since you were about to run away with Jowan."

Yes, it was definitely *that* Lily: the same plump cheeks, the same elaborately coiffed dark hair. Only she was in the robes of an ordained priest, not a mere initiate, as she had been in her Circle days. Lily looked back at her, and blinked, clearly not recognizing her.

The Templars lunged forward, Tara, her indignation swelling her mana, froze them on the spot.

"Tie them up," she ordered. "And gag them. Brosca, watch the priest: she's sneaky. I need to have a look at him." She pointed at the bleeding man in the torture chair.

It was too late. Something had burned his brain from the inside out. Tara wished Anders or Jowan were here to analyze the condition of the man's body, but certain things were obvious to her— like the misshapen brand on the man's forehead. And the dropped iron, its head inlaid with lyrium, lying nearby.

"The Rite of Tranquility, somehow gone wrong. Interesting." She snatched the parchment off the writing table, away from Lily's twitching fingers, and skimmed through it."

"My, aren't you a thorough little secretary... even recording the moans and pleas of the dying." She read aloud from the transcript. *"Please... spare me...not my eyes... I haven't done anything... Aghhh! Maker! Aghhh!"*

She broke off, her eyes boring into the defiant priest. "You are a desperately sick fuck, you know that?"

"I remember you!" Lily burst out, the light dawning at last. "You're the knife-ears that clung to Jowan like fleas!"

"Ooo!" Brosca nodded appreciatively. "This one's feisty!"

Darach, on the other hand, was furious. "Watch your tongue, shemlen!" he warned. Tara gestured him back.

"I remember *you*," she said, her voice cold. *"You're* the liar who pretended to be in love with Jowan. It was all a set-up, wasn't it? A trap to lure mages into trying to escape, so the Templars would have an excuse to kill them. You told Jowan

that they were planning to make him Tranquil, pushing him until he was desperate enough to try to break out. Only he really did get away, didn't he? You didn't expect him to have the power to knock everyone down!"

"A Blood Mage!" Lily spat. "It was rumored, but he seemed too weak. We were hoping to crack a suspected coven of maleficar. But I didn't lie about making him Tranquil. He was on the list. Suspect mages must be culled."

Sigrun shook her head in wonder, and remarked, "You're just making friends all over the place today, aren't you?" She began sorting through the various implements in the room, while Tara read through the rest of the notes.

"What are you looking for?" Catriona asked.

"This man wasn't a mage, but they tried to make him Tranquil all the same. They've done it before, it seems. It looks like sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. I think I'll take these notes, Lily, thank you very much. Maybe, among us—Anders and I... and Petra, Niall... and Jowan— we can figure out what you're doing here. Yes, *Jowan*. He's a Grey Warden now, just like me. He healed Queen Anora, and he's a friend of Queen Bronwyn. He's far beyond your power to hurt now, you conniving bitch. When Bronwyn hears about what you're doing here, she'll shut you down."

Brosca leaned close, and spoke in Lily's ear. "And Jowan's got a new girl, too. Pretty little thing, with black hair. Crazy about him. So all you did was give him a happy ending. Sucks,

doesn't it?"

Ulfa blinked, "You mean the...?" Sigrun gave her a dig in the ribs, and Ulfa snorted. "Yeah, *her*. Crazy about him."

Lily's plump cheeks were red with fear and anger. "The Grey Wardens are fools to try to take on the Chantry! When the Divine hears of this outrage..."

To everyone's surprise, Catriona slapped her face.

"Oh, shut up about the Chantry! You people are disgusting!"

Tara blinked, but went with the flow of events. "When *Bronwyn* hears about this, she'll want to know if the Grand Cleric knows about it, and then..."

"The Grand Cleric knows nothing!" Lily shouted, clutching at her cheek. "Do you think that doddering fool would be trusted with sensitive information? We operate under the direct control of Her Perfection, and if you think..."

Brosca clapped a hand over Lily's mouth. "You're just going to get yourself slapped again, your Holiness, if you go on like that. Look, Tara, we should get out of here. Not that I don't think we can take fifty Templars, but they might take some of us, too, you see."

Tara bit her lip, looking at her loyal friends. She would like to destroy this vile place and set every prisoner free, but there were simply not enough of them to do it.

"Right. We'll have to put this in Bronwyn's hands. At least we've got some evidence to take with us—"

She had quite forgotten that Lily knew how to fight, and was quite ruthless. The dagger lashed out, the tip coming within a hair's-breadth of Tara's throat. Brosca jerked Lily back, and slammed her hand down on the table to make her drop her weapon. Lily gasped, gathering breath to shout for help, and Catriona hit her again. The priest dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Tara blew out a blow, her eyes very, very wide at the near miss. "Well, that was fairly scary." Calming herself, she cast a sleep spell on Lily and the bound Templars. The Wardens moved around the room, gathering up what records they could carry.

While they worked, Brosca asked Catriona. "What's with you and the Chantry, anyway? Most humans like them all right."

Catriona sneered. "Or they pretend to because they're scared. I don't care any more. The Chantry good as killed my brother's wife."

"She was a mage?"

"She was having a baby," Catriona said, her voice caustic. "She was having a hard time, and my brother found an apostate to come and help her. Nobles can have court mages, but there's no real healing for common folk. Anyway, the apostate had her in hand and it looked like it was going to be

all right. Then all of a sudden, this trio of Templars broke down the door and dragged the mage out. Dragged her out right as she was trying to deliver that baby. Killed her, for all I know. My brother begged them to let her finish, and they knocked him down. Knocked me down, too. I kept yelling, "What the matter with you?" and my brother's kids were crying and terrified. The Templars didn't give a shit as long as they could round up an apostate. Anyway, we couldn't do anything. Polla died and the baby died, too. And when my brother applied to the Chantry for help, they turned him down because he was on their list of "mage sympathizers." Bastards. They can all go to Orlais... or the Void. I don't care which."

Tara agreed, but there was no time for more talk. She set fire to all the scrolls and codices that they could not take with them. When they were ashes, it was time to move on.

"Let's get out of here."

With stealth, luck, and a great deal of patience, they managed to get back upstairs without a general alarm being raised. Two more templars were put to sleep, and the Wardens stepped out into the cold at last, with much to think about.

"The Boss'll shut them down," said Brosca. "She doesn't put up with crap like that."

Tara scowled. "Yes, Bronwyn will shut them down, but who's to say they won't set up shop somewhere else? It'll be days before we can get back to the Halt. I wish we could have

cleaned the place out. " They walked on, snow crunching under their boots, and then Tara spoke again.

"One more thing. Don't tell Jowan about finding Lily. I may have to break it to him some day, but I'd rather he thought the Templars tortured her to death than have him know what she really was, and how she played him."

Bronwyn ruled her corner of the kingdom from a grubby stone chamber on a lower floor of Gherlen's Halt. She held court here on a regular basis, and more and more petitioners were finding their way to her: wanting justice in land disputes or family quarrels; wanting her to overrule their local landlords; wanting her opinion about the danger from darkspawn. Often they were simply there to gawk at Queen Bronwyn the Dragonslayer, or to make curious requests.

She had come west to fight, and so had not brought a great deal of luggage with her. The red dress given her by Teagan months before and some jewelry, including her ruby-studded diadem, were her only finery. Over the dress she wore a short capelet of black sable, fastened with her dragon brooch, which kept her warm in the chill of stone walls and floor. Such as she was, she seemed to satisfy her subjects. No one complained about her wearing the same gown, day after day. They wore the same clothes everyday themselves, and expected nothing more of their Queen than that her clothes should be finer than theirs.

When she held court, she had courtiers enough for a western

outpost. A pair of knights, Ser Blayne Faraday and Ser Norrel Haglin; an elven bodyguard in Zevran and a dwarven one in Oghren; her court mages, Anders and Morrigan; and her court minstrel, Leliana. Others made their appearances from time to time: among them human swordsmen and archers; the mysterious Qunari giant, the dignified Dalish, the raffish dwarven rogues, and the handsome young nobleman, Bann Alistair Fitzmaric, over whom all the girls of the country 'round sighed... even the ones who had never seen him for themselves. Above all, there was Scout, ever faithful and alert.

The request made by the fifth petitioner of the day took her a bit by surprise.

"We've come, my lady Queen..." a nervous shepherd croaked. "Me n' Aelflaed have come all the way from Darrowmouthe for you to put a good word on the baby."

Darrowmouthe was a tiny village not five miles away, where the Gherlen River flowed into Lake Calenhad. That said, it probably seemed a very great distance to the poor peasant and his very pregnant wife.

The young couple was gazing at her in hopeful reverence. Bronwyn felt herself blushing, heartily glad that her current Court did not contain the Grand Cleric. Anders leaned over her shoulder, hiding his grin.

"I think they're asking for a blessing," he whispered.

Morrigan murmured, "Oh, for pity's sake. Go on and touch the fool's belly and mumble a few holy words. Test the power of the placebo effect."

Leliana shifted restlessly, but did not openly object. Bronwyn sighed, and beckoned the young mother forward.

"Kneel," growled Ser Blayne.

Awkwardly, the girl knelt, all enormous eyes. Bronwyn leaned forward and lightly touched the distended abdomen.

"Maker turn his gaze on you, Aelflaed. May your child be a joy to you."

There was a ripple of awed whispers through the crowd at the audience. At Bronwyn's gesture, the husband came forward to help his wife to her feet.

"Our thanks, Lady Queen."

It was quite embarrassing.

And ironic, and more than a little painful as well. How could one who had lost her child have the power to bless another? The couple seemed comforted and reassured, however, and Bronwyn wished them well.

And now a deputation from another village was coming forward, not apparently to ask for anything, for to thank Bronwyn for her great condescension in allowing herself to be seen by her loyal subjects; and she was assured that there

were none loyaler than the men before her. She suffered them to recite a perfectly awful poem about her deeds—some exaggerated, and some entirely fictional—and then was entreated to do them the honor of being present at their Wintersend celebration.

Bronwyn declined, citing her duties, but ordered that they be given ten kegs of the best ale to drink her health. From their manifest satisfaction, she wondered if that had been what they were angling for all along.

A few days later, word came that the young woman Aelflaed had given birth to a healthy little boy. As the couple's first two offspring had been stillborn, the credit for the living child was attributed entirely to the power of their Queen. The Wardens chuckled over it, but only Morrigan had the nerve—or the gross insensitivity — to tell Bronwyn outright what people were saying.

There were only the five of them: three men and two dogs. They had started with Adam and Nathaniel but had quickly outpaced the main body of soldiery, and kept moving. They had camps to stay in part of the way: the Legion's camp at the mine in Amaranthine; then Kal'Hirol and Amgarrak. After that, they stuck to the empty Deep Roads as far as they could.

"It'll still be two more days until we reach Gherlen's Halt," Carver said, resigned to rough camping and cold rations.

"I just have this feeling that we need to get to Bronwyn as soon as we can," Jowan said, fidgeting nervously. "She needs to know that the embassy went well. She needs to know that the army's on the march. She might need us, too."

Fenris said nothing, but watched and listened. It had been a most interesting experience, this journey through the Deep Roads. An impressive feat, to clear them of darkspawn. He had been introduced to Senior Warden Astrid, who was extremely busy organizing her... "thaigs" was the word. He had now seen golems with his own eyes, and they were rather more than impressive. He admitted a certain curiosity about Queen Bronwyn, too, and looked forward to seeing someone so admired. A hero, her people called her.

Well, he had seen King Loghain, who also had the name of a hero, and whose reputation had spread even as far north as Tevinter. He was more what Fenris pictured when hearing that word. A formidable man; an intimidating man; a man who had done great deeds in his time. But his were the deeds of man against man, not victories over inhuman monsters from time's abyss.

Carver's tawny mabari sniffed at him, as Fenris lay on his thin blanket, and then trotted way. Fenris would have thought the name "Magister" very unfortunate, except that Carver had told them that these dogs had been retrieved from a real magister's lair. The irony pleased Fenris. These were interesting creatures, too. Legend had it that the Tevinter magisters had bred them, and then the mabarais had rejected them, and defected in a body to the Fereldan barbarians.

They were clever creatures, and the most unswerving of companions. Fenris was beginning to see why Fereldans generally held that dogs were better people than humans, elves, or dwarves.

On the twentieth of Guardian, Bronwyn awakened to a strange, persistent sound. She lay in bed, behind her heavy bed curtains, listening. A rustle? A clicking? It was impossible to guess the time in the darkness. She pushed the bed curtains aside, letting in the tentative grey light.

The noise she had heard was water dripping from the icicles hanging over the top of her window. Little rivulets coursed down the panes. A dense white haze hung in the air, as if the skies had fallen, bringing the clouds down to earth. Sickening dread nearly undid her; then she gritted her teeth and rushed to the window, looking out at the melting snow through the fog. A great deal of it was already gone. Patches of earth lay raw and exposed. The courtyard was black with puddles that looked ankle-deep. She pushed open the window, shattering the remainder of the icicles. The mild air smelled of moist earth.

"No," she whispered, trying to make the weather otherwise by force of will. "No. It's too soon."

Scout, still half-asleep, opened one eye and lazily thumped his tail.

For his benefit, she tried to sound confident. "It's probably

temporary. They have hard frosts here in the mountains as late as Cloudreach. Even if all the snow melts away, we could have a blizzard in Drakonis. We might. It's been known to happen."

The dog regarded her with compassionate brown eyes, got up, and stood close against her, sensing her anxiety. Absently, she rubbed his ears, her mind whirling with the variables.

Where was Loghain? Where was the rest of the army? They might not even have left Denerim yet. That thought was frightening, but she concentrated on calming her pounding heart. This comparatively warm weather might be a fluke. Cold air could blow in from the south later in the day. There was nothing to be done but wait and see. If she had thought it would do any good, she would have prayed to the Lady of the Skies to freeze all the world in solid ice, from the surface down to the very deepest of the Deep Roads.

Thanks to my reviewers: Datenshi, Aoi, Raxiselic, NPC200, JTheClivaz, NIX'S WARDEN, Massgamer45, Suna Chunin, Sizuka2, eternaldead, MisterSO, EpitomyofShyness, Nemrut, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Tirion I, KnightOfHolyLiht, Mike3207, MsBarrows, Chandagnac, Amidamaru88, Chiara Crawfor, almostinsane, Robbie the Phoenix, RakeeshJ4, JackOfBladesX, le-maru, Guest, mr I hate znt nobles kill em, YayForYuffie, jnybot, AD Lewis, mille libri, dragonmactir, amanda weber, Blinded in a bolthole, Costin, Have Socks.

Will Travel, Kamikaze duck, Hypothetical Spiritual Entity, Phygmalion, and Herebedragons66.

To suna chunin: A very interesting suggestion about showing the Orlesian reaction. As you see, I did in this chapter, but obliquely. While Ferelden would be mad to start a war with Orlais, a preemptive attack might be a sound idea if the invasion is inevitable.

Thanks to Massgamer45 for the suggestions about innovative uses for mabari in warfare.

101. With Fire and Sword

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 101: With Fire and Sword

Tara, Brosca, and company arrived the next morning, dripping wet, and full of excited indignation about their adventures. Tara wanted reinforcements, and to be allowed to go back north and destroy the Templar stronghold. After hearing the report, Bronwyn was sympathetic, but unmoved. Tara persisted.

"Yes, I would like to clean out the Aeonar," Bronwyn finally said, exasperated. "But no, I can't right now!"

"I could do it with fifty soldiers!" Tara protested.

"Thirty," Brosca disagreed. "We only need thirty. They've got great stuff there, Boss."

"I daresay," Bronwyn said, sorting through the oddities spread out on her writing table. "What are these?"

"Sending stones, for sending messages."

"Do they work?"

"Er... no. Not really," Tara admitted. "I think they need some special elven magic... or something. If I had time to study them..."

"Time!" Bronwyn thumped one of the stones down. "Time is just what we *don't* have! Maybe you've noticed that the snow is melting. Tara. An Orlesian army will be in Jader in less than ten days! The darkspawn could rise at any minute! However vile and despicable these Chantry folk are, they are not a priority. Besides," she blew out a breath. "Do you really want to start a war between the Wardens and the Chantry?"

Tara just looked at her. Brosca unsuccessfully tried to hide a grin.

"I'll take that as a yes," Bronwyn said dryly. "Not really a good plan at the moment. We have the darkspawn and the Imperial army to fight. I don't want every Templar in Ferelden feeling obligated to stab us in the back."

"They're torturing people, Bronwyn! They're experimenting with the Rite of Tranquility! They want to make perfect slaves!"

"And we'll stop them," Bronwyn said. "But later. Yes, I'm concerned about this, though it appears to me that this is not the Chantry per se, but a radical faction. I don't think that the Divine—or whoever is speaking for her these days—really wants to take on the dwarves."

For that was what the Tranquility experiments seemed to be

directed toward: lyrium mining. In order to have a large labor force at their command, the Chantry would need to make Tranquil miners of non-mages, for there were simply not enough mages to make a go of the project. With sufficient miners, the Chantry could go into mining for themselves and cut out the dwarves entirely. Without the expense of purchasing lyrium from Orzammar, the Chantry would keep thousands—no, possibly millions—in gold for themselves. Their power, already vast, would become irresistible. From the records, it looked like a number of important clergy were implicated to some degree, some of them thinking it was all for the greater good. Criminals, heretics, heathens would be made Tranquil. Instead of being executed, this "merciful alternative" would be instituted, and huge numbers of Tranquil would contribute to the glory of Andraste and her holy Chantry.

"At least you didn't kill anyone," said Bronwyn. "It's even possible they'll just regard it as Warden curiosity when faced with a suspicious hole in the ground."

"Maybe." Brosca was very amused. "Except that Tara made it sort of personal with Jowan's old girlfriend."

"Jowan's *what?*"

Tara shrugged. "There was this girl name Lily. She was an initiate at the Circle. She was the reason—well, part of the reason—that Jowan wanted to get away. She said she didn't want to be a priest. She was all 'Oh, Jowan, take me away from all this!' She and Jowan were going to go live on a farm."

"Oh, *really?*"

"Well, that's what he said at the time. And then he panicked and used blood magic, and then she was all, 'Ewwww! Evil blood mage! Go away!' And Greagoir said she was going to the Aeonar, which makes me think that Greagoir was in on some of this, and I hope not the Tranquility bit. No. Probably not that. He's an old fart with a greatsword up his butt, but I don't think he'd go for Tranquilizing non-mages. I do think, though, that he knew that Lily was a Chantry agent. Had to. She admitted she was trying to uncover a blood mage coven."

"Catriona slapped her face," Brosca said cheerily. "It was beautiful. We told her that Jowan had a new girl who was crazy about him." She saw Bronwyn's expression, and waved her hands. "Hey, Boss, it's true! That little dog he named after his old girlfriend *is* crazy about him. And she's a lot cuter than Chantry Girl."

Bronwyn laughed, "No doubt! Look, We can't go wandering off at the moment. The darkspawn may pop out of the ground anytime, anywhere. We've got to be ready to respond. The Orlesians are on their way, and the weather is going to speed their journey. Let me tell you about some plans I've been working on. I don't think the Aeonar is going anywhere anytime soon. We'll deal with them, I promise you, but later. If we live through this."

Tara made a face. "They're horrible people."

"How does that makes them different from everyone else

we're fighting? Come here." Bronwyn took her friends by their shoulders and made them look out the window. "See the melting snow?"

"We walked through it the whole way, Boss," Brosca pointed out.

"Then you know that whatever is going to happen, will happen soon. Now this is what we're going to do..."

Other eyes noted the sudden change in the weather. It was early in the year, of course, and there would no doubt be frost and snows, but perhaps the thaw would last long enough to allow a window of opportunity. The Empress gave commands: events were set in motion rather earlier than originally planned.

There was a great deal of activity in the Val Royeaux dockyard. While cautious and captains advised against it, the Imperial Grand Admiral moved up the sailing date of his great fleet—and then had to revise it twice. Not having ever actually been a sailor himself, and owing his position to his noble birth, he was not fully aware of the effect of tides and currents on his ships, even when planning a comparatively short voyage, such as the one to Jader. Institutional inertia prevented hasty movement, but the Empress was so eager to launch her campaign that an advance of even a day pleased her.

It proved equally difficult to change the date of the army's departure. The Marquis Bohémond de Mauvoisin-en-Fermin,

Lord of Jader, would march a day earlier, and was instructed to begin making his move through Gherlen's Pass as soon as he arrived in his city. He carried instructions for de Guesclin, the commander of Roc du Chevalier, and also for the Comtesse Coquelicot, the *gouvernante* of the Imperial Princesses at Chateau Solidor. The young ladies were to be moved east to Val Firmin, and from there to Mont-de-Glace, on the frigid shores of the Sundered Sea to the far south. Too many nobles would be on the Imperial Highway; too many who might want to abduct a princess with a claim to the throne.

A spectacular ball celebrated the commencement of Empress Celene's Grand Campaign against the Barbarians. The fairest and bravest from all parts of the empire gathered: bejeweled, bemasked, and bedight in white and gold, the Empress' personal colors. Fountains of wine played; hot-house rose petals drifted down on the company from silken nets attached to the ceiling. An orchestra of lutes, flutes, hautboys, harps, and drums played; the Imperial Choir, of young boys and girls chosen for beauty of voice and person, sang with ethereal delicacy throughout the event. During the midnight supper, professional dancers portrayed the great events of Orlesian history in exquisite mime.

No sight was more glorious than that of the Empress herself. Her hair was covered with a vast, silvery wig of finest shining spidersilk and surmounted by a fantastic diamond crown. Her skin was powdered into shimmering iridescence with mother-of-pearl. She watched the entertainment, she dined, she

danced, looking more like the image of a goddess than a living woman.

Near her sat her younger cousin, the Imperial Prince Florestan, as handsome as he was stupid. Regrettably, it appeared to Celene that she really might have to marry the buffoon herself. Making him her successor was tantamount to flushing the empire down a sewer, since he had no more political sense than a splendid horse. Her other successors were those odious daughters of her least favorite uncle, and Celene found the thought of any of *them* succeeding her distasteful. It appeared that she really might have to produce an infant herself. It was all very awkward and uncivilized, but so it was. Her only other option was to breed Florestan to one of the princesses, keep them locked up, and take possession of any subsequent children herself. Hmmm. Not a bad idea.

Florestan was a biddable lad of pure blood. He was still pouting a little about the loss of Prince Cousland's daughter. The silly boy had actually believed that the rumored union was real. Celene had sent him a consolation gift, which was even now on his lap: a little white pouf of a dog, whose collar spelled out the name "Blanchefleur." Obviously, no Imperial Princess could have been known by such a barbarous name as "Bronwyn." Had the girl actually come to Orlais, she would have been renamed as well as retrained. What an escape! Celene shuddered at the idea of such a person lumbering about her exquisite ball. Florestan apparently followed the Dragonslayer's career with interest, and made sentimental remarks to his most trusted friends, who of course reported

them all to Celene.

Dragonslayer? Andraste's Champion? Celene would put paid to such nonsense, and quickly, too. The Divine was entirely of her mind—of course—after reading the absolute drivel sent to them by the doddering fool known as the Grand Cleric of Ferelden. At the ceremonial blessing of the troops tomorrow, certain individuals would be named anathema to the Chantry. The Grand Cleric was only one of many who would be so condemned. Both she and the usurper Bronwyn would be burned in effigy in the square of the Grand Cathedral, a solemn symbol of their ultimate fate. Others would be pronounced anathema as well: the so-called King Loghain, the Arl of South Reach, and all the clergy and Templars present at the scandalous and impious Denerim conclave. The entire Fereldan Chantry would have to be purged and replaced. The Fereldan Circle of Magi, which had colluded in their actions, would be Annulled. Priests and Templars would march with the army to effect this. It was an Exalted March in substance, though it had been concluded that to declare it in so many words might be a political error.

The music swelled, unbearably rapturous. The Empress surveyed the grandeur of her event, her heart swelling with the music, but unable to smile or frown, lest she crack her painted façade.

Certain unfortunates were not invited to share in the splendor of the evening. Duke Prosper de Montfort, in disgrace since his return from Dog Land, was one such. He was packing for

what promised to be an extended journey abroad.

"I'll take the books, too," he told his steward. "Yes. All of them. And all the honeywine of the year 18 vintage. If I must live in exile, it shall be a *comfortable* exile."

The thaw was welcome. If he was swift, he could be gone from Val Royeaux on the next tide, on his way to his little *pied-à-terre* on the edge of the Vimmark Mountains: Chateau Haine. If he remained too long, the Empress was likely to change her mind; and instead of being forbidden to take part in her glorious campaign, he would be ordered to lead the vanguard, with those behind him ordered to see that he fell in service to the Empire.

The transcript of the Conclave he had brought with him had deeply offended the Empress. It had thus also deeply offended the Divine, who was quite beyond anything but repeating what the Empress told her to say. As for himself, he believed most of it, having met the redoubtable Dragon Queen for himself.

It was, unfortunately, quite impossible to say anything favorable about Queen Bronwyn to Her Imperial Majesty. Queen Bronwyn had committed the unforgivable affront of living when the Empress wanted her dead; of succeeding when the Empress wished her to fail. And now the girl was married to Loghain Mac Tir, whom the Empress detested even more than the King of Nevarra.

Prosper accepted that for the foreseeable future, he was

persona non grata in Orlais.

He would leave tomorrow, on the evening tide. In the afternoon, there was a spectacle that he could not bear to miss. The Empress meant to make a gala entertainment of her enemies. Prosper would not have a place in the seats of honor, but for once he could stand with the rabble. He might even have a better view that way...

The weather that following noon was a disappointment to the organizers of the event. While it continued unseasonably warm, the sky was grey with clouds. Melting snow and ice filled the streets and courts with filthy puddles. The Empress had hoped for blazing sun: a proper omen when her army should march down the Avenue of the Sun, through the Sun Gates, and on to victory.

Well, they would have to make do with what they had. In the broad square in front of the Grand Cathedral, anathema would be pronounced on the enemies of Orlais and the Chantry. A procession was already wending through the streets, with the effigies of the criminals carried on litters. From the distance came the clangor of trumpets and drums heralding their passage, accompanied by ranks of priests bearing censers and Templars bearing swords. Everything proclaimed the solemnity of the occasion. From the sounds, the procession was ascending the hill from the Market District, and approaching the gates piercing the walls of the sprawling cathedral compound.

Up on the steps of the Cathedral, framed by the soaring twin bell towers, sat the Empress and the Divine, each on a golden throne. Behind them was the Cathedral Choir, in full warble. Before them were the stakes and piles of wood for the ritual burning. Ranged around the square were the favored chevaliers and units of the Imperial Guard. The surging, excited mob permitted to witness this event—and they must witness it, in order to spread the word— would prove no danger to her, protected as she was.

Duke Prosper was disguised by a plain hooded cloak and an old, unfashionable mask that had been his maternal grandfather's. He was not the only masked figure among the crowd. Poor nobles, well-to-do merchants and their women, and servants masked in the livery of their masters were among the people today. There were also, no doubt, foreign spies, bards, and cutpurses. Prosper himself had been cautious. Anyone trying to take his coin would have to cut all the way through his clothes to the heavy leather belt around his waist. And for that matter, the coins were on the inside.

Ah! Here were the effigies, the high litters holding them aloft for all to see. The Grand Cleric Muirin's effigy was more generic: a stuffed woman with grey hair and a priest's habit, covered with the loose yellow robe and pointed yellow hat of the condemned heretic. Her name and a list of her crimes was written on a placard, and hung around her neck.

Queen Bronwyn's effigy was far more interesting, and owed quite a bit to his own eye-witness reports. It was dressed in a curious imitation of her red Dragon Armor, the fame of which

had spread even into Orlais. Fastened to her right hand was a wooden sword, painted silver. The arm swung free, in a mockery of swordplay. Her eyes were huge and painted a bright, bright green, giving her a demonic aspect. She too, was wrapped in the loose yellow robe of the condemned, and a yellow pointed hat of shame was pinned to the long dark hair. On the litter was the effigy of her dog, which would be burned with her.

The music reached a climax and ended with a crash, as the procession filed into position in front of the enthroned figures on high. The people cheered the entertainment. The Divine was too feeble to perform the next part of the ceremony, and so that was delegated to the Grand Cleric of Orlais, a fairly young woman, who bowed low to the thrones, and then stepped forward, ready to read from a long beribboned scroll.

A gust of wind flickered across the square, catching the trailing parchment and twisting it almost out of the priest's grasp. Another priest came forward to straighten the document. After some fumbling, the woman began reading.

"Your Perfection, Your Imperial Majesty, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen, brothers and sisters of the Chantry, and all the faithful of Andraste, hear me!

"On this twenty-second day of Pluitanis, in the thirty-first year of the Dragon Age, let the will of the Maker be known! The Chantry, with loving sorrow, today cuts off sinful members from the body of the faithful.

"The so-called Queen of Ferelden, by name Bronwyn Cousland, and the former Grand Cleric of Ferelden, by name Muirin, are declared heretics in thought, word, and deed, for they have conspired with maleficar, and led the foolish and ignorant into grave error. They are proclaimed anathema, by the inspired command of Her Perfection, Beatrix III."

The wind picked up. The lengthy parchment flapped noisily. A few onlookers pulled their cloaks closer about them. In the southwest, dark clouds boiled up from the horizon. Prosper thought he smelled rain. The Grand Cleric raised her voice, shouting in her attempt to make herself heard.

"And thus, by her authority, granted unto her by the Maker himself, by our Blessed Lady Andraste, and by all the holy disciples that followed her in times past, we excommunicate and anathematize them from the faithful congregation of the Maker's Chantry. We condemn them, that they may be tormented, disposed, and delivered over to the righteous punishment deserved by the apostate, the heretic, and the maleficar. May they be cursed, even to the Void, and let them wander the edges of the outer darkness both now and forever more.

"May they be cursed wherever they may be, whether in the house or in the alley, in the woods or in the water, or in the Chantry!

The priests and Templars shouted out the response.

"May they be cursed!"

The priest continued, "May they be cursed in living and dying! May they be cursed in eating and drinking, in being hungry, in being thirsty, in fasting and sleeping, in slumbering, and in sitting, in living, in working, in resting, in praying, and in war."

"May they be cursed!"

"May they be cursed in all the faculties of their bodies! May they be cursed inwardly and outwardly! May he be damned in their mouths, in their breasts, in their hearts, and in all their appurtenances, down to their very bowels!"

"May they be cursed!"

A brief whirlwind swept through the courtyard, catching at hoods and veils. A silk scarf of bright scarlet was snatched from a noblewoman, and flew through the air like a gout of blood. The effigies rocked on their supports. Queen Bronwyn's sword arm rose and fell, the wooden sword laying about her with a a furious clatter. A few drops began sprinkling down on the assemblage. The Divine winced as the wind tugged at her sparkling headdress. The Grand Cleric was nearly screaming now.

"And may the Maker, with all his power, rise up against them, and crush them utterly!"

"May they be cursed!"

"And let none of the faithful offer them friendship or succor, nor offer them shelter or sustenance, for to do so will be to

suffer anathema in their turn!"

"May they be cursed!"

The chorus of priests and Templars had become a bit ragged. The censers were creating a great deal of smoke, and people were coughing, covering their mouths and noses.

Prosper glanced at the Empress and saw that something was wrong. She was blinking rapidly, and had actually put her hand up to her face. If she were not careful, she would smudge her cosmetics. Perhaps something—a bit of grit or dust had got into her eye. The rain was increasing, dampening the plumes of the chevaliers. The Grand Cleric's voice cracked. She cleared it, and shouted the more.

"Let it be known that to slay them is no sin, but rather an act of worship pleasing to the Maker, for he who slays a heretic gains great reward!"

"May they be cursed!"

Definitely ragged now. Even the priests were looking up uneasily at the sky. Flashes in the approaching black clouds portended a great storm. The Grand Cleric lost control of her scroll, and a pair of initiates had to chase after it, and then laboriously roll it up and find the right place again. The crowd grew restless, thinking about wine and hot soup at home. The troops were grim, profoundly displeased at the prospect of marching out of the city in the rain.

"So let it be, in the name of the Maker and our most holy Andraste, this day. And let these simulacrum be destroyed in the eyes of the righteous, as the heretics will be destroyed in both body and soul in the eyes of the Maker!"

Then she began reading a long list of those condemned for conduct "counter to the teachings and spirit of our Maker and his holy Chantry," which began with "Loghain Mac Tir, so-called King of Ferelden, Knight-Commander Greagoir, Anora the Dowager Queen," and which went on for some time, listing most of the Fereldan nobility and clergy. As a less serious crime, it did not carry a penalty of death, but only loss of all titles, confiscation of all property, and relegation to a monastery or convent of the Divine's choice for life. The list of names went on and on, and the crowd grew restless and bored. Some began slipping away. The Grand Cleric noted that she was losing the people's interest, and sped up her reading, wanting to get to the most colorful event. She finally read off the last names: Sisters Rose and Justine of the Denerim Chantry, and signaled for a trumpet call. That earned her renewed attention.

"Executioners! Do your duty!" she ordered.

The executioners set about untying the effigies from the litters, so they could be taken down and fastened to the stakes. Wind tugged at the figures, and the yellow pointed hats tore loose from their pins and whirled away. One was deposited at the feet of the Divine. Her attendants hastily gathered it up. There was a stir and a rising murmur. An executioner was buffeted by a blow from Queen Bronwyn's wooden sword,

and knocked down.

Prosper grimaced with disgust, glad he was not a heathen of old, for if he had cared for omens, he might have advised the Empress that this day was unlucky, and they should all think again. For that matter, he was very, very glad that he was not the courtier who had planned this fiasco.

The wind ripped off the flimsy penitent's robes. and wafted them across the square all the way to the walls, leaving the images of a priest in holy garments and a queen in her armor. Some Templars came forward and lent their aid, clumsily lashing the effigies to the stakes in the teeth of a gale.

"Stop! Stop this!"

Prosper could have sworn he heard someone shout this. In a moment he was certain, for others were taking up the cry, frightened at the manifest displeasure of the heavens.

"Stop! Stop!"

The Empress did not frown—because Celene knew that made wrinkles. However, she gave a quick, peremptory gesture to hurry the the process. One of the executioners lifted a torch fueled with pitch and swamp oil, and prepared to set alight the artistically constructed pile of wood at the feet of Muirin's effigy. A low rumble of thunder echoed off the stones, alarming the crowd. More flashes illuminated the storm clouds.

The wind changed direction; the executioner turned his head to evade the smoke and flames of his own torch. He set fire to the oily-soaked tinder, and it blazed up luridly, fanned by the wind. Bits of burning straw flew into the screaming crowd, or swept up into the darkening sky in a dance of glittering sparks.

The other executioner thrust his own torch into the pile under the effigy of Queen Bronwyn.

And the heavens replied.

The bolt of lightning that struck the Grand Cathedral's east tower was so sudden and brilliant that people did not see it so much as they were momentarily struck blind. The simultaneous crack of thunder, coupled with the roar of the splintered stones as they tumbled, had people clutching their ears against the excruciating pain.

Broken masonry rained down, and was followed immediately by the skies opening, and releasing a downpour that only added to the rising panic. Twelve members of the Cathedral Choir were killed by falling masonry. The Duke and Duchess of Lydes and their servants were crushed by the great bell, bigger than an ogre, which crashed to the pavement and rolled down the Cathedral steps, tolling the doom of those in its path. Other bells, smaller and high-pitched, fell in its wake, bouncing along the walls, ringing out a sweet and terrible music.

A few kept their heads. A pair of quick-witted chevaliers shepherded the Empress and some of her ladies to the safety of the convent on the west side of the compound. Templars made a cordon around the dumbstruck Divine, and one bold man carried her in his arms into the Chapel of the Disciple Havard.

The terrified crowd rushed the gates of the walled compound, the strong trampling the weak. Mothers with babes in arms were knocked down; the old were slammed to the stones or battered against the walls. The gates were too narrow for the press, and a frenzied din rose up, as some officers vainly tried to create order out of chaos. Shrieks, curses, wails, groans, the screams of horses: the noise was beyond belief, and spilled blood spread out on the pavement, mixed with the pitiless rain.

Duke Prosper had the sense not to try for the gates. Instead, he had dodged back, and managed to squeeze past the mob and onto one of the staircases leading up to the guards' walkway at the top of the compound wall.

He was not the only one who had that idea, but they were few enough to succeed. The guards' were too shocked themselves to challenge the presence of those who stood with them in the awful onslaught of the storm, watching the disaster unfold.

The east tower was so compromised that it was crumbling piecemeal, huge stones and great statues collapsing and shattering as they struck the ground below. Huddled, sodden

shapes lay still in the wide square, or twitched in agony. Some people darted out, trying to help the injured; others to steal their valuables. A lady, pinned under masonry, had her gold earrings ripped from her ears and her jeweled mask torn from her face. Children wandered aimlessly, crying for their parents.

Another bolt of lightning struck the Cathedral, this time hitting the gilded sunburst above the huge double doors at the front. It toppled, taking the image of Archon Hessarian with it.

Brooding over the courtyard, the effigies, too drenched to burn, were unharmed, even as the oil pooled at the bottom of the wood was consumed in a sullen haze.

And just as suddenly as the downpour had begun, it ended, leaving the survivors to deal with the consequences. The black clouds passed overhead on their way north, spitting spikes of lightning as they departed. The darkness lifted somewhat, but that did not improve the prospect. People pointed at the horror at the gates. Some pressed their hands over their mouths; some wept. Prosper was not going waste time in useless pity. He glanced briefly at the piled, twisted bodies, and then turned his eyes away.

Instead, he reached under his cloak, hiked up his doublet, and retrieved enough gold for the guards to oblige him by lowering him from the walls in a supply basket attached to pulleys and a rope. Others pleaded to be allowed to go with him, but the basket was small. He closed his ears to misery, and stumbled out of the basket, tripping unceremoniously in a mud puddle.

Picking himself up, he counted himself lucky. If his ship was still afloat, he was leaving as soon as he reached the harbor. The Empress would be looking for someone to blame for spoiling her gala entertainment, even though it was clearly an act of the Maker himself.

"We can't wait for the Orlesians to attack, Your Majesty," Ser Norrel growled. "You let them have the first move, and they're likely to crush us! Why let them dictate the terms of battle? Hit them first and hit them hard!"

There were grunts of agreement around the table. Bronwyn smiled thinly, wondering if Ser Norrel had given exactly this advice to Rendon Howe when he was planning to attack Highever. Probably. It rather prejudiced Bronwyn against him, though in her heart she knew he was making perfect sense.

Bronwyn decided she must take them into her confidence, and quickly. She looked around the table, knowing that in the end that any decision would be her responsibility. Alistair, of course, sat in council with them as a nobleman, a Warden, and a trusted friend. Unfortunately, his response was always to express perfect faith in Bronwyn's judgment.

"Whatever you decide is fine with me!"

Not very helpful, though well meant, she sighed to herself.

Ser Blayne liked and trusted Ser Norrel, and furthermore felt obligated to him for saving the day back in Harvestmere when

the Orlesians attacked under the guise of a mercenary band. It had been an opportunistic probe; one that could well have resulted in the seizure of this vital outpost. He, too, was very much in favor of a preemptive strike.

Ser Norrel had more to say.

"I know you want to do the right thing, Your Majesty. I know you'd like the Orlesians to plainly put themselves in the wrong by attacking first. But by the Maker! They already have, even though by stealth and in disguise. I've fought them since I was a boy, and I learned that Orlesians have no shame. They have no shame," he repeated. "They don't care what anyone thinks of them, because they think we're all dogs under their feet. No offense," he rumbled, with a respectful nod at Scout. "But the truth's the truth. And for that matter, what do we ourselves care what anybody thinks? The Nevarrans are likely to thank us. The Marchers won't care if we kill a hundred thousand Orlesians—any more than they'd care if the Orlesians killed a hundred thousand Fereldans. Did anybody come to our aid back in the Blessed Age? No. To the Void with them, I say! Your only duty is to do what's right for your own kingdom."

He irritated her almost beyond bearing, but that did not mean that what he said was wrong.

She ran her fingers lightly over the rough wood of the desk, thinking.

"It's true," she said, feeling her way through her words. "It's true that the Orlesians are coming. It's also true that we

should do something to knock them off balance. I've already set some things in motion to give them a surprise. However, I don't want to reveal my hand too soon. If we fire the dockyards, the invasion fleet will simply go somewhere else where we are not so well prepared."

"All right, then!" said Ser Norrel, relieved that he was getting somewhere with the girl. He hated having to deal with high-minded sorts. Their ideals only got their soldiers killed. "It's not so much a matter of 'if,' as 'when.' By all means, let the fleet sail into port and burn the ships and the docks together."

"You've already made plans?" Ser Blayne asked.

"Yes," Bronwyn answered. "I have people who will be in a position to destroy the Orlesian fleet—or that part of it that arrives in Jader. I agree that we cannot delay. It would be better if we had a great fleet of our own to set fire to the ships at sea and sink them with the troops they carry, but there is no such fleet. We must let the Orlesians dock, which means that much of what they carry will unload. That is why we will also have to fire the barracks the same night."

Ser Norrel eyes lit up like a child's at Satinalia. "What can my men do to help?"

"You will distract the Orlesians," she said. "They will be so concerned about what is happening here in Gherlen's Pass that they will not be expecting an attack on Jader itself."

Rendon Howe's man, for the first time, was feeling very

pleased about his change of commanders.

"Distract them? How?"

"We are going to take the Rock."

The moon had shrunk down to the last waning crescent, and its light would not betray them. The advance party moved quickly from the west through the hills, out of the Deep Roads opening near Solidor. They came, knowing every inch of the fortress ahead; every postern, every sally port, every guard watch. They knew the location of the commander's office and personal quarters; they knew the location of the guard posts and the armory. All this had been scouted out over the past month by the best spies any army could have: spies who could not be detected. A few of the Awvars knew about Morrigan and Anders' shape-shifting abilities, but they were loyal and close-mouthed, and most soldiers would have put such talk down to heathen superstitions, anyway. And the Awvars were going in with the advance party.

The dwarves were a delicate problem. They were allies of the Wardens, not of the Ferelden Crown; and King Bhelen was not in a state of war with either Orlais or the Chantry. Indeed, the Chantry was possibly Orzammar's most important trading partner. Thus, the dwarves were posted in the Deep Roads for the duration of the operation against Roc du Chevalier. She needed, for the sake of decency, to send some Wardens with them. She had decided on Leliana, who might have scruples about making war on a country she loved, and with

her sent Shale, Asa, and Ulfa as support.

No one else at the Halt was so particular. The Dalish were allies of the Wardens, true; but it was Queen Bronwyn, as sovereign of Ferelden, who had granted them a homeland. And they were perfectly happy to fight both Orlais and the Chantry, as long as there was any chance of winning and living through it. Old grievances ran deep in Dalish blood.

The attack's strategy had been planned meticulously. Tactically, however, it was going to be executed very quickly, to avoid losing the element of surprise. The troops were marshaled or deployed on various pretexts, and would be formed up in the dark after supper. The infiltrators must seize the inner keep and the armory, and they must open the gates. Bronwyn and her people would head for the inner keep; Tara would lead the force against the gates. When the gates were theirs, she would signal—two fireballs into the sky in quick succession—and the main assault would dash across the empty no-man's land, led by Alistair and the knights. The inner defenses of the Rock were formidable, but if key places were invested, it would all be over but the slaughter. The Rock was indeed nearly impregnable against a conventional assault. What Bronwyn had planned was far from ordinary. The Rock had no real defenses against magical attack, because no army—except the Tevinters and the Qunari, both in the far north—used magic.

Nor were there Templars at the Rock. Anders had made sure there was no mistake about that. No one should be able to sense their magic until it was much too late. They knew the

guard schedules. Morrigan had flown up and down repeatedly along the stretch of wall they would climb, memorizing it, and describing it to Bronwyn. There was a low turret to the southwest that was their target. A parapet would be accessible to good climbers. It was not exactly a blind spot, because the Rock was too well-designed to have a real blind spot, but the guard on the parapet would be dealt with first, and in the darkness, no guards posted elsewhere would be able to see them climbing up the wall.

Best of all, no one would hear the clatter of a grappling hook. Not when mages could shape shift into birds, and fly up to the parapet with lengths of strong, light spider-silk rope. Not when they could resume human form and tie the knotted ropes together and to the iron bars conveniently already in place. Bronwyn, a map of the fortress firmly in her head, planned to be up that rope, and surprising the Commander in his bed before the guards changed at midnight.

It was a dark, silent march through the hills. They passed Chateau Solidor, a pale complex of towers to the north. Weapons and armor were muffled to prevent tell-tale clanking. A few soldiers stumbled and fell. No one was hurt; and if they were, Anders was flitting along with them, ready to help as needed. A few wolves howled in the distance, but did not challenge the fifty picked troops moving toward the Rock.

Their destination lay ahead, its bulk silhouetted against the starlight. Eventually they reached the Imperial Highway, and crossed it by twos and threes, slipping into the welcome

blackness of the north side. When they were all gathered once more, Bronwyn led them on until they reached the limits of cover.

The snowmelt was their friend. Instead of contrasting against white, they blended with the sodden earth. The only danger was the squelching when they stepped into thick mud. They slowed, pulling their feet up carefully, lest they be betrayed by the sucking noise.

A formidable ditch surrounded the Roc, but it had little water in it. Crossing it was a hazardous, chancy business, but this, too had been scouted. Once everyone was gathered at the base of the wall, it was time for their shape-shifters to do their part. Morrigan and Anders changed and fluttered up, disappearing from sight. After a dreadful wait, they returned, calm and unruffled.

"We took care of the guard," Anders whispered. "Now give us the ropes."

This took even more time, since while the rope itself was very light, the length involved made it too heavy for even large birds to carry up all at once. Metal clamps would hold sections of the ropes together. The birds carried their burdens up, once, twice, thrice. The rope snaked down to them, and the end was grabbed and clamped down.

Everything they dared leave was left there. Bronwyn deposited her helmet with the rest of the excess baggage, and gripped the rope.

Tara touched her arm, and whispered. "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely. Good luck."

Tara, of course, was simply not strong enough to make the climb herself, but her fighting skills and reliability were essential to the plan. Instead, Ostap would carry her on his back, fastened to him with a harness. For that matter, neither Niall nor Petra could have made the climb, either; and they weighted a great deal more than the slender little elf.

Climbing up a sheer wall was no joke, but it was also not the worst climb Bronwyn had ever undertaken. The ascent of the Tower of Ishal in a the midst of lightning and rain was forever her standard for misery. This still had its unpleasant moments: slick spots along the stones, where the sunlight had not yet melted the ice; getting over the parapet wall without making an unearthly racket; waiting for her brave companions to follow her. The dead guard was shoved to one side, making room for the living.

It seemed to take hours, since only five could be on the rope at a time. She watched the horizon anxiously, wishing that the moon might forget to rise tonight. When Tara and Ostap reached the parapet, Bronwyn and Bustrum leaned over to help haul them up and unfasten the harness.

No one fell. The worst injury was a pinched finger. Bronwyn fixed the plan of the Rock in her mind again, and opened the door to the staircase that would take them down to the main

north-south hall of the Rock.

She drew her sword with a soft hiss of dragonbone, and went to pay a call on Berthold de Guesclin.

Two sentries were unfortunate enough to be on duty. They were mowed down, and shortly thereafter the invaders parted ways. Bronwyn continued on to the commander's quarters and the armory, and Tara to the main gate.

The gate was important; not just because it would admit the main body of the Fereldan soldiery, but because the great horn for the general alarm was located there in the outer courtyard. If they could secure the area, it would be extremely difficult to rouse the castle's defenders. Tara and Brosca, an stoppable team led the charge. They passed through some reception rooms and moved perpendicular to the quarters of some of the lower-ranking officers. Quiet as they were, they were still making noise.

One enterprising Orlesian opened his door, stared out, and then hastily tried to shut it again. A surging mass of people carrying edged weapons shoved the door open and there was a short, messy fight in the cramped chamber. The Orlesian lived long enough to shout for help, and within a few moment, the entire corridor was a battlefield, with half-naked Orlesians bursting through doors, swords in hands, ready to fight to the death. A bitter, ugly fight followed, with casualties on both sides.

One of the defenders tried to run, hoping to alert the

commander. Brosca brought him down with a thrown dagger.

"Come on!" cried Tara. "We've got to get to the gates!"

They ran on, past the chapel, past the upper servants' quarters. A few people heard the noise of running soldiers, and dismissed it as normal. The corridor opened out and after a frightening moment of disorientation, Tara spotted the door that led to the walkway around the gatehouse. This was going to be rough. There were always guards in the outer courtyard.

They did not shout; they gave no warning. The door opened, and quite suddenly the guards saw soldiers running their way, whom, after a moment's bewilderment, they understood were not Orlesian. One man raised a shout.

"We are betrayed! Sound the alarm!"

Tara froze him in place, and Darach put an arrow through his eye. Screams rose up.

Brosca peeled off, heading to the long bronze horn at the angle of the walkway. Bustrum and Soren followed, spotting the Orlesians who were running toward the same goal. They crashed into each other, bodies flying. Bustrum grabbed one of the men, and flung him, headfirst, down into the courtyard. A wild yell was punctuated with a crunch.

Ostap, Quinn, and Maeve fought their way to the gate gears. Maeve tried to move the control lever and could not. She threw her whole weight into her push, and then shouted,

"Quinn! Give me a hand!"

The boy bashed an Orlesian skull with the pommel of his greatsword, and then flung his weapon down to help Maeve. With a grinding, and a clanking, the bars began moving and the gate slowly cracked open.

Soldiers burst out of the courtyard barracks, bellowing curses. Archers fired down into the mass of them, but the Orlesians had archers, too; archers who sensibly sheltered behind doorways and targeted the figures up on the walkway. Tara, running for the parapet above the gate, was knocked backwards by Darach. She looked again, and saw that he had caught an arrow with his left hand—one that would have gone through her throat in another split second. She gave him a grin and ran on. The gate was rising more swiftly now: it was high enough.

Another arrow scraped her ear as it flashed by. Tara shrieked with the sting and the fright, but managed to shoot a blazing fireball up into the night sky. A roar, and she was struck from behind and slammed to the stones. A brawny, gauntleted arm was around her throat, trying to snap her neck. Feet trampled about, and one stepped on her hand. Darach was shouting above her, and the massive, sweat-stinking weight on her back went limp.

"Get him off me!" she wheezed. "I can't breathe!"

The corpse was dragged away and Tara rolled over. She grasped Spellweaver, and flat on her back she shot the

second fireball skywards.

Aeron was perched on the gatehouse of Gherlen's Halt waiting for a signal, while the puzzled troops below fidgeted in their ranks. Only a few torches burned in the main courtyard, as the commanders watched and waited. Everyone knew by now that something big was about to happen. Adaia and Siofranni held hands in a moment of unity. Oghren fingered his axeblade, chuckling in anticipation. Sten was silent and impassive, rather looking forward to a battle on such a scale. It would be extremely interesting to see the inside of an Orlesian fortress. They had long been the power in southern Thedas. Such a structure would fall easily to Qunari cannon. These less civilized folk had no such weapons, but guile and audacity might well bring victory. That and very careful planning.

A fireball lit the sky over Roc du Chevalier. After a long moment, it was followed by another.

"The signal!" bellowed Aeron. "The signal!"

"Open the gates," shouted Ser Blayne. "No noise, men! No talking! Follow me— at the double!"

The crescent moon was about to rise. Golden light spilled over the horizon. There was no time to waste. Dark shapes flitted over the landscape like phantoms: running, running, running toward the Rock. In any other battle, they would have raised a rousing battle cry. Tonight they ran in silence, grimly

purposeful. A human might not be as fast as a horse, but he—or she—could run far more quietly.

Alistair ran with them, a dog on either side. Scout, of course, could not climb stone walls, and so Bronwyn had ordered him to fight with Alistair and Scrapper. The older mabari was not pleased, but liked the human well enough. The pup was young for this, but Scout would teach him the ways of battle—no one better.

Niall and Petra had fallen a little behind. They were far more fit than they had been when they had traveled to Ostagar so many months ago, but they were not on the level of a trained warrior. Petra puffed a little, reflecting on how much regular exercise Grey Wardens got. She stumbled over the dark, uneven ground, and Emrys put out his hand to steady her. They ran on, the opening gate growing larger at every stride.

In the inner Keep, Bronwyn was determined to behead the command center as quickly as possible. She led the way through the maze of corridors, meeting any resistance with such ferocity that nothing long withstood her. At this hour of the night, few guards were up and about. None were outside the armory, which was locked. The key was in the Commander's possession, and with luck, would soon be in Bronwyn's.

They neared the Commander's door. Bronwyn peered around the corner and saw two drowsy guards posted in front of it. She turned to Anders and Morrigan and mouthed the word,

"two," at them, illustrating with a gesture. The two mages nodded to each other and stepped silently out into the hall. Each paralyzed a guard into immobility. Bronwyn dashed out, Aveline at her side, ready to kill them, but the sight of the young Orlesians' terrified, helpless faces stayed her hand. Killing them was tantamount to killing unarmed men... to killing old people or children. She waved Ostap and Bustrum forward and murmured a command to take the guards away, bind them, and gag them.

Once the guards were out of the way, she tried the door. It was locked. She then knocked. Anders looked like he would burst out laughing. Morrigan merely raised her brows.

De Guesclin sounded sleepy. And angry.

"What is it?"

"*Monseigneur*," Bronwyn said respectfully, in her purest accent. "An important message."

A muttered curse. "Nonsense," said de Guesclin, as he turned the lock. "What message?"

Half-naked, and warm from his bed, he opened the door, and stared thunderstruck at the sight of Bronwyn. She slammed the hilt of her sword into his jaw.

"The Rock," she hissed, "is *mine*. That's the message."

De Guesclin fell back, grunting, but lashed out with a bare

foot, trying to trip her. He failed, because Bronwyn was moving already. The Orlesian was frozen in mid-stumble, and then tied to his chair. Bronwyn was congratulating herself on an easy capture when a shrieking, naked elf girl burst out through the bed curtains onto her back, and tried to stab her with a tiny dagger.

The dagger could not penetrate Bronwyn's armor, but it certainly could have cut into unprotected skin. Luckily, Zevran grabbed the girl, and pulled her away, as she kicked and cursed. He laid his knife to her throat, and de Gueslin, shaking off his stupor, cried out, "No! Don't kill her!"

Zevran looked at Bronwyn, who shrugged.

"She'd better drop the dagger and sit down."

De Guesclin's face was a mask of distress. "Mariel! It is useless!"

The girl went slack in Zevran's arms, and promptly burst into tears. Zevran let her go, wary and watchful.

"Sit," Bronwyn ordered.

The girl grimaced, but did as she was bid.

Cathair looked down at her in deep disapproval. "You.. an elf... whore yourself to a shemlen?"

The girl made a quick, rude gesture. "What business is it of yours, painted savage? He is a better man than you!"

A chuckle ran around the room.

"I like her," Zevran remarked.

"So do I." Bronwyn laughed. "I'd make her a Warden, if I didn't think she'd try to knife us in our sleep. Tie her up."

"Here are the keys," said Aveline, rifling de Guesclin's desk.

"This is an act of war!" growled the Orlesian.

"—and the Empress will hear of this outrage," agreed Bronwyn, nodding. "And so forth. The Empress has been making war on me for months. It's time the tables were turned. We'll be back to see to the terms of your imprisonment later. Meanwhile, I have a fortress to secure."

The battle in the courtyard was hot and bloody. The Orlesians were holding their own until a wave of Fereldans crashed through the gateway, ready for a fight and eager for revenge.

Scout reared up, snapping in an Orlesian's face, knocking the man down for Alistair to stab. Seeing that humans had this situation in order, he headed off to find his Bronwyn. She was not far, but he needed to be with her. Scrapper yipped in confusion, but was ordered to stay with Alistair. Scout could do what needed to be done more easily without a puppy trailing behind him.

He trotted up a corridor, ahead of the battle. An Orlesian

shouted at the sight of him and ran forward. Scout turned in the man's direction, considering.

A few minutes later, he was continuing on his way, licking the blood from his jaws.

The dog soon found himself in a room with a lot of strangers trying to hold a gate. A crowd of men were pushing timbers against the gates to bolster them. Bronwyn was on the other side, and her people were slamming something hard against the straining barrier. The situation was untenable. Without giving them a growl of warning, Scout leaped at the man at the back of the defenders. The man screamed as powerful jaws met in his thigh, and he dropped his end of the timber. Distracted, the rest of the men turned and saw their friend screaming and blood streaming from his torn leg. An axe smashed through the gate, and with a loud "*Hurrah!*" the gate gave way, with Bronwyn in the lead, her big sword cutting through enemy flesh. Scout barked happily, and released the current victim. There were many more to fight.

Once the two Fereldan forces met— once they surged throughout the fortress—once the surprised, sleepy, and outnumbered officers had surrendered—well, it was largely all over. Roc du Chevalier was theirs, but not without some loss.

Bronwyn stood in the courtyard in the thin light before dawn, her crimson armor dripping with the blood of unlucky foes, holding the Keening Blade on high, while they cheered her. It was a great moment for Ferelden: an historic moment. Roc du

Chevalier had long been a symbol of the Orlesian threat, and now it was theirs... forever, perhaps, if they could hold it. The attack had been a brilliant success. The soldiers bellowed their "Hurrahs!" and a contingent of northerners raised the Highever salute.

"Highever Hail to Bronwyn, Queen of Ferelden!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

The repeated roars of love, of approval, of loyalty, lifted Bronwyn's spirits like wings—like the blood-red wings of a mighty dragon. Her friends surrounded her, glad in their turn, proud of their accomplishment, pleased at their own daring. Alistair was grinning at her, a more quietly pleased Emrys at his side. The mages were already bending over the hurt and injured. Adaia, beaming, reeking of explosive chemicals, was whispering to Danith. Oghren was draining the flask he always carried. Maeve and Quinn were hugging each other, glad to be alive. Zevran was kissing Tara's dirty hand. Bronwyn looked for each and every one of her Wardens. They were all alive, though some had been badly wounded.

She thought of Loghain's secret map; his cherished dream of Ferelden's proper borders, and she wondered if they might be more than a dream, one day.

Very likely they would never be so lucky again, for it was inevitable that word would leak out about how it had been

accomplished. While the climbing force was sworn to secrecy about the way from the Deep Roads near Chateau Solidor, someone was bound to tell about their shape-shifters. The news might not spread quickly, but spread it would. She put the thought aside. This was a time for rejoicing.

"Now," she shouted, when the cheers died down. "Let's wash off the blood, see to the wounded, and have a good breakfast!"

Thanks to my reviewers: NPC200, RakeeshJ4, KnightOfHolyLight, Nemrut, Guest, mille libri, Chandagnac, Massgamer45, Mike3207, sizuka2, NIX'S WARDEN, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Anon, JakcOfBladesX, Slipfighter, Calliope Sol, le-maru, Kamikaze duck, Raxiselic, almostinsane, Phygmalion, Jenna53, AD Lewis, jnybot, brrt, Herebedragons66, Blinded in a bolthole, dragonmactir, amanda weber, RB23G, Psyche Sinclair, PhantomX0990, and Josie Lange.

102. Spoils of War

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 102: Spoils of War

Roc du Chevalier was a treasure house. It was immense, first of all, and it was full of... stuff.

Even after the Fereldans called themselves victorious, the work was far from done. The prisoners were disarmed and locked in the extensive dungeons. Chevaliers offered their parole, but Bronwyn had no time to deal with them. They, too, were disarmed and locked away.

Several bands of troops searched carefully through the fortress, finding locked rooms, routing out hidden opposition, dealing with the last stands of brave men who would not surrender, and accepting the swords of those who would. There were frightened servants, mostly elves, who feared that the fall of Rock was their own death warrant. These were rounded up, and assured that the terrible Dragon Queen needed maids and cooks just as much as the chevaliers ever had. Some of the servants were sullen; more seemed hopeful. They must be watched, of course, since there might be bards and spies among them. Soldiers were posted throughout the castle. Bronwyn, busy in the outer courtyard, commanded all

this, but delegated the operations to good officers.

She had to make certain their wounded were treated well, first of all.

"Clear out one of the barracks," Bronwyn ordered. "We must have a place for our wounded."

Yes, they really had been lucky. No Wardens were killed, but three had been badly wounded. Darach had been stabbed when rescuing Tara. Anders was anxious that he rest and recover, for he had lost a lot of blood. Nevin had taken an arrow through the throat, and was unable to speak at the moment. Hakan had taken a blow to the back that would have killed him, had he been wearing thinner armor.

Some of their Awvar climbers had been killed in the melee in the inner keep; Bronwyn was sorry for them, but glad not to lose Bustrum and Ostap, whom she had come to rely on. She was considering making them Wardens, but the two men did not seem very eager to Join.

Sten had been injured as well, when he had been felled by a heavy timber. Head wounds could be tricky; Anders was keeping an eye on him. Arranging a cot for him proved impossible. A large pile of straw served instead, covered in blankets and sheepskins. The stoic Qunari did not complain during his periods of consciousness, for this was indeed more satisfactory than squeezing onto a tiny, precarious cot. Or two.

Anders, Petra, and Niall were hard at work, healing the wounded. Bronwyn had insisted that their own people must have precedence, but permitted them to see to the enemy, if their own strength held out. At that, the Orlesians were not so used to seeing magic in any form, and some were too frightened or hostile to allow themselves to be treated by mages. Some Orlesians protested. One weakly tried to lash out with a hidden knife.

"Back, maleficar!" he groaned. The knife dropped from his hand, and his eyes rolled whitely.

"Leave him alone!" cried one his comrades.

"You can't force it on them," Niall said to Anders, shaking his head. "If they'd rather suffer, that's their choice."

Altogether they had lost only twenty of their own, aided by surprise and the fact that most of the garrison had been asleep. Once the gate had been taken, the defenders had largely lost heart. More than two hundred Orlesians had been killed in the assault. Some of the wounded would eventually die as well. More than the dead and wounded, the Orlesians were dazed and stricken at how the despised Dog Lords had defeated them. It was a trick, some muttered. It had to be a trick.

"Of course it was a trick," one more pragmatic soul pointed out. "You can call any clever strategy a trick. Just as winning a duel could be due to a trick of swordsmanship. The Dragon Queen outwitted de Guesclin. We are defeated, all the same."

Fereldan morale was as high as Orlesian morale was low. One of the search parties had found the food stores, and sent the welcome message that Roc du Chevalier had supplies to survive years of seige. There was no reason to stint anyone's rations. Some of the foodstuffs were already being transported to Gherlen's Halt.

Another party, Ser Norrel Haglin's, had located the stronghold's vault, and in it the paychest. Paychests. Lots of them. Gold was heavy, after all, and chests must be small enough that they could be lifted and carried. After coming to have a look, Bronwyn felt she needed to sit down and put her head between her legs. Her companions... her officers... her loyal troops must be rewarded, but afterwards, it was quite the coup. She had not planned to take the Rock for gold, but perhaps she should have. This fortune would fund many more troops and buy a fearsome battery of war machines. Haglin had a pair of clerks adding up the windfall. He was a man more greedy for honor and respect than for gold, so Bronwyn felt she could trust him to give her an accurate total.

She wanted to see more of this place that loomed so large in history and imagination. After the kitchen were raided for food, She set out exploring, accompanied by some of her Wardens.

The Rock was complex, and was more than a mere fortress. There was a handsome chapel, a well-stocked library, comfortable quarters for the junior officers, luxurious accommodations for the elite. There were also some apartments set aside for distinguished guests. A frightened

servant, found hiding in a closet, showed them the best of them, the one called the "Imperial Suite," though the Empress had never come this far east. Emperor Florian, though, had once slept there, they were informed.

The door was unlocked by trembling hands, and flung wide. The servant bowed and preceded her, flicking away dust covers from the magnificent furniture.

"Andraste's nightgown!" muttered Bronwyn. Her exclamation was drowned out by the saltier expressions of her friends.

"Whoa!" Toliver was entranced, and with all sincerity said, "This is even nicer than the Pearl!"

"What's the Pearl?" asked Siofranni.

Oghren chuckled. "Best little whorehouse in Denerim."

Bronwyn cleared her throat, but was terribly tempted to burst out laughing. She had never visited a brothel herself, but this place really did resemble her mental picture of an expensive, decadent house of ill-repute. Perhaps it was all the red velvet. Or the gilded swags. Or the ankle-deep silk carpets. Or the paintings. Her people were already gathering in front of one, whose label evocatively entitled it "Beauty Surprised." Alistair's face was as red as the velvet draperies.

"I think her bottom is too big," said Adaia. "And if she were really surprised from behind like that, she shouldn't be smiling."

In an alcove was a glorious bed. There was a gilded crown-piece in the form of an Orlesian sunburst, anchoring elegant folds of yet more red velvet. The counterpane was worked with gold embroidery and a border of dazzling suns. There were carved and gilded steps rising up to it, since the bed was so absurdly high.

In front of the black marble mantelpiece was a sofa, also covered in red velvet, and piled with an assortment of jewel-colored silk cushions. It was made in a shape Bronwyn had not seen before. While one end rose up in a graceful curve, the other end ended without an arm. Aveline studied it.

"It think that's what my father called a 'fainting sofa,'" she said. "Ladies swoon away on it decoratively, either before or after entertaining their gentlemen friends on it."

"Hmmm," Bronwyn responded, trying to imagine 'entertaining' Loghain on such an object. "Perhaps it's not long enough..."

Zevran sniggered. "No doubt Emperor Florian was far... *shorter* than your impressive king!" Tara elbowed him, grinning.

Over the mantelpiece was another painting, this one of some masked Orlesian courtiers watching naked dancing girls. It was fairly interesting, since the girls were of every race and type, though all were beautiful.

"No Qunaris, though," Brosca observed. "*That* would be interesting."

"It *would* be interesting to meet a female Qunari," said Bronwyn. "Simply looking at naked girls is *not* particularly interesting, however." She turned to the servant.

"I find those pictures vulgar. Remove them."

"Awww!" rose the protest. She ignored it.

"Take them away and replace them with something else. Do you have any tapestries?"

Rather indignantly, the servant drew himself up, and huffed, "This is a castle, and we have *many* tapestries..."

"I'm glad to hear it. Find something pleasant, with everyone wearing *clothes*. Hunting, feasting, music-making. Nothing insulting to Ferelden, either."

Oghren took the servant aside, and Bronwyn could well imagine where the paintings would go. She hardly cared. She could see that they were good art, but she found them distasteful. She did not know if Loghain would feel the same, but if he came here, she did not care to see him looking at any naked woman but herself. Actually... now that she thought of it... all this degeneracy made her think of him more fondly. He might be amused by this... Contemptuous, of course, no question... But amused, too...

"Guess what we found?" Adaia sang out.

An explosion of snickers behind her. A doorway, softened by

draperies led into another room. Colored light shone through a stained-glass window.

A dressing room? And a bathing room. With a bathtub the likes of which she had never seen. This was a fantastical version of Bann Ceorlic's elaborate facilities, translated by the Gods.

The bath was huge, and of carved greenstone, richer than marble. It was set around the rim with onyx and amethyst and great opals. The taps which filled it were gold, in the shape of dragons, designed so water would pour out of their mouths instead of flames. Elaborate rugs softened the floor. A tall, gilt-framed looking glass stood in a corner, reflecting their deplorably raffish state. The wash basin—or might there be a grander name for such a work of art—? sat on a greenstone pedestal, and was of cobalt Tevinter glass. Its taps were gold as well. Bronwyn looked about for a chamberpot or commode of equal gorgeousness, but saw only a throne-like chair nearby.

"Don't tell me..." Tara groaned. "Just don't."

Nonetheless, she approached the gilded object and lifted the hinged, brocaded seat.

"Right."

Bronwyn crowded to see with the rest. Sure enough, under the cushion was another seat, made of greenstone and carved for comfort, and a long, golden pipe leading down into

darkness. Everyone burst out laughing.

The room was ridiculous. The Imperial Suite was ridiculous. It had not been used in twenty years. Everything here, in this farflung outpost of the Orlesian Empire, was infinitely grander than in the Queen's Apartments in Denerim. No wonder the Orlesians thought them savages. No wonder Orlesian peasants were notoriously poor and wretched. It was easy to see where the taxes went.

"Can I piss in it?" asked Oghren, still entranced by the golden pipes.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "If you wait until I am *out of the room*," she agreed. "And if you aim *very carefully*."

"Fair enough."

She stalked out of the bathroom and puzzled over the contents of the rest of the suite: the delicate desk and chair, exquisite works of marquetry; the crystal-shrouded oil lamps; the round table, inlaid with mother of pearl, suitable for private dining. She sighed, and dismissed the servant to find someone to stoke the hot-water boilers.

I feel ashamed to sleep here. I must, nonetheless, to make clear that I claim it by right of conquest.

The noise and giggles from the bathroom were slowly dying down. Bronwyn wondered if every single of her companions had used the facilities. Living together in camps had cured

them of false modesty, but it was not a sight Bronwyn found particularly appealing.

Aveline was still smiling, as she joined Bronwyn, looking up at the plastered ceiling, molded artfully into scrolls and figures.

"You're going to need a maid, to keep up your position in an establishment like this."

"Ha!"

Bronwyn glumly thought Aveline was right. She might even have to have a new gown made. Her people gathered, restless; hoping to find good quarters for themselves.

Tara poked at a bronze and ivory statuette of a court lady. "So. This is the Rock. What are you going to do to celebrate?"

"Well, first of all," Bronwyn considered. "I should clean off all this blood in the Emperor's bath!"

"In *Queen Bronwyn's* bath," corrected Zevran.

"Yes." She laughed. "It is, isn't it?"

Val Royeaux was in turmoil. It was necessary to be very, very discreet. Revered Mother Dorothea had reliable agents of her own, but some of them were known to her rivals in the Chantry. She dared not call any of them to her office. She herself was already under suspicion, due to her opposition to

the event that today had claimed so many lives. It was that lack of favor to which she owed her own safety. She had been present, but back on the west side of the Cathedral among some of the lesser clergy. All of them had escaped unscathed.

A lightning storm in Guardian! They were most unusual, but not unknown. Lightning had struck the cathedral before, though never so disastrously. When the storm clouds had darkened, she had attempted to persuade the Grand Cleric to delay pronouncing anathema on the Fereldan Queen and Grand Cleric. She had been refused, with angry, bitter words. And for that matter, it was impossible to delay the ceremony, and thereby delay the departure of the army. Who could have foreseen such catastrophic weather? Was it a mere happenstance? The wrath of the Maker himself?

Or was it the work of sinister apostate mages, working hand in hand with the Fereldan heretics? That was the explanation given *ex cathedra* by the doddering Divine. It had not convinced many people, but if one repeated a lie often enough—repeated it loudly and often, and ruthlessly suppressed such inconveniences as evidence and facts—such a lie could become the truth. Perhaps it would. Others were whispering of the wrath of the Maker. Had not Andraste herself been Fereldan?

The source of the storm was immaterial. What mattered was the ceremony of anathema itself. Dorothea felt that the Divine's handlers—so very much the creatures of the Empress and the expansionist party—had overreached themselves.

Many had never set foot outside Orlais. For that matter, some had never left Val Royeaux. They could not be made to see that to intertwine Imperial interests with those of the Chantry was to cheapen and discredit the Chantry in the eyes of the rest of Thedas. Her own years in Ferelden had served her well. She had friends in Ferelden: devout clergy who did not deserve the blanket condemnation they had received today.

Nonetheless the army would march; if not today, then tomorrow. The invasion fleet, also, would sail tomorrow, despite the damage the storm had caused it. There was considerable apprehension there. Reports had come of a the sinking of an Orlesian ship by a Nevarran patrol. There had been an explosion: the vessel had caught fire and sank with considerable loss of life. Now it was whispered by Orlesians sailors that the Nevarrans possessed the black powder of the Qunari: a terrifying weapon against which they had no defense. One daring soul had suggested copper-plating the hulls of Imperial ships. Even if the Empress would agree to such a shockingly expensive effort, it would take months, and ruin her plans. No, it must be presumed that this was a fluke; a bizarre happenstance. The fleet *would* sail, and they would destroy the impudent Fereldans. The captains—none of them noble courtiers—did not hide their faces behind masks, and their expressions were grave.

Dorothea had read the conclusions of the Denerim Conclave herself, and had found food for thought in them. Muirin was no mere political careerist, but an honorable priest. So too were many of the names appearing in the document. The sincerity

of Templars like Ser Bryant and Ser Rylock was beyond question, unless one closed one's ears to everything one did not wish to hear.

And Leliana! Wild, repentant Leliana! Dorothea knew her well, and trusted her sincere faith. Dorothea had rescued her from the consequences of her youthful crimes, and Leliana had spent two years as a lay sister in Lothing, perhaps on her way to the priesthood—or perhaps preparing to become a Seeker of Truth. Dorothea herself had given Leliana a Seeker's amulet, hoping that this reformed spirit would someday be a great warrior for the Maker. In a sense, that was exactly what she was. If Leliana believed in Bronwyn's deeds, that carried great weight with Dorothea.

Why should a brave heart not win the way to the Ashes? Whatever else one said about the young Queen of Ferelden, brave she unquestionably was. And the Ashes had effected a cure. Surely that could not be the trick of a demon, but a holy miracle.

Now, she must be brave, too. It would be a shameful thing not to warn her old friends in Ferelden that the Divine had cast them off. She did not care to see Muirin tied to a stake and burned for the amusement of the Empress—and she did not care to trust Muirin's salvation to another direct intervention by the Maker. The Maker did not like having to repeat himself.

"Ser Silas," she said quietly, when the tall Templar passed her, as if by chance, in the north cloister.

"Revered Mother."

Silas Corthwaite was a Fereldan himself, of course; he had fought against Orlais during the Fereldan Rebellion. He had joined the Templars in middle age, finding peace and purpose in the Maker's service. That said, he was appalled at the Divine's sweeping pronouncements, and was very much of her mind about the Denerim conclave.

"I believe there are early snowdrops in the cloister garden," she remarked. "Quite near the sundial."

"Are there indeed?" he remarked. "I must take a moment to admire them."

"Then Maker speed you, my son," said Mother Dorothea, as she passed on.

The Templar bowed, and strode out to the wintry garden. Sure enough, by the sundial, some little white flowers peeped out of the dead grass. He bent to gather a handful, breathed their fugitive fragrance with a slight smile; and then deftly pulled the sealed letter and the travel pass from behind the loose stone in the base of the sundial. In the confusion of the disaster and the army's departure, no one would notice one more Templar on horseback.

Jowan, Carver, and Fenris had been alarmed by the dark smoke rising over Gherlen's Halt. They were bewildered when they found themselves in the midst of a wild celebration. The

gate guards had a keg of ale, and were pretty far gone

"We're Grey Wardens!" Carver shouted. "We have urgent news for the Queen!"

A grizzled crossbowman shoved a tankard at him. "She's at the Rock, laddie! You'll have to track her down there!"

Jowan goggled. "She's a prisoner?"

The soldiers at the gate roared with laughter, and pounded the newcomers on the backs—even Fenris, who did not at all appreciate it. The dogs milled about anxiously.

"Not a *prisoner!* Last night she sneaked up, climbed the wall, and took the Rock right from under the Orlesian's snotty noses! Captured it, she did! Set herself up there and she's looting the place six ways from sundown. Plenty for all, says she, Maker bless her!"

A moment of shocked incomprehension. Then Carver took a drink.

"The smoke?" he asked.

The genial guard shrugged. "Pyres. We didn't lose many, but a lot of Orlesians went to the Maker! And good riddance. Better to burn them than leave them stinking up the place!"

Carver agreed, and then gave Fenris a brief explanation about why the conquest of Roc du Chevalier was a very great deed, and a mighty strategic triumph for Ferelden.

"Now we control Gherlen's Pass, which is the quickest, easiest route into Ferelden. A land force would have to go through the Jader Bay Hills, which are too rugged for cavalry. I've never seen the Rock myself. Come on!"

Cliffs towered on either side, The huge mass of Roc du Chevalier was revealed, bit by bit, as they tramped up the Imperial Highway, past throngs of jubilant soldiers. On their way, the two Wardens ran into people they knew. Jubilant soldiers slapped them on the back, filling in details of the night assault. Wagons rumbled back and forth between the two fortresses. The crowd at the gate of Roc du Chevalier was so dense that it was difficult to shove their way through. Alistair, taking in the sights on the top of the parapet, saw them and gave a shout.

"Let them through! They're Wardens!"

Guards squeezed back some of the milling mass and the three travelers pressed on. Alistair bounded down from the wall, Scrapper behind him, tail wagging.

"Glad to see you!" He was grinning, glowing with victory and some first-class Orlesian wine. Scrapper smelled his littermates and went wild.

Briefly, Jowan introduced their companion. "This is Fenris. Originally from Tevinter. Helped us out on our mission. Thought he'd like to help us fight darkspawn."

"Terrific with a greatsword," Carver added.

"From Tevinter?" Alistair whistled, and then reached out to take Fenris' hand in a warrior's welcome. "You've come a long way to help! Good news from Denerim?"

"Some of it is," Carver said evasively. Bronwyn deserved to be the first to know about his stepfather.

They were led through the immense gate, under unused murder holes, past guard posts now manned by grinning Fereldans. Dalish elves wandered the corridors, critiquing the designs on walls and balustrades. At the end of a long hall loomed an arched opening, which took them into what was probably usually a council chamber, but was today a smallish throne room. On a dais covered with silk, Bronwyn sat enthroned in an x-shaped chair of ebony and ivory, awarding trophies to a line of smug, often tipsy officers. Beside her was a chest full of gold trinkets and fancy dress weapons. A lithe, golden-skinned elf stood to one side, eyes searching the room for danger. Fenris recognized the behavior. After all, he had been a body guard himself. A very pretty elf girl in leather armor was helping the queen sort through the treasure.

Carver grinned. "Everybody gets a prize today?"

Alistair whispered, "Some of the loot is still warm from the original owners' bodies!"

"She's killed all the chevaliers?"

"Of course not! Well... some of them. Anyway, once they surrendered, their arms and armor... and *everything* was her

legitimate booty." He grinned. "She gave me this," He pointed at the new dagger on his belt. Carver whistled softly.

"Rubies on the handle! Nice."

Bronwyn called up the next man, smiling. In her hands was a chased gold goblet.

"—Captain Rhys, take this as a keepsake of the battle, with my thanks for your good service..."

As the man stepped back, bowing, Bronwyn looked up and caught Alistair's wave. She saw Jowan and Carver, and her smile burst forth like sunshine. Fenris was struck by it.

"I'm so glad to see you! Bann Alistair, make sure they have food and drink. I'll speak to them later in my quarters!" She resumed her gift-giving.

"—And now, Captain Valenta, this is for you..."

"That is the Queen?" Fenris said, his eyes on her.

After hearing so much, he was not sure what he had expected. She was not in armor, but in a gown of crimson silk, a ruby-studded diadem on her brow. She looked softer and more beautiful than the dragon-riding hero of Carver's tales, and much more like the noble lady that Arl Nathaniel had described. Even at this distance he had seen the flash of her brilliant green eyes. Her smile, however, had taken him by surprise.

"Yup, that's our Bronwyn," Carver agreed fondly. "Come on. She said something about food."

Fenris knew enough about Wardens by now not to stand between a Warden and a meal.

"Who were those elves?" he asked Jowan. "Are they also Wardens?"

"Tara is. Zevran isn't. He's a former Crow."

Fenris raised his brows. Everyone had heard of the Crows. Zevran, presumably, was a *very* competent bodyguard.

Instead of taking their party down to the mess hall, Alistair led them upstairs, to a sumptuous private parlor, where a feast was laid out. A mob of humans, dwarves, and elves were lounging, drinking, eating, and laughing. A bald man with a scarred head was playing a merry dance on a lute.

"Look!" Alistair shouted, by way of greeting. "It's Carver and Jowan! And... er..."

"Fenris."

"And Fenris!"

A pair of mischievous-faced dwarf girls peered at them over the top of a long table.

"Fenris," said Jowan. "These ladies are Brosca and Sigrun. Fear them."

Out of scale as they were, they looked like menacing children, sitting there with gold cups in their hands. Brosca was wearing a gold neck torque on her head. Sigrun had woven gold beads into her pigtails, They were both very drunk.

"Hi, guys!" Brosca said, eyes glassy. "We just beat the shit out the Orlesians! Some place, huh? Bronwyn's room is fancier than the King of Orzammar's! Or at least my sister's room. Er... are there three of you?"

Carver pulled up a chair on the other side of the table, eyeing the rich food and fragrant wine greedily. "Carver," he said, pointing to himself. "Jowan, and Fenris."

"Do I know you?" Brosca asked, squinting at Fenris.

"No."

"Are you an *Orlesian*?"

"Hardly."

"Oh, good. Try this," she said, pouring a golden liquid from a crystal decanter. "It's Orlesian Honeywine. It's pretty good. More of a kick than you'd expect."

Fenris dutifully tasted it. It was sweeter than he liked, but not unpleasant.

"Come to Join our merry band?" asked Sigrun, with an odd emphasis on the word "Join."

"I was told I could fight with you, even if I were not a Warden."

"Oh, sure," Brosca gestured expansively. "We take all sorts. You'll see sense in time. Try the sausage." She shoved a gold platter at him, laden with delicacies.

Sigrun kissed her fingers. "Umm! So good! Alistair likes that cheese with the blue mold, but I think it's rotten."

"It's not rotten!" Alistair protested. "It's ripe!" He sat down by the cheese plate and snatch up a mouthful. "Ahhh! Bliss!"

Not all the Wardens were indulging themselves. Danith had gone to the hospital barracks to see Darach, and with her were Cathair, Siofranni, Steren, and Nuala. Niall saw them coming through, and went to meet them.

"Darach's sleeping, but I think he'll be fine. He'll need rest and lots of liquids. Come on. I'll show you."

The Fereldan sick were fairly quiet. If they were not sleeping, they were cheerful, at least, and out of pain. Danith would have preferred it if there had been a true Dalish Keeper among them, who might understand her own people better. A few Dalish had been hurt, but Danith had to acknowledge that their human Healers were honorable folk, and treated all alike with care.

As she passed, she spoke to the elves, all of whom she

recognized.

Cathair found a bench, and carried it over to Darach's cot.

"Ah, his color is better," murmured Nuala.

"Should be," remarked a human soldier who lay on the nearest cot. "The Queen came by not long ago with the news that every soldier who fought today is getting three gold sovereigns! Is this a great country or what?"

Danith snorted faintly, and then leaned closer when she noticed Darach's eyelids flutter. He smiled.

"So it is," he whispered. "Might I have some water, *lethallan*? Tara gave me some earlier, but I still thirst."

She lifted a waterskin to his lips carefully, and let him have his fill.

"Niall thinks you will be well soon," she said. She examined his bandaged, and sniffed thoughtfully. The wound was clean.

"And the others?" Darach asked. "Hakan was sore hurt."

"I do not know. We shall visit our fellow Wardens when we leave you," Danith promised, a little ashamed that she needed this reminder. "And we shall see Sten, as well. It is a strange thing, that the elvhen should be hurt in a battle between humans. 'A great country?'" she quoted, glancing at the dozing human. "I do not know. I know that in the ways that matter, it is not our country, nor is Bronwyn our queen."

"But she is our friend," Darach whispered. "and that *does* matter."

"True," Danith sighed. It was, indeed, more or less true.

"A strange state of affairs," agreed Cathair, "but we must do all we can to keep back the Orlesians. If they win, our homeland is as dust. It is fortunate that we are here to do our part. These soldiers will not forget that elves stood with them."

Steren considered that. "Should we send word to Lanaya and Marethari and Merrill? They were waiting for news of darkspawn, but this is as great a danger. The Orlesian army is on the march, according to Zevran."

Danith bit her lip, and then agreed. "Yes, it must be done. The sooner they come, the better."

Bronwyn sent word when she was back in her private quarters. Carver, Jowan, and Fenris were asked to come and report, and she asked Alistair to join them.

"This is Fenris," said Carver. "He joined us in Kirkwall and wanted to fight alongside the Wardens."

Fenris thought the Queen quite as attractive close up as she was at a distance. He had been told of the long scar on her face, but it was faint and not disfiguring. He bowed respectfully, in the Tevinter style.

"Welcome, Fenris," Bronwyn said, not sure what to make of the strange markings. This was clearly no Dalish elf. "We are happy to welcome friends and comrades! You are from Kirkwall, then?"

"No, Your Majesty. I am originally from Tevinter."

A pause. Bronwyn's first thoughts were of Tevinter agents and magisters.

"You're a long way from home."

Jowan stepped in. "Fenris used to be a slave in Tevinter. He escaped and the magister who owned him sent bounty hunters to capture him. Arl Nathaniel couldn't see anyone enslaved. He and Adam—Bann Adam— were impressed with Fenris' skills with a greatsword—"

"—We all were," Carver put in.

"—And he joined our party. He's done good service. Either one of the noblemen would have been glad to have him in their guards, but Fenris thought he'd like to try the Wardens."

Fenris spoke up. "The Wardens," he said, "seem far more comfortable with elves bearing swords."

Bronwyn laughed. "That's true enough!"

They were suitably impressed by the splendor of her quarters—though perhaps not as impressed as people would be who had never visited Nevarra—but Bronwyn did not give them

time to look about them. They sat around the small dining table, and Bronwyn served them wine and little Orlesian cakes flavored with anise and almonds. Carver knew he needed no more wine, but it made giving her his news easier.

"We brought you some letters..."

"I'll read them later. Tell me the news yourself! Is Loghain well? Is he on the march?" She saw the shadow flit across Carver's face. "What happened? Tell me!"

"The Nevarran embassy was a big success," Carve said slowly, "and the King is fine and he coming with three thousand men. But..."

"I don't like that 'but,'" she said. "Tell me the worst straight out. *Then* give me the good news to sweeten it a bit."

"All right. My stepfather Arl Bryland was assassinated eleven days ago."

Bronwyn had expected nearly everything but that. "Cousin Leonas! Dead!"

Jowan saw how it upset Carver, and took up the tale. "It was at your brother's wedding, as they were leaving the Cathedral."

Carver put up a hand, and Jowan was silenced. "A man rushed up holding flowers for my mother. While everyone was distracted, he stabbed the arl in the heart. He died almost

instantly. Bethany couldn't do anything for him."

"Who did it?" Bronwyn demanded, her face terrible.

"A poor half-wit," Carver said heavily. "Trained to strike and babble verses from the Chant of Light afterwards. He was not able to give a sensible name to the one who used him as a catspaw. He was executed, of course. It's clear that the arl was a target because of his pro-mage stance."

"Your poor mother!"

"Yes, she's taken it hard. The arl left her as his regent in South Reach, and provided well for everyone."

Bronwyn frowned, sick at the idea of Cousin Leonas paying such a price for being brave and fair and outspoken. He had been such a kind friend to her and loyal servant of the kingdom. Was it the Chantry? Was it the Orlesians? Or most likely, pro-Orlesian, anti-mage fanatics...

She could not like Habren, but she could not consider this loss without understanding how much more painful it would be for her cousin. "I shall miss him sorely. And how is Habren taking it? To lose her father..."

"I haven't seen her," Carver said. "She wasn't at the funeral. Kane says she's sick. Expecting a child, you see, and not in good shape."

"I've seen her," Jowan spoke up. "Arl Kane called me to see

to her, when he broke the news. She's been very unwell and keeping to her room. Her father's death hit her hard. She became hysterical. I had to give her a calming potion." He pressed his lips together, uncertain if he should say more in front of the others. He looked at Bronwyn in mute appeal.

Bronwyn gave him a nod, understanding that there was more to the story. She would hear it later. Habren would have to wait.

"Well, I'm very sorry for her," she said, trying to be. "Tell me about the embassy. Were the Nevarrans receptive?"

This was a far pleasanter topic, and Carver and Jowan took turns with the tale, giving every detail, from their gruesome voyage, to their meeting with Varric and Fenris in Kirkwall, to the strange Warden prison (which puzzled Bronwyn exceedingly) to the glories of Nevarra.

Next they told of the very concrete evidences of friendship given by the king in gold, ships... and wives.

"Nathaniel is married!" She shrugged, secretly displeased, but resigned. "We suspected it would happen. Tell me all about the lady."

She heard about the beauties of Callista Pentaghost and also about the charms of Carver new sister-in-law, Berenice. Then Carver, returning to the blood and thunder bits he liked best, told her how Jowan had sunk an Orlesian warship on the high seas.

"Andraste's nightgown!" cried Bronwyn, slapping the arm of her inlaid chair. "You didn't!"

Jowan blushed, and grinned like a fool. "I really did."

"Well done! We may need more of those fireballs very soon. Look here— I've been giving rewards all day, and I might as well reward you as well, for you certainly deserve it!"

She got up and rummaged through one of the treasure chests. "Here are some rings. They're quite nice. Let's find some to fit you." She smiled at Fenris' apprehensive expression. "Yes, you too, Fenris."

Bronwyn awakened in her ridiculous red-velvet room. Even the light through the draperies was red. It was a bit like waking in the belly of a monster. She was not alone. In this huge room and this huge bed there was plenty of space for some of her comrades. Aveline and Catriona shared the bed, with Maeve sleeping at the foot. Brosca was snoring on the fainting sofa, and Sigrun and Adaia seemed comfortable enough, wrapped in furs on the soft carpet and an assortment of cushions.

Scout was in the warm spot by the fireplace, tail twitching in doggy dreams.

They had celebrated late and long in the course of the day before, but Bronwyn awakened to a new set of problems, and was still facing the arrival of a large Orlesian army by the beginning of Drakonis. She held the Rock. This was a

magnificent fortress, and she should be able to hold it even against an army of thousands— even against the darkspawn, unless the Archdemon came here itself and shattered it to its foundations. If they worked diligently in the next few days, the sappers and engineers could create more of the defenses that already filled the Gherlen Pass. Was that enough?

She sat up, trying not to wake Catriona, and slipped out of bed, pushing aside the bed curtains, and going to the window to touch the pane and judge the temperature. Still mild. No hard frost had slowed the thaw. A pang of anxiety made her stomach roil. Any day now... any day...

It's only a matter of time.

She could be alone in the sumptuous bathroom, and so went in there and washed her face, brooding. Loghain needed to know about the Rock. He needed to know about a few other things too. Since she knew the route he was taking west, it should not be difficult to send him a message.

Her reflection studied her from the mirror. Bronwyn did not much liking her washed-out appearance. Too much wine; too much stress; too little sleep. Her dreams were turbulent: everything was rushing about as the chess pieces were arranged. Were they her own pieces or another's?

Adaia trailed in, squinting at the colored light from the window. It made a patch of soft red and blue on the floor.

"Is it day already?"

"Afraid so," said Bronwyn. "Another day. We need to get dressed, round up something to eat, and have a talk."

"I can go and have something sent from the kitchens. Do you want it here or in that parlor we found?"

"In the parlor. I want everyone present for a council."

"We don't even get one day off after that big victory?"

"No," Bronwyn laughed, rather rueful. "We celebrated all day yesterday. Now it's time to get back to work!"

"Speaking of getting back to work," said Aveline from the great bed, "I hope there's a laundry in this castle. I'm on my last set of clean smallclothes."

Despite hangovers, minor contusions from the battle, and general sloth, everyone managed to get up, rouse the late sleepers, and collect in the parlor that had been claimed by the Wardens. Only a few were missing: Niall and Petra had stayed overnight at the infirmary, tending the wounded. Anders would have to go down there soon and take his turn. There were non-magical healers among the troops, of course, and they could take over more and more of the care, as the worst of the injuries were healed by magic.

"I'll need to visit our wounded, too," Bronwyn remarked, between spoonfuls of porridge. "I'll go down with you. First, let's make some plans. No getting drunk today, please—or any drunker than absolutely necessary," she added, with a

glance at Oghren. "We need to keep our eyes open. Leliana will be back from her patrol tomorrow, and I want some of you to go back to the lodge. We need to keep a close eye on the Imperial Highway and Jader. I don't think many defenders escaped the fall of the Rock yesterday, but some might have, and they might well have reached Jader by now and reported."

Danith volunteered for this. She preferred the lodge in the forest—and even the cold, long watches in the trees—to the noise and smell of a shemlen fortress. Besides, this place was full of elvhen reduced to servitude: timid, beaten-down, submissive. They made her queasy. All the more reason to admire Adaia's spirit. A pity more city elves were not like her. At least some of the ones in Denerim had slipped away with Marethari and her people. They might still be saved. She glanced at the newcomer Fenris. He intrigued her. Clearly a notable warrior, respected by Carver and Jowan. Not Dalish, but not like a city elf either. And those markings...

"I shall go," she said, "after I, too, visit the wounded. Perhaps Darach will be recovered enough to join us. The clean air would do him good."

Anders was not so sure. "Maybe. As long as he takes it *easy*."

"Furthermore," continued Danith, "one of our number must go and take a message to the rest of the Dalish. We have come to the conclusion that the Orlesians present almost as great a danger to the elvhen as the darkspawn. Many Dalish would

come to help protect our new homeland."

Siofranni said, "I can run fast. I can take a southern route and reach them within a few days."

"Very well," Bronwyn said, with a concerned glance at the elf girl. "There is no question but that they would be welcome. We need all the swords and bows we can get, and the Keepers' magic too."

The Dalish nodded, satisfied that Bronwyn, at least, valued them.

"And there's one more thing," Bronwyn added, leaning back, playing with her golden cup, running over the raised designs with her fingertips. "I really don't like having the Aeonar at our back..."

"Yes!" cried Tara, very pleased.

"...but we can't spare a lot of people to seize it. Based on the notes you brought back, this seems to be a radical faction of the Chantry, with a very unpleasant agenda. While the Chantry might have some legal basis for claiming to have jurisdiction of mages—save your breath, Anders—they have no legal right whatever to experiment upon and to torture to death non-magical subjects of the Fereldan Crown. I don't want to make trouble for the dwarves, but I think if it's explained to their leaders that these people are trying to cut the dwarves out of their lyrium profits, they'll look the other way... or maybe help. So..."

Tara beamed, popping almonds into her mouth. "So?"

"I still can't spare a lot of people for this, but I'll let you go and find Loghain, Tara. Yes. Find Loghain. There's a lot he needs to know, anyway. I'll give you a letter to him. Take your usual party with you—except Darach, of course. Loghain is in the Deep Roads and should be only a few days away—"

"I could go, too," Jowan offered.

"So could I," Carver chimed in, not feeling at all friendly toward "radical factions" of the Chantry.

"Jowan can go," Bronwyn allowed. "But not you, Carver, nor you, Fenris. Jowan can caste Haste and move the party along, but we're likely to need swords very soon. Once Tara finds Loghain, he'll have plenty of men to secure the Aeonar."

The Rock's former commander, Berthold de Guesclin, had been kept under guard in his own quarters, far from his former subordinates. It was unlikely that he could escape, unless he was as brilliant a climber as Bronwyn, had found a way to make a rope from his bedclothes—which might take him half-way down, and then was able jump the rest of the distance and somehow survive. His elf mistress was his only companion. His rooms had been thoroughly searched, and all his letters and documents confiscated and taken to Bronwyn to be studied. The captives' meals were plain, but plentiful, and brought in by loyal Fereldans, who were instructed to tell him nothing. However, de Guesclin did give them a message,

and for that reason, was escorted to the impromptu throne room for an audience. His firebrand lover remained locked up.

"You wish to be ransomed," Bronwyn said, ensconced in the x-shaped chair she fancied, her head leaning on a hand. "You wish to give your parole. The usual terms, I presume: you would swear never again to bear arms against Ferelden, its people, or its rulers."

"I would so swear," de Guesclin declared. "My ransom would not be stinted. My wife will pay you a thousand gold Orlesian sovereigns, to be delivered upon my arrival home. De Guesclins keep their word."

Bronwyn eyed him for some time. De Guesclin was a brave man, but could not help fidgeting a little. Many were in attendance, to witness this conversation and to defend their Queen. The knights, Faraday and Haglin, were there, regarding him like a felon; the handsome young warrior glaring at him was the bastard son of King Maric, the one whom the Empress would have liked to have caught in her net. An armed and smiling elf watched the proceeding from the sidelines, all coiled stillness, placing himself so that any untoward movements by de Guesclin would be met with a dagger in the back. Others, human, elf, and dwarf, ranged about the green-eyed queen. Most were Wardens, he suspected. All looked fairly hostile. Queen Bronwyn, surprisingly, was the least overtly menacing of them.

"I would like to take your word," she finally said. "You are a brave man, and I believe you love your country. It gives me no

pleasure to oppress such. I have had the quality of mercy preached to me in circumstances and by beings that you cannot imagine. For that matter, it would be convenient to be rid of you. A thousand sovereigns would be a pleasant sum. I am not inclined to haggle, though if I were, I believe you could raise far more. I would accept the sum, though I would not release you until the gold was in my possession." She put up a hand to forestall his protests.

"However, such an arrangement presupposes that I *can*, in fact, trust your word. You are flushed, Monseigneur. Do not dare to be indignant. I am a Fereldan, after all. Orlesians invaded us, robbed us, raped us, oppressed us for eighty long years. Do you think we did not notice that you felt no obligation to keep your word to us? Was it not openly declared that to swear falsely to a mere dog of a Fereldan was no dishonor, since *'it was impossible to break faith with an animal?'* My father and grandfather heard those words; my mother and grandmother as well. What say you?"

De Guesclin blew out a breath. "Your Majesty, I am a man of honor. I do not wish to be judged by the actions of people long ago—people who acted in different circumstances, from different motives. You are the daughter of a noble and honorable man. As one noble to another, I wish to see my family once more."

Bronwyn refrained from asking if he intended to take his feisty little elven mistress home with him. She kept looking at him. She would love to get rid of this hungry mob of Orlesians, but

she did not wish to find herself besieged by them immediately afterward.

"You do realize," she said slowly, "that if I ever saw you in arms against me, I would have a perfect right to slay you on the spot as an outlaw and oathbreaker— as a dishonored felon and no true knight? That if opportunity came my way, I would be justified on taking vengeance against your family and dispossessing them of everything they owned?"

She was considering the possibility at least. De Guesclin's heart swelled with hope. He was also perfectly aware that a man like Ser Norrel Haglin would be pleased to hang him from the battlements, simply because he was an Orlesian. And then too, when Loghain arrived, De Guesclin expected his options to diminish alarmingly. He *must* find a way for the Dragon Queen to trust him. And quickly.

"Where is your home?" Bronwyn asked.

"Chateau Corbelin, north of Montsimnard, Majesty."

The green gaze did not flicker. "Do not imagine that the distance to the Orlesian Heartlands would offer your security from my just revenge, Monseigneur," she told him. "I shall consider your petition. You have my leave to go."

The Orlesian bowed, and then retreated to the door, walking backwards, and then bowed again. It was proper Orlesian etiquette, and the courtesy made Bronwyn think better of the man.

Ser Norrel, who now otherwise approved mightily of his young Queen, feared that she might be too soft on their enemies.

"The Orlesians would have hanged us all by now, if we'd lost, you know. Or worse. Even the wounded."

Bronwyn smiled tightly. "They are not our teachers. Why should I copy an Orlesian in anything?"

"Would you really ransom de Guesclin and his chevaliers, Your Majesty?" Ser Blayne asked, worried.

"I might," Bronwyn mused. "eventually. Not with an Orlesian army heading our way, but perhaps eventually. I've stripped the Orlesian officers of their weapons and valuables. They would walk out of here in their smallclothes and shirts." She huffed a laugh. "I *might* let them keep their boots, but no weapons of any kind. Even with the great stores of weapons at Jader, it would be difficult for the Orlesians to rearm them all adequately at short notice. However, I will not let them go without the ransom in hand. Anything else would be absurd. Ransoming over fifty nobles and knights would fill our coffers. I'm more concerned about what to do with the common soldiers. I don't want them packed in the dungeons for months on end. We'll end up with a plague, at the very least. Some of them can be integrated into the troops here."

"But not many," Ser Blayne cautioned her.

"No, not many. Some could be sent inland and resettled in distant Fereldan postings. Most we will simply have to let go.

We might march them to Solidor or Jader, and let them keep walking west."

Ser Norrel could not help pointing out the obvious. "Most of them would set up as bandits."

Bronwyn shrugged. "Then they will be the Orlesians' problem, rather than ours. It's true that many are conscripts, probably hoping for a chance to escape the army altogether. In fact," she considered further, "I might let the commoners keep their *breeches*, so as to be able to blend in." She sighed. "But I really, really, cannot let anyone go now, to swell the army that is coming. It would be madness."

Ser Norrel snorted, "I suppose just killing them all is out of the question?"

"It is not a crime to serve one's country," Bronwyn said, trying not to snap at the man. "And our own people might find slaughtering hundreds of unarmed men like pigs more difficult than you imagine. I'd rather find a use for the Orlesians, if I can trust enough of them to make the effort worthwhile."

Bronwyn's dreams were even more disturbed that night, and the following day, Leliana returned with her party, very concerned as well. The bard's dreams had been wild, frantic, and filled with tireless activity and endless, endless stairs...

And Leliana was not pleased to have been left out of the storming of Roc du Chevalier. She arrived, with Shale

thumping behind; with Ulfa and Asa at her side, with a train of dwarves happy to find a decent meal awaiting them. However, she also arrived to find everything changed, and a great many Orlesians imprisoned. After she and her companions were shown to the Wardens' parlor and had something to eat, she asked outright to speak to Bronwyn privately. Once in the solitude of the Imperial Suite, Leliana's unhappiness burst forth.

"Did you think I would refuse to follow you? Did you think I would tell? Had you already decided to attack when you sent me to the Deep Roads?"

Bronwyn had expected this response, though not to the extent of Leliana's eyes growing red with unshed tears. Still, there was nothing to do but be frank about it.

"Yes, I had planned it for some time. I did not for a moment think you'd betray us, but I did consider the possibility that was unique to you: that you might be put in the painful position of having to cross swords with a friend. Why subject you to that, when I did indeed need someone to keep an eye on the darkspawn?"

Leliana understood, but was still unhappy. She slumped on the red velvet sofa and took a dainty cup of tea from Bronwyn. Eventually she took note of her surroundings.

"How beautiful everything is!" she murmured, stroking the velvet.

"If you want a bath," Bronwyn gestured, rather amused, "go have a look at the bathing facilities in there. We kept the servants on who were assigned to stoke the boilers."

Leliana followed her gesture, and after a moment Bronwyn heard her delighted exclamations.

"I must find my clean clothes!"

"Your things are stowed in the Wardens' parlor. I had them brought over. We have more room here than we had at the Halt, Maker knows. Look here, Leliana. I did what I did to spare you from something that might have hurt you badly. Perhaps it's only putting off the inevitable, but I meant it for the best. The Orlesian army is coming; it's coming soon. By the first of Drakonis it should reach Jader, and then we're in for quite the time. Whatever the darkspawn are doing, the political situation is blowing up. Have you seen Carver or Jowan?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, they're back from a mission to Nevarra, which was quite successful. And... when they were in Denerim, my cousin Arl Bryland was murdered by a fanatic."

Leliana's blue eyes were very wide. "It is certain that it was an Orlesian?"

"No. I might well have been a Chantry conservative. The murderer was apparently an imbecile, trained for the purpose,

who spouted the Chant of Light. The arl was killed in front of his family, and died nearly instantly."

"What a wicked thing!"

"Obviously I agree, but someone must have thought it a righteous act. Surely the Divine has by now seen the results of the Denerim Conclave. Who knows what she made of them?"

"With all the proofs... all the evidence... surely..."

"I don't know," Bronwyn shrugged. "Some people believe only what they find convenient. We must accept that the Divine is our enemy.. or at least those close to her are. And you might as well know where Tara has gone. She's found the Aeonar prison, as I'm sure you've heard. She visited there again, and discovered that they are performing experiments on non-mages: experiments with the Rite of Tranquility, designed to create submissive laborers. The notes she brought back suggest they're interested in lyrium mining, which as you know is something that only dwarves can perform with any degree of safety. If, however, they could create miners who would obey even at the inevitable cost of their lives..."

"I cannot believe that the Divine would consent to this!"

"We found no proof that she knows of it. It might well be the idea of a few lunatics. Nonetheless, they've got control of a base, and we can't allow such things to continue. Tara's gone to join forces with Loghain and shut them down."

"But... how horrible... but..."

"Come on. We'll find someone to clean your armor, and you can have a lovely bath."

Leliana shook her head, baffled. "The darkspawn are restless. I have seen them in my dreams. They are preparing to attack. How can people be so foolish, when such a danger threatens? How can they pretend that nothing has changed, when *everything* has changed? They have Wardens. The Wardens must have warned them."

"Ah, but none of the their Wardens is also their Queen."

Morrigan lay back on the elegant bed, holding up the curious talisman to the red firelight. Her smile was not pleasant.

"What's that?" Anders asked, pouncing onto the bed from the other side. "Ugly thing. Looks Chasind... maybe."

"'Tis not Chasind," Morrigan corrected him coolly.

"'Tis...older."

"Worth anything, do you think?"

"A great deal, to me. I shall never let it leave my possession."

Anders had a certain gleam in his eye, so Morrigan turned her attention to her own pleasures. He was extremely well-trained now, and knew exactly how to satisfy her. Perhaps another woman would grow bored with the same man giving her the

same reliable, intense release, night after night, but Morrigan was not bored. She did not intend to remove her claws from Anders anytime soon. Perhaps never. Flemeth had stipulated that Morrigan was go into hiding *alone* after accomplishing her task, but Morrigan had come to the conclusion that Flemeth simply wished to isolate Morrigan for her own convenience. Morrigan had not the least intention of attempting the difficult parts of her task without a brilliant Healer in attendance, nor without surrounding herself with every comfort possible.

Besides, Anders was not simply her intended Grey Warden mate; nor merely her handsome lover; nor even only the useful Healer she required. He amused her in other ways than in bed, and he understood the importance of decent hygiene. At the moment he smelled pleasantly of soap, oil of bergamot, and sex.

It was all very delightful. Flemeth had scorned luxury and despised comfort, and had tried to inculcate those values in Morrigan. In the past few months, however, Morrigan had discovered that life had better things to offer than preparing root-and-rodent stew to Flemeth's taste and sleeping in a shanty in a swamp, while entertaining a succession of hairy, stinking barbarians at Flemeth's behest.

It was an ugly sort of training, Morrigan now realized; the sort of training a pimp or madam would put a young girl through when breaking her to whoredom. Flemeth wanted Morrigan to perform well enough to seduce any man; and to be so desensitized to other aspects of sex that any man would be exactly the same to her as any other. It was all part of

Flemeth's Great Plan. Luckily for Morrigan, Flemeth was—at least temporarily—dead, and Morrigan had her own plans.

Had Flemeth grasped how much Morrigan's life would change when she sent her to join Bronwyn Cousland? Wise and powerful as Flemeth was, Morrigan suspected that some things—like simple comradeship—were completely beyond her ken. Nor did she grasp the lure of luxury, the joy of appropriating this comfortable bed and well-furnished chamber from the wealthy noble now locked away in the dungeons below.

A flare of white light exploded behind her eyes, fading slowly into a series of ecstatic spasms. Anders relaxed, clutching her close, sweat trickling down his sides. And then he kissed her sweetly, as he always did afterwards. She even condescended to kiss him back. They arranged themselves for sleep, but Morrigan lay awake, thinking, listening to Anders' breathing even out, her hand on the talisman under the pillow. If the object was what she believed it to be, she would hold it close. Had she believed it possible, she would have destroyed it, though she suspected unpleasant things might happen to anyone who tried it. Flemeth would perhaps live again, but not in Morrigan's own lifetime.

The bones of Flemeth's plans remained. Anders' dreams were disturbed of late. All the Wardens felt that darkspawn were near to rising. Eventually the Archdemon would reveal herself, and Bronwyn would march against the horde. Flemeth had expressed considerable confidence in Bronwyn's destiny to stop the Blight. At some point, Morrigan would have to cease

taking her doses of contraceptive tea, if she wished to perform the rite that would make her the mother of a God.

Thanks to my reviewers for your overwhelming response to the last chapter: Nemrut, JTheClivaz, anon, Trevalyan, TironI, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, darksky01, BandGeekNinja, KnightOfHolyLight, RakeeshJ4, NPC200, Massgamer45, Garm88, MayhemPrincess, Acaila, Chiara Crawford, RohanVos, Isala Uthenera, cyko2041, Mike3207, le-maru, arutka2000, Robbie the Phoenix, dragonblade3200, JackOfBladesX, Raxiselic, sizuka2, Reynes, Tangyman, Remenants, Herebedragons66, Psyche Sinclair, Suna Chunin, Jenna53, Phygmalion, Have Socks. Will Travel, Silvescale, Cjonwalrus, The Flying Hobbo, Chandagnac, Blinded in a bolthole, Lexiconnoisseur, AD Lewis, butterflygrl, Halm Vendrella, MsBarrows, mille libri, Costin, dragonmactir, Girl-chama, Promenius, and PhantomX0990.

Thanks to Raxiselic for a wonderful film rec, Lion of the Desert, from which Bronwyn gets her response to Haglin.

An x-shaped chair is also called a Savonarola chair. Google the images under that name. Since there was no Savonarola in Thedas, I used the other term. Or use "inlaid Savonarola chair" to be more precise as to what Bronwyn was using.

For those who do not follow the Dragon Age game. The amulet in Morrigan's possession is a horcrux: Flemeth's horcrux. In DA2, Hawke and company are persuaded to take

it to Kirkwall when they escape from the Blight. A Dalish ritual causes Flemeth to rise again and fly away in her dragon form, obviously to wreak more mischief.

103. Under the Waning Moon

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 103: Under the Waning Moon

Loghain force-marched Maric's Shield, bringing them through the Deep Roads at a fierce pace. It had been a hard march westward, even mostly underground. There were delays and problems at every halt.

Other troops followed in his wake. Nathaniel, in command of the men of Amaranthine as well as shepherding the baggage train, came through in due course. His own experience in the Deep Roads heartened his men. Behind him were Arl Wulffe's troops on their way to the Neck, accompanied by the South Reach contingent, which had been slowed by their reaction to the death of their Arl. The presence of Corbus had done a great deal of good for morale. As far as experience was concerned, he was green as grass; but he was a useful figurehead for officers and rankers to rally around.

Adam Hawke had turned north to Amaranthine early on. Loghain had sent a message to Amaranthine with Hawke that their new little fleet was to sail past the Narrows and take a position off Jader, watching for an Orlesian fleet. When sighted, they were to destroy every ship they possibly could.

He had not sent only a message, however, but fifteen mages as well. Every one of them could cast a fireball. Loghain did not just want the Orlesian fleet stopped: he wanted it destroyed, down to the last splinter of the last lifeboat. Uldred had assured him that the mages could create a mist that would shroud their ships from easy view until they were ready to attack. In addition to fireballs, there were other spells that could destroy ships at sea: there were smashing blows of raw energy that could breach hulls; bolts of lightning that could destroy masts; small storms of ice or fire that could drive ships off course or even incinerate them.

Loghain heard him out, and his message to the ships' captains was explicit. They were to make the best possible use of the mages, and after what Jowan had done on their last voyage, he expected that they would be very interested in heeding his commands. It was a pity Loghain would not be there to see it, but he could only be in one place at a time.

Some mages had also been put on the handful of warships in Denerim, and told to leave for Amaranthine at once. If the ships in Amaranthine had already left for Jader, the rest were to follow and join with the rest of the fleet as soon as possible. Some of the smaller ships would patrol the Narrows and shelter at Kilda: the waters there were too shallow for an Orlesian warship to pursue them. The best way to defeat an Orlesian invasion was to see that it never happened in the first place.

Fergus and Anora, with the Highever troops, headed for the surface at Kal'Hiol, and took the North Road until they could

reached the fork toward Highever. Within three days, they arrived at the castle where Fergus had been born, had grown up; and where his parents, wife and child had perished. It was a bittersweet homecoming in some ways, and yet he arrived full of hope for the future.

Anora had visited Castle Highever years before, and remembered some of it. It was a very old place and needed modern improvements, but it was Fergus' home and he loved it. Despite a great deal of work by willing hands, some of the scars left by Howe's attack remained. Anora considered what could be done to erase them entirely. They walked over every inch of the castle, and Anora listened, amused and tender, to the stories Fergus told about it all. Their own chamber was large and comfortable, and the great hall brought back memories of happier times. The view of the Waking Sea from the tower walk was ravishing. The wind was still cold, but Anora enjoyed leaning into her husband's enticing warmth as he pointed out the sights.

"Look!" Fergus gestured toward the city. "They've made good progress on the harbor wall. Most of the debris from the Alienage is cleared away. Howe was apparently going to build a new, modern keep there, but I can't see spending the money on it."

"I quite agree. Are any elves left at all?" Anora asked.

"A handful of survivors. They've gone to Denerim, I understand, to join the people there. Decimated at the Denerim Alienage is, they'll be glad of them. It's sad, really;

they were a part of Highever that's gone forever."

Anora sympathized, but considered that the old Alienage real estate could be put to good use. New housing was needed in Highever, and she agreed with Bronwyn's view that it should be sound, and not hastily-constructed wattle-and-daub shacks that would blaze like a torch if there were fire in the city. She had some money of her own, and had enjoyed Nathaniel Howe's description of Nevarra, Cumberland, and Kirkwall. A court of terraced houses, made of stone and roofed with slate, would provide handsome, sturdy, and fire-proof shelter. Such housing would attract prosperous merchants and minor nobles. She would make some sketches, and then turn them over to a reputable builder. Renting them would bring needed coin into the Highever treasury...

"Sank it with a fireball?"

"So they said, Highness."

"Well done, by the Maker!"

Word had come to Cumberland about the adventures of their new Fereldan allies. Warden Jowan, the mage, had sunk an Orlesian warship that had pursued the embassy. It was the talk of Kirkwall, and an enterprising woman mercenary and her band made a quick journey along the coast to Cumberland to inform the Crown Prince of Nevarra.

Prince Tylus rewarded them better than they hoped, and then

considered their news. Warden Jowan had not struck him as a mighty warrior, but he was a mage, and a mage's powers were not a matter of brawn. Two fireballs had sunk an Orlesian vessel and driven away the rest. He had received intelligence that the Orlesians were building and equipping an invasion fleet in Val Royeaux. Jader was expanding its docks. The fleet was no doubt intended for Ferelden, but its power could just as easily be turned against Nevarra.

Being young, brave, high-spirited, and wealthy, Prince Tylus was not so much worried by the news as excited by the opportunity. The Cumberland Circle of mages, home to the Grand Enchanter, was here in his own city. Perhaps it was time for the Circle to earn its keep. A raid here, a strike there; they could pick off the stragglers, and go for the big transports...

When he finally reached West Hill on the twentieth, Loghain found the fortress unprepared and the bannorn in confusion. Frandarel had sent some last minute orders that conflicted with his own. Loghain wasted no time, but summoned the people and made his shocking announcement. Frandarel's commands were now without force, for the man himself was no more.

"Bann Frandarel is dead: executed as a traitor to Ferelden. His bannorn of West Hill is henceforth a royal desmesne. We have reason to believe that the Orlesians, with whom Frandarel was in correspondence, have planned an invasion. We will stop them. Afterwards, we will restore the lands of

those honest freeholders unjustly driven from their homes. Stand with me, and we can defeat all who threaten us!"

The effects of Loghain's pronouncement in the wide courtyard of the outer keep at West Hill were both long-term and short-term. People were thunderstruck; not just to hear that their former liege lord was a traitor, but at the idea that the Orlesians, who had savaged this part of Ferelden thirty years before, might be coming back to do it again. Most pledged themselves to support their king, and were comforted and emboldened by his confidence and his legend.

A few people quietly began packing up, determined to flee before the Orlesians were upon them. Some would go south. A group of them decided to travel east to Highever and find a ship to take them to the Free Marches. Among them were some of Frandarel's henchmen: the bailiff, the tax-collector, and one of the under-stewards. They had been complicit in Frandarel's evictions, and knew their days here were numbered. Loghain was busy defending the coast, but in time his eyes would turn in their direction.

Loghain hoped he could put this place in order as soon as possible, since he wanted to head for the border. He had left Bronwyn there, in the cheerless gloom of Gherlen's Halt, dealing with the crisis, watching the Orlesians like a cat at a mousehole. Or, he thought sourly, more like the mouse peering out of her hole, hoping that the cat was not coming her way. Loghain felt that he should be with her. He missed her, anyway.

And two days after his arrival, the weather changed. Loghain took note of the warming air and the melting snow, fading away into the earth. The ice around the shore was cracking and shrinking. Bronwyn thought that the darkspawn would rise with the spring. If spring came early, Ferelden would find itself with two enemies rather than one. They must be ready. The defenses he was putting in place at West Hill would serve against either foe.

Cauthrien was invaluable, as always; organizing the sappers and setting to work instantly on strengthening the fortress. Previous scouting had revealed where landings were possible, and lookouts were posted. Loghain had mages under his own command, notably Uldred himself, and they would show an attacker no mercy.

Along this stretch of coast, all seemed under control, but Loghain had not forgotten that there was one possible pocket of resistance. Before he left to join Bronwyn, he would have to deal with the nest of Templars—possibly hostile, possibly not—at the Aeonar.

Nathaniel emerged from the Deep Roads into weather that was almost spring-like. While it was pleasant not to slog through heavy snows, he was well aware that others might also travel more easily during the thaw. All the more reason to get to West Hill and get to work.

Callista looked at the huge, rambling fortress in the distance, and repressed her sigh.

"It's... big."

"And quite old," Nathaniel told her, doing his best to be cheerful about it. "Parts of it were built by the Tevinters; parts were built by the Alemarri. It's nearly derelict in places, but the king is determined to restore it. We can do our part by fixing up our quarters until they're fit to live in!"

Decrepit as West Hill was, it was a roof over the heads of the troops who came through. Wulffe, his elder son, and Corbus Bryland arrived two days later. The young arl was trying to be brave, though he was suffering from the loss of his father and his separation from his brother. He was homesick, in short, and ashamed of it. Fortunately, he had Killer; and his companions were compassionate men, and understood what it was for a young boy to be away from home for the first time in his life, and in such circumstances.

The nobles took council together, including the boy, though Corbus had the sense to listen quietly.

"There's a little keep at Stonehaven we can use as our headquarters," said Wulffe. "At least it's on the maps."

"It's still there," Loghain assured him. "My scouts found it. It's not large, but there are barns, boathouses, and cottages in the area. And there's quite a large structure not too distant that we might turn to our own use."

Briefly, he confided in them about the location of the Aeonar.

Corbus' eyes widened. The Aeonar! Wasn't it... haunted? Rothgar, in fact, said that aloud.

Loghain had no time for legends. "It's full of Templars, from all accounts, and so anything haunting the place should have been trounced long ago. Given the attitude of much of the Chantry, we might want to be certain that we're not permitting vipers to breed here in the north. Get your men rested, and then we should have a look at the place in a few days."

First they had to scout and scour that section of the coast, looking for weak points. This was labor-intensive work, for the coast here was rippling with little coves and inlets. Nathaniel led some of his soldiers over to some of the nearby islands as well. Meanwhile, Callista made the best of the drafty old fortress. It was interesting as a history lesson, if nothing else. She was very glad she had brought her own sheets.

The twenty-sixth of Guardian was a busy day for the Wardens. As night fell, they began settling down to sleep, with another busy day before them.

Tara was camped in the Deep Roads, two days from West Hill. They had been over this stretch often enough to have found a little side-tunnel, fairly clean; with a crystal-clear pool nearby. The darkness and silence closed in on them, but there were worse places to sleep. Brosca and Sigrun whispered and giggled, and there quieted down at a look from Tara.

"Some people are trying to sleep," Jowan mumbled, his voice

thick, turning on his side away from them, his arm around his tired puppy. He had been crying.

Tara felt for him, but knew he needed time to himself after what she had told him about Lily. Finding out that the girl he loved was an agent of the Chantry, looking to trap a blood mage, had hurt him cruelly. He very likely might *never* have used blood magic, had he not been seduced by Lily's dreams of escape. Tara had forced herself to tell him everything. Being surprised by the real Lily, face to face, would be even crueler than to imagine her suffering or dead.

Awkwardly, she reached out to pat his back. A muffled snuffle was his only response.

At the same moment, Danith and her people were snugly settled in the hunting lodge perched in the hills. The wind blew across the shutters, making them rattle; the fire crackled as soothingly as an old song. Their supper had been particularly good. Geese did not usually fly south so early.

A distant howling made Niall sit up abruptly.

"Only wolves," murmured Maeve. "No problem..."

"Wish I had a mabari," Quinn muttered, half-asleep.

Bronwyn and the bulk of the Wardens spent a hard day helping the sappers bolster the defenses at the mouth of

Gherlen's Pass. Afterwards, there were calls for baths all around, followed by a hearty supper. Most of them were tired, but oddly restless. Bronwyn lingered over a chess game with Alistair; knowing she needed sleep, but reluctant to go to bed. Leliana and Aeron played duets, quietly, but with real pleasure. When they could put it off no longer, they trooped off to their various quarters. Adaia had claimed the red velvet fainting sofa in Brosca's absence.

"It's so pretty," she murmured, nestling down under her silks and furs. "So pretty..."

Siofranni was lying alone in the ruins of a little shrine just off the Green Springs Road, resting her weary feet. A light rain trickled through the bare branches, and down through the stones, but Siofranni had arranged her blanket on a dry spot. She sang softly to herself until sleep took her.

*"vir sulahn'nehn
vir dirthera
vir samahl la numin
vir 'lath sa'vunin..."*

Her voice tailed off into the sighing of the night wind.

Astrid was holding court among the leaders of her new house in Amgarrack, admiring how well her thaigs were coming together. More casteless had come to her. Word was getting out about the opportunities underground, and the Paragon's

lack of prejudice. There was talk that surfacers would find their way to her, in time.

Also satisfactory were her personal quarters. In some ways they closely resembled her old apartments in the Royal Palace of Orzammar. Just today, a mine supervisor had presented her with a remarkably large and beautiful geode, filled with amethyst crystals. A pretty ornament. Her father had given her one very similar on her twelfth birthday. Astrid set it on a shelf where she would see it last when she fell asleep and first thing on awakening. The glow stones were dimmed, and their low light glittered on the crystals in a hypnotizing way.

"Almost like home..."

The Warden compound in Jader was extensive and formed a rough square: barracks and stables on each side, a gated wall protecting the front, and at the far end a tall building containing a refectory, a council chamber, training rooms, and offices. In one office, a candle still burned. Riordan paced back and forth, unable to find any solution to his dilemmas. The Warden-Command in Montsimnard was intransigent: totally in agreement with the First Warden. Riordan's shadow followed along the wall, like a poor petitioner trying to win a hearing. He paused, a unnamed fear scraping along his nerves. He peered out through the window, wondering if Bronwyn, Queen and Warden-Commander of Ferelden, was as troubled as he. At length he decided to turn in, even if he had to drink poppy juice to help him to sleep. It would hardly

be the first time he'd needed it.

A thin crescent moon rose long after midnight. With the exception of a handful on guard duty, the Wardens of Thedas were sound asleep when the earth opened to vomit up the Taint.

The world was black, silhouetted in red. Flames and screams rose together; roofs crumbled; towers toppled. Gibbering darkspawn filled the streets, hacking and trampling bewildered, sleepy merchants and craftsmen. Inside the houses, children were already shrieking. The light of blue crystal shown down on a broad avenue overrun with blighted monsters. Towering over the rest, ogres smashed open doors and windows and shattered makeshift barricades.

A pair of capering, excited genlocks dragged a horrified young woman along, each holding her by an ankle. Her thin linen shift rode up to her throat, exposing white breasts to the indifferent moon. The skin was torn from her back by cobbles and rubble and broken pots. Her mouth was open in a unheard scream, drowned out by the pandemonium swelling the doomed city. Her head struck the corner of a building house and she went limp, her bloody arms trailing over her head.

Head armored in a great horned helmet, a big hurlock bellowed a command. Darkspawn surged forward, a gate crumpling before them like parchment. They rushed in, shrugging off arrows and spears, scrambling over their dying

kin. Another bellow, and an inner door gave way. With a hoarse shout, the darkspawn rushed up marble stairways, hacking at desperate figures in silver armor. The defenders were brave, but hopelessly outnumbered. One was thrown over a gilded balustrade, a brief meteor of courage. Door after door was broken down, silk carpets were dyed crimson with the blood of the slaughtered. More females were surprised; some naked in the act of love, some in innocent sleep, some still wearing jeweled masks and feathered headdresses. They too were dragged away, most precious of all the plunder. A nest would be established in the bowels of the vast edifice. Laundresses and ladies; whores and priests: all were of equal value, since only one thing about them was of any value at all to the darkspawn.

Above them, the Archdemon soared, triumphant. Everything was under her eye. She forged on through the clouds, admiring the work of her minions. The tallest of the towers, a white spire piercing the heavens, might be a focus of resistance. That could not be permitted.

A deep, graceful dive, and a gout of purple flame. The top of the spire exploded into shards, raining down on the shocked defenders. Tiny figures pointed up, squeaking impotently. Another soaring pass, and more of the spire gave way. The mages inside would not be given the opportunity to fight. Alighting on the ruined stump of the spire, talons dug into the masonry, and another jet of flame erupted down into the interior of the structure, setting everything flammable alight: furniture, clothing, flesh. A quick leap from the crumbling

stones, and the thermals caught under powerful wings. The free, ecstatic flight continued, this time to another tall building, highly recognizable despite one of the two great towers lying in ruins. Why should one stand when the other had already fallen?

Nightmare visions shattered into thousands of individual vignettes, an aggregate of horror. Fire leaped from street to street, houses collapsed in towers of sparks. The slaughter rolled on, penetrating quiet courts and wealthy avenues, from humble lodgings to splendid palaces.

Darkspawn burst into a lofty sanctum, fragrant with incense. A knot of priests knelt, sobbing out prayers before a golden image. Between them and the charging darkspawn, a band of determined Templars stood shoulder to shoulder, knowing that they were on their way to the Maker's side. What followed was beyond bearing. The Templars hardly had room to swing a blade, as the mob of darkspawn pressed them back. An ogre shouldered his way inside and knocked the combatants aside. Once a Templar was down, he vanished under a pack of darkspawn. Helmets were knocked away, and daggers sawed at exposed throats. An ogre grabbed one of the Templars and threw him against the wall. Then the gloating darkspawn bounded after the fleeing priests.

"Oh, help me, ser!" screamed one of the women, her habit half torn off. "Don't let them take me!" She clung frantically to a dying Templar, who with his last breath, plunged his sword into her heart.

The darkspawn spread throughout the building, chasing running figures, dragging old women from under their beds, pouncing gleefully on the school children hiding on the other side of the cloister garden.

Another vision superimposed itself: a heavy wooden gate splintering under the blows of an ogre. Darkspawn flooded into a vile slum, packing to bursting with elves. Ten thousand souls dwelt there; ten thousand in a place no bigger than the Denerim Alienage. Decrepit tenements leaned crazily, sometimes touching each other from either side of dirty lanes. It took only a few torches until everything was alight and bright as bright as day. The Alienage's spreading vhenendhal tree crackled like a funeral pyre. Screaming elves rushed out of their burning homes to death from darkspawn blades; other leaped from fifth or sixth story windows, their shabby clothes aflame.

Elsewhere, darkspawn sensed Grey Wardens and pursued them to their compound, drawn by their shared Taint. Here they did not have everything their own way. The Wardens awakened quickly to their peril, organized themselves, and fought back fiercely. Their gates were strong; their defenses well-built. Three riders escaped through a concealed postern, dispersing and riding full-out through the city. Two were run down and slain, but one got away, past the city wall, out into the dark plains, galloping hard to the south along the Imperial Highway. Other refugees were already fleeing the dying city, scattered in frantic ones and twos, clutching a pitiful bundle or a wailing child.

Others fled to the docks, just ahead of the darkspawn. Frantic people waved coin and jewels at terrified sailors, who were already casting off, putting distance between themselves and the monstrous menace charging down on them. A few brave souls leaped into the frigid waters and tried to swim for the retreating vessels. Smaller boats were in danger of being swamped, and in one a boatswain wielded his truncheon, smashing at desperate, groping hands.

Others showed more compassion, and once beyond the darkspawn's ability to leap, ropes and ladders were lowered. A few seamen broke out their bows and fired back at the genlock archers. Heads bobbed in the dark water. Some sank beneath the waves, some were transfixed by darkspawn arrows. One ship could not cast off in time and was overrun by darkspawn. Fire blazed up, and the ship drifted through the harbor, a hazard to every other vessel, as every creature on board perished.

Before long the dockyards were entirely clogged with raging, cackling darkspawn, surging at the water's edge, firing in vain at the disappearing ships. In the crush, many darkspawn were pushed into the water and drowned, for no darkspawn could swim, and none present was capable of reaching out a hand of charity to another.

Too engaged in the sport of destruction to care about a few boats, the Archdemon landed in a broad courtyard, and amused itself by smashing at the greatest of the palaces with its massive tail. Bored with this after a time, it took to the skies again, flaming along streets filled with those trying to

reach the gates. It directed its thoughts at the leaders of the Vanguard.

One of them had found a glorious room within the great palace. On a golden throne sat a beautiful woman. The darkspawn seized on her with a roar of lust, and then dropped her, uninterested, when it apparent that she was already dead, the poisoned wine she had drunk still moist on her rouged lips.

Struggling to awaken from the nightmare, the Wardens' panicked cries echoed through the Deep Roads.

"I hate the fucking Fade," Brosca snarled, clutching her dagger.

Sigrun nodded, shivering. "That was real, wasn't it?"

Ulfa staggered over to the little pool and splashed water on her head. Soren remained huddled under his blanket.

"Sod this," he grunted.

"Maker!" whispered Catriona. "Those poor people!"

"Well, the darkspawn are back," Tara managed shakily, hoping she could hold down her supper. There was bile in her mouth.

Jowan stared at her. "Where *was* that?" Lily sensed his distress and licked his face.

"Wasn't Jader," said Brosca. "I've seen Jader. If the darkspawn are coming, should we go back to Bronwyn?"

Tara thought about it.

"No," she finally said. "If that wasn't Jader—and it wasn't anywhere in Ferelden, I'm sure—then we should go ahead and find Loghain. He doesn't know anything about it, and he needs to."

Astrid awakened from the nightmare and reached immediately for the White Shear on the table by the bed. She took a deep swallow, and pulled herself together.

Sod it! She thought she had more time before the darkspawn crawled out of hiding. What city was that? Minrathous? That would be too good to be true, unfortunately. Better for all of them if the rest of the Blight were to play out far, far away. But weren't the Tevinter priests male?

She took another shot of spirits, drew a deep breath, and slipped on a heavy velvet and leather gown, still thinking. A big, rich city. Richer than Denerim, which was the best Ferelden could boast. On the ocean. Cumberland? Kirkwall? Val Royeaux? Jader?

A grimace. She hoped it wasn't Jader. That would be very inconvenient, if the Blight were still to be on their doorstep. Unpleasantly close to Orzammar. Word had come that the engineers had made good progress on the new barrier doors,

but not that they were actually *done*.

She must look through the new books she had ordered. There were volumes on travel and geography. Some were illustrated. She must see if she recognized anything, and she must do it before the memories faded.

Voices sounded outside her door. Velanna was shrill with stress, as always. Ailill's smooth tenor was rougher than usual. Where were Askil and Falkor. Ah—she heard them now. She must meet with them, and calm them. And then, they would take counsel together.

Leliana's scream split the quiet darkness of the Imperial Suite. Hers was not the only cry. The Grey Wardens fought their way out of the Fade, and knew that their visions were real.

"Maker! Oh, Maker, no! Have mercy!"

Bronwyn fought out of the nightmare, trembling, in a cold sweat. Her own fear threatened to choke her. Beside Leliana, Aveline thrashed wildly, and hit out with her fists. Petra was frantic; Asa frozen with horror, her jaw hanging. Adaia's hysterical shrieks pierced like knives.

"They're all dead! They're all dead!"

A tremendous pounding racketed against the door.

"Your Majesty!" shouted a guard. "Are you under attack?"

Bronwyn struggled to untangle herself from the bed, and fell to the floor, forgetting how high up she was. She hissed with the pain of her twisted ankle, but was grateful to it, for it was bringing her back to reality like a slap to the face or a dousing of cold water. She limped over to Adaia, wailing on the sofa, and yelled, "Wake up!" and then "I'm coming!" to the door. Then she belatedly realized she was only wearing a shift, and snatched up a dressing gown.

Another crash at the door.

Dear Maker, they're trying to break it down.

"Stop!" she yelled. "It's only a nightmare. Don't knock down the door, I'm just behind it!"

Clutching her gown around her, she flung open the door. The guards were wide-eyed and had their weapons unsheathed. Bronwyn forced a smile—a rather sickly one—and tried to calm the situation. It was difficult, since some of her friends were only now emerging from the grip of the nightmare, and sounded like they were being tortured.

"A nightmare," she explained to the guards. "Grey Wardens are subject to horrible nightmares about darkspawn. This last one hit us rather hard, I'm afraid. Send word down to the kitchens to bring us some hot mulled wine. I certainly need it."

Two of the guards exchanged worried looks. Not all soldiers were idiots, and some had put the facts and speculation together.

"Your Majesty," one of them ventured. "This nightmare...or vision... well...are the darkspawn coming?"

Bronwyn blinked. "The darkspawn we saw are far away, in another country. The city we saw them attacking is not in Ferelden."

That she was sure of. She had not recognized the city—a very large rich place, much greater than Denerim—but she had read books and seen many pictures, and so believed she knew what had happened. And Leliana was crying.

More noise was coming from down the corridor. Anders' wild shout of alarm, sleepy moans of distress from the room some of the men were sharing.

"The wine?" she reminded the guards. "And bring plenty of it."

Siofranni awakened, fingers scrabbling at the stones of her shelter. She curled up on herself, her heart pounding.

Only a dream...

Of course it wasn't. Some great shemlen city was burning. Not Denerim, nor any place she knew. Even the poor flat-ears had been slaughtered.

The darkspawn had risen. Her errand was more urgent than ever.

In the hunting lodge in the Jader Bay Hills, the sleeping Wardens had no idea who the people were, but they witnessed their deaths with shock and horror. Maeve nearly choked on her vomit. Quinn staggered up from his blanket, and drew his sword, flailing about until the point stuck in the low wooden rafters. Trying to pull it free brought him more to himself. Danith was sitting up, her eyes fixed on the fading vision.

"Darkspawn!"

The Avvars stationed with them were immediately alarmed, and reached for their weapons.

Danith shouted, "Not here! A distant vision!"

Nuala shook Steren out of his unquiet, groaning sleep.

"Then where?" demanded Bustrum.

"I do not know. A great city was in flames."

Niall shook violently, wracked by conflicting emotions. He had hated his share of Templars, but no one should die like that.

"We have to tell Bronwyn!"

Danith dismissed that impatiently. "She already knows. Every Warden in Thedas must know. What place was that? Is it Jader?"

"I don't think so," said Maeve, scrubbing at her face. "It didn't

sound like Broasca's descriptions."

"Still, perhaps one of them might recognize something. Quinn, find Bronwyn tomorrow morning."

"I don't want to go back to sleep," murmured Nuala.

"None of us do, *lethallan*. Come. Let us sit by the fire."

Bronwyn was relieved that their three wounded comrades were back among the Wardens, and not in the infirmary when those nightmares struck them. Darach was looking sick, and Hakan very pale. Sten was back among them too, still not at full strength, but more comfortably quartered, with a huge bed big enough even for a Qunari. He, of course, had not shared the dream, and had been rather taken aback at the storm that shook the others.

Zevran, too, was unaffected, and was watching everyone, tense and eager to understand what had happened. Morrigan looked about the room with a peculiar glitter in her eye.

At the head of the table in the parlor, Bronwyn watched them all. Some were more affected than others. Fenris sat by Carver, his handsome elven face puzzled and uneasy. Carver had quietly told Bronwyn some of his background, and that the Tevinter warrior had issues with magic and mages. He would have to deal with it, because magic was simply too useful to forego. As to her Wardens, the dwarves did not feel the peculiar horror that some experienced in the despoiling of a

Chantry. Nor had they seen many dwarves killed. Surely that great city had a dwarven quarter. Either they had been attacked before the Wardens turned in for the night, or there were not a great many dwarves in the city; or their quarter was distant from the origin of the attack, and they had heard the sounds of battle and prudently taken to their heels ahead of the advancing horde.

The elves, of course, were deeply horrified at the fate of those thousands of unfortunates in the Alienage. They had been trapped, without a means of escape. And such a huge Alienage, too...

Leliana was still quite distraught. She had said little since awakening, but had drunk the wine Bronwyn gave her, dressed with less than her usual care, and had followed her to this meeting. Bronwyn would give her a little time, but clearly she knew something.

"The darkspawn have risen," Bronwyn said. "We knew it was only a matter of time. For the sake of our companions who are not Wardens, I will say that we saw a great city under attack. Thousands were slain by the darkspawn. The people seemed taken entirely by surprise. There was a Wardens' Compound, and they fought well, but were attacked by overwhelming numbers. How the darkspawn were able to surprise them so completely is a question yet to be answered. They were not delayed or their presence betrayed, it seems, by a delay getting past the city walls."

Alistair cleared his throat. He looked quite awful. "They must

have dug under the walls, the way they got into the Tower of Ishal through the lower levels. If they were far from the Wardens' Compound, the Wardens wouldn't have sensed them. It was a really *big* city, after all."

"Right," agreed Emrys. "They must have been tunneling for months while it was too cold to attack above ground."

Oghren grunted, and poured himself a stiff drink, slopping it on the table. "So... the big question is: where are the buggers?"

Leliana whispered something. Petra, sitting next to her, looked very startled.

"Really?"

Leliana, her eyes hollow with grief, spoke louder.

"Val Royeaux. They have destroyed the Grand Cathedral. So many priests... so many Templars... all dead."

A silence. Anders and Petra looked at each other, consumed with a wicked, vengeful glee. Morrigan noticed it and smiled slyly. She was fortunately sitting on the same side of the table as Leliana and thus not visible to her. Aveline did see it, and scowled a rebuke. Morrigan merely raised her brows, entirely unintimidated.

Brosca asked, "How far away is that?"

Then everyone began talking at once. Bronwyn put up her hand.

"Did you recognize anyone?"

Leliana nodded. Tears trickled down her face.

Bronwyn persisted, trying to control her impatience. "The woman on the throne was the Empress?"

Another nod.

"And you must have recognized some of the other people as well. I am very sorry if some of them were dear to you."

Leliana's distress restrained the people who otherwise would have been drinking to demise of a hated enemy. It restrained Bronwyn, for that matter, who had to consider how the death of the Empress and the destruction of Val Royeaux would change their situation.

As soon as word of the Empress' death was public, the surviving nobles would fight for power. What about the advancing army, coming east? Had it left Val Royeaux? Had it been destroyed? Had the immediate threat to Ferelden been sidetracked by the darkspawn?

Would an Orlais, torn by civil war, breaking up into petty kingdoms, be a good thing for Ferelden? How would the Orlesians fight the threat of the Archdemon? *Could* they?

There were the Wardens, of course. The headquarters of the order in Orlais was at Montsimnard, which was as distant from Val Royeaux as Gwaren from Denerim. They must

already be preparing to defend their country.

What about the Wardens of Jader, the third Warden base in Orlais? Riordan would certainly do his duty. She wished she could speak to him, but very likely he would be gone, even if she were so reckless as to gallop to the city herself.

She continued speaking. "I must ask every one of you to keep quiet about the death of the Empress. It will not help the fight against the darkspawn if every noble in Orlais is busily trying to grab the Imperial crown for himself. Furthermore, while everyone seems to know we see darkspawn in the Fade, allowing people to know the extent of the details might betray Warden secrets."

"We have all dreamed of darkspawn," said Cathair. "This was different. It was... vivid."

"Could it be..." Petra groped for words to express her thought. "Could it be that the Archdemon *wanted* us to see all that?"

"Perhaps as a challenge? A threat? A way to put us in fear? That makes sense," agreed Aveline.

Bronwyn felt they were on to something. "The Archdemon certainly has no particular modesty. It no doubt actually regards itself as a god. All the more reason to be discreet about everything we have seen. Its intentions are malicious. It showed us those dreadful visions to wound us. Why would others in our turn?"

Everyone was nodding seriously, while Bronwyn's mind moved on to three very good claimants to the Orlesian throne, not far away in Chateau Solidor. No one must be allowed to get their hands on them but Bronwyn herself. Once people knew the Empress was dead, they would be the target of a thousand ambitious nobles.

"But we are going to fight the darkspawn, aren't we?" Alistair asked, his face deeply earnest. "It's our duty to fight them wherever they are."

Aeron snorted, "What do we owe the Orlesians? All they've done so far is put a spoke in our wheel."

"That was the Empress," said Adaia. She shrugged, glancing in apology at Leliana, "and some of the Chantry. Those elves in the Alienage didn't do us any harm, nor the poor humans. They're the ones who suffered most."

Her words had some effect on Bronwyn, who felt that the vain, vicious courtiers of Val Royeaux had got a well-deserved comeuppance.

"That's true, Adaia," Bronwyn considered. "But we're now in the same position that Riordan was in when he wanted to help us. If we cross the border to go to the Orlesians' aid, a lot of people will regard that as an invasion. And there are troops in Jader who would come out and challenge us, or at least enough of them to harass our supply lines."

"Maybe we can make the people in Jader understand that

we're there to help them!" Alistair suggested.

Bronwyn smiled at his naïveté, and then reconsidered.

"Let me think about it..."

Riordan saw more of the vision than most. Deep in his poppy-sleep, he watched the horror playing out endlessly until one of his Wardens physically beat him awake. He opened his eyes to a ring of his people ranged around his narrow bed. Fiona was at his side, white-faced but resolute.

"We must go."

There was no question of it whatever. The day was spent in quick preparation, and they were ready to depart just after noon. Riordan himself met with the Marquis' steward and with the Captain of the City Guard.

"Darkspawn have attacked Val Royeaux. There has been a great slaughter. We Wardens are leaving today for Montsimnard, to join with the rest of our order."

Riordan was well-respected in Jader, or they would have laughed him to scorn. They had received no such message. Still, Wardens had their ways of knowing things.

"None of you will stay in the Compound?" the steward asked.

"No. We must all go. Everyone is needed. And we are not the only Grey Wardens in Thedas. If we fall, there are others to

continue the fight."

They were shaken already. Riordan saw no point in adding to their fears or creating a panic. He decided not to tell them that the Empress was already dead.

Tara and her party arrived in West Hill two days later, hollowed-eyed and grim. They were recognized at once, and the guards knew that Loghain would want to see them right away.

"Grey Wardens!"

"Brosca and I can handle the report," Tara told the rest. "Go find something to eat."

Loghain was sparring with Cauthrien when he heard them announced. Cauthrien lowered her sword, blowing out a deep breath, and wiped her face. A servant handed Loghain a towel.

Once the sweat was out of his eyes, he saw that the Wardens were Tara and Brosca, whom he particularly liked. He was even about to smile when he saw the looks on their faces.

"What news?"

Neither of them was much for courtly ceremony, and they scandalized nearly everyone present, first by not bowing, and

then by addressing the king by his name.

"Plenty of news, Loghain. Some good... some not so good. Is there somewhere we can go?"

"And we're *hungry*," Brosca grunted. Tara turned to scowl at her and the dwarf shrugged.

"What? Well, we are."

"Actually, we are," Tara admitted. "*Really* hungry."

Loghain snorted. "Follow me." He jerked his head at Cauthrien, and she took the hint, walking along with them to the chamber he had taken over as his temporary office.

He and his second were a bit peckish themselves after their workout, so they joined the Wardens as they gobbled bread and cheese and slurped mutton broth. For a brief time, there was no place for lesser concerns. Loghain and Cauthrien were finished long before the Warden, and watched them with some degree of amusement.

Brosca burped her thanks, and said, "Tell him about the darkspawn first, and then give him the good news last."

"Darkspawn?" His attention was instantly riveted.

"No place close," Tara assured him, reluctant to speak of it. "We saw them in the Fade... you know..." She glanced uneasily at Cauthrien.

"Yes," Loghain said impatiently. "I've awakened my own wife from those visions often enough. Grey Wardens can see darkspawn when in the Fade. What did you see? Have they risen?"

"Have they ever!" Brosca exclaimed. "Two nights ago."

"Where?"

Tara shook her head. "We're not sure, but it can't be anywhere in Ferelden, unless you've got this huge city hidden somewhere that we've never seen."

Loghain visibly relaxed. "They were attacking a city? Any guesses which one?"

"Well, it's not Orzammar, not Denerim—"

"—and not Jader," Brosca put in. "I've been to Jader. This was even fancier."

Loghain's heart leaped with hope. Tara saw it in his face and frowned.

"Wherever it was, a lot of innocent people were killed—poor people, old people, little children, humans, and dwarves and elves— and lot of helpless women were carried off to be raped and made into Broodmothers," she said, her voice hard. "So it would really upset me a *lot* if anybody made a big show of being *glad* about it."

Brosca raised her brows at Loghain, and said. "You got any

pictures of different cities? We know it's by the sea, because people were swimming to boats to get away..."

Tara said abruptly, "Anybody got a picture of the Empress of Orlais?" She looked up at Loghain. "We're just simple Wardens, and we've never traveled much—"

Brosca protested, "—I've traveled! I've been to *Jader!*"

"—But maybe we might recognize some people. We saw a really big Chantry, too."

Cauthrien asked, "Did it have two towers?"

"Hard to tell." Brosca shrugged, shoving her empty bowl away. "It was pretty wrecked. That sodding Archdemon is *big.*"

"I think I have some books for you to look at." Loghain got up and searched through a bookshelf behind him. He thumbed briefly through a few, and then opened one and laid it out on his desk, displaying a woodcut of the Grand Cathedral.

He asked, "Does this look familiar?"

"Maybe," Tara ventured, "but it was the dead of night and everything was on fire and all... messed up."

"You got a picture of a tall white tower?" Brosca asked. "Kind of pointy?"

Cauthrien looked at Loghain, "The White Spire?" she

wondered aloud.

The White Spire was the home of the Orlesian Circle of Mages. It was a unique, distinctive building.

Loghain advanced a few pages. "Is this what you saw?"

"Yeah," Brosca agreed. "That's it, but it's a lot shorter now."

Cauthrien blew out a breath. "The darkspawn attacked Val Royeaux..."

Tara shook her head. "The darkspawn *own* Val Royeaux." She lowered her voice. "You wouldn't believe what they did in the Alienage..."

Cauthrien quickly went through the diplomatic archives, and pulled out a flat, rectangular object. It was the official portrait of the Empress, painted some five years before.

"That's her," Brosca said flatly. "She's bought the mine."

Loghain scowled his incomprehension.

"Kacked it, snuffed it, bit the dust, embraced the Stone, cashed in her chips, bid the long goodbye, bedded down for the Big Sleep—"

Tara elbowed her. "Don't!" She said to Loghain. "—Gone to the right hand of the Maker. Maybe. She didn't let the darkspawn get her. She put on her crown, sat on her throne, and drank poison. I've seen worse. She was smart."

Loghain sat back in his chair, trying to control his face. That bitch Celene was dead! That thorn in his side, that mortal enemy of everything he held dear... He wanted to cheer, but did not. Naturally the sight of darkspawn ravaging a city would be traumatic to these decent young women. Well...decent young *woman*. Tara was decent, anyway. Brosca was too tough to be traumatized by anything short of ingestion by the Archdemon. They were loyal, brave girls, and he would not wound them by making light of horrors.

On the other hand, he felt like dancing on the Empress' tomb. Not, it seemed, that she would have one. He quizzed them at length about everything they had dreamed.

"We can't tell you everything that happened," Tara said. "We can only tell you what the darkspawn saw. Probably only what the Archdemon *wanted* us to see. We don't know about people who succeeded in hiding or running away. Surely there must be people in cellars or attics or secret rooms. There are always survivors, even in the worst massacres."

"Not *a/ways*," Loghain contradicted. "Usually, though, I grant you. Bronwyn was with you at the time? She couldn't recognize the city?"

"No. We were in the Deep Roads at the time. We did get the news about Arl Bryland from Carver and Jowan before we set out to find you. Bronwyn wanted us to bring you her news."

"And to smackdown the Aeonar," Brosca put in. "She wants that done."

Their report of their findings from their brief raid on the Aeonar were concise but disturbing. Loghain agreed that the Chantry could not be permitted to "experiment" on Fereldan subjects. The place must be cleared out and the clergy sent on their way... or eliminated. Once empty, Wulffe's men could use it. Maybe more of the troops. They would have to determine just how deep it went.

Yes, the darkspawn were a concern, but they were far away, and this nearby threat must be dealt with at once.

"And how is the Queen?" asked Loghain, his voice softening almost imperceptibly.

Tara was unsure if Bronwyn had written about the miscarriage, and felt uneasy about telling Loghain something so personal without her friend's permission.

"Working really hard. She went through kind of a rough patch last month, but of course she's pretty pumped now, since she took the Rock."

"She took... what?"

"Roc du Chevalier. She gobbled it right up on the twentieth. Anders and Morrigan had completed scouted it out, and we climbed up one of the towers after midnight—well, I didn't climb—Bronwyn strapped me onto Ostap's back—"

"Sissy," Brosca muttered, grinning.

"—anyway, we climbed up and we got the gate open, and Alistair and the rest charged in and it's ours. Hers. Yours."

A silence.

"Whoa, big guy!" Brosca laughed. "You should see the look on your face!"

Thanks to my reviewers: le-maru, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Serena R. Snape, KnightOfHolyLight, Vibrolux61, AD Lewis, Tirion I, sizuka2, Alex, Robbie the Phoenix, Nemrut, Aeonir, darksky01, Guest, Mike3207, Girl-chama, Phygmalion, Raxiselic, Jenna53, RB23G, Halm Vendrela, Blidned in a bolthole, EpitomyofShyness, JackOfBladesX, Ravus, trevalyan, Konous the grey, dargonmactir, jnybot, DjinniGenie, Persephone Chiara, anon, Herebedragons66, MsBarrows, mille libri, and Josie Lange.

To anon: Your point about the Dalish and their concept of political economy is a reasonable one. They apparently use a tribal barter system. I don't think Danith has really considered economic issues of a possible Dalish homeland at all. It would be reasonable to suppose that Arlathan and the Dales did have a national economy of some sort, but that's another lost piece of their culture.

To Ravus: Bronwyn never thought of Caridin as a golem. He was a person inside a golem, since unlike all the others she had met up to that time, he could speak and new his name

and past.

104. An Empire Crumbles

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 104: An Empire Crumbles

Loghain felt ten years younger. He made the two crazy girls tell him every detail of the successful assault on the Orlesian stronghold. The role of magic in the attack was a major one, and Loghain gave it due credit. Bronwyn had used it very, very cleverly: not mere blunt-instrument spellcasting, but incorporating skills and talents that none would even think to guard against. His puppy Amber sensed his mood and ran around his quarters, and then stood looking at him, head cocked, panting happily.

Bronwyn had done well. She had done wonderfully well, and he wished she were here at this very moment, so he could tell her so. Bronwyn had achieved a major strategic triumph. Gherlen's Pass was secured, perhaps forever. With the Rock, they should be able to hold it against the entire Orlesian army—which would not be coming, because of the disaster in Val Royeaux. Val Royeaux was closer to the border of Nevarra. Soon most of the soldiers of Orlais would be headed in that direction.

What they might be invaded by was more likely to be a tide of

Orlesian refugees. That could be annoying. It could even be dangerous if some turned to banditry. The troops he was posting up in the Neck should be able to deal with that. Orlesians could go south, north, or west... preferably far to the west. There was no way Loghain would permit an army of Orlesian beggars to invade his country. The chevaliers had been quite bad enough.

And the darkspawn had attacked Val Royeaux. He could not let go of that fact. He turned it round and round in his mind, like a goldsmith turning a jewel this way and that to catch the light. The Empress was dead. The Orlesian Empire had been beheaded with a single stroke.

And the Chantry would be in no position to threaten Ferelden. Not for years... for decades... perhaps forever. Was the Divine even alive? She was frail and old. How could she escape the darkspawn? The haughty Templars, the Seekers, the Knights-Divine and the Knight-Vigilant and the Lord Seeker... they would have more urgent issues to deal with than whether Ferelden was sufficiently compliant.

Like staying alive.

He smirked. Very well. He could deal with the Ferelden Chantry as he thought fit. The Grand Cleric liked Bronwyn. There was little point in recklessly offending her, but nothing that Tara had retrieved in her previous raid suggested that the Grand Cleric knew anything about the foul goings-on in the Aeonar.

To deal with the stronghold, he would want a very substantial force. He could possibly starve them out, but that might take months, and he did not want to divert resources from other tasks that long. From everything Tara told him, it seemed that the Wardens seemed to have absolutely no trouble with attacking a Chantry installation. The dwarves were indifferent to it, and Tara despised Templars. The archer woman ... Catriona... apparently hated the Chantry for family reasons. Jowan, too, was with them, and had fled the Circle for reasons of his own, and thus could be expected to harbor some ill feelings. Discreetly, Tara and Brosca gave him the story of Jowan's woes.

"...so," Tara whispered, very indignant. "that awful cow was tricking him all along. She never cared for him a bit. She just wanted the credit for capturing a blood mage, but she's the one who manipulated him into being one!"

Loghain had his own view of the matter. No man liked to know that a woman had used him. "I hardly think he would be grateful to you for telling him."

The little elf looked uneasy. "I meant it for the best. I didn't want him beating himself up forever, thinking he'd got the love of his life tortured and killed!"

"She's a stone-cold bitch," Brosca declared, "and I don't mean that in a good way. That dog of his is worth ten of her!"

That Loghain had no trouble believing at all. Amber believed it, too. Lily was a good dog, almost as good as herself.

"Tell your people to keep quiet about the Empress," Loghain ordered. "For that matter, while you might say that you know the darkspawn have risen, don't talk about the Chantry or even that you know that the target was Val Royeaux. Everyone would wonder how you got some information, and there could be accusations of forbidden magic. Besides, I don't want information leaking out to the Orlesians. Let them find out that they're leaderless for themselves."

"If you say so."

"I do."

His mind turned back pleasantly to Bronwyn. What a splendid girl. He must try to join her in Gherlen's Pass as soon as possible. With a present.

Immediately Loghain called for a council with Nathaniel, Wulffe, and after consideration, Corbus, telling them the news. Not all of it, but enough to give them a frame of reference.

"That the darkspawn have risen in Orlais might well have already slipped out," Loghain said. "I have no idea how discreet Bronwyn has told her people to be. She must know about the darkspawn. As to the details, Warden Tara sensibly pointed out that the information might be slanted by the Archdemon. That does not mean that what the Wardens saw is not true: it might simply not be the whole truth."

Wulffe was grinning. "Orlais! Serves the bastards right!"

Such was the general consensus around the table. Even better received was the news that Roc du Chevalier was now Fereldan.

"It should be renamed," Nathaniel urged. "The Orlesian name should be forgotten. Perhaps something in honor of the Queen."

"Good idea," Loghain replied. A very proper suggestion. "Let's all give it some thought."

Everyone was in such a good mood that they were quite agreeable when Loghain broached the subject of the Aeonar. Admittedly, he presented it as a band of rogue clergy, conducting cruel and bizarre experiments on ordinary folk, but it was not too far from the truth, after all.

They moved out the next day. Loghain left Nathaniel in charge, and marched with a company of Maric's Shield, five of the army's mages, and the Wardens. Jowan was brooding, but that was only to be expected.

It was wet and muddy as the snow retreated. Not a pleasant march, but not the worst Loghain had ever endured, either. While they marched, he asked more about the past month. He had had time to read Bronwyn's letter, and he felt she was leaving things out. He was curious about the results of the reconnaissance they had conducted on Jader and Solidor. He learned that the Marquis of Jader had been at Court, and not

in Jader, but had been expected by the end of the month. He smirked. Even if the Imperial army had already set out, they would be moving fairly slowly, and news of the darkspawn rising would reach them within days.

"Tell him about the princesses!" Brosca said.

"You tell him! I wasn't there either. That was all Morrigan."

"What princesses?" Loghain asked, in a very good mood.

"Cousins of the Empress!" Brosca loved the story. "Morrigan's been in and out of the place, just like the Rock. She flies around, and gets in, and that's how Bronwyn had these perfect floorplans. Anyway, she found this little garden at the top of a tower, and discovered that the Empress was keeping her cousins there. Three girls and a old bronto of a noblewoman who treats them like shit... calls them traitors...kills their puppies and kittens... that sort of thing. Morrigan thought they were—what's the word, Tara?"

"Insidious little fools," Tara supplied. "She said the youngest was well-meaning, though. She let Morrigan in her hawk form come into their solar to get warm, and the other girls went into to a dither, and the old woman threatened to have Morrigan killed and roasted for the princesses' dinner."

Brosca snorted. "Nice, huh?"

"Of course, Morrigan got away..."

"Tell him the good part!"

"And she snatched the old woman's wig off and dropped it over the battlements!"

Loghain's response startled the soldiers in the first ranks.

Brosca grinned, pleased to have made the big guy laugh out loud.

Loghain's laughter died quickly, considering those princesses in their tower. As soon as word got out that the Empress was dead, someone would see their value and grab at them. They could be used as puppets for anyone claiming the Empire. He hoped that Bronwyn had seen that as well. The girls should be captured and held. There was no need to harm them, but every reason for them to be safe in Ferelden hands. If he trusted the Chantry more, he'd suggest they take orders and enter a convent somewhere near Gwaren.

But the Aeonar was in sight, and he must deal with this business first. He sent out a patrol to secure the cottage where the Templar guards lodged. There were eight there, rather than the four Tara had met previously, but they sensibly lowered their weapons when so instructed. Under protest, of course.

"We shall report this to the highest levels of the Chantry!" their leader complained to Loghain.

Loghain smirked quietly, glad that he had told the Wardens to

keep most of what they knew to themselves. These buffoons were perfectly welcome to complain to a Divine... poor old biddy... who was likely either dead, or a ragged fugitive.

The templars were put under guard—separately—to keep them off balance, and scouts moved in toward the prison proper, warned to look sharp for traps. These were disarmed, and were not all that impressive. Nor were there any magical barriers, of course.

Rubble and branches had been replaced to obscure the entrance once more, but that was easily put aside. The greatest problem was the main door, which was locked and barred. The dwellers in the Aeonar had learned that lesson, at least. It took some time to bully the proper signal out of the youngest of the Templars. Finally, Loghain demanded the information himself, and Desmond could not hold out against the intimidating presence of Loghain Mac Tir, his boyhood hero. One had to strike the door with the pommel of one's sword with three short blows and then another a beat afterwards.

There was a long silence, and they were beginning to believe Desmond had lied. They tried again, and soon they heard a fumbling within, and a clanking of iron.

"What it is?" demanded the Templar on guard. He took in the strange faces and tried to slam the door in their faces. "Intruders!" he bellowed.

"Follow me!" Cauthrien shouted, and Maric's Shield burst into the Aeonar, the invaders breaking into three groups: smaller ones to the corridors on the right and left, and the main body to the central staircase leading down.

There was no hope of stealth, but the inhabitants were at least surprised. A squad of Templars rushed out from the floor below, loudly wondering if the Wardens were poking about again.

"Lay down your weapons, in the name of the King!" Cauthrien declared.

A tall Knight-Lieutenant blustered, "This is a Chantry holding! You have no authority here!"

Loghain parted the soldiers and stood beside Cauthrien. "My authority is in my soldier's blades. Do you want to test it? Is this place worth dying for?"

A pause.

"Is it? Lay down your weapons, *now*."

The six of them actually did, too, and were hustled away. After that, things did not go quite so smoothly.

Some of the Templars put up a fierce resistance. Loghain found plenty of work for his soldier's blades here, and for his own blade, too. The Templars were waving their huge greatswords as if he should be impressed, but as always, it

was easy enough to get past slow-moving men with greatswords, smash them down with his shield, and put an end to them on the spot. There was a brutal fight in the refectory, and when Maric's Shield finally prevailed, they were not inclined to be merciful. Some of the Templars battened themselves into rooms and prepared to endure a siege. Guards were posted at the doors, and the troops penetrated more deeply into the fortress. The priests gave themselves up without a fight, but with a great deal of indignant screaming.

Tara discovered that they had only scratched the surface before. The Aeonar went deep, and spread broadly on some of those lower levels. There were cells. There were rooms with familiar instruments of torture and some very exotic ones indeed. There were the restraining chairs and the lyrium irons. A spiked metal cage contained a recently dead young girl, whose body, it was explained, had not yet been removed because the notes on her case were still incomplete.

"Was she a mage?" Loghain asked.

"Oh—certainly!" he was assured. At least... she had shown signs of magic... and her mother was a known mage... and she might have had unusual skills, had she survived the questioning to display them...

"In other words," Tara scoffed. "She wasn't a mage at all. They were just torturing her, hoping that she would manifest magic if under enough stress and pain. If she'd *been* a mage, she would have become an abomination, and they could have patted themselves on the back for killing her!"

"So she wasn't a mage," Loghain considered. "What crime had she committed?"

"She *was* a mage!" a priest protested.

"What magic had she performed?"

"Well... none. But she might have!"

"A mage who couldn't do magic." Loghain sneered at the knot of priests and brothers. "I suppose you might attempt to stretch your authority to include everyone in Thedas, since all of us might be hiding secret magical abilities. No. It won't do. This girl committed no crime and was no mage, and you imprisoned, tortured, and killed her. It might come as a surprise to you, sheltered as you are, but murder is against the law." He turned to his soldiers. "Lock them up."

"The Divine will hear of this—"

They saw worse things as they descended. They found the pits—the kind called *oubliettes* by the Orlesians— where victims were dropped into stench and darkness to slowly starve to death. A few wretches were found alive, living off the rotting bodies of those who had gone before. Some were mad; some begged for death.

Of course, none of these were mages, either. You could not leave a mage alone in an ordinary prison, or they would knock the place down or set it afire. A small number of genuine mages *were* in the Aeonar, under heavy continual guard by

Templars draining their mana. These, unhappily, were immediately killed by the Templars as soon as they realized they were under attack. Some of Uldred's army mages looked at the bodies, but did not recognize anyone.

"They might well have been apostates," said Uldred. "Or they might have been from other Circles."

There were quite a few individuals who might formerly have been mages. Apparently the Rite of Tranquility did work on some non-mages. It was now difficult to distinguish who had once been a mage, and who had not. The easiest thing was to ask the Tranquil themselves, who were far beyond prevarication in the matter.

The kitchen was staffed with Tranquil. Tranquil cleaned the floors and the torture implements. They disposed of bodies and performed the rest of the ugly, dirty tasks that were beneath their masters. And in one remote corridor Cauthrien found a row of several cells, each containing a cot and a young girl or boy. They, too, were Tranquil. And naked. Some of them had had their teeth removed. They were quite forthright about the kinds of services they provided, and considered themselves better off than most.

"We are well fed," one of them said, with eerie calm. "And none of us is kept here long."

Jowan and Brosca led a band of soldiers into a quiet hall, which turned out to be where the priests were quartered. In

one of the rooms, oblivious the battle surging around her, a young priest was napping. The noise of her door being forced brought her sitting up straight in her bed, clutching a blanket close for modesty.

At the sight of Jowan she screamed.

"A man! A man in the dormitory!" Then she saw the staff and shrieked inarticulately until Brosca cuffed her.

"Shut up!"

"Lily!" cried Jowan.

The name riveted the attention of both a black mabari puppy and the young priest. The girl stared at Jowan rather blankly, not recognizing the man in light Warden leathers. Then her expression hardened.

"Jowan?"

Brosca smirked. "Yeah, it's Jowan, Your Holiness. Come on, guys," she called to the soldiers in their squad. "Search the room for weapons. She carries a knife on her, so watch it."

Jowan stared at her, transfixed, his feelings in tumult. She looked very different without her habit on and with her hair unbraided and down.

"Get up, Sister," ordered a woman soldier. "Stand over there while we search your room."

"Get out of here!" Lily hissed. "How dare you! The Divine will declare you anathema for this crime."

"Ooo, scary!" sneered Brosca. "Dwarf here, if you haven't noticed. Get up and put your hands on top of your head."

"I'll do nothing of the sort."

"Lily," Jowan said softly, "just do what they say."

A harsh, disbelieving laugh. "You— Blood Mage? You dare tell me what to do?"

Brosca was over at the side of the bed so fast Jowan did not see her move. She caught Lily by the arm and twisted it behind her, and tumbled her out bed. "Not so hard, is it? And that's 'Warden Jowan' to you!"

"You dirty short mouth!" Lily snarled, rubbing her elbow.

Jowan reached down to help her. "Lily, just let us search your room and then—"

She struck out, stabbing him under the armpit. Jowan stared at her, not feeling the pain at first. Lily yanked the dagger back, her teeth bared, while Jowan collapsed to his knees. Growling, the black dog seized the offending wrist in powerful jaws and clamped down, worrying at it as she would a rat.

Lily screamed and tried to shake the dog off, kicking out.

Brosca bounded up onto the bed, grabbed the girl by the hair,

yanked her head back, and cut her throat.

"Die, bitch!"

She threw the dying Lily aside and jumped down to see to Jowan.

"Find Tara!" she yelled at a soldier. "He's hurt bad! Come on, Magic Boy," she cooed gruffly at Jowan. "Do your stuff! Heal yourself!"

"Lily..."

"Drop that arm, Lily, and get over here. See, Jowan? Your nice pup is right here. Shit! You're bleeding like a stuck nug! You over there! Put your hand here and press down hard!" She put Jowan's head on her lap. "Heal yourself, you lazy son of a Duster!"

"I killed her..."

"No, you didn't! I did! That bitch would've stabbed anybody who came in here. Come on, Jowan! We're counting on you! Don't give up now!"

Tara burst into the room running, and swore at the sight of Jowan bleeding on the floor. She dropped to her knees, and immediately cast the only healing spell she knew. It slowed the bleeding, but did not close the wound.

"We should put him on the bed..."

Brosca jerked her head, indicating the dead body and the blood-soaked mattress.

Tara took the hint. "... Somewhere else..."

The soldiers carried him to another priest's room and laid him on the prim little bed. The dog whimpered, getting under everyone's feet. Brosca unbuckled his armor and sliced off his shirt. Jowan chest was very white and nearly hairless, and his skin surprisingly soft. He was half-conscious, his eyelids fluttering.

"That's where she got him," Brosca muttered. "Nasty. Don't think the shiv was poisoned, though..."

Tara said loudly, "I'm going to give you some lyrium, Jowan, and I'm going to poultice the wound. I need you to think about healing yourself. Just think about it, all right?"

Brosca lifted his head, and most of the potion went into his mouth. A little spilled over the smooth white pillow in a glittering blue stream. Jowan coughed, and then took a stronger breath. Tara slapped on the poultice and tied it down. She put her hand on his chest, and leaned over.

"I'm asking you, Jowan, as your best friend in life, not to die. Not here, Not now. You owe me. Promise me you won't die before I do. *Promise. Remember? 'Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you.'*"

Jowan's eyes did not open, his lips moved in a sad, fugitive

smile.

"Promise!" Tara demanded. *'Never forsake me—'*

A tear trickled from the corner of his eye. He whispered, *"—I will never forsake you as long as I live."*

The holdouts were eventually killed or captured, and the Aeonar was in the hands of the King of Ferelden. The mages were enraged over the cruelties practiced here, but also elated over the astonishing magical artifacts stored away. Tara found a curious gilt-framed mirror, hidden under a heavy spider-silk drape, and immediately claimed it as part of the Warden's share of the loot.

The Tranquil were put to work, and Loghain did his best to see they were treated humanely. The thirty-odd surviving Templars were locked away in the dungeons, and the fourteen priests were locked in their barracks, after it was emptied of everything but the barest necessities. The handful of lay brothers were held in an empty storeroom. Loghain's people had had a handful of casualties, but their best Healer was flat on his back, after a narrow escape from death. No one was feeling very friendly toward their captives.

"They're murders and rapists," Tara growled. "You should just hang them all."

"Not *all* of them," Loghain pointed out.

"And some of them are wounded," Cauthrien pointed out.

"Good," snarled Tara. "I hope they *die*. I'm no Healer, and Jowan won't be fit to do anything for anybody for days. Let some of Uldred's people fuss over them if they've a mind to. I'll never forgive myself for not killing that bitch the last time we were here!"

"All the same," said Loghain, sympathizing with her, "we have to deal with the prisoners, and with some degree of justice."

In many ways, it was a very awkward situation. Some of their captives, like young Desmond, were new to the order and had only stood guard duty at the nearby cottage. It would be unjust to treat them all alike. Some of them, yes, Loghain would like nothing better than to hang, but knew it was impolitic, even with the Grand Cathedral in ruins. Besides, it was one thing for his men to be horrified at what they'd seen. If the clergy were executed, word would get out, and people who had not seen the atrocities here would only understand that he had killed priests and Templars.

Cauthrien, sensing his disquiet, made a suggestion that everyone hated at first and then saw might do.

"They said they were acting under the orders of the Divine—or one of her advisers. Why not let the Divine deal with them?"

"Uh... Ser... I mean Bann Cauthrien... the Divine's probably dead..." Brosca reminded her.

"*They* don't know that," Cauthrien replied coolly. "Why not put them on some boats, take them to the Orlesian coast, and drop them off? Let them look for her. Maybe they'll find her, maybe not. Maybe something else will find them. Maybe they'll find that that area desolate, and starve to death. Do we care?"

Loghain rather liked the idea, but saw a flaw in it.

"We may soon be attacked by an Orlesian fleet. We can hardly spare the ships."

"I don't mean warships. Some of those fishing boats could carry a dozen or so men in the hold. Hire a few of them. The fishermen would be glad of the coin. Keep the prisoners in chains, and given them a few guards. Have them cross the Narrows and hug the north coast. Drop them off near the northern border of Orlais. Let them walk to Val Royeaux if they like."

"Not the women," Tara said. "We can't make a present of women to the darkspawn."

That was horribly true, but there was another, obvious solution.

"Send them to Denerim—also by fishing boat—with a letter for the Grand Cleric, telling her what they've done. I don't think she'll go easy on them... not now."

Eventually it was agreed that they would send the priests

back to Denerim under guard, and that twelve of the worst miscreants among the Templars and brothers would be exiled on one of the biggest of the fishing fleet. Loghain wondered if the fishermen would simply drop them over the side, rather than attempting the long and arduous journey to the end of the Waking Sea. He rather hoped they did.

The rest of the men would be kept imprisoned until more was known of the darkspawn movements. If the darkspawn turned east, the Templars might make themselves useful, or at least fight for their lives.

"Some of them will go crazy without their lyrium," Tara pointed out.

"I never forced them to take lyrium," said Loghain. "I don't intend to feed their habit now."

Within two days of the disaster at Val Royeaux, fast riders overtook the slow-moving Imperial army, telling them the dreadful news of the attack. One of them was a Warden who had been on watch that night. As he had been awake during the attack, he had not seen the vision that so many other Wardens had witnessed in the Fade, and so knew nothing of the fate of the Empress.

While the situation called for unity and resolve, for quick-thinking and prompt action, the army fell instead into quarreling factions. The command was splintered by debate and petty, self-serving politics. In short, they talked and

talked, while camped at the mouth of the River Orne, which flows from Lake Celestine, deep in the Heartlands of Orlais, northeast to the Waking Sea.

The Marquis of Jader was torn with indecision. Obviously, Val Royeaux and the Empress needed their help, but other parts of the Empire needed to be secured as well. The Marquis' brother felt a part of the army ought to continue with the planned invasion of rebellious Ferelden, since he pointed out, with some justice, that the navy had been dispatched, and was now beyond recall. He suggested being entrusted with a third of the chevaliers, which would ride quickly for the border and support the naval operations.

The Marquis knew that once his brother had those men under his command, he himself could forget about ever holding Jader again, for his brother would seize it. Another nobleman proposed that they march back west, but then head to Val Foret, and fortify the city against the horde. This seemed a sensible compromise to many.

Another noble chevalier, bolder and more loyal than the rest, denounced them as poltroons, and demanded that the Marquis lead the army back to Val Royeaux at once. He roused a great number of his fellows, many of whom had families in the capital, and hundreds of them took up the chant he started:

"To Val Royeaux! To Val Royeaux!"

"For the Empress and the Divine!"

Tempers flared and fights broke out. The Warden who had brought the news was given a fresh horse and then pressed on, south to Montsimnard, A courier was dispatched to Val Foret, and another one southeast to Verchiel. The Marquis pacified his army with great difficulty, and assured them that they would march north on the morrow, but that now they must rest, in order to be fresh for the struggle to come. In his heart, he rather favored the Val Foret plan himself. Val Royeaux must already be lost. He turned in, sleeping fitfully in his grand red and gold tent, in the center of a concentric circle of other colorful tents, and surrounded by long lines of little white tents which sheltered the common soldiers. The lines and circles were illuminated by rows and curves of thousands of campfires. From above, to eyes that saw keenly in the dark, the camp looked exactly like a bright, colorful target.

The Archdemon had had not the least difficulty in following the Warden's trail. As expected, he had led to better sport than one tired warrior. The dragon swooped silently down, down, flaming out of a star-spangled, blue-black sky, incinerating the camp in long blazing swathes. The Marquis of Jader, the center of the archery butt, was ashes before he could fully awaken to brief agony. His brother, dreaming of holding Jader as his own, died ten heartbeats later. Men ran from their tents, tangled in burning canvas. Some leaped into the River Orne and saved their lives. Some hid under the shadows of the trees. The Archdemon turned in the air, and came back to blast them once more, flying low. A handful of archers had the presence of mind to fire a return volley. The Archdemon largely ignored them, their puny arrows hardly registering as

pinpricks. The Archdemon made two more passes, neatly burning a flaming cross into the heart of the Orlesian army. Pleased at the symmetry of its handiwork and the extent of the destruction, it then soared away, back to its Tainted nest in the ruins of Val Royeaux. Over a fourth of the army had been killed, and most of its baggage and equipment destroyed. Of the chevaliers and officers camped in the center, only a score escaped alive.

The Orlesian fleet, under the command of Imperial Grand Admiral, His Excellency the Duc de Verchiel-Dauvin Roget, forged majestically through the Waking Sea, braving the rough waves along the south coast. The professionals among the captains were uneasy about hugging the coast so closely, since it was notoriously full of shifting sandbars. Even at Jader Bay, they would have to be cautious, because of the long spit of sand, called the Horn, that divided the harbor channel in two. It lay under the surface of the water, mostly invisible. Occasionally, at low tide, it was possible to walk out on it for a long distance—as long as one had not walked out too far to escape the high tides when they rushed back in, fast and rolling. The sensible, professional captains had taken care to have two experienced pilots with the fleet who knew that particular harbor very well.

It was a very impressive fleet indeed: some fifteen warships protecting fifty-four transports filled with men and horses. The Grand Admiral's flagship, *Emperor Drakon*, was a huge, six hundred-ton carrack: a monstrosity with a towering, gilded

aftcastle, housing the admiral's sumptuous cabin.

It was four days out of Val Royeaux when they rounded Cape Gris Nez, north of Halamshiral, and found a fleet of sleek, low-slung Nevarran warships lying in wait for them. Fireballs spat toward them, and blossomed out in a storm of devastation.

"We've got to bring those girls in," Bronwyn said, irritable from lack of sleep. Her dreams had been dreadful. "The princesses at Solidor. If we don't, someone else will, and they'll use them to claim the Empire."

"You wouldn't..." Alistair fumbled for words. "I mean..."

"Would I kill them?" Bronwyn asked, exasperated. "Of course not. What have I ever done that would make you think that? Lock them up in comfortable custody, yes. That's pretty much what the Empress has already done. If there is no Empress, then technically one of those girls might be regarded as the heiress-presumptive. Which one, I have no idea. The safest way is to gather up all three of them."

Taking Solidor would be a bold move. It would also make Jader very vulnerable. Was it wrong to turn covetous eyes toward that rich, splendid city? Perhaps so. Bronwyn felt a bit like a vulture, picking the bones of the Empire. The Empress was dead, and soon there would be a mad dash for plunder. No doubt a half-dozen pretenders would claim the title of Emperor.

For that matter, the Nevarrans must have seen the vision as well. What would they do? Most likely, they would swoop toward the border, pushing and pushing, gobbling city after city: Churneau, Ghislain, Arlesans... Their own Wardens might be on the march as well, preparing to face the horror in Val Royeaux. The visions had been blurred and confused last night. Perhaps the Archdemon did not want them to have a clear idea what was happening. Perhaps the Wardens were still holding out in their compound in Val Royeaux, selling their lives dearly.

A city like Val Royeaux could not be completely conquered in one night, not even by the Archdemon and the horde itself. There must be pockets of resistance: chevaliers, guardsmen, Wardens, and stout men-at-arms who would fight bravely. People might well have escaped, living to fight another day. And the greatest number of Wardens was not in Val Royeaux, but at their headquarters in Montsimmard, several days to the southeast. A great many women had been captured by the darkspawn, and within a month would be spawning reinforcements for the horde. That was not a desirable outcome.

Which brought her to her own duty. She had denounced the rest of Thedas for leaving Ferelden to its fate. Would she now do likewise, smugly watching the destruction of her hated enemy? All of the arguments she had used against such complacency were still perfectly true. It was stupid and short-sighted to allow the darkspawn to have their way in the Empire. They would only grow stronger and then they would

move on to despoil some other land. That land might well be Ferelden. Had she herself not pointed out that the darkspawn cared nothing for borders?

She must prepare to continue her war against the darkspawn, and if the darkspawn were in Orlais, she must prepare to continue it there. They must secure the way into Orlais and she might well consider recruiting more Wardens. She must strengthen their own position. It was awkward, how far their supply lines stretched now. There were obvious solutions.

Jader was closer to West Hill than it was to Halamshiral, the next large Orlesian city. And Loghain felt it would round out the borders of Ferelden so very well. That was true. Solidor protected the Frostback Gate: the gap in the mountains through which the Imperial Highway ran. If they could hold the Frostback Gate, then Jader was theirs, and all that fertile lowland plain as well. It was not a huge amount of new territory, not so big as to be indigestible; but having it would give Ferelden far better and more defensible borders... and it contained a very fine city. If it were part of Ferelden, it would need a lord. An Arl of Jader? It was certainly large enough to merit the name of arling. It would encompass all of the land from the Frostback Gate east to the Neck and south to the borders of Redcliffe. That would put Cauthrien's bannorn of Haven within its purview.

Bronwyn made her mind stop racing. She was getting ahead of herself. She had darkspawn to fight. She must get rid of her Orlesian prisoners and focus on the real enemy.

But, a sly little voice inside her head whispered, "*Wouldn't it be far easier to fight the darkspawn from a base like Jader?*"

It was a strong city with plenty of barrack space for her army and wealth to pay her troops. It had one of the best harbors in the Waking Sea and easy access to the Imperial Highway. And the farther into Orlais she carried the fight against the darkspawn, the safer Ferelden would be.

"Solidor first," she told her companions. "We'll take Solidor first. If we're going to move on the darkspawn, we must command the Imperial Highway."

It began with breakfast, because all days began that way. The Imperial Princesses Celandine, Eponine, and Eglantine were completely ignorant of all events that had happened in Thedas over the past seven years. They knew nothing of political economy or diplomacy or even arithmetic more advanced than addition and subtraction. Their education had been limited to the artistic, the religious, the innocuous. They could all play the lute, embroider beautifully, and recite large portions of the Chant of Light from memory. No expense had been spared by the Empress to make them at once exquisitely accomplished and profoundly incompetent. Between their *gouvernante*, the Comtesse Coquelicot, and her crony, Revered Mother Rictrude, they not only were without the skills to intrigue for the Empire or rule it; but they did not even know how to dress themselves, or make tea.

However, amidst the congeries of little known and useless

facts they were permitted to know, they had some concept of the classical dramatic unities.

The unity of action: a play should have one main action that it follows, with no or few subplots.

The unity of place: a play should cover a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place.

The unity of time: the action in a play should take place over no more than a single day.

The most dramatic event of their lives happened at Chateau Solidor, in a single day, And they were so absorbed in the event as it pertained to them, that they were oblivious to any possible subplots.

After their usual breakfast of porridge, cream, and honey, the princesses retired to the solar for the usual pursuits of reading romances, embroidering yet more cushion covers, and making music. The Comtesse did not join them at once, as she was no doubt ranting at the steward and laying down the domestic law—in the most insulting manner possible—to the housekeeper. She was more unpleasant than ever, now that she was forced to wear her second-best wig, which was black instead of auburn. The girls cherished the few moments of privacy before she arrived, talking quietly about the shreds of gossip divulged by the servants. Isolated as their tower was, they heard nothing going on in the rest of the castle.

Celandine whispered, "I know now why Lisette is no longer here. I was told that she and the footman Auberon engaged in *'illicit intercourse.'*"

"Whatever that means," shrugged Eponine. "I feel certain that she would not be sent away simply for talking."

"But what could—"

"Oh, look!" cried Eglantine, "The hawk is back!"

"Don't open the door, Eglantine," Celandine complained, "It is too cold!"

Eponine shuddered. "And the bird will get in again!"

Ignoring them, Eglantine opened the door to the little garden.

"Bonjour, Monsieigneur Faucon!" A raven fluttered down to the dormant rosetree and cocked its head. "And a raven! I have never seen one so close!" She walked to the battlements to have a look at the view, streaked in the east with rose and gold, and then gasped.

"An army!"

The other girls hurried out to see. Over the tower there was a boom of thunder and then a dazzling shower of blue and gold sparks. Eglantine clapped her hands.

"How beautiful! And in our official colors, too!"

Bronwyn urged her horse forward, well within bowshot, having decided to explain why a prudent man would indeed lower the drawbridge and admit her and her host. She gave a signal, and a missile was fired from one of their portable trebuchets. It exploded above the north wall with a terrible thunder and a rain of lyrium-enhanced fire. Her troops had come up the road in the night and surrounded the castle. The captain of the castle guard was gaping down at the forces arrayed against him, which had appeared as if by magic. The man was very surprised and seriously frightened by the demonstration of their explosives. Bronwyn smirked up at him.

"Hear me!" she shouted. "I am Bronwyn Cousland the Dragonslayer, Queen of Ferelden. As you see, we can shatter your gates with ease. We can blow your castle apart. If you do not surrender at once, I will order my engineers to begin the demolition of this castle, and when the gate gives way, I will order my soldier to sack Solidor and put the defenders to the sword, to the last man, woman, and child. If you lay down your weapons, I will show you mercy."

"What is going on?" wondered Celandine. "Is it the Marquis of Jader?" She had always thought he must be handsome, though she had never seen his face. His fine, tall, person and his noble bearing suggested that under the mask was a being of godlike beauty.

"I do not see his arms," said Eglantine. "The chevalier leading them is in red armor. How striking!" She then saw Alistair, and remarked, "Look at the young man on the bay horse. He is

quite comely."

"He is not a gentleman," Celandine reproved her. "He wears no mask. "You should not look at him. Look at the fine chevalier in the red armor instead! Is he not splendid?"

Eponine leaned over the battlements and waved at the troops with her white silk handkerchief. "The helmet is very charming and fanciful, with the wings going up like that. And the mask is part of it. That is clever. I wonder who he is?" She sighed. "I wish he would call upon us. It would be so diverting."

Celandine shook her head. "The Comtesse would never permit it!" She took out her handkerchief and waved, too. "Come, Eglantine, wave at the chevalier!"

"I wish we were not so high up," Eglantine complained. "I wish we could hear their conversation!" She waved her handkerchief with great enthusiasm. "Bonjour! Bonjour! Maker bless all you brave soldiers!"

Ser Norrel squinted at what appeared to be white flags waving from the highest tower. "Are they surrendering?"

Bronwyn scowled at the hapless captain. "Ser Captain, are you *mocking* me? Are you treacherously pretending to surrender while scheming to attack?"

"No! No!" He craned his neck and looked up at the tower. "It is their Imperial Highnesses. They must think you have come to

call."

"I *have* come to call," Bronwyn said coldly. "The Princesses have offered their surrender, and I suggest you do not delay me in accepting it." She waved back at the princesses, who giggled with excitement.

"Gentlemen," ordered Bronwyn, looking back at her knights and Wardens. "Bow to the Imperial Princesses. They have surrendered Chateau Solidor to us." There was some laughter, and the princesses were duly saluted. Bronwyn glared at the captain. "Lay down your arms. The next explosion will destroy your gates."

An aged woman in a black wig and lace mask appeared on the top of the gate by the captain, and shrilled out, "What is going on? What was that noise? How dare you! Do you know who I am?"

Bronwyn eyed her without respect. "The question, Madame, is: Do you know who *I* am? Enough of this trifling," she said to Haglin. "Give orders to begin the bombardment." She turned her horse's head.

The captain called, desperate. "I must defend Their Imperial Highnesses! Will you give me your word that they will not be harmed?"

"I give you my word. I have not the least desire to harm them. They will be treated with the honor their rank demands. Surrender, and I will spare them, and you and your men. Any

who resist will perish."

"You fool!" screeched the Comtesse. "Shoot them! Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!"

"—And I believe that I may have to begin with that harridan," said Bronwyn. "Do shut her up."

The Comtesse's jowls quivered under the lace mask, and she rushed away.

"Good riddance," snorted Bronwyn. "And now, Ser, there is the matter of your capitulation..."

"Oh! Oh!" cried Eglantine. "The gate is opening! Oh, I do hope that we are permitted to meet our guests!"

"Should we put on our masks?" Eponine dithered anxiously. "Would it be proper to receive visitors without them?"

"Madame la Comtesse will inform us if we are to come down," said Celandine. "Of course we shall wear our masks once we leave our private chambers."

There was a noise in the corridor outside the solar. Someone was rushing up the stone steps. The angry voice of the Comtesse made the girls fall silent in dread. A moment later, the door was thrown open, and a pair of frightening brutes with wickedly sharp daggers burst into the room, followed by the Comtesse.

"Kill them!" she screamed, pointing at the shocked princesses. "They must not be captured!"

A chaos of shrieks rose up, and the princesses ran outside to the little garden and huddled together, on their knees.

"No! No! Oh, ser, spare us!"

The Comtesse's henchmen lunged through the door of the solar, daggers raised.

... and were frozen in place.

The Princesses blinked, not understanding what they were seeing. The Comtesse stared, and then uttered a hoarse cry.

"A mage! A filthy ma—"

She too, was frozen.

The raven was not to be seen. In its place was a tall and handsome man with blonde hair and a winning smile.

"Much more the thing. Too much screaming and knife-waving. Calm down, calm down, Anders is on the job..."

The cup of wonders was not yet full. The hawk dissolved, transforming into an exotically beautiful woman, who fixed yellow eyes on them: eyes full of amusement and contempt.

"Well, well, what have we here? Three little princesses all in a row?"

The girls stared at her, terrified. Yes, they were just as terrified of her as they were of the Comtesse, but the Comtesse was cruel and repulsive in appearance. This woman looked like she might be cruel, too, but she was also lovely. She reminded them a little of their cousin the Empress, and how she had smiled at them while describing the executions of their father and mother.

And charming as Anders could be, the appearance of the two mages, as they shifted from bird to human, was in no way reassuring. Mages were evil: they were the source of all the world's sin and sorrow, and these were free and unhampered by the Chantry; working their magical arts on people and changing into birds, and —

"Oh!" cried Eglantine, racked with humiliation. "I *invited* you into the castle!"

"Eglantine!" Eponine scolded. "This is all your fault!"

Celandine sobbed, "You foolish child!"

Their nurse had told them that evil creatures like demons and mages could not enter one's home unless invited. As long as you did not proffer an invitation, your home was safe. The wicked mage had tricked Eglantine, appearing as an innocent bird, and Eglantine had brought disaster on them all.

More people were coming. Soldiers. Soldiers who were obviously not Orlesian. They did not seem surprised by the frozen assassins, nor by the frozen Comtesse, who looked

very fierce, her face distorted with murderous rage. The soldiers were rough and smelly. They did not bow. In fact, they paid almost no attention to the girls at all.

Anders said, waving at the unmoving figures, "They were going to kill the princesses, just as the Queen suspected. Better lock them up. She might want to question them."

"What has happened?" whispered Celandine. "Who are these people?"

Anders beamed, and then to his disappointment, noted that his smiles were wasted on her. "The castle has been taken by Queen Bronwyn. She won't hurt you."

Eponine was bewildered. "Who is Queen Bronwyn?"

The soldiers lugging out the stiffened prisoners looked at each other with some amazement and at the girls with derision. One made the quick gesture that suggested the girls were half-wits or insane. The rest shrugged. Morrigan gave a harsh laugh like a hawk's cry.

"The Girl Warden, the Dragonslayer, The Queen of Ferelden. The Warden Queen. The Red Queen. The Dragon Queen—"

"—and Andraste's True Champion!" Anders declared, grinning.

The girls were more and more bewildered.

"Did she marry the rebel Maric?" faltered Celandine.

Both mages laughed, frightening the princesses even more. At that point, Alistair arrived.

"Got the situation in hand I see," he said. "The ladies are all right?"

"They're fine, Alistair," Anders assured him, "just a bit nervous around the *scary mages!* Mwah-ha-ha!" He waggled his hands in mock threat, and the girls shrank back, squealing. Morrigan snorted in disgust.

"Whimpering and witless fools," she sneered. "Look at them, huddled like sheep! Hardly worth the effort to save their worthless lives."

Alistair remembered why he had never liked Morrigan.

"Maybe they wouldn't be frightened if there hadn't just been an attempt *to kill them*, and if you weren't *scaring them!*" he snapped. Then he made a point of giving the poor girls the bow he had learned to give Arlessa Isolde years before.

"Your Imperial Highnesses. It's an honor to meet you. The Queen will send for you very soon. For now, please stay here in your apartments. No one is going to hurt you or—"

"Ser... Alistair?" ventured Eglantine.

"Not 'Ser," said Morrigan, with mocking emphasis. "'Tis *Bann* Alistair. Bann Alistair Fitzmaric of Stonehaven!"

He reddened. He should have introduced himself as a Warden from the first. Now *Morrigan* had mentioned that *stupid* title.

"Yes, Bann Alistair, I'm afraid."

"You are noble!" said Eponine, relieved. "You are a gentleman!"

"Well... yes."

Celandine gushed, "Pardon our confusion as to your rank. You are not masked." Then she realized that she was not masked either, and flushed. It was all very improper.

"No. Don't have a mask," Alistair mumbled. "We never wear them in... er... Ferelden." He grimaced, and said to Anders, "They're scared of you. Maybe you and Morrigan should go, and I'll explain what happened."

Morrigan shrugged. "With pleasure!"

"No!" cried Eglantine. "She cannot go if you stay!"

Alistair, miserable and red-faced, stared at them in confusion. Morrigan was offended and Anders amused.

As if it were obvious to the meanest intelligence, Eglantine explained, "We cannot possibly speak in our private apartments with a man unrelated to us and with no chaperone present."

Eponine's eyes were huge. "It would be a scandal!"

"We could be executed!" Celandine solemnly assured them.

"Hmmm." Anders smirked. "There are three of you. Can't you just... I don't know... chaperone each other?" Alistair was silent, dizzily contemplating a worldview in which Morrigan could be regarded as a *chaperone*.

"Or we could all just *leave*," Morrigan hinted, bored.

"Right," said Alistair, rather glad of the suggestion. Young ladies—especially pretty young ladies—made him nervous. "We'll all just leave. Now. The guards at the door are there to protect you. Nobody's going to bother you. Just stay here. We'll let you know when Bron—Queen Bronwyn's ready to see you. Your Imperial Highnesses," he remembered to add.

He bowed again, backing away, and tripped over his own feet. The mages laughed heartlessly. In a moment they were all gone, shutting the door of the solar behind them.

"What an odd man," remarked Celandine.

"But a noble," Eponine pointed out.

Eglantine nodded, her eyes dreamy. "And *handsome!* Even without a mask!"

"They are pretty fools," Morrigan said to Bronwyn, with a shrug. "Very nearly mindless. They were horrified at being exposed to the impurity of *mages*, and equally horrified at the

idea of being left alone with our bold and lecherous Alistair—"

"Hey!" Alistair protested.

"—without a *chaperone*," Morrigan finished, relishing the sarcasm. "One would think that after their last chaperone attempted to murder them, they would have had enough of such creatures!"

"I'll have Leliana deal with them," Bronwyn said. "She should know all the protocol rubbish they're accustomed to. Or I'll find a reliable female officer to escort them. I want them out of here as soon as possible. They need to be sent east, out of any pretender's reach."

So she sent for Leliana, though she had more important things on her mind than three silly girls. A long conversation with the captain of Chateau Solidor had explained some of the reason for the collapse of all resistance.

The Grey Wardens of Jader had come through two days before, and Riordan had informed the captain of the rising of the darkspawn and the attack on Val Royeaux. The gravity of the situation was not lost on the captain, and he had been uncertain what to do. Riordan had also told the Marquis' steward in Jader about the attack. Word was out, and every man in the garrison here had heard the news. They were afraid, now that the Blight was here in Orlais, and not far away in enemy country. Many wanted to go home to their families. Bronwyn pressed for news of Riordan, but the captain knew little.

"The Senior Warden said he would go to Montsimmard, to the head of the order in Orlais, and join forces with him. It will take them at least seven days, even if they travel fast."

It was less and less likely that the Orlesian invasion force would attack Ferelden. If no one else informed them of the disaster, Riordan would eventually meet the army. It could not attack the eastern border when the capital of its own country was being ravaged by the darkspawn. Interestingly, the captain said nothing of the Empress. Bronwyn danced about the issue, but apparently Riordan had not given him that detail, perhaps hoping to prevent a panic.

Well, the news would get out eventually, and panic there would be. Bronwyn was just as glad to keep it quiet for now, reducing the value of the young princesses.

The garrison had been disarmed—stripped of their armor, too. Bronwyn planned to have them escorted west along the Imperial Highway, then have them told to keep marching. If they tried to double back, they would be killed. The next sizable city was Halamshiral, two days away. No, more like three, if the defeated Orlesians had no boots. By the time they reached Halamshiral, news should have arrived about the events in Val Royeaux. The Orlesians would have better things to do than try to retake Solidor.

"We'll keep the officers and the Comtesse," she said to Alistair. "We might get ransom for them. The woman might have some useful information for us, too, once she gets tired of bread and water. For the rankers, it's best to simply let

them go. I don't want to feed them."

Leliana arrived, very cheerful from her examination of the castle, and Bronwyn gave her her new assignment.

"I'd like you to take charge of the princesses for now. Have them come down so I can speak to them. No masks. That's an Orlesian custom I can't abide, and they need to learn to do without them. They seem to think they need a chaperone, even though they are hardly children. Win their confidence and find out what you can about them."

"Nothing easier!" Leliana beamed, rather pleased at the idea of being entrusted with such a task. Three princess, locked in a tower, would be delighted to have the company of a minstrel. The romance of the situation appealed to her greatly. "I shall go up to them at once!"

Solidor was a fine castle, though nowhere near the size of the Rock. It was an imperial possession, and had often been used as a prison, as it is now, for distinguished but inconvenient individuals. Bronwyn set about organizing a garrison of her own, and discovering what weak points this castle, so serendipitously fallen into her hands, might have. While she was busily giving orders and listening to reports, Leliana arrived with the princesses. Each was exquisitely pretty in a frail, white-skinned, fine-boned way. Each was gowned in sumptuous velvet: blue, gold, or rose. They wore elaborate pearl diadems to hold back their pale-gold hair. They were presented by Leliana, and they made Bronwyn elaborate curtseys.

They were clearly very much afraid of her.

Bronwyn realized that she might be intimidating to such sheltered individuals. She was in armor. She towered over them. On the other hand, they were a little old to be so childish. The youngest might not yet be twenty, but the two older princesses were older than Bronwyn herself. Perhaps it had suited the Empress for them to be timid and ignorant, but they had also been pampered with comforts and luxuries and the endless labor of many servants' hands. Bronwyn was not going to provide them with such a lavish lifestyle. Not when she herself often had to sleep rough out of doors or on stone in the Deep Roads. She looked down on these feeble, inbred specimens, the offspring of cousins, of uncles and nieces, and saw little to respect.

To be sure, she could not fully comprehend what a strange figure she cut before the Imperial princesses. She was tall and imposing, certainly, and her red dragon armor was splendid; however, the princesses had never seen any woman with any pretense to gentility appear even among other women with her face unpainted. That she was also unmasked—and demanded that they, too, be unmasked, even in the presence of men and commoners—seemed rather indecent. They might not grasp her courage and daring, but they noticed the dirt under her fingernails and her untidy hair. Eglantine thought her face might be pretty, with some lip rouge on her pale mouth, and with her eyebrows properly plucked thin and the horrid scar covered up. Her eyes, though, were terrifying: piercing and hard, and a bright, bright green that made

Eglantine think of snakes and poison... or...somehow... of dragons. Of course, she was altogether too big. Her feet and hands were like a man's. They could see the sinews of her neck, unfeminine and muscular. She did not look like a Queen. She did not even look like a lady. She looked like she had been working in the fields, like a peasant woman.

Then, too, her retinue was composed of uncouth and sinister creatures... The big dog, of course: almost a cliché in itself. There was a huge giant of a man with grey skin and lavender eyes. There were elves, armed and daring to look them straight in the eye, some smiling, some grave and disapproving, like the tall, white-haired one. What was that look directed at them by that little elf girl? Insupportable impudence! It was unnerving. A crude stone figure stood in a corner, as tall as the giant man. The princesses wondered what it was, because it was the ugliest statue they had ever seen. Then there were the two mages that had tricked them, and another mage as well, all boldly bearing their staves for everyone to see. Dwarves loafed about, mightily at their ease. The armed human men—and women— about the queen wore dirty, stained armor and the grips of their swords and daggers looked greasy and unclean. Not one of them looked like a noble chevalier, aside from Bann Alistair, and he was not very clean either.

Still, this Queen Bronwyn did not speak to them unkindly, though she did not use all the ceremony that was their due, as they were Princesses of the Imperial line of Drakon Kordilius, and she a mere upstart queen of a little barbarian realm.

"Ladies," Bronwyn said briefly. "You have nothing to fear from me. I shall see that you are protected. In a few days, you will leave Chateau Solidor and take up residence in another of my strongholds. You may each select a servant to take with you, and you will be provided with a wagon for your possessions. An escort will be assigned to you."

They were too cowed to ask her their thousand questions, and Bronwyn was too busy to coddle them, so she gave them a curt nod of dismissal. "Warden Leliana, take the ladies back to their quarters, and help them begin preparing for their journey."

Frightened into speaking, Eponine asked, "Our escort will not contain... mages, I trust?"

The Queen frowned, displeased, and Eponine quailed briefly.

"What? Like those *mages*," Bronwyn said slowly, her green eyes terrible, "who saved your lives not two hours ago? You object to their presence. Is that not correct? Am I to understand that rather endure the presence of *mages*, you would have preferred to have been gutted by a pair of thugs at the behest of that vile old women in the dungeons?"

Embarrassed and confused by such a response, the princesses blushed and lowered their heads. Eglantine tried to sort out her own feelings. Of course she was glad not to have been killed, and that the Comtesse was in the dungeons was wonderful news; but it was very improper for a lady to use the word 'gutted.' And the mages were still... mages...

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "Take them away, Leliana. I'm busy."

Thanks to my reviewers: Vibrolux61, Nemrut, Serena R. Snape, DjinniGenie, JTheClivaz, trevorswim, Koden21, Nightbrainzz, JackOfBladesX, HeavensScribe, The Flying Hobbo, RohanVos, Girl-chama, Mike3207, RaZoRMandiblez, Raxiselic, Cjonwalrus, anon, darksky01, Calliope Sol, Herebedragons66, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, KngihtOfHolyLight, Chiara Crawford, le-maru, Guest, Acaila, Blinded in a bolthold, TirionI, kirbster676, BAMS, Robbie the Phoenix, So you want to be an Author, Phygmalion, Highlord, timunderwood9, mille libri, chrysanne, Costin, sizuka2, PhantomX0990, Persephone Chiara, Jenna53, Verpine, Suna Chunin, Halm Vendrella, RakeeshJ4, jnybot, Juliafied, Kalom, AD Lewis, amanda weber, Mike 3207, forget the rest, YayforYuffie, Lyssa Terald, Psyche Sinclair, Lexiconnoisseur, RB23G, Saurman, trevalyan, Josie Lange, and Alex.

The Orlesian fleet is not as big as the Spanish Armada, which was composed of 22 warships and 108 covered merchantman. There were also a number of small vessels accompanying them. On the other hand, Celene had not been planning her invasion as long as Philip II. For that matter, the Fereldans did not have the naval power that the English possessed. While the English ships were much smaller than the Spanish, and heavily outgunned, there were

around 200 of them. Ferelden can only muster a total of two dozen, tops, and some of them are privateers and converted fishing boats and merchantmen.

English theatre has never paid much attention to the Aristotelian unities. They have been powerfully influential, however, in European dramaturgy. It's one of the reasons that many Europeans, up until the mid-19th century, thought Shakespeare barbarous. Big sprawling plays like King Lear, with its many locations and huge cast, made no sense to them.

Had some honeywine Friday night. Not Orlesian, but Ethiopian. Tej. Interesting and not at all like mead.

A piece of fan art for Victory at Ostagar! Thanks to Girl-Chama. There is a link on my profile page.

105. The Fleet That Had to Die

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 105: The Fleet That Had to Die

Those refugees who had escaped Val Royeaux by ship began landing up and down the coast within a day or two. Not all of them were alive. Plenty of boats capsized in the panic, spilling their burdens into the cruel sea.

The first of the bodies washed up the following morning: the remains of a beautiful young girl who floated in, breasts bared to the empty sky, while gulls screamed overhead. Soon bodies drifted to shore all along the coast, and were eagerly looted, both by the people of the local fishing villages and by the denizens of pirates' coves.

A number of heavily-laden boats reached the Port of Lydes by sunset of the following day, and the hideous news began to spread like a cancer on the land. By the next day, boats were landing in Val Chevin to the north. It took six days for the larger ships to put in at Cumberland, and the people aboard them were starving. Along the coast, news from the sea met news from the shattered army, and the panic grew steadily. A great many of the most powerful nobles had been at Court in Val Royeaux, and their vassals and stewards at home would

eventually begin to consider how the world had changed.

A handful of mages had survived the destruction of the White Spire and managed to fight their way out of the city. They had not had time to dress in proper robes, and had picked up cloaks and valuables from the dead and dying. There were too many people crowding on the roads for anyone to care about a few more shabby fugitives. Enchanter Rhys tried to think about where they could go.

"We can go anywhere!" a red-haired girl burst out eagerly. "The Phylactery Chamber was destroyed! Nobody knows we're alive. Nobody knows we're mages."

"Wherever we go," Rhys said, "I suggest we get as far away from the darkspawn as possible."

They followed the coast north to Val Chevin, and then took the Northwest Highway. Maybe Andoral's Reach would be far enough. Maybe they would go even farther. Soon, all the Templars in Orlais would be hurrying in the other direction.

The Divine, Beatrix III, had actually survived the darkspawn attack, defended by faithful Templars, one of whom cast aside his weapons and carried her to safety on his brawny back. A great many brave men and women died to cover her flight through the Cathedral complex to the entrance to an escape tunnel that ran under the city. Most fortunately, it had not been discovered by the darkspawn. They emerged from the tunnel mouth near the River Royeaux at a considerable

distance from the walls. Downriver, the night sky was orange and grey above the tortured city. It was raining; a sharp cold rain that penetrated the Divine's thin night shift and even the heavy cloak someone had wrapped her in. No one knew, until she was untied from the exhausted Templar, that during the terrors of their flight, her heart had quietly failed.

"What shall we do?" sobbed a young priest. "Revered Mother," she asked Mother Dorothea, "What shall we do?"

That sensible woman and experienced politician, Revered Mother Dorothea, was too weary for speech. It had been all she could do to round up the Divine and a few companions. As they were escaping, just ahead of the darkspawn, a pair of priests had run after them screaming, begging them not to shut the concealed door in their faces. If they had waited for those women, the darkspawn would have seen them and caught them all. Mother Dorothea had given the order to shut and bar the door, and now she could not stop seeing those women's faces; could not stop hearing their screams.

The ranking Templar, Ser Evangeline, stepped forward to lead them, young as she was. "We shall find the nearest shelter and rest," she said, calm and decisive. "Pursuit tonight is unlikely. The darkspawn have plenty to occupy them in Val Royeaux."

"What of Her Perfection?" asked a tearful lay brother.

"We shall wrap her in the blanket and take turns carrying her. We must give her a decent pyre when we can. Yes, we shall

rest, and then follow the river north to Belle Fourche. The roads divide there. By then, a plan should have come to us."

"Someone must take up the mantle of the Divine," whispered Mother Dorothea's secretary. "Someone must speak for our Lady Andraste."

"That person must be properly elected by a duly assembled Sacred Conclave," Dorothea replied quietly.

"In these disordered times—" the secretary urged.

"Stop. I do not wish to hear it."

She had given the order that had killed her fellow priests, and at the moment, she hoped she would never be called upon to give any orders ever again.

Later that day, when two fleets met off Cape Gris Nez, three Orlesian warships were sunk outright in the first moments of the battle. Five transports joined them under the waves, and four more were soon burning. On the deck of the *Emperor Drakon*, the admiral's personal priest was instructed to pray. Indeed, she would have prayed, ordered or not, for they were in terrible danger.

The Nevarran vessels only numbered twelve, but they wreaked havoc, not by boarding and fighting like honest warriors, but by the foul and treacherous use of magic. Orlesians ships would try to come to grips with the enemy,

but the Nevarrans evaded them, and the mages on board—who could be seen quite clearly, though they were out of bow range—continued to rain the wrath of the elements on the ships of the Empress.

There was no defense against the fireballs the Nevarrans launched at them. Not all of them struck their targets, of course. Some were timed badly, and exploded in the air as the ship dipped into the trough of a wave. Some struck the water and fizzled out. Some missed entirely.

"Pursue them!" shouted the Grand Admiral. "If we can get close enough, we can board them and slaughter them! We outnumber them ten to one!"

The flagship's captain stared at the admiral in disbelief. The man clearly had no clue about what was and was not possible in a sailing vessel. *Emperor Drakon* looked impressive, but the elaborate aftcastle had made it top-heavy and hard to handle. He had previously tried to talk to the Grand Admiral about dismantling some of it once the problems manifested, but that suggestion had not exactly been well received.

Besides, the problem with pursuing the enemy was that a closer distance made the Nevarran mages' aim that much better. Some of the Orlesian captains understood this, and considered escape their own option. They raised more canvas and ran before the wind, their larger area of sail enabling them greater speed than the smaller Nevarran warships.

"Come back, you cowards!" the admiral sputtered. "You will

be flayed for this betrayal!" He saw a Nevarran ship coming up on the port side, and shouted. "That one! Attack that one!"

"Monseigneur," the captain objected, " we cannot turn so quickly..."

"I decide what you can do! Turn and attack! Chase the coward!"

Under the captain's orders, the *Emperor Drakon* began a slow, ponderous maneuver that would eventually cause their course to intersect with that of the warship. In some ways, it was not a bad idea, since they would no longer present a broadside target to the enemy. However, the sea was thick with ships, and sudden changes of course by a few in the center of the fleet raised the prospect of collisions.

"Too slow! Too slow!" the admiral raged. "Turn faster!"

"Monseigneur, we *cannot* turn faster..."

"You!" The admiral pointed to a random sailor. "Obey me! Take the wheel and turn this ship!"

When the sailor glanced first at his captain for confirmation, the admiral lost his head completely, and ordered one of his own bodyguards to take the helm. The man-at-arms gripped the unfamiliar wheel uncertainly, but pushed it manfully in the direction the admiral indicated. The captain burst out into a stream of objections, and was knocked down by a chevalier for his impudence

A strong gust caught the sails. The ship rolled, then heeled. The Grand Admiral fell sprawling, and looked around stupidly, trying to understand what was happening. The priest wailed out appeals to the Maker.

There followed a sickening lurch, and waves splashed over the port side. The captain lunged at the wheel, and shoved the man-at-arms aside, trying desperately to save the ship.

"Ease the sails!" he shouted, hoping to spill some wind and right the dangerous tilt.

It was too late. Orlesians watched in horror and Nevarrans in delight as the flagship slowly rolled over, the massive weight of the aftcastle weighing it down. Sailors leaped into the water, swimming for their lives. Some of them were picked up by other Orlesian vessels. The chevaliers, the servants, and the horses were not so fortunate. None of the elven servants knew how to swim—though one quick-witted elf clung to a spar and survived—and the horses were locked in the hold, and perished miserably.

It had been hinted to the chevaliers that wearing plate armor at sea was not a particularly wise move, but such advice had been dismissed as poor-spirited. Now the chevaliers sank like stones. Once in the water, they vanished without a visible struggle, and were lost.

More ships were coming under attack, and they tried to break free of the attackers. They were not well positioned for it, because the admiral's orders that they hug the coast put them

close to the lee shore, with the wind from the north pressing them ever closer to reefs, rocks, and the shifting sands. The Nevarran captains were perfectly aware of this, and showed no mercy. The ships that had fled most quickly were the survivors.

Others were burned or blown apart. Some ran aground, their keels mired on sandbars or broken on submerged rocks. On one of the grounded ships, an older chevalier had the sense to free the horses and let them swim to shore. He doffed his treasured armor and swam after his mount. Meanwhile, the sailors lowered the ship's two boats and there was a bitter struggle over who would occupy them. Most chevaliers could not bear to remove their armor, but the majority of the survivors did. In one of the boats, the chevaliers discovered that none of them knew how to row or steer. That boat capsized before it was halfway to the beach.

The sun set, and the wind rose. The Nevarrans withdrew, pleased with their success. They had sunk nine of the fifteen warships and thirteen of the transports. Nine more transports had been wrecked by collisions or underwater hazards. Three of the transports had been heavily damaged and had surrendered. They were being towed back to Cumberland as prizes. Four transports had refused to surrender, and the Nevarrans did not want to waste time and lives in a hand-to-hand struggle. Instead, their masts and rudders destroyed, the ships were left to drift, helpless, toward whatever fate the Maker had in store for them.

The surviving Orlesian fleet of six warships and twenty-five

transports was widely dispersed. Night was falling, and all of them felt the need to regroup. A number of them needed serious repairs. The logical move was to make for Jader and the port facilities there. They could still strike a serious blow against Ferelden, and they still outnumbered the pathetic Fereldan navy, but it might be wise to revisit the details of their mission. Their admiral was dead, and his second-in-command as well. Once it was clearer who had survived, they could establish a new chain of command.

The ruins of the Orlesian army faced the dawn, beginning to comprehend the extent of the disaster. Most of the chevaliers and senior officers were dead. Most of the soldiers had no idea what they ought to do. There were hundreds of wounded, many suffering burns. The Marquis and a few other nobles had brought their own personal mage healers. Most had also been killed in the attack, but a few survived. Some took the opportunity to run away. Others remained, doing their best to treated the injured. A mob of furious soldiers gathered, blaming the mages for the acts of the Archdemon. Stones were thrown, but by the time knives were drawn, a junior officer was able to calm the situation. That officer sent some reliable men to destroy all the army's remaining stores of strong drink. Ale and wine were necessities, but brandy would drive frightened men to madness.

Other leaders arose. A minor noble from Halamshiral won some of the more patriotic to his side, urging them to come with him to Montsimmard.

"We cannot run like children from the darkspawn. Let us put ourselves under the command of the Grey Wardens, and fight for our country!"

Much of the army split along regional lines and many men simply wanted to go home to their families. The soldiers who hailed from Val Royeaux did not want to go south to Montsimmard, but wanted to see if their loved ones had survived. A vigorous, charismatic sergeant mustered them into a company. They called themselves the Imperial Guard, which was absurd, since not one of them was well-born enough ever to have served in the actual Imperial Guard. However, they managed to organize and equip themselves decently, preparing to march north.

The degree of discipline varied widely, depending on the strength of the officers. Some attempted to capture and hang deserters, and were themselves hanged for their pains. Other officers were more respected, and were able to maintain order in the ranks. A large portion of the army remained at the camp at the River Orne, under the command of the junior officer, the Sieur de Flambard, who had quelled the riot. He sent out bands to requisition supplies from the locals, and assigned men to help care for the wounded, who of course all remained therein camp. There was talk that within a few days, they would have sufficient wagons to take the wounded along with them to Verchiel, the closest large city. The Sieur de Flambard meant well, but by degrees, the force was transforming into a gang of mercenaries, and he into a mercenary captain.

On the thirtieth of Guardian, the Wardens of Montsimnard came upon the camp, on their way to Val Royeaux. They were not alone, for Orlais had a second Circle of Mages, this one at Montsimnard itself, and it was entirely at the disposal of the Orlesian Warden-Commander. The quarrels and debate raged anew. Precious time was wasted in trying to resolve all the factional conflicts. The influx of mages both helped the wounded and fanned the flames of discord. In the end, the Wardens moved on, taking the "Imperial Guard" with them, and that portion of the army that was still loyal to the Empress. By that time, a good fourth of the survivors had deserted and melted away into the countryside. Shortly thereafter, the Sieur de Flambard withdrew with his troops to Verchiel. The city did not know until much too late that it should have shut its gates against them.

The Orlesian fleet limped toward Jader, gradually falling into something of a formation. Two more ships sank during the voyage, though one had sunk slowly enough that there was time to evacuate the humans onto another vessel. A skeleton crew remained aboard, and headed to land, hoping to beach their foundering ship and save the horses and elves aboard. At the very least, they hoped to sink close enough to land for most to swim or float to safety.

On the first of Drakonis, the rest of the ships sighted the Jader headland.

They also sighted another fleet arrayed against them: a fleet of ten warships of varying sizes, and two modified caravels. A

fireball arced out ominously toward them, a portent of their coming destruction. Immediately upon realizing that these ships, too, carried mages, a number of transports turned south, preferring to offload their soldiers and horses rather than to lose them altogether. The Ferelden fleet moved in quickly, the wind with them. Nor were mages their only armament. Some ships moved in boldly, bearing strange machines that sprayed fire over the Orlesian ships in gouts of chemical flame.

They targeted the Orlesian warships, first. One of the modified caravels was particularly maneuverable, and captained by the clever and resourceful Isabela, it wreaked havoc on the enemy. She steered *Siren's Call* in between a pair of warships, enabling the mages to attack from both sides of her ship. Leaving devastation in her wake, she sailed on, cleaving the Orlesian fleet in two.

What followed was a slaughter. Ships were pummeled, were burned, were shattered. Hulls were breached, masts toppled, canvas went up in flame. In the end, there was little choice for the survivors but to surrender. Prize crews were assigned, and the crestfallen chevaliers imprisoned below decks. Isabela had three prizes of her own, and rather than take chevaliers for ransom, decided that she would rather pass them on to her colleagues—once utterly stripped of valuables—and take their horses instead, which would be worth a fortune in Ferelden or Kirkwall. When a frightened elven servant asked what she intended for them, the Rivainni only shrugged, and said she would drop them off somewhere safe

after her voyage was over.

Only one of the smaller Orlesian transports managed to escape into Jader harbor. It was not, alas, one of the ships carrying an experienced harbor pilot. The ship staggered, its hull caught in the soft wet sand of the Horn. The tide was low, but already flowing back in. Looking toward Jader, much of the Horn was exposed: a long, wet stretch leading to the harbor. It bulged out in the middle, and narrowed down at the end by the harbor.

"Quickly!" shouted a young chevalier. "Unload the horses. We can ride down the sand to Jader!"

With frantic speed, gangplanks were lowered into the shallow water, and the horses were led down them, squealing and neighing. Their tack was thrown over the side, along with the elven grooms, who saddled and bridled the horses, up to their thighs in the surf.

Chevaliers desperately packed their belongings, reluctant to leave anything behind. Heavy trunks and chests were shoved into the elven servants' arms, with dire threats if they did not arrive safely at the barracks. Some were more sensible, and took off down the sandbar as soon as they could mount their horses. It was a quite a long way to the city, and the water was perceptibly rising. Men-at-arms leaped down, bags slung over their shoulders, and marched away, sloshing through the water, stumbling onto the heavy sand, following the first of the horsemen, and dodging the laggards, for the chevaliers had not the least scruple about riding down anyone in their way.

The ship's boat was lowered, and the sailors piled in, sculling neatly toward the land.

Impatient, armed humans bellowed orders at the elves, demanding that their own horses be saddled first. It grew crowded and chaotic, as horses panicked and began swimming away. Cursing chevaliers ran after them, grabbing at their reins. More and more, as the water rose, men threw themselves onto their mounts bareback and galloped away. As the water rose, it flowed into the ship through the damaged hull, and the vessel shifted, leaning dangerously. The gangplanks collapsed, and the last of the horses fell into the water, eyes rolling white.

The narrow spit of sand was growing narrower by the moment as the water rose. A pair of elves, burdened by their master's impedimenta, looked at each other, threw the trunks aside, and began running.

Fourteen of the chevaliers made it to the harbor, riding hard. Twenty-five of the men-at-arms survived, though most had to swim the last third of the way. The ship's boat arrived, and was pulled up safely above the high-tide mark, while the captain told the shocking story of the defeat to the port commander, gesticulating wildly. Two of the elves—the ones who had run first—dog-paddled and splashed up onto the beach, and were beaten savagely by their master for losing his luggage.

The rest of the elves, the ones unable to swim, made it as far as the wide bulge in the Horn, but the water rose too rapidly

for them to make it to shore. They were trapped, easily visible, on a shrinking little island. The port commander looked at their through his fine spyglass, shaking his head. He sent some of his guards down to help the human survivors as they emerged from the sea and to catch the frantic, riderless horses.

"I suppose we could send out a boat for the elves," he muttered.

The captain shrugged. "My men are too weary. Besides, they could never reach them in time, anyway."

So they watched, as quite a large crowd gathered, chattering about how someone should do something. The cries of the elves drifted on the breeze, high and desperate, as the water rose up and covered them.

Jader was uneasy. The Alienage was seething.

News had come a few days before that Roc du Chevalier had fallen to Queen Bronwyn the Dragonslayer. The people of Jader were familiar with the rumors that Orlais was to launch an invasion of the country to the east. They were not sure what to do with the news that said country had taken Orlesian territory instead. Jader was very close to the Rock. It was only a day away, in fact. They had never felt vulnerable like this: not in their entire history.

It was also known that the darkspawn had risen and attacked

Val Royeaux. No one had expected that. When the Wardens marched out, it seemed like the world had been turned upside down. The great army they were expecting to house would almost certainly not be coming, because it would have other enemies—closer enemies—to fight.

And now the city learned that the invasion fleet, the dockyards for which they had spent thousands in taxes, had been destroyed. The enemy ships on the first day had been Nevarran, but the ships that had followed up the attack two days later had flown Ferelden colors. It was true, then: Nevarra and Ferelden had forged an alliance. That was ominous.

And the death of those elves out in the harbor had fired up the Alienage. Two of the elves had survived the shipwreck and a severe beating, and had run away, hiding among the elves of Jader. A patrol of city guards sent to retrieve the disobedient pair had been driven away with stones, and now the Alienage gates were shut. It was well known in the Alienage that Queen Bronwyn welcomed elves among her companions. Even the legendary Dalish elves had left their forest to follow her. *She* would not have left the elves to drown, surely.

The large dwarven population watched the situation unfold more objectively. The Marquis had never been popular among them, mainly because he never paid his bills. He was no friend to the dwarves. Queen Bronwyn, on the other hand, had not only fought in the Deep Roads as a Warden, but had traveled to Orzammar and settled the succession dispute in favor of the present king. The dwarves below had responded to her

call to fight against the Blight. It made surface dwarves rather proud—in a distant, third-hand sort of way—to know that their cousins were doing their part.

The Queen's ships had just whipped a huge Orlesian fleet. There was talk that she used magic, but also some clever inventions that sounded dwarven in origin. The Queen might be a human, but she had the sense to value good dwarven engineering.

And the Queen had agents in Jader. Everyone knew about the dwarf girl who was involved in a scuffle a little while ago. If she was not one of the Jader Wardens, then she was one of the Queen's. And she was definitely not one of the Jader Wardens.

An Empress might ordinarily outrank a Queen, but things were different when the Empress and her army were far away and under attack by the darkspawn, and the Queen in question was only a day away—with her own army. It put things in perspective. From all reports, Queen Bronwyn *did* pay her bills. The tax rate was a lot lower in Ferelden, too.

Even among certain elements of the human population of Jader—the free-thinking, the idealistic, the lovers of adventure—the young Red Queen was a popular figure of romance. She was the Girl Warden, the Dragonslayer: she pushed back the darkspawn and fearlessly followed them into their lairs. She had gathered champions around her, like a Hero of old; she upheld chivalry and justice by right of arms.

The apostate mages in Jader were also talking, through an offshoot of the Mage Collective. It looked like Queen Bronwyn was turning toward Jader. She favored mages. She traveled with known apostates. The Revered Mother had denounced her in the Chantry for that. The enemy of their enemy was definitely their friend.

And then, a pair of hunters entered the city with the news that the Queen of Ferelden's host was at the gates of Chateau Solidor, which had opened to her.

Meanwhile, the Grey Wardens of Thedas considered the situation. As predicted, the initial attack by the darkspawn on faraway, insignificant Ferelden had been only a feint. No one had been taken in by it, and they congratulated themselves on their good judgment. The Wardens there had apparently dealt with it very commendably, although the acting commander was shockingly ignorant of tradition. However, that had been only a sideshow, and was now over. The real Blight had begun.

And it had begun with a very great catastrophe. A great city had been undermined and savaged, and hundreds, perhaps thousands of women had been taken, presumably to breed more darkspawn. Something must be done, and quickly.

The First Warden consulted the Chief Archivist for his analysis. He was grim, but pointed out that prompt action was the only acceptable strategy.

"It will take some time to turn all the women, because a proper nest must be established. We can hope that has not already been done. Then it takes, we believe, around ten days to turn a woman into a Broodmother. After that it takes yet more time for the tubes and pods to develop and then a month for the first darkspawn to gestate. Alas, many things are unknown to us: how many darkspawn an average Broodmother can produce; the average lifespan of a Broodmother. Obviously, it is neither feasible nor acceptable to allow one to develop in controlled conditions. We do know that many of the captured women will die: of shock, of injuries, by suicide, by accident. There is evidence that some women die during the process of spawning."

The First Warden grimaced. "Many will also live. If you can call it that."

"True. We can expect a great increase in the horde within the next two months. This time is critical. Even more than the Archdemon itself, we must raze Val Royeaux, find the nest or nests, and burn them out. Broodmothers are very hard to kill by conventional means. It is better to try to seal them in and use magic, poison, or fire. I suggest you form a task force of specialists to target this problem. The force will need serious defense, both by Wardens and by all allies we can command. And we must share this information with all the Warden-Commanders."

The First Warden listened, nodding sometimes, thinking through the best way to pursue the campaign. As he had predicted, the darkspawn had struck at an important target.

Nonetheless, he must send word to that crazy barbarian girl in Ferelden as well as the official Warden-Commanders. He had recently received an abusive missive from her. She was arrogant and untutored in proper Warden protocol, but that was not entirely her fault. She had so far been quite effective, both in gathering allies and in fighting darkspawn. Killing the Architect was quite the accomplishment. Besides, she had the ear of the King of Orzammar. Yes, he would send some experienced Warden liaisons to her: adaptable, *tactful* people who would know how not to end up with their heads on pikes. If she was still alive after the Blight, the Wardens should attempt to persuade her to relinquish her command to someone who did not insist on holding a title. If he sent good people, perhaps they would spot some likely candidates, even among those savages. Ordinarily he would have chosen an Orlesian, since Ferelden was so conveniently close to Orlais and the two countries had long-standing ties. The Orlesians, however, would have their hands full for the foreseeable future.

The heads of state were informed of the danger, as was standard procedure. None opposed the order's wish to fight the Blight. It was their duty. A powerful darkspawn menace on the surface could ultimately threaten everyone. A few expressed anxiety about a multiple attack, and requested that some Wardens remain within their borders. That was not deemed unreasonable. Every post left a garrison, both to watch for new attacks and to recruit new Wardens, who might soon be needed.

It was also time to invoke the ancient treaties. The dwarves had already committed themselves. The Circles of Magi were sent messages, summoning them to battle against the enemies of all life on Thedas.

The Tevinter Circle, of course, the oldest, largest, and most powerful Circle in Thedas, was the seat of power in the Imperium, as it included not just those who had attained the rank of magister, but all the Imperial Senators and the Imperial Archon himself. They had vast resources to draw upon, and would send an impressive contingent. And they did not hesitate to use Blood Magic. Very likely, it would be needed.

The First Warden contacted the Circle at Hossberg himself, sure, due to his influence in the Anderfels, of their complete cooperation. He was not disappointed. Aside from a few instructors who remained with the apprentices, everyone fit to travel would do so.

The reaction of the other Circles varied, depending on the relative power of the secular authorities versus the Chantry. In Rivain, the site of the last and final battle of the Fourth Blight, where Garahel fell, the response was strong.

The Nevarrans sent word to Cumberland. Prince Tylus was somewhat startled to learn that at the same time they had sent two dozen able enchanters to attack the Orlesian fleet, the darkspawn were attacking Val Royeaux. Nonetheless, he did not regret the raid, which had been very profitable. The fleet would have attacked their new ally, ignorant of events in their own country. The Grand Enchanter told him that the

magicians had enjoyed their adventure. More volunteered to join the Grey Wardens and the Nevarran auxiliaries. As for the Orlesian prisoners, he decided that rather than hold them for ransom—which might be long in coming—he would permit the Grey Wardens to inform them of the situation. To a man, they chose to march with the Wardens rather than rot in Nevarran dungeons.

In Antiva, there was some excitement at the news of a Blight, and a feeling that this was an exciting, historic adventure, worth experiencing. The Templars, hearing of the destruction of the Grand Cathedral, were eager to go and avenge the depredations of the false Old God. Their attitude enabled a very large number of magicians to sail with them. The Wardens even experienced an influx of hopeful recruits, including a number of Crows, who wanted a change. The Crow Masters discussed this, and decided that as a Blight was an event that had not happened in four hundred years, permitting a few restless boys and girls to take part was in fact, good public relations.

The Warden post at Ansborg in the Free Marches received an excellent response from the Circle in their home city. The numbers they could muster from Markham and Starkhaven were less impressive. They traveled by riverboat down the Minanter to Wycome, where they took ship. At Ostwick, they docked, and the Warden-Commander made a personal appeal to the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander, with considerable success. A similar attempt in Kirkwall yielded not a single magician, for Knight-Commander Meredith

Stannard forbade any mage or Templar of the Kirkwall Circle to leave.

"The Grey Wardens," she said coldly, "have ever been a refuge for criminals and apostates."

The Warden-Commander looked her in the eye, and left, making a note to deal with her later. The Grey Wardens would not forget such an insult.

Nonetheless, word got out, as word will do, and a number of Kirkwall's mages, both apostates and from the Circle itself, slipped away. A few managed to make it to the docks and offer their lives and magic to the Warden-Commander. Others braved the terrors of the Planascene Forest and its wyverns, or the desert lands of the Vimmark Pass. Some even survived, and found armies that were glad to take them.

From Tevinter, from Nevarra, and from Weisshaupt, a great army of Wardens, their griffon banners streaming in the wind, journeyed south on the Imperial Highway, moving toward the source of the Blight. The First Warden himself was in command, glad that he had lived to see this day. Border crossings were alerted to expect large numbers of Grey Wardens. The other Wardens, from Rivain and Antiva and the Free Marches, sailed to the great city of Cumberland, their rallying point, to fulfill the duty that could not be forsworn.

There was also the matter of the Dalish, who, like the Dwarves and the mages, were also bound by ancient treaties

to support the Wardens. This was a far trickier matter. Historically, sometimes the Dalish came forth against the Blights. Sometimes they did not.

For one thing, one had to be able to *find* the Dalish. The Dalish did not conveniently live in an underground city or in a tower, but flitted through the forest, treading softly. Nor did they live in all the nations of Thedas. No sane Dalish elf would set foot within the borders of the Tevinter Imperium, since the practice there was to capture and enslave any "wild" elf.

There was also the delicate issue of the Blight having arisen in Orlais, which was another place that the Dalish tended to avoid—or at least which they traveled through as unobtrusively as possible. After all, the Dalish were named for the Dales of Orlais, their ancient homeland, granted to them for their loyal service to Andraste herself. However, after the Second Blight, relations had soured, and the Orlesians had roused the Divine to declare an Exalted March on the elves, ultimately resulting in the acquisition of territory that now amounted to a fourth of the Empire, composing its eastern portion from Montsimmard (once a border fortress) all the way to the Frostbacks. The Dalish elves were the survivors of the elven aristocracy: those who, unlike the commoners who had been herded into the Alienages, kept their independence at the price of a wandering life.

Would the Dalish fight to protect the Orlesians, against whom they must hold bitter rancor? The First Warden doubted it. As well ask them to fight for the Tevinters, were *they* invaded. Rumor had it that the girl in Ferelden had made contact with

the Dalish, and that a number of them had joined her, but would they remain with her when she turned west?

The First Warden's doubts were well-founded. Attempts by the Wardens to enlist the Dalish yielded spotty results. Some Warden-Commanders had conscientiously tried to maintain relations with various clans, and a few of those gave vague promises of going south. More simply melted away into the forests. In the Free Marches, the Warden assigned the duty of contacting the elves was given a blunt refusal by one clan's Keeper.

"That treaty you speak of no longer has any validity. It was made between the Lords of the Dales and the Grey Wardens. The Dales were stolen from the elves by your Chantry, and the Grey Wardens did not aid us then. We shall not aid you now. If the darkspawn come, we shall fight them in our own way."

While the Wardens and their allies upheld—or not—their ancient duties, the various nations of Thedas considered how best to deal with other aspects the current crisis. The current *Orlesian* crisis. Some Wardens were more forthcoming than others. The Chief Archon of Tevinter and the King of Nevarra were on excellent terms with their respective Warden-Commanders, and they now knew that Orlais was currently without a ruler. They knew that the elite had been savaged by the attack, and that the empire would be in disarray for years, perhaps for decades. Possibly permanently. And everyone hated Orlais.

The Archons of Tevinter debated the matter, and within days, all the property of Orlesian nationals was confiscated, including their ships, their goods, their houses, and even their persons. As Orlais had made itself universally unloved, there was no outcry at the injustice, but rather a great deal of spiteful satisfaction. Other foreign merchants were pacified with new contracts without Orlesian competition. It was all a tremendous boon to the Imperium's coffers, and the Imperial Archon judiciously gave a considerable portion of the proceeds to the Grey Wardens, to further their valuable, nay, *essential* mission. Over a hundred fit and healthy Orlesians were offered the choice between slavery and induction into the Wardens. They would be sent south to fight as soon as a slave ship was refitted for the duty.

There were also Orlesian mages in Tevinter. Some had been sent there through official channels as students. Others were escaped apostates, making new lives in a land where the word "mage" was not an insult. It was decided that these individuals would be treated quite differently. They were approached, and also offered the chance to become Wardens, but the Joining was not forced upon them. However, in Tevinter, Grey Warden mages were deemed the elite of the order, and paid accordingly. A number of immigrants looked upon it as a good opportunity— excellent pay, free room and board, potential for advancement—which it was, if one survived the initiation.

King Baltus of Nevarra heard the news with grim joy, and began redrawing the maps. Not immediately, but eventually,

all of northern Orlais would be Nevarra. They would not go all the way to Val Royeaux, because that would be Blighted, and unfit for habitation for generations, but from Arlesans to Andoral's Reach, they would have new, great cities to add to their realm. Due west held few charms: marshes, deserts, barren mountains. Let the Orlesians continue to claim those worthless territories. The prize plums would be his. He sent troops to support the Wardens. Their secondary duty would be to stem the tide of refugees—preferably by diverting them to the undesirable Western Approach.

The news filtered more slowly to other countries. The Crows of Antiva received it faster than the queen of that country, due to a contact within the Grey Wardens themselves. Their first response was to cancel the contracts on those already known to be dead, and to send no more assassins to Val Royeaux. Presumably the members of their cell within the city were either dead or fighting to survive. The various Masters then called a council to discuss the validity of contracts taken out by those deceased individuals, primarily those taken out by the Empress or her agents. The Empress had her own Shadows, of course, but the Crows had also been used, especially when she wished to deceive others with a false flag attack. While the Crows prided themselves on honoring their contracts as a general rule, there was no one who would hold them to account if these particular contracts were not fulfilled. They could keep the gold and protect their human and elven assets, who might otherwise be killed or injured. There were some other longstanding contracts, such as the one on Loghain Mac Tir, which were set aside as a separate issue.

No one had dared to take up that contract in several years. However, a number of other people had also contracted for his death, and so a final decision was held in abeyance.

The contracts taken out by Rendon Howe on the young Queen of Ferelden and her brother were cancelled. Rendon Howe was no longer alive to complain, and the Fereldans were fighting the Blight, which was an advantage to them all, now that everyone was convinced that it was indeed a Blight. However, word had come that the contract taken out on the Howe family was incomplete. Signora Fortuny, that distinguished and important patron, had learned that the eldest son, now Arl of Amaranthine, had survived, and she was very angry. The Masters agreed that someone must be sent to tie up that unfortunate loose end.

Some members of the clergy also knew of the attack on Val Royeaux. The Black Divine in Minrathous had naturally been informed, and had kept his solemn countenance to an admirable degree, as he led prayers for those dead in the rival religious center to the south. The Grand Cleric of Nevarra knew that the Grand Cathedral had been destroyed and that many clergy had perished. No one could tell her the fate of the Divine.

Ser Silas Corthwaite had been following the Imperial Highway, day after day. His heart lifted at the longed-for sight of the Frostback Gates, the wide mountain pass that was the gateway to Orzammar, and further on, to Ferelden. Ultimately, the way narrowed, as it led through heavily fortified

Gherlen's Pass, but that was another day away.

There was much on his mind. The Divine was totally under the control of the Reclamationist Party, who wanted to put Ferelden under Orlesian rule once more. The attack by the darkspawn at Ostagar was interpreted by them as a sign of the Maker's anger against the Fereldans, who had rebelled against their rightful rulers. The Empress had been cool to the Reclamationists for years, but the darkspawn attack had evidently seemed a fine opportunity to regain those fertile fields in the Bannorn. Orlais needed Ferelden to better prosecute its war with Nevarra.

People tended to forget that Silas was Ferelden-born-and-bred himself, and when reminded, they would condescend with silly compliments about how civilized and courteous he was, and how he was not at all like a Fereldan.

His usual response was, "I *am* a Fereldan. Therefore, I am exactly like one."

He did not like the Orlesians taking advantage of what the Grey Wardens regarded as a Blight, but there had been little he could do, until Revered Mother Dorothea had given him a direct order to warn Grand Cleric Muirin. Orlais was not a safe place for her. She should plead ill-health and stay in Denerim, no matter how pressing the "invitations" were.

He rode on, resting his horse frequently, since he had not had a change since Halamshiral. Perhaps he should turn off and head toward Jader, where he could get a fresh pair of horses

and night's rest in a bed in the Templar barracks. That, however, might delay him. It was vital to keep ahead of the Imperial Army.

As a Templar, he could generally claim shelter most places, and considered the idea of stopping at Chateau Solidor instead. The castle drew closer as he rode, its towers blending into the rugged hills behind it. It was an Imperial fortress, and the captain there would almost certainly welcome him. As he approached, something nagged at him. Something was different here, and he tried to determine what it was.

And then he noticed the banner at the topmost tower. Silas was fairly sure that particular banner should not be there. He picked up the pace, squinting ahead, and then noticed all the activity surrounding the castle. Something had happened...

The soldiers had noticed him now, and were looking his way. It would cowardly and foolish to turn around and gallop off. He rode on, and presented himself to the nearest officer.

"Ser Silas Corthwaite of the Grand Cathedral. I am bearing a message for the Grand Cleric of Ferelden."

"Well— " The officer chuckled grimly. "That's way above my pay grade. Reckon you'll need to see the Queen. Follow me."

Silas dismounted and followed the officer. His horses were led away, with the officer's cheerful assurance that no one would steal them. Once they reached the gates of the castle proper,

he was handed off to a different officer, this one with finer armor. Yes, it was perfectly plain that Fereldan troops occupied this castle. The Queen was actually here? What had happened? Had the Fereldans taken Jader, too?

Puzzling over the strange situation, he did not notice the pretty young woman coming down the stairs until she called out to him.

"Silas!"

"Leliana!"

Thanks to my reviewers: JTheClivaz, Raxiselic, Vibrolux61, DjinniGenie, KnightOfHolyLight, Guest, Tirion I, butterflygrrl, Highlord, trevalyan, MsBarrows, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Nemrut, Robbie the Phoenix, le-maru, JackOfBladesX, Mike3207, Lyssa Terald, Blinded in a bolthole, sizuka2, Phygmalion, Jenna53, Death Knight's Crowbar, kitza, Fastforwarmotion, RB23G, NPC200, AD Lewis, darksky01, jnybot, dragonmactir, Herebedragons66, Zute, and Josie Lange.

I changed my mind about Wynne's mage son being dead. Rhys did survive, but he and his friends are escaping to the northwest, and will play no further part in this story.

My list of Circles is from the Dragon Age Wiki. However, I have tossed out the Jainen Circle of Ferelden, which is only referenced in the Google+ and Facebook Game Dragon Age:

Legends. It is not mentioned anywhere else, and since it had no role in *Origins*, I refuse to believe it actually exists. Why would Ferelden have two Circles of Magi a day apart in distance? The logical location would be the island south of Gwaren that in my other fanfic I call Salt Island. Or perhaps at a rebuilt Tower of Ishal at Ostagar. And why doesn't the PC Warden go there? So I am not using Jainen. I am using all the rest of them, however. Remember that while the Rivaini Circle was annulled, that was not until 9:39-40, and the Starkhaven Circle did not burn until around 9:31-32 (estimate). Thus, they still exist.

I've had to invent some towns. Obviously Thedas is grossly underpopulated based on the map. My thought is that (aside from Ferelden), the developers are only showing cities of ten thousand or more. There are all sorts of places that must have settlements around them: where roads fork, at the mouths of rivers, along rivers and lakes, along the ocean. One of the most bizarre blanks is on the map of Orlais, where a road is indicated across the Waking Sea. I presume that indicates a crossing that is heavily used. There should be a town on either side of the sea. In the chapter I refer to "port of Lydes." The map also only shows a few major roads. Obviously there are many more, since we have cities with no roads leading to them. I think there must be a road along the Waking Sea coast, because traveling on the Imperial Highway all around Lake Celestine is ridiculous. And there are no towns at all in the Dales. Huh? there has got to be a town at the mouth of what I call the River Orne, which

connects Lake Celestine to the Waking Sea. There would probably be a town AT Lake Celestine, too. In Ferelden, there should be a town built up around Vigil's Keep, which is at the mouth of the Hafter River.

For the fate of the Orlesian fleet, I was influenced by a dated but readable account of the destruction of the Imperial Russian Baltic fleet at the Battle of Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War. (The Fleet That Had to Die, by Richard Hough). Among other reasons, the Russian defeat was primarily due to three factors: the deficiencies of the Russian warships and their crews, the poor leadership of their admiral, and the choice of the route.

Yes, the Qunari will become very interested in events, but not until they get word of this. Having no Wardens, they will be the last to know.

106. Vive la Reine Rouge

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 106: Vive la Reine Rouge

There was a distinct lack of light in the Aeonar. The rooms occupied by Wardens were very dark indeed, and devoid of comfort. They reminded Tara of another place she had disliked: the Circle Tower. They were worse, really, for at least there were *some* windows at the Circle, even those were very high up on the wall and filled with colored glass, so one could never see outside. At least some light had come in... pretty colored light. The Aeonar was lit by a combination of dwarven crystals and candles. It was smoky and mysterious in a rather threatening way, and it made getting a good look at anything something of a problem. Tara had plenty she wanted to study in detail here, and holding a candle close to time-worn symbols and markings seemed less likely to reveal secrets of the past than to set her hair on fire.

She stood back, gazing at the magnificent mirror. The frame, incised with arcane signs, was not mere gilded wood or plaster, but mostly gold, hence the weight of the object. It was far taller than she, and hinted at possibilities beyond imagination.

"It's an eluvian," Tara decided, studying the elaborate object

Brosca was briefly distracted from munching sausages. "A what?"

"A magical elven mirror."

"Neat." Brosca paused. "What kind of magic? What does it do?"

"Nothing, yet. Give me time. I've only now figured out what it is."

Tara hoped they would leave the Aeonar soon. Loghain had disposed of the worst offenders, and had set up a garrison to protect this place. The Wardens had moved all their loot to the rooms they occupied. At the moment, the Aeonar was not good for much of anything other than as an observation post for watching the sea and for providing shelter for transient troops. Tara wanted to move on and see what was being done about the darkspawn, but there had been delays due to supply problems and heavy rains. While they waited, Tara examined and catalogued the magical objects they had found stored here, and she carefully protected her own finds from Uldred's grasping hands.

She had gone on an Elven Heritage spree a few years before, and read everything in the Circle Library about Her Elven Ancestors. There was even a book on the elven language, though it was not a complete grammar, but more a word list. For that matter, it had not helped her much with the Dalish,

since it seemed that their pronunciation had diverged from whatever source the book's writer had used. There were lots of languages in Thedas, after all, and why shouldn't there be variations in the elven tongue? And they had used more than one kind of writing. The symbols in the ancient elven temple were unknown to her. There had been quite a few ancient texts there, too, and perhaps some of them might hold a key to deciphering some of the symbols. However, at the Circle, the books about the elves were written in standard letters, and the words could be sounded out.

One book about elven culture she had particularly enjoyed was entitled *A Catalog of Elven Relics*. It was filled with fascinating lore about some of the objects, some magical, some not, that a scholar of ancient history had found or heard about. The scholar himself seemed to be human, based on the tone of the the text: a little breathless, a bit patronizing, and unnecessarily mysterious.

She had found the information on eluvians quite impressive. After destroying Arlathan and enslaving elvenkind, the Tevinter magisters had plundered the magical treasures of the elven empire, and a number of eluvians had fallen into their hands. The one in front of her—it must be thousands of years old—must be one of them.

The magisters had never unlocked all the secrets of the eluvians. They had used them to communicate with one another. Perhaps they still did. Perhaps the Tevinters still had working eluvians. It might be another reason why, even though diminished, they had never fallen: not to the Qunari, not to the

Exalted Marches.

According to her book, however, the elves had been able to do other things with their eluvians, most specifically, they had been able to use them as portals. Tara was not sure if that meant that they traveled from eluvian to eluvian or to some magically-designated place. Magical travel would be marvelous.

For now, she wrapped up the elaborate mirror and kept it in the room she slept in with the female Wardens. She had told all her people to say nothing about it.

She next asked Darach in private if he knew anything about eluvians, but he did not recognize even the name, and referred her to Marethari.

"Or Merrill," he said, after a while, considering it further. "Merrill is very interested in the old days of Arlathan. The clan has a few books that the Keeper takes care of. I know nothing more."

Footsore and done in, Siofranni found Keeper Marethari and her clan on the first of Drakonis. Merrill joined them, wide-eyed, wanting to hear the news. Siofranni sat wearily on a mossy stone bench and tried to put her thoughts in order.

"At first we feared that the Orlesians would invade. Danith wished to inform you and to ask the elves to come to their aid. Now, however, it seems unlikely that the Orlesians will come,

for the darkspawn have risen. I think it was in Orlais, for their words sounded like Leliana's. At any rate, the darkspawn destroyed a great city, and slaughtered many elves. It was dreadful, Keeper."

Marethari gave her some strengthening herb tea, and soon a roasted partridge, so tender that the meat slipped from the bones. Siofranni ate and drank gratefully while Marethari and Merrill pondered her words.

"We must send a runner to Lanaya, and to the other clans who have come to Arladahlen."

Siofranni caught the unfamiliar name. From the context, it was what they had decided to name the elven homeland centering around the ancient temple. "Home in the Forest" seemed appropriate.

Merrill said, "I think we should go. We have given our word to Bronwyn. We pledged our help to the Wardens, long ago."

Marethari was not so sure. "Will elves die to defend the Orlesians who drove us from the Dales? Will they die for city elves? It cannot be decided by one or two."

Merrill waited until Siofranni had finished her meal, and then touched her arm.

"Come, *lethallan*. We shall find you shelter for the night, while the others gather."

"Ma serranas."

As they walked, Siofranni was astonished at the changes taking place. She had seen the ancient temple only once, and briefly. It looked very different now. Orderly settlements radiated out from it, in rings of aravels. Within the temple itself, rubble had been cleared, and paving replaced. New rooms had been found, opened up, and cleaned. Some had held great and ancient treasures. Some had been the abode of giant spiders.

The temple had been of great service to Marethari's clan during the hard winter that was now transforming into spring. It was not common for elves to live indoors, but not unheard of, when ruins or abandoned huts could be found. The clan had adapted happily to the security and comfort of a sound roof overhead.

Merrill said, "We lost no little ones over the winter. It is a great blessing."

"What of the barrier to protect us from the shemlen?"

Merrill was pensive and a little sad. "It is a difficult matter. It seems we must have two barriers: an inner one, to protect the temple and the settlement itself, and then a looser, outer one. We wish to keep out enemies, but we wish for other elves to be able to find us. We wish not be troubled, but we must also respect the migration paths of birds and beast and insects. If we girdle our Arladahlen too tightly, we will strangle it." She gave herself a little shake. "But it is a great blessing,

nonetheless, and we are learning so much all the time!"

"But you will come to help us fight the darkspawn?"

"I shall come, and other friends. Perhaps not so many this time."

Astrid swept into Orzammar on the first of Drakonis, and summoned the deshyrs to the Assembly, informing them that the darkspawn had made a major assault on the surface.

"Val Royeaux?" asked Lady Dace. "Isn't that the largest surface city, Paragon?"

Astrid did not believe that it was. Probably Minrathous was larger, but she let the mistake pass. Val Royeaux was far closer to Orzammar than Minrathous was, and would thus stir up the Assembly more.

With a decent, utterly false pretense of brotherly cooperation, King Bhelen pointed out that Orzammar's army had already been put under the command of his good friend, Queen Bronwyn.

"True," his sister the Paragon said, smiling sweetly. "And they've done good service. We need more troops, however, to turn west. I'll make a sweep of Dust Town, and see what I can round up there."

"You can take all the filthy Dusters," gibed Lord Wodrak.

"Every one of them! Another service to Orzammar."

There was some laughter, but not, to Bhelen's disappointment, the mocking sort. His sister accepted the jest with good humor.

"And so I shall. Every one of them fit to bear arms. However, we must also consider the defense of Orzammar itself. I'll be making an inspection of the new barrier doors. It's vital that we keep the Amgarrak Road open. We need another set as well, to close off the Kadash Road at the Forks. The Wardens have explored part of the Kadash Road—at least the part that leads under Gherlen's Pass, but further expeditions will have to wait until the end of the Blight."

"Any sign of the Archdemon?"

"It led the assault on Val Royeaux. The darkspawn are nesting there. We'll want to put a stop to that, but it will take time to go west. We're summoning everyone, including the various units of the Legion of the Dead."

"Did you find any more golems?"

"Not functional ones. King Loghain found one in Denerim, and someone got it to work. He's keeping it, unsurprisingly. Queen Bronwyn has one with her as well. Our people are keeping their eyes out. There were quite a few in Kal'Hiol, but they were badly damaged. Smiths are seeing what they can do with them."

She and Bhelen strolled about, inspecting, chatting amiably. Only the most perspicacious and cunning of nobles could divine the underlying tension. All seemed perfect harmony. The Paragon admired her growing nephew, gave him a gold goblet of antique date, and was informed that another Aeducan was on the way.

"Excellent news!" she approved, quite sincerely. "I'll be sure to find an equally fine gift for him... or her. I should like to have a niece."

That remark caused quite a bit of embarrassment. Another son would take his father's caste. A daughter, of course, would take her mother's. Rica Brosca had been admitted into the Aeducan clan, but as a concubine. Her child would technically have no caste at all. Astrid only smiled at Bhelen's expression.

"Don't worry about it!" she cooed at her little brother. "If it's a girl, I'll adopt her. Such a convenient way to have an heir."

Bhelen eyed her speculatively, and gave a nod. "That might... be a solution."

In the end, she was able to round up a few hundred recruits, and put them under her lieutenants for some short, sharp training. Once she had them in order, she really ought to find Bronwyn and see what she was doing about the darkspawn in Orlais. Probably doing a victory dance. Once she finished that, Astrid had some ideas about how they should move on the horde in the west.

"Silas!"

"Leliana!"

Leliana had only a few moments to catch up with her old comrade Silas before he was led into the Queen's presence. He seemed—aside from some distinguished gray in his beard—much the same as he had three years before, when they had escaped Marjolaine's vicious trap. Mother Dorothea had saved them both, and saved more than their lives. Meeting her had changed them and given them purpose. Leliana had gone to the bucolic peace of the Lothering Chantry, to take stock of her life and choices. Silas had taken vows as a Templar, wanting to make a difference for the better. It was good to see him again.

"You're a *Warden*?" he asked, astonished.

"And you're a Templar!" she teased. "We are both very important people!" She grew grave. "You know about the darkspawn, of course."

"I know there is a Blight," he said, uncertain what she meant. He had ridden far and fast, and talked little with anyone, even at the Templar posts. "The darkspawn appear to be quiet for now."

"Oh..." she said, hating to tell him. "You do not know the latest news. Did you not come across the Wardens of Jader when you were coming east?"

"No." He chuckled ruefully. "I was doing my best not to be noticed. I am on a mission from a mutual friend."

"Mother Dorothea!" Leliana sighed. "I hope she is well..."

"She was when I last saw her," Silas replied. "Why? What has happened?"

"My friend," she said, her hand on his arm. "The darkspawn have risen. They have attacked Val Royeaux."

He was thunderstruck. At first, he could not believe his ears.

"How is this possible? How can you have heard this? I was in Val Royeaux only eight days ago."

"The darkspawn attacked in the early morning of the twenty-sixth. I am not permitted to tell you how I know, but it is true. It was a terrible attack. Many are dead, and many are fleeing for their lives."

"The Divine? The Revered Mother?"

"We do not know. Come. Speak to Her Majesty. She is planning to fight the darkspawn, once she need not fear daggers in her back."

Silas found himself quite impressed by the young Queen of Ferelden. He had heard of the Couslands, of course. A very great family, overlords of the Howes, who ruled Amaranthine, where Silas was from originally. In his youth, he had often

seen Bann Esmerelle at a distance, haughty and exacting. Word had come that she had left Ferelden after the fall of Rendon Howe. Silas had seen Arl Rendon Howe on occasion, and once the Teyrn, Bryce Cousland. Those two were dead, of course. Old Rendon's elder son was arl now. Nathaniel... that was the name. Silas had seen him too on occasion, years before. Some new fellow was ruling the city, and Silas knew nothing about him. He had never expected to see Ferelden again. After what he had suffered from Harwen Raleigh and his Orlesian doxy, Marjolaine, Silas was not sure he wanted to.

That did not mean of course, that he wished his native country ill. If it had meant riding all the way to Denerim to do his duty, he would, of course. But perhaps he might not have to.

The tall and comely queen greeted him affably, less because he was a Templar than because he was vouched for by Leliana. Silas studied her. Why not? She was, at the moment, perhaps the most remarkable person living in Thedas, and looked it. Her eyes, while large and beautifully shaped, were not of a green seen anywhere but in a cup of poison. Silas found them rather alarming. Her armor was likewise notable, and according to gossip, was made from the bones and scales of a dragon killed by the queen herself. Perhaps she had killed a dragon, and perhaps she had not, but the armor was clearly from that rare substance, the remains of a High Dragon. Leaning on the chair was a big longsword in an antique scabbard. Something about the weapon was odd, and Silas' senses, attuned to the arcane and magical, flared briefly

at it.

Queen Bronwyn's mabari watched him with narrowed eyes, apparently sizing him up. Silas, knowing something of the breed, wisely did not get into a staring contest with him. Leliana seemed quite at her ease, and that boded well.

"Your Majesty. This is my friend, Ser Silas Corthwaite," she said, with an elaborate curtsey. "We had many adventures together a few years ago. He is a brave man and fine swordsman."

Silas bowed, and the queen inclined her head graciously.

"Ser Silas. Any friend of Warden Leliana's is welcome." She looked a question at Leliana.

"No, Majesty," said Leliana. "He did not know about the attack. He left Val Royeaux on the..."

"...the twenty-third," Silas interjected.

"Ah." Bronwyn looked upon him with a hint of compassion. "The darkspawn rose in the early morning of the twenty-sixth. You have outridden the news."

"But *you* are aware of it, Your Majesty," Silas pointed out warily, wondering just how she could know.

"Yes, we are. All the Wardens are. The Wardens of Jader left the city on the twenty-seventh, heading west. Surely you must have seen them."

"I did my best not to be seen by anyone, Your Majesty. Had I noted their camp, I would have avoided them. I stayed at Templar barracks along the way. I do not recall seeing Warden armor. Somehow, our paths did not cross."

"And you did not wish to be seen..." Her green eyes turned thoughtful. "Now why is that?"

He knew most of the gossip in Val Royeaux. He had also seen a certain report. "I was entrusted with a message to the Grand Cleric Muirin."

"Indeed. And what message was that?"

There seemed little reason for secrecy. And offending this lady would be very unwise.

"Not to come to Val Royeaux under any circumstances, Your Majesty." He lowered his voice. "Certain events took place before I left. The climate was perhaps too *hot* for someone of her years..."

Bronwyn sat back in her favored chair, considering. She seemed to understand that he wished to tell her more in private. "Indeed. We shall speak more of this later. For now, take your ease. Leliana will help you find comfortable quarters. Do not wander far, since you are not known to my people."

Silas bowed out, along with Leliana, and she tugged on his arm, leading him upstairs.

"No mere barracks for you, my friend!" she declared. "Friends of Wardens stay among the Wardens. We have taken some choice rooms here. I shall introduce you to my companions."

"Wait!" Silas slowed and urged her to a corner, out of the way of busy soldiers and servants.

"Is it true?" he whispered. "About the Ashes?"

She dimpled, and then patted his arm. "All true. I wish you had been there. So beautiful. So glorious. And then," she shrugged ruefully. "And then there was a dragon to fight. We could have used your sword. We lost a good friend."

"I saw the report of the conclave. It was... amazing. The Revered Mother Dorothea believed it. It made many very angry."

"Our Lady Andraste made many angry, too. But that did not stop her from telling the truth. Let us get you settled. After supper tonight, I shall take you to speak to the Queen in private."

He was ushered into a room that seemed filled to bursting with exuberant warriors.

"My friend Ser Silas!" Leliana shouted into the pandemonium. "He's staying with us!"

A dwarf smirked. "Is he staying with *us*, or staying with *you*, Red?"

They were certainly a motley crew. Silas realized that he had been rather sequestered in the past years, living with clergy, dining with clergy, working with clergy. As he had been an aide to Revered Mother Dorothea in the Grand Cathedral, he had almost never seen an elf or a dwarf in that time. He never met a Dalish elf in his life. Nor were they the most exotic of all the company.

In the common room was... a golem. Silas remembered hearing a reference to such creatures many years ago in a story or legend. He had believed them to be fantasy, but there was not only a golem in the common room, but the golem could speak and had a name.

"Another squishy human. Charming. Do make yourself at home. Hang your cloak on me to dry. Don't stand on ceremony."

Aside from the snark, he could tell that his Templar armor did him no favor with the elves or the mages. One of the mages, in fact, was an apostate. Silas blinked at the sight of the beautiful Morrigan, and he had a wild impulse to arrest her on the spot. Probably a mistake, as another mage, obviously her lover, hung about her, hand on his staff, glaring blackly at Silas' Templar regalia, and Silas in it. The woman was the most outrageously apostatish apostate Silas had even met. His thoughts raced.

"Apostatish?" Is that a word? No, but it describes her."

She was not even a Warden! A number of people here were

not, but were fighting with them as auxiliaries: a golden-skinned elf with a permanently amused expression, a tall elf with the strangest tattoos, and an enormous Qunari who watched everything, but said little.

The actual Wardens were likewise diverse: dwarves and humans and Dalish elves. A city elf, too: a delicate, pretty creature with soulful black eyes and silky blond hair. Even among the humans were men and women, tall and short, with a range of accents.

Everyone was eating, though it was only mid-afternoon. Silas was invited to join them, and set to gratefully, since his last good meal had been in Halamshiral, three days before. Leliana was on one side of him, apparently having a second breakfast. Across from him was a pleasant young fellow named Carver. On his other side was a handsome red-haired woman, who did not seem hostile. She was tall and strong, and clearly a warrior.

"Aveline," she introduced herself. "Welcome to the madhouse, Ser Silas."

Over sausages, eggs, and cold pigeon pie, he was given the tale of Solidor's precipitous surrender. It was really almost funny. Clearly, the Ferelden Wardens intended to pursue the campaign against the darkspawn, but wished to protect their rear. Silas assumed that Jader would be next. The rest of the Ferelden army was on its way.

They talked cheerfully, in a kind of code that escaped Silas;

the kind of code used by friends who have seen things no one else would understand. There were oblique references to Orzammar, and a place called Dust Town; to people called Merrill and Lanaya; to other Wardens named Tara and Brosca. To Silas' dismay, Leliana slipped away and left him here among these peculiar strangers.

"She'll be back," predicted the half-drunken dwarf, whom Carver had addressed as Oghren. "Got to nurse and change the little princesses."

Silas must have looked quite blank, because Aveline then kindly explained that the Empress' cousins—young ladies, and certainly not infants—had been prisoners here, and that Leliana had made friends with them.

There was a spare bed in one of the rooms, and Silas put his gear by it. He hoped the next bed over was not Oghren's. He would bet serious money that Oghren snored like a bear.

A few more Wardens made their appearance, and Silas listened to more of their stories, feeling that he needed more context to make sense of them. He had stories of his own, but thought it best to share them with the Queen first.

It was nearly sunset by the time Leliana returned, and then they went to a different room—one with guards at the door, that must be the Queen's private apartments.

Silas made his bows again, and was told to sit. Then it was time to tell her the whole ugly tale.

"The Divine had me burned in effigy?" Bronwyn was shocked. Whatever she had expected, it was not that. The idea was grotesque, vindictive, absurd.

"And the Grand Cleric Muirin as well. It was done with the full ceremony of anathema, in front of the Grand Cathedral. With a choir." He shrugged an apology at a white-faced Leliana.

"They were cast out?" she gasped. "That is... monstrous!"

"The burning did not come off quite as they intended," said Silas. "A storm came up quite suddenly. The Grand Cathedral was struck by lightning and the north tower was seriously damaged. A number of people were hurt... and many were killed. Then came the rain. The effigies were drenched." He cleared his throat. "The worst thing was the panic. Dozens more were killed as they tried to flee."

Bronwyn frowned, not picturing it. Silas explained.

"The cathedral complex is surrounded by a wall, which has only a few openings. Most people fled south and the crowd panicked, and trampled the weaker underfoot."

"Maker's Breath!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "What madness! Those poor people! Was the Divine really so offended by the conclave's report?"

Silas grimaced. "It was not what the Reclamationist party would wish to hear. And really, you must understand, the claims made in the report were such... anyone ill-disposed to

you would dismiss it out of hand. To be fair, I do not think the Divine understood much of it. She has been unwell, and suffers much from the debilitation of old age."

Bronwyn blinked, still trying to take it all in. "I was declared anathema? Am I even an Andrastean anymore?"

This was very bad news. If this got out, her right to rule as Queen as Ferelden could be challenged... even her right to live.

"You are an Andrastean if you say you are," Leliana said fiercely. "They do not have that sort of power over you, Bronwyn!"

For that matter, Mother Dorothea had had a great deal to say in private about such an obviously political abuse of Chantry ritual. Whether it was binding according to canon law was another matter. It would be a question for the next Divine to resolve. Silas decided not to express an opinion.

The Queen spoke. "I shall send a letter to the Grand Cleric, telling her of this. Of course, the point is now moot. Even if she were so foolish as to present herself before the Divine, she would be hard put to find her. As for you, Ser Silas, what will you do? You may certainly travel on to Denerim, and I daresay the Grand Cleric will find work for you, but perhaps you might wish to stay with us."

Silas very much felt he ought to stay and fight, when the entire world was in danger. "If it would not be too much trouble, Your Majesty."

"No trouble at all."

It was one thing to fight darkspawn, to slay dragons, to thwart assassins. Bronwyn knew she had many enemies. Somehow, learning that the world leader of the religion she professed thought she was so evil that she had to be burned in effigy and publicly made excommunicate was painfully depressing. Had the clergy applauded? Had the Templars' hearts swelled with pride at the celebration? Had the people cheered her defamation? She had been fighting the Blight, protecting the unhelpful world from the darkspawn, and those ingrates in Val Royeaux had made her *anathema*?

People often claimed that life was unfair. Of course it was. Bronwyn tried not to whine. Compared to others, she had won life's lottery as the strong and healthy daughter of a great nobleman. It was the nature of darkspawn to massacre, of dragons to ravage, of assassins to murder. None of them claimed to speak for the righteous. For the Divine and her clerics, however, to denounce her in such a way seemed so perverse and hypocritical that Bronwyn felt an intense, spiteful satisfaction that most of them were probably horribly dead or driven into exile. It really, really did serve them right.

As for the Empress, Bronwyn would not shed a tear for her. The Empress had compassed Bronwyn's death while Bronwyn was defending Thedas from monsters. That was greedy, selfish, and vile on a cosmic level. The world was better off without such a person ruling a great empire.

Of course, the Blight itself was horribly unfair to the innocent common folk of Val Royeaux. Thousands must be dead: the old, the sick, expectant mothers, little children; humans, dwarves, and elves alike. The fate of the elves seemed particularly cruel—crammed into that sty of an Alienage, forbidden to learn to defend themselves, disregarded by those who ruled them. How many elven women would be made Broodmothers? The Wardens of Thedas would be fighting sharlocks for many years, most likely. What the abducted women were experiencing at this moment was unbearable to contemplate. Bronwyn decided not to contemplate it, as it would do neither them nor her any good, and turned her mind to the monumental task before her.

One hoped that the rest of the Wardens would be roused to actions by the disaster in Val Royeaux. They had not cared a jot for Ferelden, but perhaps the destruction of a great city known to many of them would shock them into action. As for her, she would not wait to see what they would do. She must act herself. The darkspawn would be marching soon. The Archdemon might well choose to lead them eastwards along the Imperial Highway, where the cities of Orlais were set like a string of pearls. Ultimately, that march would lead to Jader, and then through Gherlen's Pass to Ferelden. Hiding behind stone walls or theoretical borders would not save them.

And then, later that evening, an extraordinary piece of luck came her way. Luck? Perhaps not. Perhaps it was simply human—or elven—nature.

The two city elves from Jader who appeared before her were

not very attractive specimens, for they were gaunt and weathered and sly-faced. They had, however, been resourceful enough to sneak out of Jader and present themselves to the Queen of Ferelden. They had come to Solidor, looking for her.

Once led before her, they performed something that looked like cringing rather than bowing. Scout growled at them, perhaps objecting to the smell. Still, the elves regarded her hopefully, thinking that they might get a beating, as usual, but that they also might get a meal and a handful of silver each. The information they brought was actually beyond price.

"The fleet was destroyed?" Bronwyn echoed them, astonished. "Completely destroyed?"

"Maybe not *completely*, Queen," one elf conditioned. "Word is that a few of the ships ran back to Val Royeaux." He grinned, exposing a few blackened snaggles. "Reckon they won't like what they find *there*."

"Reckon not," agreed his friend, staring gormlessly at Bronwyn. He touched his forelock, remembering to look at the floor. "If it please your Queenship, we heard a few ships beached a few days away and some of the nobles got away with their horses. In Jader Bay, only a dozen chevaliers and about two dozen soldiers lived to tell the tale. They left the elves to drown." He looked like he was about to spit on the floor, and then thought better of it.

Bronwyn studied the elves briefly, and then spoke to an

officer. "Take these men to the kitchen. See that they have a good dinner. Put them to work and see that they are watched." She granted her informants a brief smile. "If their story checks out, they will be rewarded very handsomely indeed."

She glanced at Morrigan and Anders, who drifted away from the crowd, and not too much later, were winging, straight as arrows, to the north.

Before dawn of the next day, Bronwyn discovered that the elves had given her Jader.

Now that the Jader Wardens had left for the west, there was no danger of Bronwyn's people being discovered by them. Anders and Morrigan, of course, could get to Jader the fastest. They could even listen to the desperate, frantic debates going on among the Marquis' deputies in the Palace Emeraude.

Jader was clearly ready to capitulate. The Wardens had told them the darkspawn had risen. and the word had spread through the city. It was obvious that the Imperial army would not be coming to Jader, but would remain in the west to fight. The navy, with its invasion force, would not be docking in Jader Bay. Jader was quite alone, and the Queen of Ferelden had taken the key fortresses of Roc du Chevalier and Chateau Solidor. The survivors of the ship that ran aground on the Horn talked extravagantly of sieges and last stands, while the seneschal and steward clutched their heads in horror.

"And who will withstand this siege, Monsieur?" demanded the steward of the young hot-head who had led the charge up the Horn. "Who? The elves are a finger's-breadth from revolt, the dwarves have left their work and locked themselves in their houses, we have an City Guard adequate only for looking handsome in their armor, and no garrison to speak of! The Marquis did not think it necessary! Who will man the walls, defend the gates? The pampered nobles? The plump, complacent merchants?"

"I shall defend the city!" the boy shouted back. "I and my fellow chevaliers! We will defend this city to the last man and the last breath!"

The steward glared at him in contempt, rubbing his beard. "That sounds very fine, Monsieur. Very fine indeed. And what of the rest of the city, once you have made your *beau geste*, and lie dead? What of them?"

The young man stared at him blankly, at a loss to imagine anything more important than his own heroism. The thump of the seneschal's fist on the nearby table made him jump.

"My beautiful city will be sacked, you young fool! My people will perish! They may mean nothing to you, but they do to me!" His friend, the seneschal, put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Get out of here," the man finally growled. "We need to think, and you clearly have nothing sensible to offer."

The raven outside the window remained listening, absorbing the older men's subsequent despair. When they were at last silent over some shared brandy, he flew away to report.

In bringing their troops further along the Neck, Arl Wulffe discovered the hunting lodge that Bronwyn had used as an observation post.

At least his scouts did, and they met and talked with the Awars left there. News was brought to the old arl, and he joined them, bringing Corbus with him. Lord Rothgar was back with his own men, patrolling along the coast.

Corbus was tired, and very glad to drink hot wine under a roof, sitting by a fire, even though it was a small and shabby hut in the hills. Killer curled up by his feet, grateful for the rest. Boy and dog listened to Arl Wulffe question the men as to the Queen's recent activities.

"Heard she took the Rock! Bloody well done, that! What else has she been up to?"

Bronwyn's scouts did not know too much more, though they had heard she had gone a day's journey west to deal with the big castle by the Frostback Gates. Wulffe slapped his knee, chuckling, and then pulled out his shabby map and showed Corbus the lay of the land. The boy nodded, seeing why it was a good idea.

"So if she takes Solidor, then we control the Imperial

Highway? What about that?" He pointed to Jader, a dot and a name on the painted seacoast.

"What about it indeed, lad? Finish your drink. We need to go find the Queen. She'd be glad of some reinforcements about now, I daresay."

A messenger was sent to inform Rothgar of their movements. Rather than heading for the Pass, Wulffe decided to go ahead and cross the Neck through the Jader Bay Hills, approaching Roc du Chevalier from the other side. He really must stop there and gloat for a bit. They could rest the men and horses for the night, and then move on and join their intrepid young Queen. If she had her eye on Jader, Wulffe wanted to be in at the kill.

The Imperial Princesses found their new lives as prisoners of Queen Bronwyn pleasantly exciting. For one thing, they were not kept so entirely in ignorance. In a few days they heard more news than they had in years. Some of it was terrifying, but some it was very diverting. There had been a feast, and the princesses had been permitted to join, sitting at the Queen's table. Eglantine and Eponine had been enchanted to find themselves on either side of the handsome Bann Alistair. Celandine had not been so lucky: she had sat between the Queen and Ser Blayne Faraday, an old soldier. Still, neither had spoken unkindly to her, and there had been much to see and hear. Some of the Grey Wardens were quite good-looking. One of them, she was told, had noble blood.

Warden Leliana was a very different sort of *gouvernante* than the Comtesse. She would tell stories and sing songs, and she was not unwilling for them to learn something of what had been happening outside the walls of Solidor in the past seven years. She told them many of the Queen's adventures: how she had fought darkspawn and explored the caverns of the dwarven realm; how she made friends with the Dalish elves, deep in enchanted forests. The story they liked best was how she had found the Ashes of Andraste, and slain a dragon. If the Prophet had so blessed her, perhaps she could not be so very terrible. And one she washed very thoroughly and her hair was nicely arranged, she seemed more like a real Queen and less like a bandit.

"The Queen will not harm you," Leliana assured them. "Nor will she permit anyone else to harm you. She is a most merciful and chivalrous Princess. Her great goal is to defeat the Blight and to save the people of Thedas. You will be leaving Solidor soon. The Queen wishes you to be taken east, farther from the darkspawn, where you will be safer."

"But what will become of us?" Eponine did not mean to whine, perhaps, but many of her questions came out that way. "Will we remain locked up? Will we be given husbands?" She added, "I should like to have a husband."

The princesses looked at each other. They had whispered their hopes to one another over the years. Celandine was twenty-five now, and really almost too old for marriage, but Eponine at twenty-two was not ready to give up and take orders yet. Eglantine, at eighteen, was still quite eligible. They

had often speculated about possible husbands. There was always their cousin, Prince Florestan, but there was only one of him. And their mother had once said that there had been quite enough marrying among the Imperial cousins. But who else was good enough for an Imperial Princess?

"A husband would very nice," Eglantine said, exploring the idea, a particular individual in mind. "Even if he was only a minor noble... as long as he was kind and handsome."

"Be careful what you wish for," murmured Celandine, who remembered the most about the realities of the outside world. "What if she gave you to a savage brute? A Wilder nobleman, wearing stinking skins? That could be worse than anything we have yet endured."

"I should like one all the same, stinking skins or not," Eponine insisted. "And I should like a child of my own. I would not care what I had to endure."

They had actually endured quite a bit, Leliana discovered. They had been fed and clothed and sheltered, but always they had lived in the shadow of the headsman's axe. The Comtesse had hated them, and they had suffered under a thousand petty tyrannies. She had made them feel like nothing: like fools, like traitors, like useless burdens. She had demeaned and denigrated them at every opportunity. She took away books that gave them pleasure or useful information. She had killed their pets once they were thoroughly attached to them. She ordered meals for them entirely composed of foods they disliked. They had never set

foot outside the chateau since they arrived years before. Their only sunshine and air were from the tiny garden at the top of the tower. And now, they knew that the Comtesse had always been under orders to kill them, rather than let them fall into other hands. In fact, they nearly *had* been killed, just like their dear Mamma and Papa, who had suffered so terribly before they died.

Leliana had tried to make Bronwyn understand something of what they had suffered. No they had not fought, or slept on the ground, or been wounded, but their lives had been hard in other ways. Bronwyn granted them some sympathy for the murders of her parents, but tended to think the rest of it was fairly minor, considering how much harder it could have been.

"Not one of those girls knows what it is to starve, or be ravished, or be without a home," she said. "They need to pull themselves together."

"Not everyone is as strong as you, Bronwyn," Leliana said softly. "And the Empress did her best to train them to be as weak as possible."

They certainly were rather weak. When told to start packing, they stood about, looking helpless, not knowing where to start. Determined to begin sensibly with them, Leliana made them sit down and discuss what they might need.

"—Our clothes."

"—Our jewels."

"—Our books."

"Yes," Leliana said, encouragingly. "But don't you think that the first thing you need is something to *hold* your possessions?"

"A trunk!" cried Eglantine, pleased with herself. "A trunk for each of us!"

"Yes!" Celandine agreed, remembering. "A trunk for our gowns, and then a chest for the books. And my lute must go in its case. If you cram too many things in a trunk, the gowns will wrinkle."

Step by laborious step, Leliana drew the princesses along, helping them grasp a little about how to plan and organize. Soon they each had a trunk and a chest, and they progressed enough to suggest that they would order their maids to pack their gowns. Leliana sighed, but it would have been hopeless to expect them to pack their own clothes. Simply being able to decide on a task and delegate it was a sort of accomplishment.

Then it was necessary to remind them that when they traveled, they would be outside in the cold for some time.

"We need... cloaks?" Eponine ventured. "We have not worn cloaks in a long, long time."

There was obviously no time to fashion elaborate cloaks for them, so the Comtesse's possessions were raided. Her

wardrobe was rather heavy on black velvet and sable, but that was not unsuitable for the season, and everything was quite rich. Best of all, they did not have to be altered to fit, since they were simply cloaks. And the Comtesse had many other nice things as well: gloves and muffs and warm fur hats. Her boots did not fit the princesses, so they would have to travel in the covered wagon, shod only in their fragile silk slippers.

The Comtesse Coqueliquot also had a small fortune in gold and lesser coin, locked in a handsome chest. Leliana picked the lock, counted the coin, and brought this to Bronwyn's attention.

"Don't give it to those silly girls. It's really the woman's, after all. No, wait. Look here, take a bit of it and give each of the girls a purse of three sovereigns in all. We'll see how quickly they fritter it away."

The girls accepted the purses gravely and studied the coins with great curiosity. They had never before carried coin themselves. It was not something an Imperial Princess did. Someone else always paid for things, they supposed: a servant, or a seneschal. Leliana sighed, and then explained how common folk earned coin; how hard they must work for even a little, and how much it cost to eat, to warm themselves, to dress in coarse garments.

"That must be very disagreeable," Eglantine agreed solemnly. "If we were not princesses, I am not sure we would be able to live."

Leliana was not a bard for nothing, and so neither laughed or wept for them...at least in their presence.

The Rock would better serve as the base for her advance on Jader, so Bronwyn planned to move back there, leaving Ser Norrel as castellan at Solidor with a decent garrison.

Her plan to release the Orlesian rank and file had hit a snag. All the Orlesians knew about the attack on Val Royeaux and were horrified. Some indeed wished to go home to their families, but quite a few felt they would be safer among their comrades, and under a reliable commander. Their sergeants passed along a plea not to be dispersed, weaponless, to the west, but to serve Queen Bronwyn, instead.

"Ridiculous!" fumed Ser Norrel. "The impudence of those Orlesian swine!"

Bronwyn was no so inclined to dismiss them. In fact, the former captain of Solidor had made a similar plea. His family lived in the Chateau. It was their home. If Val Royeaux had fallen, there was no one to ransom him; and to send his wife and children wandering into a country in chaos was to sentence them to a miserable death. Furthermore, rumor hinted that the Empress was dead. If that was so, Orlais was without a leader to defend it. Until the succession was settled—and who knew when that would be?—it appeared that service with the Queen of Ferelden was their best chance for an organized resistance to the darkspawn.

Rumor was doing its work at the Rock as well. De Guesclin was sick with fear, picturing his own family. Their chateau north of Montsimnard was directly between the Grey Wardens and the darkspawn. He pleaded for an audience with the Queen, and was told she would be returning to the Rock within a day or so.

Before she left Solidor, Bronwyn summoned the Orlesian prisoners to the parade grounds. Ser Norrel, on her instructions, asked all those who wished to be released to go home to come forward. They would be given rations and escorted for half a day along the Imperial Highway. Once they chose to leave, they would not be permitted to turn back, on pain of death.

Over two dozen soldiers stepped out of the ranks, amidst mutterings and hissed disputes.

"Any others?" Ser Norrel shouted. "For the rest, you will remain in custody while the Queen considers your application to serve her. Good behavior is recommended if you wish her favor."

Bronwyn decided to speak. She raised her voice and addressed the Orlesians.

"I know that you are brave men who love your homeland! Some of you have family obligations that cannot be neglected. I understand and respect that. Others wish to remain under arms and fight to defend the helpless victims of the darkspawn. I would like to trust to your honor, though I have

suffered numerous attacks and grievous harm from foreign agents since the Blight began. It is possible that among you are some of these Imperial agents, looking for an opportunity to do me injury. Know this: the Empress is dead."

A shocked outcry from some, and some grim, unsurprised looks from others. A few seemed skeptical.

"Yes," Bronwyn declared. "The Empress is dead. Val Royeaux lies in ruins, and the Imperial spymasters are slain or are wretched fugitives. The Archdemon gloats over the treasure chests of the capital. There is now no one to reward a faithful agent for sabotage or espionage. It is a new world, and it would be wise to make a new place in it. While I am away, I trust Ser Norrel Haglin to treat you with justice, and I expect all of you to prove your good faith by obedience, as good soldiers should. That's all I've got to say."

An Orlesian sergeant bawled out, "*Vive la Reine Rouge!*"

"*Vive!*"

Bronwyn found the spontaneous demonstration rather moving. Ser Norrel only grunted.

"I can't believe you're even considering trusting this lot."

"It's not so much a matter of trust," she murmured. "It's better to have them under my command, under discipline and the threat of punishment, than fighting against us as bandits or rebels. Be fair to them." She gave him a wry smile. "Be *fair*."

I'm not asking you to be *soft*."

The move to the Rock involved quite a few wagons. It also involved the appearance of the most ludicrous conveyance Bronwyn had ever set eyes on.

"That's a *carriage*, that is," breathed Toliver.

"That's a *ridiculous* carriage," Aveline said curtly.

Leliana tried to be matter-of-fact. "It is the Princesses' carriage; the one in which they journeyed to Solidor." She pointed out the heraldic features, numerous and gilded.

"Here is the Lion of Orlais, and here is the eagle of the princesses' mother, who was a daughter of another Imperial Prince. Here is the princesses' personal crest, and the wolves—here— designate heiresses-presumptive."

Bronwyn thought it the ugliest thing she had ever seen since the Paragon Caridin forged King Bhelen's crown. "And the dragons?"

"Oh! They are just for pretty... I think."

Ridiculous as it was, it held three trunks, six chests, three princesses, their maids, and assorted instrument cases. Alistair and Leliana would ride beside the carriage as guard and chaperone. As the girls emerged doubtfully from the door to the outer keep, wrapped up warmly in their borrowed

cloaks, they were passed by the guard escorting the soldiers who had asked to leave. Along with them was a wagon carrying the Comtesse Coquelicot, who would be leaving with them.

Bronwyn had not forgiven her for urging the soldiers to shoot at her. She had, as a sop to decency, pointed out to the older woman that the road would likely be unsafe. The Comtesse had demanded that she be released at once; and as she was of no real use, a wagon was made available and loaded with her possessions, other than the cloaks the girls were using and the bit of coin granted them. One of the released soldiers was assigned to her as a driver. The contrast between the rough wagon with its canvas top and the magnificent carriage was striking, and the Comtesse, clutching her horrid little lapdog close, glared at the cringing princesses with unadulterated malice.

The girls were much affected, to Bronwyn's annoyance. After the woman had vanished through the outer gates, she turned to them and remarked, "She has no power over you now. No power at all, really, other than over her dog."

"Maker grant we never see her again!" Eglantine prayed.

"You won't," Bronwyn shrugged, as Alistair handed the girls up and shut the door of carriage.

It was only too easy to imagine exactly what become of that unpleasant and foolish woman, once the party was out of sight and the soldiers remembered there were no officers

watching them. The only question was how soon they would loot the wagon, down to the last copper, and if they would kill the Comtesse before or after they were done.

Bronwyn put the matter from her mind, and swung in the saddle. It was back to the Rock for her, to prepare for her march on Jader.

Thanks to my reviewers: *Rexiselic, Torricklol, Tirion I, Chandagnac, NPC200, Nemrut, RaZoRMandiblez, Blinded in a bolthold, Mike3207, Mage, Zute, le-maru, AD Lewis, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, BAMS, Reynes, sizuka2, djon863, CBH17, darksky01, MsBarrows, Acala, jnybot, JackOfBladesX, Death Knight's Crowbar, Robbie the Phoenix, YayForYuffie, KnightOfHolyLight, Phygmalion, Lyssa Terald, Lohr, Massgamer45, Ellyanah, Jenna53, Isala Uthenera, mille libri, Herebedragons66, Vares, Guest, dragonmactir, and RB23G.*

Dragonmactir has posted a charming picture of Loghain and Bronwyn to Deviant Art. [dragonmactir .deviantart #/art/Loghain-Greets-Bronwyn-359478677?_sid73c4d21](https://www.deviantart.com/dragonmactir/art/Loghain-Greets-Bronwyn-359478677?_sid73c4d21) 8

Now I'll have to write that scene!

107. Red Queen in the Emerald City

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 107: Red Queen in the Emerald City

Bronwyn was delighted to find reinforcements awaiting her at the Rock. She waved at Wulffe and Corbus, who were standing outside to greet her as she rode in.

"Well met, Your Majesty!" cheered Wulffe, brushing a groom aside, and holding Bronwyn's horse himself as she dismounted. He leaned forward to growl confidentially. "and well done, dear lass!"

She clapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "You're not a moment too soon. I have plans. Let's talk upstairs."

Then she put out her hand to Corbus, who dutifully kissed it. Not satisfied with that, she pulled him into a hug. "I am so sorry about your good father. He'll be missed, but he'd be so proud of you!"

She told them the news of the taking of Solidor, and then they were distracted by the huge golden carriage trundling into the courtyard in her wake. Corbus goggled at the grandeur, and Wulffe tried to pretend not be impressed by anything Orlesian.

"Maker's stones!" he grunted. "Is that the Empress' coach—or her hearse?"

"Neither," Bronwyn laughed. "It belongs to her cousins, the Imperial Princesses. The Empress had them locked up at Solidor for years and years. Harmless, silly girls, but we don't want people getting their hands on them and declaring themselves Emperors."

Alistair rode in beside the coach, and the two arls greeted him in friendly fashion.

"Good for you, lad, looking after the ladies," said Wulffe. "Wouldn't mind having a look at them myself."

Turning a bit pink, Alistair handed the timid, wondering princesses out of the coach. They had very much enjoyed their outing, though the coach had been cramped with all their luggage and servants. They looked quite ethereal: porcelain skin, pale blue eyes, and golden hair contrasting with their black cloaks. They saw Bronwyn, and dutifully curtsied low.

"Your Majesty," they said, more or less in unison.

"Your Imperial Highnesses," Bronwyn responded with a nod. "These are two of my loyal Ferelden nobles: Arl Gallagher Wulffe of West Hills, and Arl Corbus Bryland of South Reach."

Both arls bowed, Corbus a split-second after Wulffe. He was still gaping.

"Ladies," grunted the older arl, thinking they would probably cause a great deal of fuss and trouble, either directly or indirectly. They were certainly pretty enough for it, princesses or not. Corbus blushed, and then peeked again. One of the girls smiled at him, thinking him a very sweet boy.

Not insensible to the byplay, Bronwyn grimaced, and gestured Leliana forward.

"Perhaps the second-in-command's old rooms would do for them," she suggested in a whisper. "Best to get them settled and out of sight as soon as possible. And I want a guard on the door."

"I shall see to it." Leliana assured her. She gave a smile and a nod to the arls and then called to the princesses. "If it please your Imperial Highnesses, let us go at once to your quarters, so you may rest after your journey."

"*I'm* not tired," muttered Eponine, a little rebelliously. So much was going on, and there were so many people here...so many men. Some of them were quite good-looking.

Celandine hushed her, and they followed Leliana. Eglantine looked back over her shoulder to give Alistair another smile. Bronwyn saw his response: a most deplorably feeble grin.

Already enamored. Oh dear. I must think about it. Perhaps it's not such a terrible idea. She's the youngest and therefore third in the line of succession. Perhaps marriage to a Fereldan noble is a good solution. Not to a bann, though.

We'd have to elevate Alistair to an arl at least. Well... let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Wulffe raised his brows at her. He hadn't missed that bit of flirtation, either. She rolled her eyes, and he chuckled.

"Pretty girls," he remarked. "Any sign of sense in any of them?"

"Not so you'd notice. The Empress had it ground out of them. Their guardian was a spiteful old cow. I sent her back to Orlais, and I'm having Warden Leliana look after them. They might as well have some serious protection. The guardian tried to have them killed rather than captured."

"That's horrible!" Corbus said, feeling sorry for them, even though they were Orlesian. They were just girls, after all, and they seemed a lot nicer than Habren.

Bronwyn forbore to shame him by ruffling his hair, though she really wanted to. "Indeed, my lord arl, it was. She was a cruel woman, and they're well rid of her. How Killer has grown! Quite the warriors now, both of you." She laid her hand on Wulffe's arm, eyes full of gratitude. "and under Wulffe's tutelage, too. I could not be more pleased. Let me wash off some of the dirt, and then we'll have a talk. Alistair, let Ser Blayne know, before you join us. I'll want him there, too."

Her ridiculously grand rooms were awaiting her. Bronwyn briefly thought of putting the princesses in them, as they were probably more what they were accustomed to. More

considered thought, however, prevented that. It would not do the girls any harm to learn to live a bit more moderately, at least for a little while. And Bronwyn really liked that bathtub.

Their temporary quarters were adequate, though rather small. The princesses had always had to share a bedchamber—the better to guard them—but now they would also have to share a bed. There was a brief squabble as to who would have to be in the middle. Celandine, the mildest-mannered of them, lost, as usual.

Still it was not bad, and from the window they could see the courtyard, and the soldiers busily at work. It was very entertaining. Wanting to detain Alistair, Eglantine pursued some rumors she had heard from the servants.

"Is it true, Bann Alistair," she asked, "that you are the son of King Maric?"

Leliana winced, knowing this was a sensitive subject. She shot a pleading look at Alistair, mutely asking him to be kind. He looked away, annoyed.

The resigned, slightly sour look on his face confused the princesses. Surely it was an honor to be of the blood royal? Since Alistair was not rude by nature, he answered the princess, rather than turning his back and walking away.

"Yes, it's true," he said. "King Maric was my father. I never knew him, though. I'm a bastard, and I was raised by Arl

Eamon of Redcliffe."

"Well!" said Eponine. "That is very appropriate, yes? A great noble *should* be the one entrusted with the tuition of one of royal blood."

"Is that where you earned your spurs as a knight?" asked Eglantine.

"I learned a *lot* living in Redcliffe," Alistair agreed, a bit more snidely than his wont. "But not that. If you ladies are comfortable now, I believe I must return to the Queen."

Leliana nearly threw up her hands in despair. The princesses were grieved that he wanted to leave so soon.

"Oh!" cried Celandine, "You are offended!"

"Was it something we said?" asked Eglantine, in a small voice.

Alistair pulled himself together. He was being ridiculous. Maybe it was the high, Orlesian-accented voices that had set him off. Arlessa Isolde no longer had any power to harm him.

"I don't mean to be abrupt, but I don't have many happy memories of my childhood. Here's the story of my life, for what it's worth. Arl Eamon told me I was a disgrace, and sent me to live in the stables. When I was eleven, and his wife grew tired of me, I was sent to the Chantry to become a Templar. I wasn't suited to it, but at least I learned to read

and write there, since Arl Eamon didn't bother educating me in anything but grooming horses. Luckily, I was conscripted into the Grey Wardens. That's where I met Queen Bronwyn. It was her idea to make me a noble."

The princesses regarded him with horrified pity. Eglantine waved her hands at such an outrage, and said, "And that was well done! How wicked to keep one of royal blood in a stable!"

"It is a crime against nature," Eponine agreed, perfectly seriously. "I hope the Queen has punished this Arl Eamon."

"He's dead," Alistair said briefly. "I used to think of him as a good man. Then I really thought about it, and changed my mind. They say children can adapt to anything, but no child should have to adapt to people telling them that they're nothing and nobody."

Leliana said feelingly, "I believe that their Imperial Highnesses are in complete agreement with you."

"Of course!" Celandine murmured. "Did not the Comtesse say all that and more when she ruled over us? And she said other things, too: that the Empress would kill us if we displeased her; that we would be beheaded, or broken on the wheel like our father, or smothered under a featherbed like our mother."

"She was *cruel*," Eponine declared. "And spiteful."

Leliana was still looking at him in mild rebuke. Alistair spread

his arms in surrender.

"I know I'm not the only one who ever had a hard life. I'm sorry if I was short with you."

"That perfectly all right, my lord!" Eglantine assured him anxiously. "I am sorry I was so impertinent and curious. It is just so pleasant to have friends at last."

"It is very pleasant indeed," agreed Celandine. "The Queen has been very gracious, and Warden Leliana so kind."

"She has been helping us with our music," Eglantine told Alistair. "I am sure I have improved a great deal already!"

"Why don't you play something for Bann Alistair?" Leliana suggested. She smirked as two of the princesses delicately manhandled Alistair toward a cushioned chair, while Eglantine found her lute and set about tuning it.

"Don't laugh at me," she pleaded.

"I won't laugh," Alistair assured her, even a little indignant that she could imagine him such a ruffian.

Eglantine simply looked at him with huge blue eyes, and he softened a bit. Then she smiled, and strummed her opening cards. Her singing voice was quite pleasant: sweet, soft, and a little breathy.

*"Do you know the land where the lemons bloom?
Golden oranges grow amidst the leafy gloom."*

*A gentle breeze from blue skies blows.
The myrtle is still, and tall the laurel grows.
Do you know it?*

*'Tis there, 'tis there, 'tis there,
'Tis there I would go with you, my love.*

*"Do you know the house? It has columns and beams.
The great hall glistens, the staircase gleams,
And the marble statues ask me, sad and mild:*

"What have they done to you, poor child?"

Do you know it also?

*'Tis, there, 'tis there, 'tis there,
'Tis there I would go with you, my knight.*

"Do you know the cloudy mountain pass?

*The muleteer picks his way through the misty mass;
In caves the ancient dragons raise their terrible brood
While the cliffs are polished by the crashing flood.*

"Do you know it well?

*'Tis there, 'tis there, that I would journey!
O dear one, let us go!"*

She finished, and looked at him so anxiously, that he felt quite protective.

"You sing beautifully," he said.

The princesses were very pleased with him, and better pleased with their quarters, when a servant appeared with

some refreshments. Leliana teasingly pressed Alistair to stay, and a curious conversation followed.

"The two noblemen we met today," Eponine began. "Are they of good estate?"

"Wulffe and Corbus?" Alistair asked, rather blankly. "Well... I suppose so. They're arls," he explained. "High nobles. I've never been to West Hills or South Reach, but they seem to have everything they want."

"Arl Wulffe is married, I presume," Celandine said softly, "and the young Arl is very likely betrothed."

Leliana bit back a smile, and looked at the floor.

Alistair, innocent of intrigue, shook his head. "No. Arl Wulffe's a widower. Been one for years, I think. Corbus is just a little boy. His father was killed only last month."

Celandine ventured, with a warning look at Eponine, "I presume that Arl Wulffe has an heir?"

"He has two grown sons," answered Alistair. "And the older one is getting married in the spring."

"Ah." Eponine sighed and shrugged. "But the young Arl is not betrothed?"

"Not yet." Alistair looked completely mystified. "Look, I really have to go. The Queen's called a council..."

He bowed and escaped, leaving the women to discuss their prospects at length. His ears would have burned if he knew what they said.

Bronwyn permitted de Guesclin to attend the dinner that welcomed her back to the Rock. As she expected, he greeted the Imperial princesses with great deference, but he also showed surprising submission to Bronwyn herself.

"I pray you, Your Majesty," he said, "to hear my petition for parole at your earliest convenience."

He looked quite desperate. Bronwyn thought he probably was.

"You may approach me in the audience chamber after dinner," she said. She nodded to his guards. "See to it."

Her mind was on Jader while she ate, but she could not help but notice the flirtations, the subtle jockeyings for power, the rivalries that surrounded her. Even among her Wardens there was friction. Alistair disliked Morrigan; Anders was annoyed with Alistair for disliking Morrigan; the Dalish were growing insular once again; the dwarves speculated about their Paragon Astrid; Aveline chatted with Silas while trying to avoid Toliver's advances; Carver had had too much to drink.

The princesses appeared to have discovered men. It was unsurprising but inconvenient. She left strict orders that they be watched. Leliana was going with Bronwyn to Jader, and

the princesses would be guarded but unchaperoned for some days. Bronwyn hoped they did not run away with plausible soldiers or smooth-talking charlatans. At least the eldest was very shy, and the youngest was fixated on Alistair. The middle one was even making eyes at young Corbus, who had no idea what to make of such behavior. Bronwyn did not care for it. Corbus was too young, and Bronwyn rather fancied the idea of matching him with sweet young Faline Kendalls. That would be far more appropriate.

When she left the feast and summoned de Guesclin for the interview, she found it harder to resist his arguments than she had anticipated.

"My chateau... my home... Beaufremont... it is there, on the map. My wife and children are there, between the Grey Wardens of Montsimmard and the darkspawn in Val Royeaux. Tell me: have the darkspawn marched on the Wardens?"

"I don't know," Bronwyn told him frankly. "I think not. I am under the impression that the Wardens have marched on the darkspawn. They might indeed have taken shelter at your chateau."

That did not reassure de Guesclin. "What if they decided to make a stand there? That might lure the creatures to my home!"

As that was indeed possible, Bronwyn did not try to put him off with lies.

"I am moving on Jader," she told him. "I have every reason to believe the city will capitulate, between the attack on Val Royeaux and the destruction of the invasion fleet. Once I have secured Jader, I mean to march on the darkspawn."

"Into Orlais, you mean," de Guesclin replied, looking grim.

"Yes, into Orlais. The darkspawn do not *care* about jurisdiction. If I sit here in these castle, guzzling wine, the horde will only grow stronger and more and more of Orlais will be fouled by the Taint. They must be challenged, and immediately. I presume that you wish to defend your country."

He gritted his teeth, obviously enraged at such a patronizing remark. He restrained himself, not wishing to end up locked away in the dungeons. He gave a curt nod.

"Good," Bronwyn said. "If you will swear allegiance to me for the duration of the Blight, I will release you and your men. I will allow you to go west and fight the darkspawn—with my army if you agree, otherwise alone, though I think that reckless. There will be no ransom demand."

He blinked in surprise. Bronwyn scowled at him.

"These are not normal times, despite the way Orlais has treated Ferelden since the beginning of the Blight! It is disgusting to allow the darkspawn to ravage, whether in my country or someone else's. We can cut one another's throats when the darkspawn are defeated, if that is your goal in life."

"I will," he said instantly. He reddened in confusion. "That is, I will swear allegiance to you while this Blight lasts. I and my men shall follow you against the darkspawn. I would follow anyone who would help me return to my family. I shall support you if you march to Jader. It will be necessary for supplying the army. I can see that. How soon do we march?"

Bronwyn smiled. "We march tomorrow. Why wait?"

The Fereldan army mustered in its ranks and marched out under its banners, concealing nothing... much. Bronwyn still had some of her Avvar scouts posted in the hills, looking to see what slipped out of Jader; making sure it was nothing that could harm them.

Bronwyn had sent scouts and spies to Jader, but had not seen it for herself before today. It was... a great deal more impressive than she had expected. It was clearly larger and grander than Denerim. While Denerim had dazzling Fort Drakon as its signature landmark, this city had many other magnificent structures, towering high above the strong walls. From the sign of the holy flame, she could see what must be the bell tower of the Chantry— incomparably larger than that of Denerim Cathedral. And nearby, faced with greenstone, were the towers of the Palace Emeraude. It was a jewel of a city, and possessing it would make Ferelden a richer, more powerful, more *credible* nation.

In one of the supply wagons, the two Jader elves rode, purses full of gold. Their initiative had made them the richest

men in the Alienage. They had picked up all sorts of useful odds and ends of information, too. The Queen knew them now, and very likely, it would be her word that carried weight in Jader from now on.

Ahead of her, Bronwyn sent a herald under a flag of truce, requesting a parley. With any luck, she could have Jader without her soldiers risking so much as a finger.

Sure enough, the gates of Jader opened, and a party of knights and men-at-arms rode out under the sea serpent banner of Jader and their own flag of truce. Bronwyn smiled, and prepared to do battle with words, rather than swords.

The harassed, middle-aged man with pepper-and-salt hair on the good horse was presented to her as Ser Manfred de Laclos, steward of the city in the absence of the Marquis. Bronwyn thought he looked very ill, and did her best to repress an impulse of pity.

"Ser Manfred," she said, without much ceremony, "I am here to pursue my campaign against the darkspawn. I need Jader as a supply base. Thus, I am willing to entertain your surrender. Open your gates to me, and you and your people will be treated with mercy and honor."

His face contracted with veiled anguish.

"Your Majesty, your valiant reputation is known far and wide, but you cannot expect me to yield up my city without resistance."

"I do expect it, Monsieur. Indeed, I *demand* that you do so. You must know that the darkspawn have risen. As a Warden, I am sworn to fight them by any means necessary. This is no time for niceties over jurisdiction. The Imperial Army will not march on Ferelden—" she smiled coldly "—as I know it planned. It is engaged in saving the lives of Orlesians further to the west. Val Royeaux lies in ruins. The navy you were expecting lies at the bottom of the Waking Sea, for the most part. I could indeed watch the process of the Blight at a distance, but that selfish and cowardly counsel would be madness. The horde must be fought and destroyed, lest it continue to grow larger and spread like an evil flood over Thedas. Not one Orlesian was willing to aid Ferelden when the darkspawn attacked, but I, at least, will do my duty."

The man licked his lips, thinking. "If you march west, Jader will not prevent you."

Bronwyn treated that hint with the contempt it deserved. "Nor will it help me," she said. "I quite understand you. But no, monsieur, I am done with fighting the darkspawn while Orlais holds a dagger at my back. My troops will rally here and resupply. The harbor will receive the Wardens from other lands who will come to fight. I need Jader, and I will have it, one way or another."

One of the nobles was glaring desperately at de Laclos, trying to gain his attention. The steward noticed him, and cleared his throat. "With certain sureties, perhaps an accommodation can be reached."

Bronwyn looked over the gentlemen of Jader and said, "Here is my offer. Open your gates. Submit to me as your rightful Queen, and you will be treated as loyal subjects under the law, with the same rights, privileges, and duties of other Fereldan subjects. You will join my realm secure in your lives and possessions, your people untroubled and their property protected. You will join with me in the campaign against the enemies of all Thedas: the noblest and most vital struggle of our age."

Some of the nobles and knights appeared willing. Some hoped to retain their lands and titles, and others were drawn in by the prospect of the adventure. Ser Manfred, more contained, waited for the other shoe to drop. Bronwyn flicked her gaze over the various expressions, and continued.

"Or you may choose to decline my most honorable and generous offer. You may choose to hide like cowards behind your walls, letting others face the challenge of the Blight. In that case, I must indeed move on—for the darkspawn care nothing for such petty disputes. In that case, you will face my husband, King Loghain, who is on the march with the greater part of the Fereldan army. He will sack your city and put you to the sword. So that is your choice, gentlemen: the easy way or the hard way. Admit me now, or admit King Loghain, who has no cause to love you. One way or another, Jader *will* be Fereldan. I shall I shall give you an hour to consider my offer."

She made as if to turn her horse away, while a frantic muttering broke out among the Jader envoys.

One hissed to his fellows, "We don't *need* an hour! We'd be fools to refuse!"

"—But what of those chevaliers from the *Belle Aurore*?"

"—Lock them up, if need be! Quick, de Laclos! She's leaving!"

"Wait, Your Majesty!" cried Ser Manfred. "I beg you!"

It turned out very well; very conveniently for Bronwyn. Mind you, they really had little choice, unless they wished to commit mass suicide to prove their loyalty to a dead empress. Ser Manfred and his companions returned to the city to make it ready for her entrance, which would be at noon the following day. Very likely, they needed the time to deal with the intransigent elements in Jader itself.

"All the same," whispered Zevran, "It is best to be prepared. I do not think that this de Laclos would betray you, but who is to say that others might not attempt it? Send some of your people into the city."

This seemed good counsel to Bronwyn. A large party of Awars, dwarves, and a few elves slipped in through the harbor side and crept through the sewers to position themselves. Anders and Morrigan flew to the Palace Emeraude to keep an eye on the activities of the steward and the seneschal. The latter had not taken part in the parley, just in case the fierce Red Queen had decided to kill all the envoys. The fact that she had not made Jader's leaders far

more hopeful that she would keep her word about not sacking the city.

So the Fereldan army made camp, numerous and menacing, on the plain before Jader. There was no reason to go back to the Rock. Instead, Bronwyn had made a point of bringing every wagon and every spare war machine she possessed, to make her numbers seem greater. With what she had, she could certainly blow apart the gates and take the city, but it would mean a bitter house-to-house fight, and a great slaughter at the palace and barracks, which she would prefer to have intact and habitable for her own use. As night drew on, more units could be seen joining her, though these actually were servants and support staff, too far away to be distinguished from soldiers. Bronwyn also ordered three times more fires to be lit than necessary, and to keep them fed and burning, knowing that there were eyes on the ramparts: eyes that she wish to impress with her overwhelming force.

The lights burned bright and late in the Palace Emeraude, too. There was a meeting of nobles, knights, and guild leaders, during which the seneschal and the steward impressed on everyone the necessity of acceding to Queen Bronwyn's demands. Even representatives of the dwarven community were summoned to attend, and they, of course, agreed that it was perfectly sensible, and indeed was the only thing to be done. A few chevaliers lamented the city's cowardice, and swore to defy the invader. They were arrested on the spot and hustled into the dungeons. If the city fathers needed scapegoats to offer in sacrifice before the Red Queen, these

would do as well as anyone.

Tension in the city was at an all-time high, as the criers announced that Queen Bronwyn was entering the city at noon tomorrow, and that the citizens had nothing to fear as long as they refrained from objectionable behaviors. These "behaviors" were detailed at length, and included assassination attempts using any weapon or no weapon, shouted insults in any language, fist-waving, brawling, refusing to sell to a Fereldan, kicking dogs of any breed, or "spitting likely to cause a breach of the peace."

Disputes among the various races in the city threatened to boil over. A great number of elves marched out of the Alienage, swaggering, shouting their allegiance to "Good Queen Bronwyn, Friend of the Elves," and waving home-made red banners made from rags dipped in rose madder dye. The dwarves, more reserved but equally sanguine about their prospects under the new regime, stayed out drinking their new Queen's health at the city's dwarven taverns. The dwarven council of elders met all night, deciding on a proper present for the Queen, to make clear her dwarven subjects' loyalty. Something red, probably. She apparently liked red.

While the human residents were unsure whether to lament or welcome their new monarch, quite a few of them set their womenfolk to sewing red banners of their own. One woman in the Market district made a tidy sum by cutting up an old red silk gown into pennants, and fastening them to thin dowels. They looked quite nice when she was done, and the coin she earned would earn her a dozen new gowns in the old one's

stead.

In the Palace dungeons, a number of chevaliers fumed, but their anger was muted, in the wake of the news that the darkspawn had attacked Val Royeaux. Some were already considering offering their parole, in exchange for being permitted to leave the city and fight the monsters.

Bronwyn's army was restless with excitement. Feelings were running high. The fall of Jader was a sweet revenge. Those who remembered the Occupation— who remembered their parents' stories of brutal extortion and forced labor— smirked at the idea of showing Orlesians what it meant to be a humbled, conquered people.

"Not that I don't think the Orlesians don't deserve a bit of turn-about," Arl Wulffe growled, "but it'll be harder to make use of the city if the soldiers go mad. Bad for discipline, too."

"I *hate* Orlesians," Corbus sulked. "They killed my Father."

Bronwyn gestured him over and had him sit down by her. "It's very unlikely that the citizens of Jader had anything to do with that horrible crime," she said gently. "In war, it always seems to be the helpless and innocent who suffer." She had an idea. "You don't think those princesses had a hand in it, do you?"

He sulked, but shook his head.

"Of course they didn't. They were locked up as prisoners. And

it wasn't the poor elves in the Alienage, either. It was the Empress and her toadies who were behind it. And some of the Empress' agents in the Chantry, too, of course. They're already horribly dead; killed by the darkspawn, and good riddance. And after tomorrow, the people of Jader won't be Orlesians anymore. They'll be Fereldans; part of our country. I think we need to start as we mean to go on. I gave my word that they would be treated with mercy, Corbus, and I can't let anyone break my word for me."

Corbus was still unhappy, but he was unhappy because his father was dead, not because he disagreed with her. If her arguments could work on him, they might work on others as well. For that reason, Bronwyn addressed the army as they prepared for their great and bloodless victory. On the windy plain of Jader, under the blue and cloudless sky, she tried to find words of power and persuasion.

"Today we enter the city of Jader! Today we make Ferelden greater and stronger than ever before!"

There were shouts and cheers, but Bronwyn gestured them to silence, with an indulgent smile.

"The leaders of Jader have agreed to open their gates to us. They have agreed to accept me as their Queen and to accept their new status as Fereldan subjects. Today they become Fereldans—like you, my soldiers, standing before me today."

"I have been very pleased with your good service throughout this campaign. Now I ask you to once more show me your

quality. You are all great fighters. The last few days have proved that to the world. Now I offer you a new challenge: to take a city without striking a blow; without looting a shop; without even knocking a fat merchant down—even if he deserves it. I need this city unravaged and unplundered. I need your strength and discipline to keep the peace in Jader, now and forevermore."

They were silent, and listening, at least. Bronwyn took a deep breath, and went on:

"Jader was not always part of the Orlesian Empire. It was founded as a humble fishing village in the days of the Tevinter magisters. As the Tevinters were pushed back, it was, for long ages, an independent, free city. Eventually, the long arm of the Orlesian Empire stretched out and took it as a prize. Today, we liberate Jader from its Orlesian overlords. We welcome it into our realm, not as a reluctant prisoner, not as a conquered slave, but as an equal amongst our other noble Fereldan cities. From a strong, prosperous Jader, we will supply the force to challenge the newly-risen horde."

"Therefore, we go to Jader today not as arrogant victors, slaughtering and plundering like Orlesian chevaliers; but as brothers and sisters, as true-born Fereldans, to make our kingdom strong and secure. I expect all you to join with me in treating the citizens of Jader just as we treat the citizens of Denerim, of Highever, Amaranthine, and Gwaren! As we treat honest Fereldan villagers and freeholders: with fairness and honesty; with good faith and friendship; with mercy and mutual respect. These are the qualities that make Fereldans different

from the tyrants of Thedas! We come not to ravish and pillage, but to protect and defend! Thus will we enter Jader—our city!"

The cheers followed in her wake. They formed up to march through the wide gates as they slowly swung open. Men from Gherlen's Halt went first, deserving the honor. Bronwyn was behind them, on horseback, with Corbus and Wulffe a little behind her and to either side. Alistair was a welcome and reassuring presence at her back. Along with them were the Wardens not already in the city, and behind them dwarves and elves and men, united in a great cause.

And Jader welcomed her as a favorite daughter. There were even musicians. Apparently Jader had a city band, composed of trumpets, hautboys, flutes, drums, and clashing cymbals. They blared out a fanfare that echoed to the skies, as Bronwyn rode under the greenstone-faced gate, the first Fereldan monarch ever to do so. The musicians fell into step behind the Wardens and in front of the men of South Reach. Those hardy hillmen watched them narrowly, puzzled by marching soldiers who carried instruments rather than weapons.

And the citizens of Jader, rather to Bronwyn's astonishment, cheered her. The streets were lined with smiling, enthusiastic people, who for some reason were waving red banners. It made quite a pretty effect, especially since at the tail end of winter, there were few flowers to throw. The route planned led through the Grand Bazaar to the Place Emeraude, the site of the Chantry and the Palace. It led past the dwarven quarter

and the Alienage. The steward had wished to dissuade Bronwyn for this route, especially from the dangers of the turbulent Alienage, but she felt it was an important gesture to the other peoples of Jader. She would be their Queen, too.

She smiled with careful dignity, and waved at the children. Jader was even more impressive from the inside. The Alienage was as shoddy as the one in Denerim, but the elves greeted her with enthusiasm. Her two informants jumped out of the wagon carrying them and rushed among their fellows, with tales of the bounty of their new queen. The dwarven quarter was quite handsome, and the homes of the rich along the Voie d'Or put the noble estates of Denerim to shame. No wonder people called Fereldans barbarians.

All these sights, however, were quite overshadowed by the Grand Bazaar, with its splendid, well-built shops and brilliantly painted signs. The streets flowed toward the impressive open square of the Place Emeraude, and gradually the magnificent edifices there were revealed, a bit at a time, until she rode out into the midst of the great square, the sides of it blocked off by the City Guard, while crowds shouted and waved those incomprehensible red banners. These buildings, elegantly faced with carved greenstone, were entirely beyond her experience: a palace the like of which Bronwyn had never seen except on a very small scale in picture-books, and by the Chantry which made Denerim Cathedral look like a village chapel. She felt her face grow hot. If she did nothing else, she would find the funds to build an entirely new Cathedral worthy of her kingdom.

Everyone—steward, seneschal, Revered Mother, and guard captain—was waiting for her on the steps of the Palace as agreed, so she would go there first. A narrow red carpet led up to the doors of the Emerald Palace, which was now hers. She must make an appearance at the Chantry later, too, if only to prevent everyone taking her for a complete heathen. Being a heathen would be unpopular, even among the red-banner waving Jaderians. The musicians tactfully moved off to the side, still blaring triumphantly, while the company from Gherlen's Halt ranged themselves on the steps both to look impressive and to be more effective bodyguards. At the approach to the steps, a groom rushed out to hold her horse, and was tactfully nudged aside by Zevran, dressed in his shining best. Her nobles and Wardens followed her, also carefully surrounding her, and Bronwyn turned to face her new subjects. She opened her arms to them, and the crowd went mad: a sea of fluttering crimson, vivid as if the streets were covered in blood.

Oblivious to her own people scanning the crowd, the rooftops, and the windows facing onto the square for hidden threats, Bronwyn basked in the welcome. This was *something*. She had won a great city for Ferelden—a far greater city than she had imagined—and strengthened her realm immeasurably. Once inside the palace itself, she was again staggered by the splendor, the wealth, the luxury of Orlais. She was shown the treasure chamber, and after catching her breath at the amount of gold, she took a moment to glance at the accounts. She resolved once again to do something to improve Denerim. Why hadn't the bloody Orlesians invested in some great civic

works during the Occupation? It might even have made them popular.

A new Cathedral was a must, and she knew just the place to build it: on the south side of the city, where the foothills behind Fort Drakon declined toward the sea. Sections of city wall would have to be demolished and rebuilt, but the cost would be nothing, with these strongrooms to back her. Wide South Lane would lead up to it, giving the edifice an approach and a vista that would awe and delight the pilgrim. She might rename the street Cathedral Lane. There would be room for a square in front of it, a place fit for ceremonies and reverence. She must draw up the idea.

She might even order some improvements to the Palace, though Loghain would growl about "Orlesian frippery." It was one thing for them to remain true to the sturdy, independent character of Ferelden; it was another to look like penniless barbarians. Something should at least be done with the Little Audience Chamber. And the entry hall of the Palace proper. And the thrones in the Landsmeet. They were horrible.

All this raced through her head as she strode through the magnificent, vaulted corridors and antechambers. It was much in her mind when they reached the Marquis' own throneroom, immeasurably handsomer than her own. She could not help comparing this place to the comfortless Landsmeet Chamber as she ascended the steps to the High Seat, which was gilded, inlaid with gems, and comfortably cushioned on both seat and back in sumptuous green velvet. She made a point of asking if there was a mate to the chair, since Loghain would

no doubt be coming soon, and she was assured in the affirmative. The Marquise was very insistent on her rights. Or would be, when she and her children returned from Val Royeaux.

If they returned...

Very likely they were dead. If they did return, Bronwyn saw no reason to confirm them in possession. The Marquis had been given command of an army to invade Ferelden. That was not something to be forgiven. Rule of this splendid province would be given to a loyal Fereldan. She would have to have it out with Loghain as to the name of lucky new arl.

Jader would not be a teyrnir, she decided. Two teyrnirs were quite enough, for she had no desire to elevate anyone to the level of the Couslands or Mac Tirs. An arling, then. Another arling, this time in the northwest, would balance out the great nobles very well.

All this flashed through her mind, before she must speak. Not just humans were here, but also representatives of the dwarven guilds. Good, it saved time. No elves, of course, but that would change. The elves had been pleased by her appearance in the Alienage today. Tomorrow, she would summon their hahren and some of the other elders before her to discuss the issues concerning them.

The crowd fell silent as she turned toward them and spoke from the dais.

"My lords, ladies, and gentlemen! Wardens, soldiers, and wise representatives of the dwarven people! Jader becomes Fereldan today. I greet you as loyal subjects and renew my promise that you will be treated with the justice and mercy shown to the rest of Ferelden. Your rightful property remains your own. Your lives and endeavors will be respected. Together we will continue the struggle against the Blight, protecting the weak and rallying the strong." She addressed the seneschal. "Ser Manfred: present the nobles and worthy folk of Jader to me. I stand ready to accept their homage as my true and faithful subjects."

That process lasted quite some time, with a herald bellowing out the names, and the seneschal whispering background information in her ear. Both he and Ser Manfred also told her that a number of local chevaliers were not present, but remained either in their townhouses or out in the country on their lands, not wanting to commit themselves to what some of them saw as treason. The names were recorded, and in due time, someone would pay calls on them. If they would not pay homage, Bronwyn decided, their desmesnes would go to Fereldans: leavening the Orlesian nobility with new men loyal to her.

Gifts were presented to her: a gold rhyton in the shape of a deer's head; a great deal of magnificent crimson velvet; a symbolic key to the city; a beautiful bronze statuette of a horse and knight. The dwarves gave her a pair of matching gold bracelets, nearly as wide as bracers, studded with rubies. Bronwyn was quite taken with them.

Her troops were carefully spread through the city. Some made use of the capacious barracks, and other were quartered in the Palace itself. A brief chat with the Captain of the City Guard made plain to him how very unwise it would be for his guards to pick fights with Fereldan soldiers.

A feast had been prepared, and was inspected by Zevran and Leliana for poisons. There were none. It was quite the affair. Bronwyn understood the importance of meeting and greeting, but was deeply relieved when she could withdraw to the Marquis' apartments—now her own.

These made even the Imperial Suite at the Rock look modest. There was a great deal of green, which Bronwyn liked. The rooms and connecting corridors were checked thoroughly for peepholes and hidden doors. A few were found. The family quarters of the Marquis were quite large, and accommodated all the Wardens easily, for they were composed of the Marquis' bedchamber, dressing room, bathroom, and private study; the Marquise's bedchamber (with hidden connecting door), her boudoir, dressing room, and bathroom; three rooms which had been used by the family's older children, with a joint bathroom; the large nursery and its curious and amusing bathroom; a private strongroom; the rooms of the upper servants and the bathroom used by them; a family dining room, and a family parlor.

The servants had prepared the Marquise's room for her own use, which was appropriate, Bronwyn supposed, even though she preferred the quieter, sturdier —comparatively speaking— style preferred by the Marquis. However, Loghain would be

coming, and he would likely explode at the Marquise's ultrafeminine style: dainty furniture and delicate colors; fragile draperies, and tessellated floors covered by pale silk carpets. Bronwyn took it as her own, and suspected she would learn to like it.

The exquisite bath was made in the shape of a shell. Perhaps that was appropriate for a seaport like Jader, but Bronwyn had never felt less like a rare pearl as she scrubbed off the dirt of travel. No doubt the Marquise would have shuddered at such a desecration.

Chateau Haine was fairly remote, set picturesquely on the edge of the Vimmark Mountains. There was good hunting here, a decent library, a large enough staff to provide for one's modest needs. Prosper de Montfort had always enjoyed his stays here. Now, of course, his stay promised to be of some duration. He was keeping a low profile, alert for Celene's next move against him.

It did not help his temper that Cyril was here. A man needed a son and heir, naturally; and it would have been mad to leave Cyril in Val Royeaux as a hostage to be used against his father. The problem was that Cyril *bored* him. He was not a true companion, and could not meet him in conversation, whether rational or playful. The boy, now fifteen, was just like his late mother—except for a blessed lack of piety. He was lazy and impertinent; he was arrogant and self-satisfied; he had no curiosity whatever about the world, other than to want to know—*now*—when his next meal, his next drink, and his

next wench would be provided. At Cyril's age, Prosper had already mastered the Arcanum and Qunari tongues, trained a hawk, learned the arts of sword, dagger, and crossbow, and killed his first man in a reasonably fair fight.

Cyril had tried to escape from their ship before departing Val Royeaux. He had whined about missing his friends, about missing the splendid events at the Grand Cathedral, and about missing the festivities that bade farewell to the army. Prosper had finally had to knock him senseless and throw him below decks.

The boy was *still* whining about his worthless friends. Prosper had refused all invitations to attend salons in Cumberland, wary of the Shadows of the Empire, Celene's assassins. While Orlais and Nevarra were at war, Prosper's ambiguous status as a noble holding domains in both those countries made him acceptable. His current status as an exile even made him welcome. It was a pity that it was simply too dangerous to go, for he had reason to believe that some of the young men of Cumberland were not as shallow as those of Orlais. They might have been a good influence on Cyril. The young prince, now, the king's heir— he was a hard-working lad, and nobody's fool. A son like *that* would be a son to be proud of, even if meant watching him very, very carefully, lest Prosper himself be supplanted prematurely...

One great diversion kept Prosper entertained: the curious egg that his chief huntsman had brought to him last summer. It had hatched, and the first face the astonishing creature had seen on emerging from its shell was that of Duke Prosper de

Montfort. It had become attached to him. It remembered him from visit to visit. Prosper had undertaken attempting to train the creature, for no one else to his knowledge had a pet as glorious, menacing, and potentially useful as a wyvern.

It took imagination and tact. It was not at all like training a horse or a hawk. Perhaps it was something like those Fereldan dogs, for the wyvern was a surprisingly clever creature. It gave Prosper considerable satisfaction to picture how quickly his dear Leopold could dispatch and devour a mabari.

Wyverns could *fly*. Leopold had grown rapidly in the six months since his hatching, and Prosper had feared that he would simply fly away. Chaining him up unlikely to help in their bonding, so Prosper had taken the risk of leaving him free during the day; only locking him in his cage at night. Luckily, Leopold appeared to like Prosper, and could now understand simple verbal commands. Most importantly, he understood that he was not to eat humans, especially Cyril, no matter how annoying they were. Eventually, Prosper believed he could train the wyvern to attack on command, but that must be done carefully. Prosper had a dream for Leopold; a great dream that had not been realized in Thedas in two ages; not since the extinction of the griffons. Was the wyvern strong enough now? Perhaps it was time to see.

He took Leopold out to the training yard and began putting him through his exercises: to sit, to lie down, to trot in a circle around the paddock, to stretch his wings and then take flight to this or that pinnacle or tower and then return at a whistle. It

was going well. Leopold liked to please him; he was far more satisfactory than Cyril in that regard.

He was about to send Leopold on some practice hunting flights when his agent in Cumberland came racing in, his horse white with sweat. The man jumped down, and ran toward him. Something remarkable, it seemed, had happened.

Prosper listened to the news, his face blank, not letting the man see what this meant to him. He questioned him, wanting to understand every detail. It had already been clear to him that the Maker had not approved of burning his Bride's Champion in effigy. Now, the full extent of his wrath was clear. Prosper dismissed the man after a time, almost numb with shock, and then turned to Leopold, waiting patiently in the paddock.

"Leopold, my clever boy... we are going home! But before we depart, there is one last exercise we must try..."

Loghain's arrival at the Rock already had him in a mood to celebrate. The news there was better than anything he had ever imagined.

"She's in *Jader*?"

"That she is, Sire," Ser Blayne Faraday affirmed, his gruff face uncommonly cheerful. "Jader collapsed like rotten fruit. Her Majesty told the troops to behave themselves, but it's the Maker's truth: Jader is ours. They opened their gates and let

the Queen ride right in."

Loghain caught Cauthrien's eye. She was trying not to grin, as elated as he was. Jader. Solidor. A border all the way to the Frostback Gates.

"Where are the Orlesian prisoners?"

"Most of them not only gave their parole; they swore allegiance to her. It's not hard to see why. With the Empress dead, who else can they follow?"

Loghain frowned, not entirely displeased, but thinking it over. He listened to the rest of the story. Bronwyn had been merciful... far more merciful than he would have been. So far, it seemed to have worked. Perhaps it was for the best that she, and not he, had been here. The chevaliers despised his origins and hated him for his deeds. Bronwyn, on the other hand, was someone they could feel comfortable with: a noble like themselves, with no long history of bitter opposition to them.

Ser Blayne roused him from his thoughts. "The princesses are here, of course. Mild young ladies. The Queen said she was thinking of sending them east, but she hadn't decided yet. She might want them in Jader, instead. Do you want them summoned, Sire?"

"Not now," Loghain growled. He had not the least desire to trouble himself with a trio of treacherous Orlesian harpies. He would very much like to see Bronwyn, but it was already dark,

and his men were tired. "I want a good look at this fortress. Then I want a meal, a bath, and a place to sleep. I'll ride to Jader in the morning, and see the Queen."

After a shockingly good meal, he was shown the way to the Imperial Suite, where he was told the Queen had lodged. On the way, he passed the Wardens. Tara waved at him a little maniacally, as she supervised while her people carried a long and heavily wrapped object into the Wardens' quarters. Loot, obviously, but the most awkward sort. Why not just leave it at West Hill or the Aeonar itself?

The servants, clearly frightened of him, opened the doors to the opulent apartments. Loghain eyed the splendor of the place, distrustful and secretly a little intimidated. Still, the bath was... extraordinary. Those of his personal guards who were not on door duty found comfortable places to sleep. Amber settled down by the fire, and curled up comfortably, indifferent to gilded swags and inlaid marble. Endeavoring to follow her example, Loghain stretched out on the ridiculous bed, feeling a bit late to the party, but resigned to it. It was not important who had achieved this; it was only important that it *had* been achieved. Not a huge territory to add to their kingdom; but a strategically vital one.

His dreams were confused and brightly colored: a vision of a field of red poppies below him, and Bronwyn dancing through them, robed in white. He was awakened in the middle of the night by the snoring of a guard, but before he could grope for a boot to throw at the man, someone closer had kicked him awake.

"Maker's balls, Kain! Roll over!"

Without a response, the sergeant did just that. Loghain lay awake for some time, arranging and rearranging Ferelden, trying to retrieve that vision of Bronwyn. It was just the sort of dream that he liked, but had all too rarely. As the sky lightened, he gave up on trying to sleep, and rose, exploring more of Roc du Chevalier.

The pay chests stored here were a boon indeed. Bronwyn had sensibly given the men a bounty, but it had hardly made a dent in the gold. Loghain did not think of himself as a man greedy for coin, but coin made the impossible possible. The gold would strengthen Fereldan cities; pay Fereldan troops; purchase Fereldan war engines. He had some of those spears Bronwyn had ordered from Master Wade in his luggage. He hoped Bronwyn would consider them an appropriate gift. With the gold they now had, he could purchase many more.

After a quick breakfast, it was time to move out. Cauthrien had Maric's Shield ready to march with swift dispatch. The other troops were ready as well, even the small band of Templars from the Aeonar that had joined his forces. Some of them had been sickened by the crimes committed by their fellows; some, like young Desmond, had been entirely ignorant of them until shown the hideous truth.

The Wardens were a bit slower off the mark, since Tara was still mucking about with that huge piece of loot.

"What in the Maker's name is that thing?" he growled. "Get it loaded into the wagons, and let's be off!"

"Sorry, Loghain!" Tara called back cheerfully, not at all daunted. "It's fragile. And important."

He grunted. "It had better be."

She grinned at him, but moved her people along a little faster. Brosca glanced over at him, and whispered to Jowan. To Loghain's surprise, she approached, speaking quietly.

"Hey, Loghain. Can we talk?"

"We're talking."

"Where nobody can hear us? It's kind of important."

Deciding to indulge her, he led her into an empty room and shut the door behind them.

"What is it?"

She shuffled and fidgeted, plainly uneasy. He raised a brow at her.

"It's like this," she said. "Tara doesn't think we have any business telling you something this personal. Tara thinks only Bronwyn should tell you this, but I'll bet anything that Bronwyn won't. She should, but she won't. Jowan agrees with me."

Now he was feeling uneasy. What had happened to Bronwyn?

"Tell me what?"

"About two months ago, after you left, we were working on that observation post in the Deep Roads near Solidor. We told you that Jukka bought it there, right?"

"You mentioned he was killed in a rockslide."

"Yeah, that's right. Bronwyn was close by, and she got buried too, and hurt pretty bad..."

He was now fairly alarmed. "How badly?"

"Well... she lost the baby. You know how she is, toughing things out and not fussing about wounds, but it hit her hard. There wasn't anything Anders could do, since it took time to dig her out. I just thought you should know. She's accomplished a lot, yeah; but she's had a hard time, too."

Loghain leaned back against the wall and blew out a breath. A baby? She had never told him she was with child. Perhaps she had been waiting for the perfect moment, and it had passed her by. The thought of her lonely suffering was painful to contemplate.

"I'm glad you told me. Bronwyn probably would not have said anything." He opened the door, and let the little dwarf through first, partly so she would not see his face.

No, very likely Bronwyn would say nothing. She was proud, and hated to seem weak. She probably hated anything that

smacked of pity as much as he did. Perhaps she would even perceive this as a personal failure. It grieved him to think of her disappointment. He had hoped he was done with the crushing sorrow of miscarriages, but he had been wrong.

Well, that was all the more reason to be done with this war. They had achieved all the goals he had dreamed of. Jader was Fereldan. Orlais was occupied with the Blight. Perhaps it was time for Bronwyn to rest on her laurels.

First, though, he wanted to see the new territory she had won for them, and to make clear his own admiration for her accomplishments. They soon moved out in good order, and traveled along the Imperial Highway, down toward the broad coastal plain. There to the north, like a painted city by a painted sea, was Jader. Its tall towers flew Fereldan banners. They turned off the Highway toward the city, speeding up a little, eager to see more. The walls were impressive; far better than Denerim's. Loghain was heartily glad that a siege had not been necessary.

The guards saluted, puffed up with self-satisfaction. He smiled back wryly, feeling they deserved to be pleased with themselves. An officer fell in with them, and led them through the streets, pointing out the sights. Runners were sent ahead to inform the Palace of his arrival. Apparently word had got out who he was, for the human Jaderians were scurrying out of sight. The dwarves and elves, however, were coming out and cheering, perfectly friendly.

That was something to consider. Dwarves and elves were not

always, strictly speaking, Orlesian—not unless they had personally bought into the culture and customs. Some did, like the upper servants who aped the manners of their masters, but the Alienage elves seemed pleased at the change of regime, and the dwarves were being sensibly pragmatic about it. It would be something to build on, in trying to keep this distant city loyal to Ferelden.

He had a great deal on his mind, and did not take much note of the splendor around him. Yes, it was grand, just as every Orlesian object and person had to be grand, but at the moment, Loghain simply wanted to see his young wife, and assure himself that she was all right.

There was the Palace, overlarge and overdecorated. Ridiculous name, Palace Emeraude. They would divest themselves of Orlesian affectations starting today. It was green, so they could call it the Emerald Palace. And there on the steps, surrounded by men in armor, was a straight and slender figure in red...

He leaped from his horse, and made straight for her. What a fine girl she was, and like all the women in his life, far better than he deserved. Without foolish ceremony, and much to her surprise, he swept her into his arms and kissed her soundly, not caring what the rest of world might think.

Thanks for your review: Nemrut, Chiara Crawford, JackOfBladesX, Blinded in a bolthole, Meatzman2, darksky01, DjinniGenie, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, sizuka2,

KnightOfHolyLight, Mike3207, Reynes, D-Ro2593, le-maru, Robbie the Phoenix, LadyoftheDrow, Massgamer45, Phygmalion, Jenna53, zcohen723, kirbster676, mille libri, The Flying Hobbo, Vizantir, jnybot, Lyssa Terald, AD Lewis, dragonmactir, Inveleth, and Zute.

Wow. It really has been three years since I began this monster. To all you who have been with me since the beginning, and to all you who have joined the glad throng since then, thank you. I appreciate your support and patience. We really have only a comparatively few chapters to the end. I am considering a way to incorporate two different endings at the moment, but we'll see how that works out.

Eglantine's song is translated and adapted from a song of the character Mignon in Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (original: Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre), the second novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, published in 1795-96.

Denerim Cathedral (even though we never see the inside) really is pretty tacky, with a mean and shabby entrance at ground level. Every other Chantry we see in canon looks better. Even the comparatively small Chantry in Haven is handsomely situated on top of a hill.

There are all sorts of things I dislike about the DLC Mark of the Assassin, but one of them is that nobody makes the huge deal it deserves of the fact that Prosper has trained a FLYING WYVERN AS HIS STEED! Explain to me why he

isn't the hero of the episode, rather than Hawke, who's there to rob him. Sorry. It really is a big deal, and the Wardens need to shake off their lethargy and take notice. Even the Havenites who raised dragons didn't actually have the stones to ride on them.

108. Beyond Borders

Victory at Ostagar:

Chapter 108: Beyond Borders

Leandra Hawke had not expected to return to Denerim so soon. Less than a month in South Reach had proved quite enough.

Her reception—and her daughter's—had been markedly cooler on her recent visit than it had been when taken there by dear Leonas, who had been so very popular in his own arling. The late arl's ashes were interred in the South Reach Chantry: Our Lady of Light. Revered Mother Damaris had given Bethany some very hard looks, for it was common knowledge that the arl had been killed—in part at least—because of his progressive views on mages. Nor was she the only one. Perversely, a great many people blamed Bethany for his death.

"Mark my words, if he hadn't tried to please that new wife of his, he'd be alive today."

People did not care if she heard such cruel words. Bethany grew more and more uncomfortable there. She did not feel welcome in the Chantry. Nor did she feel comfortable in the

small town of South Reach, down the hill from the castle. People stared at her, and made the sign against evil. Sometimes they spat. They did not dare refuse to sell their goods to her, but there was, quite honestly, little there that she wanted.

Their whole party was out of spirits. Lothar missed his brother Corbus horribly, and acted out on occasion. No one had ever seen him so willful and bad-tempered as he was now. He complained of having nothing to do, and clung to Charade, wanting to practice archery or go hunting.

Charade confessed to Bethany that she wished that she and Rothgar had run away and eloped, so she could have gone with him on campaign.

"Who knows how long he'll be gone? It's ridiculous, sitting around here. Between the steward and the housekeeper, there's nothing left to be done but work on my wedding clothes. Ugh."

"They're very nice wedding clothes. A good thing we bought all the materials in Denerim, though."

"I hate sewing," Charade said flatly. "I swear, once I'm married I will never pick up a needle again, so hear me, Maker!"

Bethany laughed, a little ruefully. "I doubt that you'll need to."

It was only too true that they had little to do. They were in

mourning, of course, which made lively entertainments improper and disrespectful to the arl. Leandra, deeply grieving for her kind husband, had gone to South Reach with every good intention of doing her best as her little stepson's regent, but the fact was that she had little experience in administering a large household, much less an arling. The steward, who had been perfectly affable when the arl was alive, now looked with suspicion on his widow, apparently concerned that she would plunder South Reach for her own benefit and that of her children. He was a loyal man, but not loyal to her. Instead, he held out for the rights of the absent young arl, whom he regarded as his rightful master. He was kind only to Lothar, taking him on a brief visit to his future bannorn, of which Leandra, naturally, was also the regent. He was carefully civil to Charade, as the future wife of a decent young nobleman. With Leandra and Bethany, however, he was distant and formal. The housekeeper was no better, and took any interference by Leandra as an insult. Dismissing them would cause more problems than it would solve, for they were earnest, hard-working people who knew their duties, and would be incredibly difficult to replace.

It was not surprising that by the fourth of Drakonis they were back in Denerim. By the time Bethany returned, she had a good idea about what she wanted to do.

She was up early on the morning after their return, and took a long walk alone, muffled in a plain cloak. Her mother would have hated to know she was going alone and unprotected, so Bethany did not tell her her plans. She walked to the Market

District, a heavy, old-fashioned key in hand, to see the house that had been bequeathed to her. The arl's seneschal in Denerim had told her something about it when she asked for the key.

"The last tenant was a foreign woman who ran off without paying for the quarter, leaving the place a filthy mess. Must have thrown wine on the walls to leave them so stained. The arl told me to have it freshly white-washed and the floors scrubbed down. Renting it out will bring you a steady income. I trust you'll find it all in order, Mistress Bethany."

The sun was low, and the city walls cast chilly shadows. Nonetheless, she liked the look of the house, close to the shops, a few steps from the Chantry, easy to find. It was in Threadneedle Alley, a tiny cul-de-sac, and the best house there.

The lock clicked open readily enough, and smelled recently oiled. Bethany mentally thanked the seneschal, who was far nicer to them than the people of South Reach. She stepped into the house and took stock of her property.

Oh! If they had had such a house in Lothing, they would have thought themselves well-off, indeed! It was charming. The anteroom had small, high windows, letting in light. It was furnished with benches, which would serve well for what she had in mind, and also with chests and a wardrobe, which would not. The walls were plastered, and yes, newly whitewashed. It smelled pleasantly fresh, though it would need a bit of dusting. She opened the door in the middle of

the opposite wall, which led to a delightful parlor, larger than the anteroom, and with a cozy arched fireplace at the far end. There were good-looking wool rugs on the floor, woven in bold Gwarenian patterns. Parts of the walls were covered with handsome oak wainscoting. The ceiling rose to a peak, and the mullioned, triangular window was also high, above the level of the anteroom roof. Good light. She would need to be able to see to do her work properly.

The room was furnished with long couches covered in canvas and deerhide, a table with a chess set, and a pair of bookcases still filled with books. Bethany clenched her hands in her excitement, hoping there was something good to read there. She would need very different furnishings, but she had coin of her own now.

Yes, coin of her own. She had briefly pictured some things at Bryland House she could use, but discarded the notion. That was as good as stealing from Corbus. Everything she needed she would order from a carpenter, and then pay for it herself. It would be hers.

To the left was a bedchamber with its own fireplace. It contained a fine, curtained bed, a cupboard, a wardrobe, and a big iron chest that proved to be empty, save for a few unpaired stockings. They were silk. Their prior owner must have been a woman of property. The bed looked comfortable. Bethany felt an aching desire to throw herself on the bed and hide in this darling little house, only coming out to buy food from the street vendors and to visit the Wonders of Thedas.

But she had not seen it all. To the right of the parlor was the kitchen, which had its own oven for roasting and baking, as well as a fireplace for other cooking. There was a stone tub, for laundry and bathing. The foodstuffs had been cleaned out, but it would be easy enough to restock. Perhaps she should get a cat, to ward off mice. Perhaps she should have two cats, to keep each another company. A giggle escaped her. In this house, she could have all the cats she liked. She could be a old cat lady, reading her books, playing her lute, and baking her own bread. It sounded lovely.

There was a pantry, too, with a woodpile and two large kegs of what turned out to be quite decent wine. Bethany thought the pantry excessive, considering the size of the kitchen. With a little work, this could actually be turned into a decent little sleeping room. There was a ring in the floor, and a trapdoor opened to reveal some musty wooden stairs to a cellar. Not having a candle at hand, Bethany decided to put off exploring the cellar... until someone else was with her. It was a little creepy. She lowered the trapdoor and pulled one of the empty shelves over it, knowing she was being silly.

I wonder if there's a loft.

That might be hidden, too. Sure enough, she discovered where it must be, above the kitchen. It was probably small, since the ceiling of the parlor was too high to allow a loft to cover the entire house. Bethany puzzled over that, since the building on the outside seemed to have a straight roof. A brief check showed there was also a small loft above the bedchamber. She had seen a ladder in the anteroom, but she

would need a chain or a rope to fix to the hooks. Maker only knew what was up there. She would want to bring some dust sheets to spread over the furniture, because it would certainly be filthy.

But this was hers, all hers, and it would do very, very well. Now it was time to consult someone who had the power to make her plan succeed or fail.

The Grand Cleric Muirin was startled to find that the young woman seeking audience with her was Mistress Bethany Hawke, the late Arl Bryland's mage step-daughter. Though she was a lightning rod for debate about the changing role of mages, she had always seemed to Muirin a very sweet girl. She curtsied nicely, and sitting in the visitor's chair, looked much like any young initiate or lay sister who was hoping to talk Muirin into something.

"Your Reverence," Bethany began hesitantly. "There is something I would very much like to do, but I don't want to shock people, or make them feel they are doing wrong, or something contrary to the Chantry..."

Muirin raised her brows. Bethany struggled on.

"In fact, I hope you like the idea, because I think it would be best for me to have some Chantry supervision. Not that I'm dangerous," she hurriedly assured Muirin. "But people might think I am, and if I had supervision, then people would feel safe, which would make them happier and more comfortable.

I don't want to be seen as making some sort of political statement. I have nothing to hide. I've never used forbidden magics. My father made me promise that my magic 'would serve the best in me, not that which is most base.' And it wouldn't cost the Chantry anything, because I already have a place for it, and I can pay for the things I need."

"My dear child," Muirin stopped her. "Perhaps you should tell me exactly what it is you wish to do."

A little later, Muirin sent for Ser Otto. She could think of no one better to be the Chantry's representative at a free clinic in Denerim Market, only a few steps away. The rich had their own household healers. Now the rest of Denerim would have the benefit of magical healing, too.

While the young girl and the gentle-voiced Templar talked, Muirin got up and looked through her window at the Market below, deeply moved. It was a splendid idea, and it was a disgrace that no one had thought of it before now, or dared to suggest it. Were the theologians in Val Royeaux so pitifully afraid of anything that might make mages look useful? What would the Divine say, if she knew? Muirin did not care. She must leave for Val Royeaux soon, and would face the storm when it came. However briefly this clinic lasted, it would be a blessing for the people of this city.

Ser Otto was quite taken with the plan, but he was an idealist, and it would naturally appeal to him. He suggested that they make regular visits to the Alienage as well, since the people there might be hesitant to come to the market. They even

discussed if the presence of a lay sister might not be desirable. Sister Ursula knew something of healing, and might be of great assistance in the work. She was a hearty, good-humored widow, who had joined the Chantry because she had had nowhere else to go after losing her husband and home. Muirin nodded absently. They were working it all out very nicely between them. They needed nothing but Muirin's approval, and she was quite inclined to grant it. She liked it all the better for the fact that the Divine would denounce it.

Might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. Or burned.

Ser Otto was eager to see the future clinic for himself. The girl explained her current limitations with the cellar and lofts. Ser Otto told her they would take his friend Irminric with them, along with a lantern and a length of rope. Muirin told them to take that gangly boy Ser Kevan with them, too. He was a willing lad, and strong enough to carry firewood and draw water, at least.

It was later in the day, well past noon, when a king's messenger arrived, giving her the news of the dreadful thing that the darkspawn had done. Muirin wept for the destruction of so much grandeur and beauty, and prayed for the dead. She would not be going to Val Royeaux, after all. Her trunks, half packed, were emptied, and she spent the night on her knees before the statue of Andraste, hardly able to form a coherent prayer, ashamed of herself to be so relieved by her own deliverance.

News spread through the streets. It was rather like a festival

on one hand, and a wake on the other. While it was unreasonable to expect Fereldans to show pity toward the Empress, Muirin held a solemn memorial service to commemorate the innocent dead and the destruction of the Grand Cathedral.

A thread had broken, the strong tie that had bound her to the Divine and the central authority of the Chantry. The Divine might well be dead, and certainly a great many of the powerful figures of the clergy as well. The Lord Seeker, the Knight-Vigilant, the Knights-Divine... some at least would have perished. No one would know for quite some time. By the power of the Maker, the Fereldan Chantry was now on its own, for good or ill. Muirin shivered under her heavy ceremonial robes, bowed down by the terrible responsibility.

A few days later, further news came: a secret message that relayed the shocking story of her own and the Queen's burning in effigy and the lightning damage to the Grand Cathedral, Muirin was glad that she had held the memorial ceremony beforehand, for she found herself somewhat out of charity with the Divine. As it was, the Maker had spoken. Rather loudly, in fact.

She was very glad that she had approved the clinic. She was even happier that she would be here, in Denerim, watching over it.

"But darling!" Leandra protested. "How will you have time to attend salons and dinners with me if you're at that *clinic* of

yours all the time?"

Bethany had suspected this would be the hardest fight of her life. Too bad she was right.

"There's no point in showing me off like some sort of noble catch, Mother," Bethany said. "I'm a *mage*. No nobleman—*no one* in his right mind—would marry me. This clinic is something of *mine*. Nobody else can do it. The Grand Cleric has approved of it. It's a way of reconciling mages and Chantry. It's a way of doing real, practical good for the people of Denerim. My only other choice, as I see it, is to join the Wardens like Carver. Would you prefer that?"

"Oh, Maker! No!" Leandra tugged on her hair, obviously worried and frustrated. "That's much too dangerous! I don't see why the Queen couldn't leave Carver in Denerim with those dwarves... But this is dangerous, too! Leonas was killed by a man who hated mages! You'll be alone among strangers. If only Adam were here..." she paused. "... or Carver..."

"They're not," Bethany said, feeling a bit cruel. "They have their own lives now. I want my own life, too. You have Lothar to take care of and Charade to show off at the salons. She's better at all that than I ever could have been anyhow."

"Oh, Bethany..." Leandra's voice trailed off, tears standing in her eyes.

"No! No pity! I can't stand it when you look as if you're sorry for me!"

Now Leandra was crying in earnest. "At least let me help you!"

Bethany bit back her reply. Yes, she would like to do it all by herself. Still, she could show the house to her mother, and let her see how nice it was. Maybe that would help reconcile her to the plan.

It worked out fairly well. Leandra insisted on traveling by carriage with an escort, even though it was not a long walk. Mother was an arlessa, after all. They found the house unlocked and Sister Ursula and Ser Kevan hard at work.

"But this is delightful!" Leandra cried. "What a pretty little house!"

Proudly, Bethany showed her every detail, especially the altered parlor, where four cots had been delivered. These were sturdier and higher than regular cots. In the bedchamber, in addition to the big bed, were a little writing desk and a chair and a birthing stool of Bethany's own design. She had helped her father deliver babies, years before, and was excited about using some of his ideas. She had decided on using the bedchamber for childbirth, both to give the new mothers more privacy, and because they might make a great deal of noise. Most mothers would choose to have their child at home, but Bethany had seen many cases in the old days when a terrified young mother-to-be appeared on their doorstep—a girl who had been thrown out by her family and spurned by the child's father. Something of the sort was bound to happen here.

Work was being done on the pantry. Lathe had been put up for plastering and whitewashing. A narrow window had been drilled into the wall, and was already glazed. It did not let in a great deal of light, but any natural light was infinitely better than none. It was being new furnished with a single bed, and the chest and wardrobe that had stood in the antechamber.

They had a little more work to do before the clinic was ready to open. The lofts had proved to be full of nothing but trash: moth-eaten rugs and rat droppings. Bethany took that to heart and found a mouser in need of a good home. Sister Ursula liked cats herself and thought Pyewacket a good investment.

The cellar was filthy as well. Bins of what Ser Otto thought might be rotten turnips vied with rusty, jagged-edged pails for the description of the most unattractive rubbish. It smelled of damp and decay. The floor was earth, and rough. Otto thought that having some men lay tile or brick there would make the place more tolerable. There were opened sacks of quicklime and a shelf with a few forgotten jars of honey: ancient, cobwebbed, and wax sealed. Theoretically, honey never spoiled, so Bethany made a face, wiped them off, and carried them upstairs. Honey was a good salve for wounds, and prevented infection.

Mother was even more reconciled to the idea of the clinic, when Bethany told her she would not be sleeping there, but at home at Bryland House. Sister Ursula, however, would stay there at times, rotating with Ser Otto and Ser Irminric, who was quite taken with the whole concept himself. The plan for the single bed in the little bedchamber was altered to a very

well-built, comfortable, and *long* set of bunk beds. Otto and Irminric were quite tall men.

And Mother did have one very good idea, after they went home and she had time to think. She decided to hold a salon, and invited all the notable residents of Denerim, as a way of announcing her return to the city. There, they could talk about the clinic, first as a wonderful idea in itself, and second, as one sanctioned by the Grand Cleric. The Chantry personnel were invited to attend. Even the Grand Cleric agreed to make an appearance.

"I hope Habren comes," Leandra fretted. "Surely by now she's able to cope with social gatherings. Either that, or we really must call on her, Bethany. Anything else would look odd and unfriendly. Lothar ought to see his sister, if she is unable to come to us."

But Habren did not come. Despite Leandra's warmly-written invitation, Arl Kane arrived, attended only by his little sisters, who were wild to see dear Arlessa Leandra. While the girls hugged Leandra and Charade, Kane took Bethany aside.

"Your mother's set on seeing Habren, isn't she?"

"Well... yes. She's her stepmother. She feels it's her duty."

"Fine woman, your mother. Good to the girls. Always liked her." His too-handsome face knit in a frown. "Look here, I agree that someone should see to Habren. She's not right. I'm not sure the boy should come, though. It might be get ugly."

Bethany stared. "What's wrong? Habren's very ill?"

Kane spread his hands, his expression calculated to display what a devoted young husband should feel when concerned about his expectant wife. He lowered his voice.

"She's... not right. She gets so upset and hysterical. She attacked Faline's little puppy—tried to throw her out the window!— and she hurt the governess, too, one time when I was out of the house. Warden Jowan saw her awhile back, when I had to break the news about her father, and he gave her something to calm her; but he said that she couldn't take that all the time. Maybe you should come... perhaps with your mother and Lady Charade. If she could behave herself, I wouldn't have to have her watched so closely. If you're there, you can keep her from hurting herself."

Now quite alarmed, Bethany sputtered in confusion. "I'll certainly... discuss this with Mother. Could we come today?"

"Before sundown," he suggested. "Habren sleeps at odd hours. I know I can trust you not to spread this about. Imagine how it would hurt all of us... hurt the child... if word got out that his mother was... *mad*."

He was called away by one of his many admirers, and Bethany was left to digest this very serious news. She disliked Habren fairly intensely, but if she needed healing of any sort, of course Bethany would help. And perhaps her behavior might be somewhat forgiven, if it was caused by a mental illness... perhaps grief over the death of her father. Bethany

tried to put it from her mind for the moment, while smiling for her noble friends.

Everyone was saying such kind things about the clinic, vowing to tell everyone they knew, offering financial support and gifts. A few people carefully expressed their concern about Bethany overworking herself, since she would be the only Healer there. It was a very broad hint that she should have skilled —*magical*— help, but so far, no one was willing to make the point outright.

They all went to the Arl of Denerim's estate in the carriage. It had been decided that Lothar would visit Faline and Jancey while the ladies paid a call on Arlessa Habren.

"I don't want to see Habren anyway," Lothar declared. "I *hate* Habren."

"Lothar, darling," Leandra admonished him, "you mustn't say such things about your sister."

Bethany and Charade shared a look. Lothar remained defiant, and turned away from them, staring out the window at the streets.

He whispered, "But I *do* hate her. Why couldn't *she* have been killed instead of Father?"

Leandra sighed, and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. She was relieved that he did not shrug it off.

"We won't be there long," she said. "Habren isn't well, and Bethany will see if there is anything we can do for her."

"All right. At least there'll be *someone* to play with."

Charade said, "Faline and Jancey were pretty excited about having a visitor. They'll probably have treats. Don't ruin your supper!"

He grinned wickedly over his shoulder. Charade laughed at him.

The Kendalls were waiting for them in the reception hall. Faline and Jancey were bouncing with delight. Kane greeted them in his friendliest way, ruffling Lothar's hair.

"Hello, little brother!"

Lothar scowled, but managed a polite bow.

"My lord Arl."

Bows and curtseys were exchanged, and mild gossip about the improving weather. Kane was planning an outing to Dragon's Peak, since his duties were not of the sort that would prevent any pleasure of his. He was quite at the disposal of the South Reach ladies.

Truth to tell, he was secretly annoyed that these women would meddle in his private matters, but they were not doing it out of spite. Very likely they would never have troubled their heads about Habren, had they not thought it was their duty.

For that matter, young Lady Charade looked like she'd rather be anywhere else. He trusted his luck, which had not yet failed him, and even more to Habren's complete inability to behave decently to anyone.

"I told her you were coming, and that she ought to see you," he sighed, playing the worried husband card. "I'm glad a proper Healer's going to have a look at her."

The women glanced at each other, very concerned. Bethany had told them about Habren's deranged behavior—especially about the attack on the puppy, which was certainly beyond the bounds of sanity.

"Meanwhile," Kane suggested, "why don't Lothar and girls go and have a pleasant time? Mistress Manda's planned some fine games!"

Lothar trudged off, as if going to a funeral, but most of that was pretense to make everyone sorry for him. Once the children were gone, Kane's face became grave, and he led them down the long north hall, speaking quietly.

"Let me go in first, and get her used to the idea. Wait here."

"Of course," Leandra agreed. Once he was out of sight, it occurred to her that Kane's manners were atrocious—worse even than Loghain Mac Tir's— but his handsome face let him get away with things no plainer man could. Of course, much of that was due to his upbringing...

"All right." Kane was back. He grimaced uneasily. "This is not one of her good days."

He gestured them through the door, and shut it behind them softly.

Habren's pregnancy was not yet advanced enough to show, but her appearance had altered a great deal from the last time they had seen her. Her hair was straggling and greasy, her gown wrinkled and unclean. She took a deep breath, and then rushed at them, eyes wild.

"Let me out of here!" she shrieked. *"Let me out of here!"*

The three ladies gaped, utterly taken aback. Habren threw herself at Leandra, shaking her by the shoulders, ripping her lovely purple gown.

"Do you hear me?" she roared. *"I demand* that you inform the Landsmeet that my husband is keeping me a prisoner!"

"Now, now," Kane said mildly, detaching Habren's hands from the shocked Leandra, and gently interposing himself between the women now that the damage was already done. "That's no way to behave to your good stepmother."

"Stepmother!" Habren barked a bitter laugh. She turned to Leandra and snarled out her words. "Listen, you gold-digging hag, I want you and that abomination over there—" she pointed at Bethany, who gasped "—to tell everyone how I'm being treated!"

Charade lost her temper. "How dare you, you crazy bitch! Don't you talk to my family that way! You tried to throw a *puppy* out the window! You may be noble, but you're not *normal*. So sit down and *shut up!*"

"Charade, don't!" Leandra pleaded.

Habren, red with rage, lunged at Charade, who seemed quite ready to punch her.

Bethany cried, "Kane! Catch her!" and cast a sleep spell on Habren. It struck, and the furious woman slumped. Kane caught her easily, and carried her over to her rumpled bed.

"She's like this sometimes." He sighed. "I don't know what to do. She's going to hurt herself, or someone else, or the baby. If her father were here..." He shook his head dolefully, trying not to overdo it.

"She shouldn't be alone," Bethany said. "You should find someone to sit with her and talk quietly to her. Someone..." She thrashed about for a good idea. "Someone *strong*. Maybe a lay sister from the Chantry?"

"I'll find someone," Kane said, showing his fine white teeth. "That's a wonderful idea. It's important to be keep this quiet. She may get better someday, and she'd be so ashamed..." He had already decided to hire a well-paid female guard. Maybe two. Strong? Absolutely. Habren had tried to cut him with a sharpened pendant only a few days ago.

Bethany did not expect Habren's conduct to improve, since it seemed all of a piece with her usual conduct. Habren was still Habren, only frighteningly more so. Still, she had a duty as a Healer, and checked the sleeping woman out carefully.

"The baby seems fine," she told Kane. "And Habren too, though all this agitation isn't good for her. I'll come by every week, and of course you can always call on me if there's an emergency..."

"I knew I could," Kane said, with artless gratitude. He led the ladies away, his spirits dancing. "We're family, after all. Why don't you stay for some refreshments so the children have more time to play?"

"There's absolutely no reason not to return to Denerim," Fergus told his beautiful new wife. She was glowing with happiness. They were both glowing with happiness. The darkspawn had risen in the far, far west of Thedas, the Empress was dead, the Chantry unable to further chastise Ferelden, and the vaunted Orlesian navy was at the bottom of the sea—or in port, as prizes held under Ferelden colors. Some of them were here in Highever, being given new names. Captain Isabela had thrown quite the party on the biggest of her new ships.

Anora threw her arms around Fergus, unable to contain herself. Yes, it was horrible that the darkspawn had risen, and no doubt all sort of innocent people had suffered, but they were not *Fereldan* people. Ferelden, instead, had fought off

the darkspawn so bravely and so intrepidly that the monsters had gone elsewhere. Word had come that the Rock had fallen to Bronwyn, rendering Gherlen's Pass secure.

"I do hope," Anora said tartly, after a long kiss, "that the rest of Thedas will wake up and start doing its duty. Why should Ferelden defend Orlais? They did nothing for us, Maker knows. And now we are safe!"

They had made an appearance at the party on the docks, and had come home to a pleasant supper, among good friends in the largely repaired dining hall of Castle Highever. There was still a great deal of work to do—many improvements to make, for that matter—but the castle was livable. They were happy enough in the splendid bedchamber that had been the retreat of the Teyrn and Teyrna of Highever for ages past. Anora had some ideas about redecorating here, and Fergus was glad to indulge her. Their marriage had been clouded by the assassination and the funeral of Arl Bryland; by the horrific execution of his murderer; but their honeymoon in Highever was everything they desired. Anora learned every street of her new city, and together they made plans to beautify it. They rode out into the country and up into the Coast Range and to the Cliffs of Conobar. They visited humble freeholders and newly-made banns alike.

Howe's ill-gotten gains, which Fergus had retrieved from his siege of Vigil's Keep, were making change an effortless matter. The damage done to the family rooms made it imperative to order newer, finer furniture; to cover stone walls with wainscoting; to purchase new carpets; to set the

weavers to making new hangings and linens.

Bronwyn's old room was almost entirely changed, only keeping the splendid old bed. It was still mostly in green, Bronwyn's favorite color. Fergus hoped that she would visit, at some point. She had been there... she had seen what was done... perhaps the pain was still too great.

He was not able to enter the room he had once shared with Oriana. He had left it entirely to Anora, who ordered it largely gutted, save for the glorious carved woodwork. It would be their child's nursery, when a child came. The walls here, too, would be wainscoted in places and plastered elsewhere, with a partitioned sleeping alcove the child and his—or her—nurse. And there *would* be a child. It was too early to tell now, but they were both absolutely confident that so much diligent activity could not be in vain.

The huge hall into which all the family room faced was deemed by Anora to be entirely wasted space. She had purchased a wonderful table and chairs for the room, and a handsome huntboard, carved with game, so the family could use the area as a private dining room. She had also commissioned paintings to hang there. The one of Fergus and Anora was almost complete. The large formal dining hall downstairs and the Great Hall were also in the process of improvement, and spectacular tapestries had been ordered to adorn them.

The maid was dismissed, so Fergus could brush out his wife's shining golden locks himself.

"There are plenty of good reasons to return to Denerim, for that matter," he said. "The Tevinters might arrive very soon, and we must be ready for them."

"Oh, yes," Anora smiled, thinking of the surprise the slavers were likely to have. "I agree we should go. I'd like to see the rooftop garden at Highever House made ready for the spring. Besides, I'm not at all sure Kane is quite up to the challenge of dealing with our foreign 'guests.'"

"I'm not sure he's up to *any* challenge... but enough of other men in my bedchamber!"

She laughed like a young girl as he tossed the brush aside and took her in his arms again.

"Greagoir," First Enchanter Irving gently remonstrated. "Brooding won't help. You need to eat something. That broth looks quite good..."

The Knight-Commander of the Fereldan Circle mumbled an indistinct answer, his head in his hands, slumped over his cluttered desk. Irving grimaced, and moved the bottle of brandy from the desk to a cupboard, and then shut the door without a noise. He sat down in the chair opposite, gazing in compassion at the man who was both enemy and companion of his old age.

He cleared his throat. "Many have died, but we still live. We can could do much to help the fight."

"M too *old*," Greagoir groaned, still rather drunk. "Old and bloody *useless*. They're all *dead*."

"We're too old to dash into a fight, perhaps," Irving agreed, "but not too old to train and encourage. Our young people need us." Personally, he did not think he himself was too old at all, but perhaps it would help Greagoir pull himself together if he thought he was not alone. They had serious work to do. The Grand Cleric had sent them orders, and Irving, from reading the letter upside-down, had discovered them to be astonishingly agreeable. Without Val Royeaux looking over her shoulder, perhaps Grand Cleric Muirin would prove the leader the Chantry here in Ferelden needed. She had been remarkably open-minded at the conclave.

Of course the news from Val Royeaux was what had crushed Greagoir's spirits. He had friends there, after all. A lot of friends. Of course, most of them were retired Templars, spending their last years mindless and drooling in the Templar Hospice, but Greagoir remembered them as able and devout men and women. Irving thought that death was better than such an existence, but mages looked at life and death quite differently than members of the clergy. One must not be too downhearted about death. It could strike a mage at any moment. Irving knew people at the White Spire, the Circle of Magi in Val Royeaux. He was very sorry if they were all dead, but they would have died hereafter, one way or another. They could die like Wynne, murdered out of spite for no real reason at all. Or they could be killed out of hand for looking the wrong way at a Templar. Or the Chantry could arbitrarily decide to

Annul a Circle, and that was the end of all the mages in it, the innocent and guilty alike. In this particular case, the Orlesian Circle had been Annulled, so to speak, by the darkspawn. Bad things happened to good people. Good things happened to bad people. There was no justice, Irving was convinced, under the sun. The First Enchanter was in fact a secret agnostic, not at all convinced of the existence of the Maker. If He did exist, Irving thought, He should be thoroughly ashamed of Himself. Thedas must have been created on one of his off days.

"Does the Grand Cleric have any task for me?" he asked. "Is there any way I can help you?"

He already knew the answer, but carefully kept up his mask of innocence.

Greagoir shoved the letter at him. "Her Grace wants a Healer and two apprentices of the School of Creation sent to Denerim. She's setting up a clinic for the poor. If it's a success, she might want more Healers, too." He snorted, "She really wants magic to "serve man," starting *today!*"

"Why not young Florian?" suggested Irving. "He's quite gifted, and a civilized life in Denerim seems right up his alley. He's never given any Templar the least trouble."

"*Civilized life,*" Greagoir snorted. "Wouldn't we all love *that?* That little ponce." He wiped his face. "'Scuse me. She —Her Grace— wants us to do more about the Blight, too. Maybe send another batch of mages to Queen Bronwyn, whom she

reminds me is '*dear to Our Lady.*' She also said if I've got excess Templars who want to help the Wardens, I should let them go."

That was promising. Whatever his views on the Maker, the Ashes of Andraste had proved a wonder, and Irving had a very high opinion of Ferelden's young Queen.

"Well..." Irving tugged on his beard and ventured, "These are all good things, are they not? Helping the sick, helping the fight against the darkspawn... They're good things, and not beyond our powers."

"No," Greagoir snarled. His fist pounded the desk, making the bowl of broth slop over. "'S'not beyond our powers to send young people to their deaths, *while we sit back drinking our bloody brandy!*"

Technically, it was Greagoir's brandy. Irving was offered a drink when Greagoir was in a good mood. Irving understood what Greagoir meant to say, however. Greagoir was feeling guilty about Cullen again. That happened from time to time. He had sent young Cullen off with the Wardens, wanting him to spy on the Warden mages, and the young man had ended up bitten in two by a dragon. Bronwyn had sent Greagoir the kindest letter, extolling Cullen's virtues, but Greagoir still felt the boy's death as a great reproach to himself personally: a judgment on him for playing games and fancying himself *subtle*.

"We don't have to sit back. No one says we have have march

all the way to the darkspawn," Irving pointed out. "You could ride a horse, couldn't you? I, of course, would find a wagon more agreeable."

"We can't leave the Circle." There was a curious gleam in Greagoir's eye. Irving knew he was winning.

"Of course we can," he said briskly. "Just as we did when we left to attend the conclave. I thought you were grooming Ser Rhodry as your successor. A little *stern*," Irving lied, thinking Rhodry quite a reasonable fellow, actually, but wanting to make Greagoir think he'd be leaving the Circle in the hands of a terrible taskmaster, "but I'm sure he would grow into the position. And Sweeney could manage the mages..."

"He's half blind!"

"...with the help of Leorah..." Irving smiled ruefully. "Perhaps death-defying adventures are not only for the young. The two of us have been defying death for some years now."

As the Grey Wardens of Thedas made their way south or west, they experienced their share of hindrances and hazards. Daring bandits raided baggage trains. The boldest of them struck at the First Warden's own guard one night, when they camped on the Silent Plains under the brilliant stars. The bandits were driven off, for the most part. Those bandits who were caught were gruesomely executed, and their heads displayed along the Imperial Highway, with the placard "Enemy of the Grey Wardens" tacked to the stakes. The First

Warden considered conscripting them, but decided that making an example was more useful at the moment. Those interfering with Wardens in the performance of their duty would pay the price.

The Felicisima Armada attacked the Rivainni Wardens at sea. The pirates were soundly trounced, but the Rivainnis still had to put in at Wycome for repairs. The Rivainni Warden-Commander set his jaw with forced patience, but privately swore revenge on the Armada. They had ruled these seas too long. Anyone who hindered or delayed Wardens in their duty ought to face the harshest penalties. He could not spare the time now, but he suspected that his friends in Antiva would be glad to join him in sacking Llomeryn, the pirates' stronghold. Perhaps some of the Marchers would join in. It should be profitable, and very, very satisfying.

The Nevarran Wardens, naturally, were the first to arrive in Cumberland. They marched quickly toward the Orlesian border, fast-moving scouts on horseback in the lead. All along the way they met weary refugees, pleading for help. From them, they learned what was happening to the west. Val Chevin, the closest of all cities to Val Royeaux, was already bursting with refugees, and the city had closed its gates to more. Newcomers were being directed either north, or east to the Nevarran border, where the guards were letting through those who had the coin to bribe them. For those too poor to pay, a sprawling, disorganized refugee camp had sprung up near the Imperial Highway, just at the border crossing by the River Chevin. It was a vile place, where savagery ruled;

where rape and robbery were commonplace; and it grew larger every day. Some Chantry people had arrived there: a Revered Mother and a few Templars and priests. They were trying to put the place in order, but it was a desperate affair.

The darkspawn had not ventured further north than a few miles from Val Royeaux. The crossroads at Belle Fourche were still open, as far as anyone knew. It could be that the horde was moving south, or southwest, toward the rich city of Val Foret. No one was sure of anything, except that they wanted to get as far away as possible.

On the seventh of Drakonis, news finally reached Qunandar of the Orlesian collapse. It had traveled quickly by the usual agents, one of whom had happened to discover that the Rivainni Grey Wardens were going south to fight the Blight. A few of the Wardens had visited a tavern and spread the news. The agent had boldly questioned the men, and then had galloped to Kont-arr and found a ship. The Grey Wardens had ever been a thorn in the side of the Qunari in Rivain. While the Qunari had come to Thedas long after the last of the fabled "Blights," the order of Grey Wardens remained in their wake; a useless relic, as far as the Qunari could determine. Qunari had occasionally captured Grey Wardens, but found them remarkably difficult to indoctrinate. Nor did they respond normally to the use of qamek to subdue them.

It did not take long for the Arishok, the Arigena, and the Ariqun to meet in council, discuss the matter and agree on a plan. The Arishok had sent a party of Beresaad to Ferelden

some months ago to discover the answer to the question: "*What is the Blight?*" but had not heard from the Sten in command. Very likely the soldiers of the Beresaad were dead, which might be a kind of answer to the question they were sent to investigate.

The Qunari cared little about the history of Thedas prior to their arrival from the north. Much of it consisted of the insignificant accounts of pointless battles amongst even more pointless robber lords. However, the Blights loomed large, and while much of the lore of the darkspawn was obviously superstitious rubbish, there did appear to be a core of truth somewhere amidst the myths.

If the city of the strongest of the *bas* had been sacked by the creatures, perhaps it was time for the people of the Qun to take a hand in restoring order. An expeditionary force was loaded into a dreadnought and sent south, with orders to land on the coast of the Waking Sea and discover if Orlais was ripe for conversion. The Qunari had previously targeted the minor territory of Ferelden for conquest, to give them a strategic foothold in the south, but this new opportunity was far more promising.

Lanaya took the news that they were needed in the west very well. She was strong in her conviction that they owed the Grey Wardens their loyalty. Her clan, at least, would support Merrill in her efforts to rally the Dalish.

Four hundred odd Dalish were on the march, moving swiftly

toward the Frostback passes. Some Fereldans knew that the Dalish were involved in the war against the darkspawn, and thus made allowances for the large number of aravels openly journeying on Fereldan roads. Others were frightened and angered at the sight of so many armed elves. Farmers and their families hid in their houses. Random arrows flickered through the trees. Insults were shouted in the villages the Dalish could not avoid without time-wasting detours.

Hostile guardsmen at a nobleman's manor challenged them one day, hands lingering on their sword hilts.

"Heard you knife-ears were given land of your own. Why don't you stay on it?" one gibed.

The Dalish warriors bristled, but Merrill gazed on the men in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Queen Bronwyn has called us to fight the darkspawn," she told them in her sweet, lilting voice. "You don't think we should *disobey* her, do you?"

The guards looked at each other, and then backed away.

"Er, no... 'course not. On your way, then."

The elves passed, crowding the guards off the road. Merrill called to the disgruntled men over her shoulder.

"You should come with us. Bronwyn's terribly nice. We'll have lots of fun at the war!"

They needed to move fast, but not so fast that they were too tired to fight. Riordan had moved his people up the Imperial Highway without delay, but various problems had arisen. People began asking questions when they saw the entire complement of the Jader Grey Wardens marching through the countryside. There were one hundred and fifteen of them, after all, along with their supply wagons. It was slow-going through the hills around Halamshiral. It was not surprising that the city guards of Halamshiral should be concerned, when they admitted such a large force.

And it would be wrong to lie. When taxed by the captain of the guard, Riordan told the man the truth: the darkspawn had risen and attacked Val Royeaux. The Archdemon had led them. The Blight was in Orlais. The man immediately took Riordan to speak to the Vicomte de Brangelome, who was steward in the absence of Duke Enguerrand. A council was called, and Riordan felt obligated to stay and tell the leaders of the province everything he knew, realizing that he might well be leaving panic in his wake.

The Vicomte begged him to stay, or to at least leave him a few Wardens. Riordan considered it, but refused. They would need every Warden to combat the horde he had seen in the Fade. Instead, he conscripted all the fit-looking criminals in the city dungeons. Perhaps he could find a use for them.

It rained on the journey, not improving their spirits. Riordan's dreams were confused. Perhaps the Archdemon was blocking clearer visions, having lifted the veil enough to shock and awe

them.

They reached Lydes just as the first refugees from Val Royeaux arrived there. This also slowed them down considerably, for they needed to talk to them and find out more of what actually had happened. The city was overcrowded and chaotic, trying absorb too many penniless people at once.

Many of the people were too overwhelmed by the horrors they had experienced to give a clear story. It had been the middle of the night; they had been roused by a living, stinking nightmare that was all too real. Some had lost wives, children, parents in their flight; families had been torn apart by the rush of maddened, hysterical crowds; survivors had seen loved ones slip under the water when they grew too exhausted to keep clinging to the side of a boat. Many had had no time even to gather the barest necessities. Some were barefoot; their feet torn and scabby. Some who had fled half-naked had perished of exposure on the ships, and then been tipped into the sea. So many corpses had attracted huge numbers of sharks, which followed the rag-tag fleet, feeding off death in a blood frenzy.

There were a number of children who could not be matched to an adult, and the Lydes Chantry did not feel equipped to take in any but the infants who would die immediately without care. That left children as young as four or five out on the streets to fend for themselves. Some were quickly snapped up by brothel-keepers; some had banded together in feral packs on the half-day's ghastly march from the Port of Lydes. Small

bodies were found every day in filthy alleys, dead of hunger, of cold, of abuse, of heartbreak.

Fiona and some other elven Wardens went to the Alienage, to talk to the handful of elven refugees. To some extent, the elves who had actually survived—and they were not many—were better off than the humans. There was a defined community they could go to. The elves of the Lydes Alienage were poor, of course, but they were willing to share what they had. The surviving elves all had a roof over their heads.

"They really don't know what happened around the Palace or the Cathedral," Fiona told Riordan later. "The survivors were almost all servants from noble houses fairly close to the docks. Anyone farther away could not outrun the darkspawn, or they fled by the north or east gates."

She did not bother to repeat some of the horror stories, but they had roused furious indignation in the Alienage. Two elven girls had been pulled to what they thought was safety on a boat, and then had been gang-raped by the men on board for the entire two days it took to cross the Waking Sea. Old men and women had given sailors everything they owned, and had been thrown to the sharks afterwards. Babies had been killed for making too much noise. Taken by themselves, no one event was all that unusual. In the aggregate, it was an ugly reminder of how little humans valued elven lives.

"If it looks like the darkspawn are coming east, the elves are talking about moving out *en masse* and heading for the Fereldan border. Words been trickling in about the new Dalish

homeland, and that the Fereldan queen has elven advisors. The elves know that no Orlesian soldier will die for an elf, and the elves have so little that it would not be wrench to leave what they have behind."

"Did you see any candidates for the Joining?"

"One or two, but the elves see little point in fighting for Orlais, either. They could be conscripted, but they very likely would run away."

"Then we don't need them. I found some prospects among the refugees. Thugs, mostly, but with the look of good fighters." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "They would march on Val Royeaux—even face the darkspawn—for the privilege of picking through the rubble."

Fiona was disgusted, but knew they must be practical. "They we should take what we can get."

There were only a dozen of them, and not all would live, but Riordan gave them a brief talk and some equipment, just as he had the seven from Halamshiral. There was no time for a Joining. Perhaps they would do that in Verchiel...

Which turned out to be impossible, since the gates of Verchiel were shut against them. Smoke hung over the city in an ominous haze. At a distance, Riordan had at first feared the darkspawn had already reached it, but this was human violence. Verchiel had fallen to Olivier, the Sieur de Flambard, and his soldiers, who were determined to hold it against all

threats. Those threats, in the opinion of de Flambard, included Grey Wardens. He and Riordan had a heated, shouted conference with one outside the gate and the other standing up above the gatehouse. A band of hostile archers took aim at the Wardens below, ready to shoot on order.

"We want no Grey Wardens in Verchiel!" declared the angry nobleman. "Wardens attract the Archdemon! We saw it at the camp on the River Orne!"

"On the River Orne? Where is the Imperial Army?" Riordan shouted back, desperate for news. Possibly the man was right: it could have happened that the Archdemon, sensing a Warden, might have followed him.

"There *is* no Imperial Army! Not anymore!"

"What *happened*?" Riordan asked, his heart in his boots. This was a disaster.

"Much of what is left of the army is within these walls! A Warden brought the news of the fall of Val Royeaux to the Imperial Army as we were camped by the River Orne. Then he rode on to Montsimmard. That very night, the Archdemon swooped down upon us and destroyed the camp with fire. The Marquis, his brother, and his entire staff were roasted alive. A quarter of the army was killed. We spent the next few days picking up the pieces. Many deserted. The Wardens from Montsimmard arrived and tried to make us follow them to Val Royeaux. It is madness. Some followed them, but others—and the wounded— came here under my command.

There were Wardens at Val Royeaux, too. I'm no fool. I've heard that Wardens can sense darkspawn. It's clear to me that *they can sense you, too*. So get out of here. Go chase the Archdemon, but don't lure it back here, or I'll kill you all. I have people to protect."

Riordan studied the man. It was inevitable that every so often someone— more keenly perceptive than most— would divine some of the Warden secrets. A pity that this man was so against them, for he seemed intelligent and brave. If he were not up on a wall, surrounded by archers, Riordan would have conscripted him on the spot.

"And what will you do," he demanded, "if the horde marches on Verchiel?"

Olivier de Flambard glared down at him. "Then we will hold this city. We are provisioning ourselves for a siege. We have ballista that can be aimed at the sky. We keep watch. If the darkspawn try to storm the walls, we have boiling oil to pour down on them. If they try to burrow up through the ground, we will poison them in their tunnels like rabbits. We don't *need* Wardens. Now go."

"You don't know everything," Riordan said, trying to reason with him. "Believe me, you *do* need Wardens. Only a Warden can slay an Archdemon—"

"You have until I count three to start leaving," replied de Flambard. "And then I will order my archers to shoot. One... two..."

"Wardens! Move out!"

They retreated, feeling terribly exposed. A few raunchy insults followed them. Some of the Wardens swore bitterly, and others muttered dark threats.

"—When the darkspawn come, I say we let them have this pesthole!"

"—He won't be so haughty when he's rotting from the Taint."

Fiona huffed sharply at that. Riordan sighed, and gave her a look of mild reproof.

"Well, he won't be," she muttered.

"Possibly not, but how many innocents will die to satisfy his pride?"

"Riordan?" asked an archer. "Where do we go now? Montsimnard?"

That was a question. He had no idea how to answer the woman. It was in the Maker's hands.

"We'll go back to that stream we saw earlier in the day," he decided. "There is good water there. We will hold the Joining. Then I must think."

They went deep enough into the forest not to be visible to anyone in Verchiel, even on the highest towers. They set up a carefully well organized, defensible camp, talking volubly.

Disputes broke out. The oldtimers had their hands full keeping the recruits on task. Riordan sat on his folding canvas stool, chin on his fist, trying to sort out what to do in the face of this very bad situation. Fiona busily mixed the Joining compound. The ritual had special meaning, in these desperate circumstances. Twelve out of the nineteen recruits lived, which was reasonably successful. Riordan hoped it was a sign.

After something to eat, they felt better. It was no longer so cold at night, so the Wardens did not complain much when Riordan made them put out the fires after supper. The surviving recruits were laid on blankets in a tent to sleep off the shock of the Joining. The dead were taken deeper into the forest and left for the wolves: an old-fashioned country alternative to burning. A large pyre would be unwise.

"There is no reason to make ourselves noticed," he said quietly. "We must rest. Alain, organize a good watch. Let nothing slip past. We will talk in the morning."

He was stalling, he acknowledged to himself. He was stalling because he had no idea what to do.

His dreams were not much help, unless one imagined that seeing Gerod Caron's rotting head on a stake was a help. The man was a Senior Warden of Montsimnard, and Riordan knew him well. The Fade vision was too blurred and vague to give Riordan a hint as to where the chuckling darkspawn were. Somewhere, some Wardens had met the darkspawn, and it had not gone well.

Still, sleep worked its old magic, as it always did. By dawn, he was able to come up with something resembling a plan.

"We will not go to Montsimnard," he told them. "We are going northwest, toward the army's last camp at the River Orne. We will scout to determine if it was indeed a dragon that attacked the army. We will attempt to round up any stragglers..." He paused. "If they are human, they may be in need of the Joining. If they are darkspawn... we fight. We will continue northwest to Val Foret, where perhaps we can learn more."

It all seemed reasonable, and there were nods. Riordan was not yet done.

"Fabrice, Clovis, Minjonet—you are going back to the border."

"To Jader?" asked Clovis, a sturdy sword and shield man.

"No," Riordan said firmly. "Beyond the border. Go wherever you need to go to find the Fereldan Wardens. Seek out Bronwyn. Tell her what we have discovered so far. Tell her where we have gone. Tell her to recruit as many as she can. Ask her to show more mercy than she has been shown, and to come to us. The time for foolish secrecy is over. We are all Wardens."

Thanks to my reviewers: Nemrut, Vibrolux61, Juliafied, Tirion I, Kyren, NPC200, Rexiselic, Massgamer45, Mage,

Mike3207, Saurman, DjinniGenie, anon, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, JackOfBladesX, Chiara Crawford, KngihtOfHolyLight, darksky01, MsBarrow, mille libri, KrystylSky, James317, BandGeekNinja, PsychoLeopard, HeavensScribe, Robbie the Phoenix, le-maru, sizuka2, Blinded in a bolthole, Lyssa Terald, Lohr, Phygmalion, watchermostcharmed, Lehni, Jenna53, AD Lewis, jnybot, dragonmactir, Costin, RB23G, Ravus, and mille libri.

109. Magical Creatures

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 109: Magical Creatures

Loghain was certainly happy to see her. Bronwyn backed away from that searing kiss, somewhat wide-eyed. *Very* happy to see her. He was looking at her, just looking at her as if she were Andraste herself— no, that sounded wrong— as if she were the greatest woman of the world, and had given him a gift he had longed for his whole life long.

"You look well," he said, and then paused. "No... that's not what I meant to say. You look beautiful. How do you feel?"

"I feel... fine," she answered, a little flustered. "And you?"

He shot her a keen look, nodding here and there at the cheering soldiers, appearing not to see the cheering Jaderians. He was quite oblivious to the fact—unlike Bronwyn — that the passionate kiss he had so publicly bestowed on his queen had raised him very much in his new subjects' esteem. From a barbarian bogeyman, he had become a hero of romance. People loved romance. And Loghain was a very impressive figure after all... very dashing, whether he cared to acknowledge it or not. In fact, in his iconic Orlesian armor,

captured at his victory at the River Dane, he looked a far more credible chevalier than most chevaliers. The people of Jader had not expected that, and were very pleased.

Their dogs were happy, too; greeting one another in proper doggy fashion, tails wagging in excited blurs. The crowds chuckled, amused and kind. Loghain was a hero of romance... with a faithful hound. Scout was happy to see him, too, and barked cheerfully.

"Come inside," said Bronwyn, her heart somewhat warmed to her husband... perhaps because his was so obviously warmed toward her. "Come inside and see our new palace. It's quite amazing."

"What are all these Orlesians doing here?" he asked, his nostrils flared as at a foul odor.

"They're your new subjects. They live here," she said patiently. "That is the steward, Ser Manfred, and that is the seneschal, Gilbert. Over there are the minor nobles and landholders. They know all about the place and they've done homage to me. They're very useful."

"You've accepted the homage of Orlesian noblemen?" Despite his good mood, he sounded just the least bit testy.

"Noblemen of *Jader*, yes. They're not Orlesian anymore. They're Fereldans. And you should accept their homage, too." She looked over her shoulder, smiling and waving to the crowd. "Loghain, give them a wave. They're quite happy to

get out from under the Empress."

He scowled ferociously, but turned and put up a gauntleted hand in acknowledgement. His scowl deepened at the happy cheers and the fluttering red banners.

"What's all that about?" he asked.

"No idea. They think I like red, I suppose. I'm a bit tired of it myself, but it would be silly to hurt their feelings." She gave him a look, and with a grunt of acquiescence, he offered her his arm like a gentleman. That pleased the people of Jader, too.

He had never actually been in an Orlesian city, and it made him very nervous and off-balance. He could be attacked at any moment. And he felt countrified and out of his depth, too. To hide his feelings, he assumed his usual stern mask. The place was completely ridiculous. The floor was ridiculous, made of shiny bits of differently colored marble. The walls were ridiculous, covered with paintings of half-dressed layabouts. Even the ceilings were ridiculous, with plaster swirled and stretched and gilded into garlands and leaves. Ridiculous. Fussy and ridiculous. Orlais taxed its merchants and peasants nearly to death, and used the gold to build palaces that were like overgrown trinket boxes.

She showed him the principal rooms of the palace. The one he actually liked was the study, which had a model of the city of Jader on a big table in the middle of the room. The study itself was overdone: an oval room with pilasters of jasper,

chalcedony, and greenstone lining the walls and framing the bookshelves, and a fireplace carved with naked girls pretending to read. However, the model of the city was absolutely a delight. It was better than any map. It was a way to learn this new city in an hour. There were tiny trees and horses on the Voie d'Or— no, the Golden Road from this day forward— and tiny people in Emerald Square, and ships at anchor in the harbor. There was the Alienage, with the huge vhenadahll tree in the middle. Loghain walked around the table, taking it in, not realizing that he was smiling. He pulled up a chair and studied the model. Bronwyn quietly ordered a servant to bring them wine, and sat beside him. She smiled too, at his pale blue eyes, alight with his pleasure in such an object.

"Do you know who made this?" he asked abruptly, after a long, happy silence.

"I don't. I'll ask Gilbert. He knows everything about the Palace. We can but hope the artisan is still alive. Wouldn't it be delightful to have models of all the cities of Ferelden?"

He only grunted, his eyes still on the model. He had never imagined such a thing, but it was better than simply an ornament: it educated and enlightened; it put the place in a kind of perspective. He set down his crystal wine goblet, rather surprised to see that he was holding one. Bronwyn was smiling. He remembered there were other things he wanted to do here.

"I suppose the living quarters here are just as overdecorated."

"Indeed they are. Let me show you."

He followed her out, with a last glance over his shoulder at the enchanting city on the tabletop.

He raised a brow at his own apartments, snorting his opinion; he raised both brows at the sight of hers, and then brought them crashing down in an access of disapproval.

"Oh, come, Loghain!" Bronwyn laughed. "They're not that bad. The bed is quite comfortable."

"It looks like it would splinter if a man so much as sat on it, much less—"

Bronwyn gestured the servants out, trying not to laugh out loud. "I suppose we could see. / haven't splintered it so far, but it's possible—"

He turned to look at her, his face changing. Bronwyn was silenced at the curious intensity of his expression.

This was inevitable, Bronwyn knew. He was happy to see her. He would want to renew their relationship. Now. She was not sure how to feel about that.

Her childish obsession with him was over and done. Her heart no longer pounded at the sight of him. There were no awkward blushes that she must struggle to master. He was no longer a distant ideal to her, but a real man, with plenty of flaws. Marrying him had seemed the right thing for Ferelden—

no, it *had* been the right thing— but now she felt somewhat trapped. She had not grasped how much she was giving up, by committing herself to this relationship. Thank the Maker they had things in common!

Nor was he repulsive to her physically. He was a generous lover, in that he saw to it that she found their couplings as enjoyable as he. Not a gallant or romantic one, by any means, of course, but satisfying. And she was young, and her natural drives demanded fulfillment.

They were married. They were husband and wife; King and Queen. They must be lovers in a physical sense. Could they be friends? Bronwyn hoped so, but Loghain was so much older than she, so very used to being in charge, so accustomed to control, so ready to dismiss the opinions of others. He had done a great deal to vex her during the Landsmeet. He had not shown much personal regard for her during their earlier campaign out here in the west, and the memory of the miscarriage still caused her the occasional pang of sorrow. It was all very well to know that their child was safe in the Maker's care, but had things turned out otherwise, Bronwyn even now would be giving Loghain the wonderful news of her pregnancy. The child would have been born in Kingsway, and would have made their family, their friends, their subjects so very happy. The child would have been hers to hold and love; hers to guide and teach; a link with her lost parents and a stake in the future.

A hostage to fortune, too, she granted ruefully, but also a

Prince of Ferelden.

It was not to be, but there was always the possibility of another. Bronwyn had struggled with the entire issue of whether or not to use contraception, and had ultimately decided that she could not in honor make use of means to prevent the conception of an heir so badly needed by her country. To do so would be to contravene her duty as Queen of Ferelden. Yes, she could fight the campaign against the darkspawn more effectively without the complication of pregnancy, but who knew when the Blight would be over? Some had lasted over a hundred years. Was she to put off her life... forever? If she became pregnant, then she would just have to find larger armor when she grew too big to wear what she had.

She moved to help Loghain out of his own armor. For all Bronwyn knew, it had been taken from a kinsman of one of their new subjects. Deftly, she unbuckled and untied; she bent to help him with the poleyns and sabatons. Everything was laid out in proper order on the green silk brocade of her sofa. Then she allowed him to help her slip out of her velvet gown.

As her smallclothes slid away, he took her by the shoulders, looking her in the eye.

His voice husky, he said, "You're a brave and clever girl... and I love you."

Too confused and embarrassed to think of a verbal reply, Bronwyn led him to her bed and made him welcome in their

latest home. He was curiously hesitant, and seemed concerned that he would hurt her.

Of course. They told him about the miscarriage.

"I'm quite all right," she assured him, "Entirely healed. I don't want to talk about it."

He still looked like he wanted to talk about it, but she did not, and she succeeded in distracting him from a conversation that would make her sad again.

It was all very nice, very exciting, very pleasurable. They both dozed off afterwards, and Bronwyn buried both dreams and nightmares too far down to be troubled by them.

She was very glad she had had the presence of mind to close the bed curtains, because she awakened to the furtive noises of servants busily working, trying to be quiet as mice: feeding the fire, laying out clothes for dinner, drawing a bath, setting out snacks and wine on the amethyst-topped table.

Yes, the table was covered with a layer of amethyst, smoothed and polished. Bronwyn had seen marble-topped tables in the past, but the tables here were inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ivory, or were topped with solid sheets of semi-precious gemstone: amethyst, topaz, rose quartz, citrine. Yes, it was an obscene display of wealth, but it was here, and it would do no one any good to throw it away and replace it with rough-hewn pine.

She lay back on the silken pillows, and smiled when Loghain opened his eyes, looking about suspiciously. The light coming in through the curtains was a delicate pale green, like the young leaves of a forest in spring. Bronwyn liked it. Red curtains would have made the inside of the bed look like a demonic inferno.

"Our subjects await us, Loghain. Time to put on a show for them."

He sat up, a little disgruntled but quite relaxed.

"Orlesians. They're our enemies, if you don't recall. My policy has always been to ignore them if possible and destroy them if necessary."

Amused, Bronwyn brushed his hair back from his brow and said, "When I make friends of my enemies, do I not destroy them?"

He scoffed loudly at that. Bronwyn laughed.

"Perhaps you'd prefer that I simply waved my hand and shouted, 'Off with their heads!'"

He rubbed his stubbly chin, trying to hide his smile.

"Maybe. Now and then." He added, "I don't mind telling you how impressed I am that you managed to take Jader without striking a blow."

"It was no problem at all," she said archly. "I threatened them

with *you*. I told them they could become Fereldan the easy way—" She pointed at herself. "—or the hard way." She slapped his chest lightly.

He looked down at himself, and nodded. "The hard way? Fairly soon, at this rate."

Shaking her head, she slipped through the curtains and shooed the giggling serving maids away. She threw on a dressing gown, and tossed another — larger and outrageously peacock-glorious— to Loghain.

"Maker's Breath! I'm supposed to dress like an Orlesian tart now?"

"A delicious male tart, yes; I suppose so, but only for me." She laughed, and splashed recklessly into the wonderful hot bath.

Loghain scorned the dressing gown—which Bronwyn thought a pity since it was a good color for him,— and stalked across the dainty room, proudly naked, which was not bad, either. He slid into the huge tub, making waves, sniffing suspiciously at the scented waters.

"It's sandalwood from Seheron," Bronwyn said. "Surely that's manly enough for you."

"I know what it bloody well is. It's still a *perfume*."

But his grumpiness was all for show. He was obviously really

quite happy, and very nice about scrubbing her out-of-the-way bits.

"Have you met the princesses?" Bronwyn asked.

He snorted. "I was thinking about *you*. And I took time to survey the Rock. No time for playing games with Orlesian snakelings."

"They're not so bad. Very young, and kept locked up and very ignorant of anything practical."

"Hmph. Sounds sensible to me. Let's keep them that way. Locked up and ignorant."

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "*Of course* I've ordered a strict watch over them. The woman who guarded them for the Empress was a nasty tyrant who tried to kill them rather than let them fall into my hands. Like the people of Jader, the girls seem quite happy at the change. They could be useful, too. We'll want to appoint a Fereldan to rule Jader.. as an arl, I thought. If one of the princesses married him, it would go down well with the locals. The youngest, I think."

He scoffed at that, too, reflexively, but considered her words. Loghain's opinion of Bronwyn, always high, had soared, and he was willing to grant that she seemed to have the knack of managing these strange people. Was she planning for Alistair to be Arl of Jader? It might do. It might also cause a great deal of trouble, since Loghain disliked the mixing the blood of Kordilius Drakon into the Fereldan nobility. Their children might

well have dangerous ideas. He was too pleased with Bronwyn to shoot down the idea on the spot, and instead decided to think it over.

First, however, he had to demonstrate 'the hard way' to his young queen. She seemed to like it very much, though a great deal of soapy water sloshed onto the shining floor.

Loghain was not the only man glad to see his lover again. Tara was enchanted with the charming little nest Zevran had made for them in one of the servant's rooms connected to the family apartments. It held a deep, downy sleigh bed, painted with flowers and... dragons... of all things, and was draped with rose satin that Zevran had appropriated from the palace linen chests. It had a little arched window and a door that locked. He had claimed a number of other trifles as well: an inlaid chest, bronze lamps in the form of dancing girls, a set of blue goblets, a little tinder box of solid gold.

Her gorgeous, mysterious mirror fitted in just perfectly.

"But what *is* it?" Zevran asked, coming up for air. "Mind you, I like the way you've positioned it... very stimulating, *cara mia*."

Tara bounced up and grinned naughtily in the eluvian. Then she gave it a wave. Zevran glanced at it, wrinkling his brow in uneasy concern.

"Don't worry! I don't think they can see us."

"Who?"

"The ancient elves of Arlathan," Tara declared grandly. "That's an eluvian. According to my readings, the elves used them to communicate with each other, and possibly to travel from place to place. The magisters could manage the communication part only. It was stored in the Aeonar and covered with dust, so I don't think the Chantry researchers had any luck with it."

"There was no such 'eluvian' at the Circle?"

"No... never saw one before, but I read about them in the library there. There was an old book on elven artifacts that nobody but me cared about." She gazed deep into the silvery depths of the looking-glass, past the dim reflections of the two comely naked elves. "I'm betting serious money that there's something very important for us to learn here. I have the strangest feeling about it."

Zevran lay back at his ease, hands behind his head. "Will you show it to Anders and Morrigan, then?"

She thought about that. "No. Not yet. Maybe not ever. This is elven magic. This is for *us*. I like Morrigan, but she'd grab it for herself if she thought it was important. I like Anders, too, for that matter, but no. This is for the elves. Maker knows we have little enough of our own. Siofranni's gone to summon the Dalish. I want to show this to Merrill and Lanaya and get their opinion first. I've told all the rest of my people not to say anything about this. For all anybody knows, it's just a really

fancy mirror that I took for my share of the loot. Let's keep it that way."

Bronwyn and Loghain held Court the following day, up on the grand dais, enthroned in splendor. Many came, seeking audience. The nobles of Jader uneasily paid homage to Loghain, who uneasily accepted it. Certain facets of Orlesian life were manifestly offensive to the new Fereldan monarchs: no masks were to be worn. It was made clear that the fashion for masks had passed, and that anyone wearing one would not only not be permitted into the royal presence; they were likely to be mocked as hopelessly uncouth. La Voie d'Or had become the Golden Road overnight. Jader boasted an Emerald Square and an Emerald Palace. Other familiar names were vanishing. Innkeepers kept sign-painters busy with new names for old taverns. Those sign-painters used quite a bit of red paint. Some even depicted large and ferocious dogs.

Among the Orlesians presented to Loghain was Ser Berthold de Guesclin, formerly in command of Roc du Chevalier. It was clear to see that the Orlesians were far more comfortable with Bronwyn than with Loghain himself, though that was no more than Loghain had expected. De Guesclin seemed quite impressed by Bronwyn, and was eager to go west and fight the Blight. What surprised Loghain was how anxious the Orlesians were for leadership—even his own.

Not all of them. The steward had tales to tell of the independent-minded lordlings who had decamped to their

keeps, clearly hoping to wait out the war. Some had unwisely left wives and children in the city; these would be kept in comfortable captivity as hostages. Others had been sent stiffly worded message, demanding their presence before King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn, no later than the twelfth of Drakonis. If they failed in their duty, their lands and titles would be forfeit.

Bronwyn smirked, thinking about it. "That should bring them."

"You *want* more armed Orlesians?" Loghain muttered under his breath.

"Yes, I do," Bronwyn insisted. "It's their bloody country, and they can bloody well defend it. Especially the noblemen. If they can't ride out and do their duty, I swear I'll dispossess the lot of them and put them on a boat to Par Vollen and let the Qunari decide what they're fit for!"

That got a chuckle out of him. Actually, it was not a bad idea... for some of the useless Fereldan nobles, either.

After the endless ceremony, they adjourned to the council chamber. The councilors numbered only eight at first: Bronwyn and Loghain, Arls Wulffe and Bryland, Ser Blayne Faraday, Alistair, Cauthrien and also Emrys Stronnar, because all the nobles knew him or his capable uncle, and Alistair had come to rely on him quite a bit. The others, including the new Jaderian subjects, were left to cool their heels in antechambers while the big decisions were made.

"Are we going to keep Jader?" Corbus piped up. "It's rather nice, isn't it?" He liked his room quite a bit, and Killer had his own velvet cushion. He wished Lothar were here to see it all.

There was some mild laughter about the room. Loghain told the boy. "We are definitely keeping Jader. We needed a good city on our western border. And we're keeping Solidor and the Rock, too!" He pointed to the large map on the wall, admiring how the border was far neater and more defensible now.

"Jader is ours for good, lad. We'll need to organize it as a proper holding. Bronwyn—" he nodded to his queen "— thinks it should be an arling."

Wulffe stroked his beard. "It's a big enough territory for that. Six Fereldan arlings instead of five... three in the north and three in the south. One teyrnir in the north and one in the south. Balances things off, I suppose. And Jader's a big city. That's a fine demesne. We'd better put someone there whose loyalty can't be questioned or bought. Someone the fancy lot here can respect, too."

Emrys was trying to catch Alistair's eye. Alistair was scrupulously studying his boots. Cauthrien watched them both, rather interested.

"We'll have some new bannorns to share out, too," Bronwyn said. "Dispossessing lords who've sworn homage would be dishonorable. Quite a few, however, have not made an appearance. They were either with the army, like the Marquis, or they've gone to ground. I'm willing to stretch a point if a wife or an heir shows up to act as proxy, but if *some*

representative doesn't present himself— or herself— in timely fashion, the lands are forfeit. It's important to sprinkle in a lot of loyal Fereldans to bind Jader to the kingdom." She turned to Cauthrien. "When we draw the borders, I think that Haven should be on the south end of the arling."

Cauthrien could see the sense in that. Now and then, she thought about going to see the place. It was theoretically hers, and she was very curious about it. She had not had a home of her own since Loghain had plucked her out of the life of a farmer's daughter in the Bannorn. Not that she regretted that for an instant, but she had reached a point in her life when the idea of settling down in a place she could call hers was not unpleasant.

Ser Blayne spoke up for his friend. "You couldn't ask for a more faithful man than Norrel Haglin."

Bronwyn's smile became a trifle fixed, but she said nothing. It would suit her if the man stayed on the border for the rest of his life. Loghain agreed with the knight, of course.

"He won't be forgotten," he agreed. "Nor will you. That steward fellow... Ser Manfred... found me a good map of the area, showing all the holdings. After the twelfth, we'll start dividing the spoils."

"And then what?" Wulffe said. He peered at Bronwyn, trying to read her intentions. "Are we going to try for more, or hold what we have?"

"I don't believe..." Loghain said slowly. "I don't believe that grabbing more territory is necessarily a wise move for Ferelden. Even the addition of Jader will alter our national character in some ways. We don't want to water down our culture with too much Orlais. Ferelden is still somewhat depopulated from the eighty years of Occupation. We've got a good border now, and a fine, rich city. If we're greedy, we're likely to overextend ourselves, and leave an opening for other enemies."

"I agree that we should make no more territorial claims,," Bronwyn put in, her voice clear and firm. "*However*, we still have a Blight to contend with. The current alliance of men, elves and dwarves must go west and take the field against the darkspawn."

"The Orlesians won't like that," Wulffe pointed out.

"I am indifferent to their opinion," Bronwyn said coldly. "There has been too much selfish parochialism. Yes, it is not hard to rejoice at the sight of a mighty enemy humbled, but beyond that, the fall of a city such as Val Royeaux puts all Thedas in very great danger."

Loghain frowned, waiting to hear her out.

Corbus did not understand, and said so. "Why is that, Bronwyn?"

"Because," Bronwyn explained, sorry to tell the boy the ugly truth. "When the horde sacked the city, it abducted many

women and girls. Those unfortunates will be used to breed thousands and thousands more darkspawn. It will take a month or so, but eventually, the horde will increase many times beyond its present size—and it is already huge. Eventually, the horde will pick the area around Val Royeaux clean, and move on to the next city, and the next, ever abducting more victims and swelling its ranks. The longer we wait, the greater the odds against us when the horde turns our way. And it will."

Loghain loathed the idea of fighting to save Orlesians, but the argument was convincing. Better to fight the darkspawn in Orlais than to fight even more darkspawn in Ferelden. Bronwyn was making sound strategic sense.

"It sounds like you'll need more Wardens," Ser Blayne said.

"Absolutely," Bronwyn agreed. "Tomorrow I shall put out a call for them. When the Dalish and dwarves arrives, I shall do likewise. We definitely need more Wardens. Lots more. I might even poach more mages. When we go west, we'll likely be entering areas vilely Tainted, where only Wardens and dwarves can travel in safety. In the meantime, I'll need what's left of Orlais to remain more or less at peace, until it can sort itself out."

"Until we can sort it out," grunted Loghain.

"Yes, very likely we'll have to do that, too. We don't want such a state of anarchy on our border that mobs of refugees start pouring over."

Emrys spoke for the first time. "Perhaps we should think about what we want Orlais to be when all this is past."

Ser Blayne snorted. "Perhaps we should think about whether we want an Orlais at all!"

Emrys did not roll his eyes, but his mouth tightened. "Some sort of diminished Orlais, I think, would be a very good idea. Or maybe a few small buffer states. An East Orlais, a South Orlais... something of the sort. As Bronwyn so justly says, we don't want to deal with the overflow from a land in anarchy. Furthermore, such a place would be ripe for conquest. We may not want more Orlesian territory, but others might. Would we really want Nevarra, ally or not— swollen with land and people, immensely more powerful— on our western doorstep?"

"Or the Qunari, eager to make order of disorder?" At the questioning looks around the table, Bronwyn shrugged. "My companion Sten was sent here as part of a scouting party to discover more about the Blight, since the Qunari arrived long after the last one."

"To discover more than that," said Loghain. Bronwyn was right to be suspicious of the Qunari. As for young Emrys... he looked at the lad with new respect. Very sensible young man. Good analysis of the situation. Perhaps the precedent of giving Wardens some territory should be followed here. If they made Alistair the arl, he would need a good bann he could rely on.

After finishing her meeting with the inner circle of Fereldans and the outer circle of Jaderians, Bronwyn still needed to talk to her Wardens about their plans. They gathered in a luxurious salon, and draped themselves over the furniture, eating and drinking, as usual. Leliana and Silas whispered together, their faces serious. Tara and Zevran held hands. It was very sweet. Fenris was watching Bronwyn herself, his huge green eyes intent. Occasionally she found the intensity of his gaze a bit disturbing, but today she was glad to have everyone's full attention.

"First of all," she said, "I want to thank everyone for their brilliant service. The campaign to take Jader and the Frostback fortresses has been a tremendous success, won with a minimal loss of life. I wish all wars could be fought so. Everyone in the Warden party will be paid a bonus of twenty sovereigns tomorrow."

This was greeted with great enthusiasm. Maeve was eager to go shopping in the Grand Bazaar. Catriona had promised to go with her, but planned to send all of her bonus home to her brother, along with much of the rest of her pay. Maker knew he needed it. Twenty sovereigns would not only pay his rent for the year: it would feed and clothe him and the children very well indeed. She'd made friends with the official courier, who had agreed to carry "Wardens' correspondence" in his post-bag.

"So what do we do now?" asked Sigrun. "Are we going to explore the Deep Roads again?"

Toliver grinned, "Or will I have time to make a complete catalog of Jader taverns?"

"Will you watch the progress of the Blight from your newly-won towers?" Sten asked, his disapproval manifest, "or do you intend to pursue this campaign?"

"Well, *I* think it's time the rest of the Wardens stepped up and did something," Carver declared, feeling defensive. "If you'd seen everything the Nevarran Wardens have! There are hundreds of them, too. And what about all those Wardens in Montsimmard? Why is it always *our* problem?"

Morrigan sneered at him. "If the darkspawn decide to march in this direction, it *will* be 'our' problem, whether you like it or not. I say we must continue to fight the darkspawn, and vigorously, too."

They were restless; Bronwyn knew they had too little to do. She must nip this debate in the bud.

"Morrigan is absolutely right," she said. The witch preened smugly.

Bronwyn only smiled, and went on: "We shall march west soon. I agree that the darkspawn remain a great danger. Greater than ever, perhaps, since their number will greatly increase very soon. I agree that the other Wardens must do their part, Carver, but we simply don't know where they are. Presumably they saw what we saw, but since they have done so little up to now, I can't say that I trust them to do the right

thing. And even if they *do* the right thing, I can't say that I trust them to do it well."

She popped a stuffed date into her mouth and waved dismissively at the thought of other Wardens. "When they come, they come. Meanwhile, we've got to do some serious recruiting before we leave. When you're out and about, look for likely recruits in the city. Loghain brought us some of Master Wade's dragon-hunting spears. We'll practice with them so you all know how they work. Jowan, I want you and Carver to stand up now and tell us everything the Nevarran Wardens told you about dragon hunting. Yes, I know you've told quite a bit to various people, but everyone needs to hear everything. We may need more equipment, and there are good smiths here in Jader."

Carver was always eager to make himself heard, and discoursed for some time, with Jowan adding bits here and there. Some dragonhunters had dug pit traps; other used triple-strand spider silk nets. Everyone used heavy barbed spears and poison. The dragonhunters had carried long, light shields of silverite to deflect blasts of flame. Some times they had assistants whose only job was to hold and position the shields over the hunters, while they themselves wore protective clothing. The hunters had also often made use of the terrain, finding high places where they could shoot down at a dragon, or even — in the most daring cases— leap down on a flying dragon's back.

"Jump down on a flying dragon?" Petra asked, astonished. "That's the craziest, stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"I'd do it," Brosca declared, eyes alight. "It sounds like fun. The Boss rode a dragon that time—"

"Exactly!" Carver said, boiling over with enthusiasm. "That's exactly what some of the Pentaghasts did. Some of them still train in an art they call 'tumbling,' which is learning to jump and roll and leap."

"I've seen professional tumblers," Leliana put in. "They are very diverting. They turn flips in the air and make human pyramids— and perform all sorts of tricks. Some minstrels have learned the skill. I had not thought of applying some their arts to fighting, but I can see situations where those tricks would be useful."

"Crows are taught some tumbling," Zevran agreed.

"Anyway," Jowan cut in, "Back to dragonhunting... The dragonhunters would also use bait. Dragons are attracted to blood. They really like human blood, and especially—" he cleared his throat. "— the moon blood of a young woman. Sometimes the dragonhunters even brought a young woman who was having her courses with them. It would make the dragons excited and reckless. They also killed drakes, and... er... made use of the drake's... er... natural juices... to attract the dragon."

Raucous laughter greeted that suggestion.

"Victims of luuuurrrrve!" shouted Oghren. "That's terrific! Wonder if it would work on the Archdemon? She probably

hasn't had any in... what? About twelve ages!"

The meeting swiftly descended into bawdy chaos. Bronwyn laughed, too, remembering the drakes at Haven. They could talk more about this in the coming days.

The Qunari's shout cut above the noise. "*Parshaara!* How soon do we march?" Sten asked, pressing the matter. The Wardens slowly subsided.

"That depends somewhat upon our allies," Bronwyn said. "I would prefer it was sooner rather than later. Danith, how quickly do you think the Dalish can be here?"

"I am not sure. Still, I am certain that Lanaya will come. Merrill, too, and the old Night Elves."

"I'm glad. We'll need good scouts. I've also sent word to the dwarves. The Legion of the Dead has largely regrouped at Orzammar, under their new Paragon."

Brosca lifted her goblet, "Stone protect our Astrid!"

"Aye!" The dwarves rumbled agreement. Then they burst out laughing again.

Bronwyn expected Astrid to arrive within the next day or so. She did *not* expect the arrival who sailed into Jader Bay, bold as Kordilius Drakon, on his own personal ship, carrying strange cargo indeed.

"It is Duke Prosper de Montfort, Majesty," murmured Gilbert the seneschal, in his most soothing tones. His pronunciation of "Majesty" was very Orlesian: "*Majesté*." The seneschal added, "He has come to offer his homage... and his support."

"That bloody Orlesian?" Loghain snarled. "That one who showed up at the Landsmeet and had the bloody effrontery to bloody threaten us to our bloody faces?"

"That's the bloody one," Bronwyn agreed, more cheerfully. "Let's see what he has to say, Loghain. It's not like he can play the Empress card anymore." She patted his hand. "If he insults us again, we really can shout, 'Off with his head!'"

Prosper made his appearance, elegant, unruffled, and particularly debonair. Being a high noble of great wealth, he had property near Jader, and hearing that those who wished to keep their estates must pay homage for them, he was prompt in his duty. He did not commit the offense of appearing with a mask, but instead was dressed in the casual but colorful style appropriate to a gentleman on his travels in an unsettled time. He made his bows, and approached the thrones with well-bred respect.

"Don't tell me," Loghain drawled, "that you ever expected to see us here, and in this situation."

"The wise man," said Prosper, "knows to expect the unexpected, and above all, that when he makes a plan, the Maker might well decide to laugh at him. The Wheel of Fortune has turned, and Your Majesties rule in Jader. The

darkspawn have attacked Val Royeaux, and the Empress, my late, lamented cousin, is no more. All reasonable people must agree that ridding ourselves of the darkspawn would be a very good thing. I wish to do my part."

"And what sort of part are you prepared to play, my lord?" Bronwyn asked.

"A not ignoble one, I trust," Prosper answered easily. "I can give you a great deal of information about the situation in Val Royeaux and the composition of the army prior to the attack, as I was there up until the day before. While my principal seat at Montfort, alas, is far beyond my reach, I have lands near Jader and property within the city that will enable me to contribute to your campaign. I have a company of well-trained men-at-arms, whom I will lead into battle under your banner. I know every person of importance within the borders of Orlais. And..." his lips quirked in an odd smile. "I have a weapon, perhaps... an item that would be of interest to you. I brought it on my ship, at considerable effort. If Your Majesties would condescend to inspect it, I would be honored by your presence at my manor of Galehaut."

Before they would agree to any such thing, the man was interrogated privately and at great length. He could describe at length the scandalous episode of the burning of the Queen of Ferelden and Ferelden's Grand Cleric in effigy; of the lightning storm that struck the Cathedral; and of the subsequent panic and loss of life. He told them frankly that he had heard of the fall of Val Royeaux from the Nevarran Grey Wardens, who had mustered in Cumberland for an overland

march south on the Imperial Highway.

"They do mean to cross the border, then?" Loghain asked.

Prosper's light laugh was wry. "I think at this point the border means very little to them. Elements of the royal army will support the Grey Wardens. Obviously, they cannot strip their defenses on the Tevinter border, but many are coming. For that matter, they clearly expect the Wardens of Weisshaupt and even of Tevinter to join them."

"Interesting," Bronwyn said, the words bitter. "An darkspawn attack on Val Royeaux is worthy of their attention."

"It is worthy of everyone's attention," Prosper said, unembarrassed. "I mean no disrespect, Majesty, but how interested would you have been in an attack on the Adamant Fortress?"

Bronwyn regarded him blankly. "I have never heard of such a place, I confess."

"I name it merely as an example. It is an abandoned Grey Warden fortress located in the Western Approach. It seems no more remote to me than Ostagar would to you. Or say, the attack had taken place in Rivain or in the distant Donarks? On the other hand, everyone has heard of Val Royeaux. The Nevarran Grey Wardens seemed... alarmed about the fact that the attack had taken place in a place so populous, but they would not tell me why."

Bronwyn saw no reason to keep it a secret. "The darkspawn use captured women to breed: humans, elves, dwarves. In Val Royeaux they might well have captured hundreds, if not thousands. The process is rapid and ghastly, and results in hundreds of spawn from each abducted woman."

Even Duke Prosper was briefly silenced by that image. "I... see. That is why I was told they had no time to lose."

"Exactly. The horde will grow, and grow, and grow. That is why Blights can last so long. You've given me one very good piece of news already. The Nevarran Wardens are marching toward Val Royeaux. If they could reach the city and destroy the nests, it would slow— even stop— the growth of the horde."

"Then you intend to march against the darkspawn... further into Orlesian territory."

Loghain snorted. "At this point borders mean no more to us than they do to the Nevarrans. Mind you," he said grimly, fixing Prosper with an icy look. "We're not out to conquer Orlais. We have what we want, and we intend to keep it."

"On the other hand," Bronwyn added, "We don't intend to let national prejudices prevent us from fighting the Blight. If we delay and conciliate, the darkspawn win. We will not tolerate opposition to our alliance when it goes west... soon... to face the Archdemon. If people want to fight, they should join with us and not try to hinder us."

"Indeed?" Prosper brightened considerably. "I believe I can be of some assistance to you. If this is clearly an alliance—Feredan and Orlesian; human, dwarf, and elf— then it will be far more difficult for local warlords and petty powerbrokers to oppose it. To fight the Blight, you have a great deal of potentially hostile territory to cross. I shall do my utmost to dispel—or at least mitigate—that hostility. In such a way, you will have some army left by the time you reach the darkspawn. I shall do my utmost to ensure it. This, I swear." He smiled. "And now, will it please you to come to Galehaut?"

"Oh, Loghain, do let's go. Now I'm curious."

Duke Prosper had considered how they might react to his exhibit, and said, "If you like, bring a retinue of archers. What I am going to show you may seem menacing. It is important that you understand that I am not attempting to assassinate you with it."

Loghain stared hard at the man. "We'll come with you... tomorrow. I confess I'm curious, too."

There seemed little point in not inviting him to dinner. Indeed, their new-sworn lords seemed at greater ease than ever, seeing one of the great nobles of Orlais in their company. The dinner went quite well, and there were calls for entertainment. Leliana caught Bronwyn's eye.

Bronwyn could imagine her feelings. This was an opportunity to perform in the country where she had been raised. For all her Fereldan birth, Leliana's views and values were essentially

Orlesian. She longed to show these nobles that she had made something of herself: a Grey Warden, an accomplished bard and minstrel; a companion to the highest in the land.

"I am certain," Bronwyn said, "that Warden Leliana can oblige us with her skill."

"Indeed!" cried Leliana coming forward, sweeping the floor in her silken gown, her blue eyes sparkling. "Your Majesties, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen! I know just the story."

Leliana's Tale of the Dancing Princesses

There was once a king who had three beautiful daughters. They slept in one room and when they went to bed, the doors were shut and locked up. However, every morning their shoes were found to be quite worn through as if they had been danced in all night. Nobody could find out how it happened, or where the princesses had been. The king put more locks on their door and set guards on them, but nothing, it seemed, could keep the princesses from wearing out their shoes.

So the king made it known to all the land that if any person could discover the secret and find out where it was that the princesses danced in the night, he would have the one he liked best to take as his wife, and would be king after his death. But whoever tried and did not succeed, after three days and nights, he would be put to death.

A king's son soon came. He was well entertained, and in the

evening was taken to the chamber next to the one where the princesses lay in their three beds. There he was to sit and watch where they went to dance; and, in order that nothing could happen without him hearing it, the door of his chamber was left open. But the king's son soon fell asleep; and when he awoke in the morning he found that the princesses had all been dancing, for the soles of their shoes were full of holes.

The same thing happened the second and third night and so the king ordered his head to be cut off.

After him came several others; but they all had the same luck, and all lost their lives in the same way.

Now it happened that a soldier, who had been wounded in battle and could fight no longer, passed through the country where this king reigned, and as he was traveling through a wood, he fell in with an apostate mage, who asked him where he was going.

"I hardly know where I am going, or what I had better do," said the soldier; "but I think I would like to find out where it is that the princesses dance, and then in time I might be a king."

"Well," said the mage, "that is not a very hard task: I've heard the story of how the men all fall asleep. I advise you to take care not to drink any of the wine which one of the princesses will bring to you in the evening; and as soon as she leaves you pretend to be fast asleep. Follow them and see where they go, but be careful."

"No problem with that," said the soldier. "Stealth is one thing I've learned."

So the soldier he went to the king, and said he was willing to undertake the task.

He was as well received as the others had been, and the king ordered fine royal robes to be given him; and when the evening came he was led to the outer chamber.

Just as he was going to lie down, the eldest of the princesses brought him a cup of wine; but the soldier threw it all away secretly into a potted plant, taking care not to drink a drop. Then he laid himself down on his bed, and in a little while began to snore very loudly as if he was fast asleep.

When the princesses heard this they laughed heartily; and the eldest said, "This fellow too might have done a wiser thing than lose his life in this way!" Then they rose and opened their drawers and boxes, and took out all their fine clothes, and dressed themselves at the mirror, and skipped about as if they were eager to begin dancing.

But the youngest said, "I don't know why it is, but while you are so happy I feel very uneasy; I am sure some mischance will befall us."

"You simpleton," said the eldest, "you are always afraid; have you forgotten how many kings' sons have already watched in vain? And as for this soldier, even if I had not given him his sleeping draught, he would have slept soundly enough. Hear

him snore!"

When they were all ready, they went and looked at the soldier; but he snored on, and did not stir hand or foot: so they thought they were quite safe.

Then the eldest went up to her own bed and clapped her hands, and the bed sank into the floor and a trap-door flew open. The soldier saw them going down through the trap-door one after another, the eldest leading the way; and thinking he had no time to lose, he jumped up, and followed them, using all his arts of stealth.

However, in the middle of the stairs he trod on the gown of the youngest princess, and she cried out to her sisters, "All is not right; someone took hold of my gown."

The soldier instantly hid behind a pillar.

"You silly creature!" said the eldest, 'it is nothing but a nail in the wall."

Down they all went, and at the bottom they found themselves in a most delightful grove of trees; and the leaves were all of silver, and glittered and sparkled beautifully. The soldier wished to take away some token of the place; so he broke off a little branch, and there came a loud noise from the tree. Then the youngest daughter said again, 'I am sure all is not right - did not you hear that noise? That never happened before.'

But the eldest said, "It is only our secret princes, who are shouting for joy at our approach."

They came to another grove of trees, where all the leaves were of gold; and afterwards to a third, where the leaves were all glittering diamonds. And the soldier broke a branch from each; and every time there was a loud noise, which made the youngest sister tremble with fear. But the eldest still said it was only the princes, who were crying for joy.

Awaiting them on the other side of the underground grove were three handsome princes, who seemed to be waiting there for the princesses. The soldier shuddered, for he could see that they were demons, who had enthralled the young women.

Soon he saw a fine, illuminated castle from which came the merry music of horns and trumpets, played by unseen musicians. They entered, and each demon danced with his princess; and the soldier saw it all. When any of the princesses had a cup of wine set by her, he drank it all up, so that when she put the cup to her mouth it was empty. At this, too, the youngest sister was terribly frightened, but the eldest always silenced her.

They danced on till three o'clock in the morning, and then all their shoes were worn out, so that they were obliged to leave. The demons led them back to the grove, and the princesses made their way through the winding caves, promising to come again the next night.

When they came to the stairs, the soldier ran on before the princesses, and laid himself down. And as the tired sisters slowly came up, they heard him snoring in his bed and they said, "Now all is quite safe." Then they undressed themselves, put away their fine clothes, pulled off their shoes, and went to bed.

In the morning the soldier said nothing about what had happened, but determined to see more of this strange adventure, and went again on the second and third nights. Everything happened just as before: the princesses danced till their shoes were worn to pieces, and then returned home. On the third night the soldier carried away one of the golden cups as a token of where he had been.

As soon as the time came when he was to declare the secret, he was taken before the king. In his robes he carried the three branches and the golden cup; and the three princesses stood listening behind the door to hear what he would say.

The king asked him. "Where do my daughters dance at night?"

The soldier answered, "With three demon princes in a castle underground." And then he told the king all that had happened, and showed him the branches and the golden cup which he had brought with him.

The king called for the princesses, and asked them whether what the soldier said was true. When they saw that they were discovered, and that it was of no use to deny what had

happened, they confessed it all.

So the king asked the soldier which of the princesses he would choose for his wife; and he answered, "I am no longer young. Give me the eldest."

So they were married that very day, and the soldier was named the king's heir.

It was a popular story and was well-applauded. Leliana's cheeks were pink with excitement and satisfaction. The Orlesians, too, found it a charming and gallant tale. The Wardens, at their own table, had their own opinions.

"I liked the part with the apostate," said Jowan. "He deserved some sort of reward."

Tara grinned. "Maybe he got the gold cup out of the newly-made prince. It would only be fair."

"Ha!" Anders scoffed. "I know old soldiers! He probably gave the mage a boot in the backside for his trouble."

"I certainly would," Catriona agreed, utterly shameless, "if somebody tried to talk *me* out of a gold cup. Maybe he'd get a purse of silver instead."

"At least!" Quinn said, indignant. "*I* wouldn't turn him away."

Maeve ruffled his hair. "You're not an *old* soldier, either. After a few more years, you'd probably give him a boot in the

backside, too."

Galehaut was a charming place: just what a country manor should be. The demesne was not large, but it gave de Montfort sufficient living space for himself and his men-at-arms, and large stables for their excellent horses. One stable, newer than the rest, stood apart, on the other side of the compound, and was built very solidly of stone. It had a wide set of double doors, opening on a large paddock. The grooms there wore thick leather armor and helmets with movable visors.

The dogs sniffed and growled. Scout paced restlessly, looking up at Bronwyn.

"What is it, Scout? What's in there?"

Scout had no idea, actually, but he thought it smelled strange and rather menacing. Amber sniffed, too, whined, and lifted a paw, as if uncertain whether to charge or to run. Scrapper, Magister, and Lily barked, and then huddled with the other dogs.

The grooms swung open the heavy doors. Prosper called, "Leopold, dear boy! Come! We wish to see you!"

Out trundled a massive body, sleek and muscled. It stood well over man height at the shoulder, and its body was long, with a powerful tail. It had smallish wings, and was actually larger than the dragon Bronwyn had killed in the Elven Temple.

There were a few frightened screams mixed in with the shouts of wonder. Everyone one took two steps back.

"A wyvern!" cried Bronwyn. "A real wyvern!"

Loghain narrowed his eyes at the Orlesian. "What kind of trick is this?" he asked, his voice menacing.

"No trick," Prosper assured them. "An egg was brought to me. When it hatched, I was there, and I imprinted on the creature, much as you have on your fine hound. I have succeeded in training Leopold. While griffons may be extinct, there are other creatures in Thedas that might be effective in combat: even more effective than horses, when it comes to fighting monsters."

It was an intimidating creature. It was also a magnificent creature. Its shining hide was dark blue, striped and marked here and there in a vivid yellow. Spiny frills trembled threateningly by its ears; its eyes were golden and enormous. Bronwyn tried to remember everything she had ever read about wyverns. They were said to be extinct in Ferelden. This one looked plenty lively to her.

"Don't wyverns spit poison?" Loghain asked abruptly. Of course, as Gwaren's symbol was the wyvern, Loghain could be trusted to have read all he could about wyverns.

"They do indeed," Prosper assured him. "A most lethal poison. Leopold only spits poison on command. It somewhat limits his value in hunting, since anything poisoned by him is quite

inedible for everyone else. However, he has other means of killing: his claws, his fangs, his tail, his great body mass."

Behind them, nobles and Wardens alike were gazing on Leopold in awe.

"A splendid beast!" Morrigan murmured, avidly taking in every detail. If she could master shape-shifting into such a creature, she would be in a far stronger position facing both darkspawn... and... someday... Flemeth.

Leopold swung his heavy head in her direction and blinked slowly, not reluctant to accept the admiration of a sensible human. So many of the feeble two-legs were too fearful to look at him properly. Many of them here today were fearful, too, but others were very not. These smelled of respect and proper caution. Leopold preened, flicking his frills wide and stretching out to his full length.

"So..." Loghain considered what sorts of uses a wyvern could be good for. "He will attack the darkspawn? Your enemies?"

"He does."

"How well does he fly?" Bronwyn wondered.

"He cannot fly as high or far as a dragon is said to, but he's extremely quick, and..." Prosper left them in suspense, before he vaulted into the saddle on the wyvern's back. "... and he can be ridden!"

With that, he put Leopold through their usual exercises, only now mounted on the wyvern's back. The crowd watched, delighted and amazed. He took the wyvern around the paddock, and then reversed, and then performed a serpentine maneuver as if on horseback. Leopold, on command, sprang up and soared briefly over their heads. Prosper brought him back to earth, and then smirked triumphantly on the guests.

"I want one!" declared Brosca.

"Very impressive," said Loghain. "Let's talk."

"You!" Prosper shouted to the grooms. "Feed Leopold!" He slid easily down the creature's back, and gave him a parting pat. Then he strolled over to the Fereldans, feeling that he had made his place secure.

"Very impressive, indeed," Bronwyn agreed. "I previously came across people who had trained dragons to attack, but they did not ride them. The creatures clearly understood human language, just as your wyvern does. Where did you find the egg?"

"The Planascene Forest, I suppose," muttered Loghain, thinking rapidly.

"The very place," said Prosper. "It was brought to me by a hunter as a curiosity. As a rule, all nests are destroyed when they are found, but perhaps that is wasteful. The essential element is that the egg must be kept viable enough to hatch, and the person present at the hatching will be the one to

whom the creature bonds. I was extraordinarily lucky."

"But then you successfully trained the creature as well," Loghain pressed him, trying not to be swept away by visions of a wall of charging wyverns, crushing all before them. The wyvern gulped down great gobbets of raw meat, tossing back its head as it swallowed.

"A similar technique might work with dragons as well," Bronwyn said, also watching entranced. "It would be worth exploring, though of course it would take years. How old is Leopold?"

"Only nine months old, Your Majesty. He has not yet attained his full growth and strength."

Morrigan approached, Anders with her. She studied the wyvern as a miser studies gold. She gave Duke Prosper a very graceful curtsy. He bowed in return, recognizing the beautiful woman he had noticed at the Court in Denerim.

"Might I have leave, my lord," she asked softly, "to examine your remarkable pet at closer quarters? Might you persuade him to let me *touch* him?"

Prosper was impressed by her nerve, and did not see the quick, amused looks exchanged by Bronwyn and Loghain. Instead, rather flattered, he showed off Leopold at greater length, putting him through his paces, ordering him to spit his venom at a target, allowing the fair Lady Morrigan and her escort to touch his hide, his frill, his wings; to peer at his fangs

and claws. For that matter, Leopold was flattered, too.

Other Wardens came closer, and Morrigan asked an elf to obtain a sample of the venom. Some among the Wardens were clearly mages, and they gathered gravely together, discussing Leopold in low tones.

"—how resistant would darkspawn be to the poison?"

"—what kind of stamina do they have?"

"—Interesting. I think it could take on an ogre with no trouble at all."

"—I still say dragons are better. Poison only works on living creatures. It's no good against golems or siege works, for that matter."

"—And you can't use them together. Wyverns and dragons are natural enemies."

One of the mages laughed. *"Only real ones. Not magical creatures."*

Bronwyn whispered to Loghain. "I don't know about wyvern eggs, but I've found dragon eggs in two different places in Ferelden. After what we found in Amaranthine, I believe there must be dragons in the north of the arling. It's possible there are still nests up in the mountains at Haven, where I found the false Andraste. Perhaps Cauthrien should have a look at her new bannorn sometime soon. She could be there in two days,

if she followed my map carefully."

Loghain looked about and saw Cauthrien, standing nearby, speaking quietly to Alistair and Emrys. It would have been a good idea, were they not in the process of going to war.

"I'm not sure I can spare her at the moment. We'll have to see what the mages can make of the Orlesian's pet monster. Surely more of them can learn that shape-shifting trick."

The Warden mages— Anders, Tara, Jowan, Petra, and Niall — were gathered round, listening to Morrigan's cool voice quietly discoursing on the qualities of the creature before them. Loghain wished that they had brought some of the mages traveling with the army with them as well. Uldred seemed powerful, as did his loyal follower, that blonde woman Gwyneth. He was not sure about the others. That mage girl Kieli, for example, he could no more see turning into a wyvern than he could himself.

Duke Prosper, seeing that his demonstration had been received favorably, insinuated himself into the conversation.

"I understand, Your Majesties, that my young cousins, the Imperial Princesses, are safely lodged at Roc du Chevalier. Have you any particular plans for them?"

"You are concerned for them," Bronwyn said sweetly. "That is very amiable of you. Rest assured, the ladies are safe, comfortable and exactly where we want them to be."

"Of course," Duke Prosper smiled, thinking about what kind of reward he might expect for services rendered. "Of course. I merely mention them because in the lamentable absence of the Empress, Orlais currently has no ruler to keep the peace while we pursue the darkspawn. They are certainly the next in blood. A puppet Empress, married to a reliable consort who has sworn homage to you, might be of inestimable help in pacifying the country."

Bronwyn's face was blank. It was obvious now what Prosper had come for, but she was not entirely comfortable about giving an innocent young woman into his care. Loghain was more pragmatic. The girls in question were Orlesian, after all.

"Let us say, for the sake of argument, that you were to be a candidate for such a princess's hand. Which one would you choose?"

Duke Prosper gave them a smiling, self-deprecating bow. "I am no longer young, Your Majesty. Give me the eldest."

Thanks to my reviewers: Nemrut, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Chiara Crawford, Quirky, Raxiselic, KnightOfHolyLight, Mike3207, Blinded in a bolthole, Konous the Grey, Ellyanah, le-maru, darksky01, Robbie the Phoenix, mille libri, JackOfBladesX, sizuka2, NPC200, Jenna53, Calliope Sol, jnybot, Massgamer45, Herebedragons66, Guest, dragonmactir, Chandagnac, Lady Laney, Tsu Doh Nimh, Rb23G, Suna Chunin, RaZoRMandiblez. Herebedragons66,

AD Lewis, Josie Lange, Kyren, and imperial queen.

Bronwyn's remark about destroying enemies by making friends of them is stolen from Abraham Lincoln's many words of wisdom.

Leliana tells a benign version of Grimm's The Twelve Dancing Princesses. In another version they collected, "The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces," eleven of the princesses are beheaded by their father for lying to him. Only the terrified youngest confesses what she's been up to, and then is married to—in this case— a peasant. In a German/Hungarian variant, "The Invisible Shepherd Boy," all the princesses— except for the youngest, who tattles on them— are burned at the stake as sorceresses.

I've posted a new Dragon Age story, "The Flight of the Hawke." It's a one-shot AU about a Mage!Hawke in Kirkwall. If you haven't received the alert, I'd love it if you take a look and tell me what you think.

Bestiaries are in conflict when it comes to the flying capacity of wyverns. Some say that the wings are vestigial, and that wyverns do not fly at all. Some say otherwise. In canon, it's clear they have some flying capacity, since they are seen in the air in the distance, mating.

110. The World Has Changed

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 110: The World Has Changed

The mages spent a great deal of the visit to Galehaut studying Leopold. Even those who had not mastered shape-shifting before were galvanized by the power and majesty of the wyvern and the possibilities that such a creature represented. Morrigan liked the Warden mages well enough to coach them through a rigorous study of the wyvern's anatomy; his movements and his vocalizations, the smell of his poison. An experienced shape-shifter herself, she found interesting challenges presented by the wyvern.

"I have asked the grooms for the sweepings of the creature's stable: pieces of hide, claws, quills from the frill. We will need these to charm our garments. Otherwise we can only shift between beast and nakedness, which would be distracting to a rational enemy, but simply inconvenient and dangerous when fighting darkspawn."

Inside the big stable, a groom presented Morrigan with a large crate of such waste. Morrigan dismissed him, and the mages spent a long time over the objects, touching them, discussing them, slitting their garments and weaving charms

into them along with odd bits of wyvern. Morrigan had learned from a great mistress of the art, and knew a multitude of training exercises for shape-shifting. All of the mages had already done them before, but the intimacy with such an impressive creature caused them to make much greater progress than they had in the past, when trying to become a cat, a bird, a bear. Perhaps it was the fact that each of them really, really wanted to be something so powerful as a wyvern. Intent was always vital in performing magic.

They went back to the paddock and again examined Leopold. Morrigan leaned against him, listening to the mighty heartbeat, moving with the inhalations and exhalations of the enormous lungs. After some time they left the other guest once more to their politicking and their wine, and went behind the big stable. The rest of the visitors did not feel the sudden wave of air pressure, or hear the muffled exclamations. They did not particularly notice that Leopold's head swiveled around eagerly, as he sniffed the breeze.

"We-I-I-I-I... Morrigan..." Anders managed, backing away from the sleek, dark blue menace. "That's... interesting..."

"Amazing," breathed Petra.

"Scary," muttered Tara.

"I feel I can almost do it," said Jowan. "Almost, I mean..." He shut his eyes and gritted his teeth. His arms turned blue and developed very impressive claws. Niall laughed so hard he fell to the ground. Jowan was briefly horrified, until the claws

retracted and the arms became human once more. Morrigan shifted back herself in order to scold them.

"An acceptable first attempt," she praised Jowan. She turned to others, not about to tolerate adolescent behavior. "May I point out," she said, with more than a touch of acid, "that the ability to assume such a shape would quite alter the balance of power between mage and Templar? It would, dare I say it, change the world."

Anders was still laughing, but not at Jowan. "Morrigan, the world changed from the moment I met you!"

Astrid approved of Jader. There was good stonework here, and the architecture of the dwarven quarter showed a proper reverence for their underground origins. It all looked far more prosperous than Denerim, certainly. The dwarves came out in force to greet her, too. Everyone was impressed by her golems.

"Atrast vala, Paragon!"

"Hail, Astrid Goldenhand!"

"Free drinks for the Paragon and her officers at the Paragon's Cup!"

"Stone preserve you, Paragon!"

"We're with you!"

It would be quite nice if they were. Astrid wanted to recruit soldiers for the dwarven army, and also craftsmen for her thaigs. The soldiers would have to be in their own unit, of course. The warrior caste would never accept them into the army proper, and the Jader dwarves might not care for the restrictions imposed on them by the Legion of the Dead. Jader, the closest surface city to Orzammar, had a huge dwarven population. Why not have a company of Jader dwarves? And in it, a strong unit of engineers...perhaps a handful of Wardens, too. Astrid had some ideas she wanted to discuss with Bronwyn. It was absurd for warriors to rush at the horde, waving swords like that fool Cailan, when there was plenty a good engineer could do to soften up the horde first.

Velanna and Ailill, her Dalish elves, were moving along quickly, their eyes a bit wild. Maybe they'd been underground too long. Ailill had closed in on himself, and Velanna had become almost maniacally abrasive. Maybe they needed a change of duty. Astrid was fairly tired of them, anyway. Maybe she could find a sane human mage. Maybe two humans, who could keep each other company. Ailill and Velanna would be even crazier by now, if they hadn't had each other. It was something else to talk over with Bronwyn. For now, she had to keep on task.

'The Paragon's Cup?' Astrid decided to make an appearance at that clever innkeeper's establishment, and see what kind of concrete support the dwarves of Jader were really prepared to give. Free drinks would be quite welcome. First, however,

she must meet with Bronwyn, who had also been doing exceedingly well for herself.

She greeted her as an equal, of course. She owed that to the dwarves. No Paragon should humble herself before a human king or queen. On the other hand, she liked Bronwyn and thought her a sound leader. There were mutual bows and then a warrior's greeting, hands clasped to forearms. Bronwyn had considerately provided a chair up on the dais, next to her throne. That pleased the dwarves, too.

"How fares Orzammar, Paragon?" asked Loghain.

"Well, King Loghain. Our defenses have never been better. The dwarves can send a mighty force abroad without fearing for the safety of the dwarven kingdom. The Amgarrak Road has a strong barrier door, cutting it off from the western and southern Deep Roads, and connecting it securely to Orzammar. Our reclaimed thaigs prosper."

A cheer rose up from the dwarves in the throne room, and from the Wardens, too.

Bronwyn said, "The security of our worthy allies, the dwarven people, is of the greatest importance to us. We plan to march west soon, and look forward to once again marching with you."

Astrid smiled. "We'll be there."

Of course, in private, they had details to go over. The

dwarven Wardens were invited to that discussion. Their Dalish vanished early on, greeted by the other elves as their long-lost brother and sister. Velanna's voice rose shrilly in joy and relief to see her own kind at last.

"I never want to go underground again! The dwarves can have Orzammar and welcome! They're so—"

Thankfully, the door shut on the noise.

Brosca greeted Astrid with great enthusiasm, and of course wanted to know about her family.

"How's little Endrin?"

Astrid was glad she could give her good news. "Little Endrin is big, bouncing, and healthy. Your sister's beauty is undiminished. The King was in good spirits, since he's very satisfied with the progress of the war. Oh... and your sister is expecting again. The baby's due in a month or so."

Brosca beamed with joy. "That's our Rica! Another prince!"

Astrid shrugged. "Or princess."

Brosca's smile faded.

Astrid laid her golden hand reassuringly on Brosca's shoulder. "Don't worry. If it's a girl, I told Bhelen I'd adopt her. The more Aeducans, the better."

Loghain leaned over to Bronwyn, whispering questions about

that situation. He occasionally forgot that the aristocratic Astrid and the common Brosca were aunts of the identical little prince. A curious situation, and one that could only have arisen in Orzammar.

There were more polite preliminaries, and then they sat down to some serious talk over a big map of Orlais.

Loghain presented their general strategic situation—which was not at all bad— plus what they knew so far of the fate of the Orlesian Imperial army, the fall of Val Royeaux, and the movements of other Grey Warden contingents. Bronwyn gave some general background on what tactics they themselves had developed.

"It's clear that the Archdemon is our essential target. I've had some of my people working on the problem of a flying opponent."

Briefly, she summarized what Carver and Jowan had learned from the Nevarran Wardens about traditional dragonhunting. She gave her own experiences with using bombs and magic to bring down a dragon in flight. Loghain then discussed the use of the ballistae which had damaged Flemeth's wing and brought her down to ground level. Catapults could throw bombs. For that matter, so could their golems. Shale could carry huge sacks of bombs and grenades as he waded into battle. The explosives of the Glavonak brothers could deal death on a wide scale to the darkspawn.

Astrid herself had some exciting news of dwarven ingenuity to

share.

"The workshop of Smith Garin has come up with a new weapon." She motioned Falkor forward. He carried a strange object: Gleaming steel and silverite, its butt was shaped like that of a crossbow and it had a trigger mechanism, but there was no bow section, but instead a long metal tube with a kind of sighting device at the end.

"Garin calls it 'the Airbow,' said Astrid. "It shoots lead pellets he calls 'bullets,' and it operates by means of a coiled silverite spring-loaded piston contained within a compression chamber, and separate from the barrel. Cocking the bow—" She demonstrated this with a click "— causes the piston assembly to compress the spring until a small hook on the rear of the piston engages a lock; pulling the trigger releases the lock and allows the spring to decompress, pushing the piston forward, thereby compressing the air in the chamber directly behind the bullet—" she held up a small sphere of lead. "Like this. The bullets are easily molded, which makes them cheaper and faster to produce than arrows. When you pull the trigger, the bullet moves forward, propelled by an expanding column of air. All this takes place in a fraction of a second. This particular model is enhanced with Runes of Impact and Striking."

She flipped the butt of the weapon against her left shoulder, sighting down the barrel at a porcelain figurine on a stand across the room. She pulled the trigger. A muffled "pop," and the figure shattered. The missile continued on and slammed into the wall, penetrating over a handsbreadth into the plaster,

wood and stone. The lead missile was dug out of the wall and examined. It had flattened out to the diameter of a sovereign. It would have torn a great hole in a darkspawn's chest.

"Oooo!" rose the delighted murmur.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes, amused and tolerant. There was nothing a Warden loved like new death-dealing devices. She rather liked them herself. Loghain's gaze was fixed and hungry. This was a splendid ranged weapon for someone who was not a skilled archer, and who might not have the physical strength to cock a heavy crossbow.

"If I may?"

Astrid was delighted to show off her new toy, and demonstrated how it was loaded with the lead bullets. The Airbow could hold up to five in reserve, as well as the one in the shooting chamber. Shooting the bullet caused the next one in the reserve to enter the chamber in its turn. The interior of the barrel itself was incised with a long spiral, which improved the accuracy of the weapon.

"Really?" asked Loghain. "That's a fine piece of smithcrafting."

He went to the window, opened it, and held the weapon as Astrid had. It was designed for a dwarf, and so did not suit his longer reach, but he had no trouble picking up how to support the barrel with one hand while operating the trigger mechanism. The sight was not much different than that of a crossbow, though more refined. Loghain took aim at a bronze

windvane in the shape of a lion at the far end of a roof jutting out perpendicularly from under their window. He breathed out slowly and squeezed the trigger.

Another muffled "pop!" followed instantly by a clanging "crack!" as the bullet struck the bronze lion, blasting off its head. The windvane spun wildly.

"Whoa!" Brosca actually patted Loghain on the back. "That'll show 'em, Big Guy."

Loghain smiled grimly. He was conscious of the recoil against his shoulder. It was a good, hard punch, but not hard enough to trouble him, even if he had shot several times. Nonetheless, someone using this weapon regularly would likely want some padded leather there.

"This weapon," he said quietly, "will change the world."

Bronwyn only smiled and took the Airbow from him. She had heard of repeating crossbows, but they were delicate objects, prone to breakdowns. If a bowman could shoot six times before reloading, he would achieve a rate of fire superior to the best traditional archer—at least for those six shots. And the weapon seemed accurate... at least at fairly short range. So far, she had seen nothing to indicate that it could rival a longbow for that.

Hakan spoke up. "Could you poison the bullets?" He waved her hands expressively. "I don't mean pouring poison on them. Couldn't you put a little poison inside? Form the bullet around

a bit of crystal or pressed glass?"

"I don't know," said Astrid. "It might be worth the experiment, though it would make the bullets more expensive. It might be easier to stamp them with runes."

"We'll have the Glavonaks see what they can do," said Loghain. "That young Warden Adaia, too. And I want as many of those Airbows as the dwarves can make."

"It just so happens..." Astrid smiled serenely. "That I have two with me right now. Askil, the gifts. One for the King, and one for the Queen."

"A wonderful gift, indeed!" Bronwyn laughed, teasing her. "As long as it's not red. It isn't, is it?"

Astrid grinned and shook her head. "Just good, sound silverite and steel. With white runestones and your names in gold."

Many of the new soldiers in the fortresses along Gherlen's Pass had never seen a Dalish elf in their lives. Most Orlesians had certainly never seen a caravan of them, hallas picking their dainty way along the road, pulling the aravels behind them. Veterans of Ostagar merely greeted them, told them that Bronwyn was in the city of Jader, and pointed out the way.

For the most part, the Dalish preferred to camp outside the walls. Siofranni, Merrill, and Lanaya, however, with Thanovir,

Maynriel, and a party of warriors, presented themselves at the gate. The Fereldan guards there knew their business too well to attempt to bar their way. A runner was sent ahead to alert the Palace, and a pair of soldiers escorted the Dalish through the colorful streets of Jader.

The Dalish were gazed on in wonder, especially by the city elves, who had previously been comfortably certain that the Dalish elves were a myth. Disabused of this notion, some of the younger elves followed in the wake of the Dalish, too timid to speak to them, but thinking them extraordinary, glamorous beings.

"Now this is much prettier than Denerim!" Merrill exclaimed, looking about her. "So much neater and cleaner. The houses don't all look about to fall down. That's nice for the people. I wouldn't want a house to fall on me!"

Lanaya said less, but was equally consumed with curiosity. She did not remember much of her early childhood before her rescue by the Dalish, but she knew she came from a shemlen city and had been born in an Alienage. She hoped that the Alienage here in Jader was better than the awful place in Denerim. They must pay a call on their city cousins. The Sabrae clan had had some luck in luring the poor creatures back to the happier, nobler ways of the Dalish. Lanaya would like to save some of them as well. And there was the burgeoning little village in the new elven homeland. Surely that would do for those who must have a roof over their heads.

Siofranni was not so sure if leaving the city was the ideal

outcome for everyone: not if the elves lived in the kind of beautiful houses she saw along the fine, wide streets. She had enjoyed her comfortable quarters at Roc du Chevalier. The problem, as the young Warden saw it, was not so much that the city elves lived in cities: it was that they were *poor*, and thus could not enjoy the pleasures of city life.

They were all astonished at the majestic beauty of Emerald Square, anchored on either side by two huge buildings of greenstone. They felt very relieved when Danith and Nuala emerged from the palace, and ran down the steps, smiling, to greet them.

"*Aneth ara!*" Danith exclaimed, her arms out. "You are most welcome!"

They were made welcome, again and again, by the rest of the Dalish, by the other Wardens, by Bronwyn, by Loghain, and then were invited to join them at dinner. They were invited to stay in the palace, too, for that matter, but were not pressed when they explained that they preferred to stay in the Dalish camp. Siofranni, as a Warden, told them she would be staying at the palace with her fellow Wardens.

"I must hear what my comrades have been doing," she said. Adaia whispered in her ear, eyes dancing, telling her of the charming room she would share with her. It sounded very inviting.

It was not until after dinner that Tara could take Lanaya and Merrill aside and urge them to follow her.

"Let me show you something I found! Bring the warriors, too. Everybody's welcome! " She lowered her voice, "Well, all elves, anyway."

Very intrigued, the Dalish party crowded into Tara and Zevran's exquisite room. Already present were Danith, of course, and Cathair, Steren, Nuala, and Darach. Velanna was there, and Ailill. Both of them had the look of escaped prisoners, rejoicing in their freedom. Siofranni and Adaia had made themselves comfortable on some pink satin cushions. Merrill had no eyes for anything in the room other than the lofty, gilded object in the corner. She had recognized the eluvian immediately.

How angry she had been angry with Marethari for disposing of the other eluvian—the one that had poisoned Danith and Tamlen in the forest. This, however, was undamaged and untainted.

Since Tara had determinedly kept it a secret, Danith had not seen the mirror before that moment. She backed away, alarmed.

"Don't worry!" Tara assured her. "it's not like the one that infected you."

Merrill cried, "It's perfect! I can't believe it!" She told the puzzled elves, "It's an eluvian! It was made in Arlathan by our ancestors the ancient elvhen, long, long ago!"

An awed silence filled the room.

"This is a noble thing," muttered Maynriel. "We live in an age of wonders."

"It belongs to the elves," said Tara. "No one is to speak of it to anyone else. My fellow Wardens only know that I claimed a splendid mirror as plunder." She had told Brosca a bit more than that, but saw no reason to bring it up. Brosca could be trusted not to blab a friend's secrets.

Tara's insistence that this be purely an elvish matter was greeted with general approval. No one had the least desire to share a lost treasure of the elvhen. Velanna declared her agreement vehemently and repeatedly. She had never heard of such an object, but if it was elvish, than not even torture would force a word of it from her to either shemlen or durgen'len.

Lanaya had been told about eluvians by Zathrian, who had known a great deal of ancient lore. He had never seen one, however, or spoken to anyone who had. Lanaya was thrilled at this glimpse of the glory of long-lost Arlathan.

"It's beautiful! I can sense its power, but what does it actually do?"

Tara gave them what information she possessed, derived from the book she had read at the Circle library. Merrill, however, was examining the mirror in detail already, murmuring unknown words in her sweet voice. The reflective surface wavered, and then ripples spread out from the center, as if she had dropped a stone into a forest pool.

Abruptly, her chant stopped, and she backed away, shocked by her own success. Her words came back in a soft, distorted echo. The elves murmured in wonder and then were absolutely silent, as they heard the soft sussuration reflected back at them. Merrill whispered a word of command, and the surface smoothed out once more.

"I think," Lanaya said softly, "we should be very careful about what we say to this mirror. We do not know who may be listening."

"That's true," agreed Tara, a little discouraged. "We might be communicating with the Black Divine, for all we know."

"We must study it," Merrill insisted. "Not only could we use it to speak to others far away—we could use it to travel. We hadn't many books in our clan, but we had a book about the eluvians. There is a spell to make them open their paths among the worlds. Different eluvians led to different places. We will need some blood..."

"Blood magic!" cried Lanaya, horrified. Everyone fidgeted with dismay.

"We can use mine," Merrill said, unruffled. "It's not to control anyone, but to let the eluvian know that an elf wishes to step through. Only the blood and magic of the elvhen can unlock all of its powers. Our enemies the magisters could not make full use of an eluvian for that reason, not even with elven thralls. They did not even know what was necessary."

"Well, if it's just that..." Tara said. "It's more like the Templars using blood for tracking, and nobody—other than mages—has a problem with that."

"It is good to know that the evil Tevinters could not use them," growled Darach. "But where does such a path lead?"

"Our wise ancestors," murmured Lanaya, "would not lead us to an evil place, or a dangerous one."

"Not deliberately, I grant you," said Zevran. "However, if this is connected to another eluvian somewhere, perhaps that, too, has been moved from its original location."

"There is writing on the frame," Tara said, "but I can't make it out. It's in a very old script that's quite unknown to me."

Merrill peered at it and then read it off:

*"Melava inan enansal
ir su araval tu elvaral
u na emma abelas
in elgar sa vir mana
in tu setheneran din emma na*

*lath sulevin
lath araval ena
arlar ven tu vir mahvir
melana 'nehn
enasal ir sa lethalin."*

The Dalish looked at each other, shocked and rather excited. Tara looked at each of them, but her knowledge of the elven language was not sufficient to translate something spoken so quickly.

"I'm sorry," Adaia said, greatly daring. "I don't understand it at all. Please tell me what it means."

Merrill smiled, and hesitantly rendered the ancient tongue into common Trade language.

*"Time was once a blessing
but long journeys are made longer
when alone within.
Take spirit from the long ago
but do not dwell in lands no longer yours.*

*Be certain in need,
and the path will emerge
to a home tomorrow
and time will again
be the joy it once was."*

"Do not dwell in lands no longer yours..." Lanaya whispered. "Is it our doom, or is it offering us a new way?"

Merrill was radiant. "'The path will emerge to a home tomorrow.' Well, we'll just have to see about that. There is an incantation—actually several different incantations, depending on which eluvian you are using... and one needs to prick one's finger ... only a drop of blood is needed to find the way

through... and then... we shall see, won't we?"

"Wait..." Tara said. "You're just going to... step through?"

"Of course, " Merrill replied. "That is what it's for. How can I know where it goes, if I don't go there?"

"You cannot go alone," Maynriel spoke up. "I shall go with you, Keeper."

"That is kind of you, *lethallin*."

"I, too," Danith declared, forcing herself to master her fear of the thing. "We shall be safer as three."

"Now, wait!" Tara said, rather taken aback at how events had accelerated. "Why don't you... I don't know, just put your finger in first, and see what happens? All right? Or I'll do it. Maybe a little finger? So if something bad happens, I don't lose anything essential?"

"That sounds very sensible to me!" Zevran seconded her loyally.

"If you like," Merrill agreed. "A finger only. That way we will at least know that it works. But I shall do it first." Instantly she drew her belt knife and pressed the sharp tip to her index finger— much to Tara's exasperation— and then intoned an incantation.

"Vena an areth!"

Nothing happened. Merrill slumped in disappointment.

"Not the right one, then. Let's see..."

Siofranni whispered to Adaia, *"I go to the safe place..."*

Biting her lip, Merrill tried again.

"Ar in Setheneran!"

"I dwell in the Land of Waking Dreams," murmured Siofranni.

No response. The elves sighed in sympathy.

Merrill straightened her thin shoulders, and took a deep breath. "I'm sure this is the one!"

"Ero din an ti Arla!"

To their astonishment, the eluvian began humming. Everyone in the room but Merrill pressed back against the wall. Merrill then slowly reached out to the mirror's surface, which had ceased reflecting and was now a silvery pool of light. At the touch of her fingertip, the surface dimpled like water touched lightly, and then there sounded a low note, sweet as a harp struck softly, and her finger disappeared into the eluvian. The once-hard surface of the mirror resembled a viscous, metallic liquid, quicksilver bright. It swirled like a whirlpool.

"Oh!" cried Merrill.

"Keeper! Be careful!" urged Thanovir. "Step away!"

"I'm not hurt... I'll just be a moment..." said Merrill, and then quickly stepped forward. There was a soft, sucking sound, and the young mage vanished, the silvery whirlpool drawing her in.

"Mythal, protect her!" screamed Danith. She drew her knife and slashed at her palm, running at the mirror.

"Ero din an ti Arla! Ero din an ti Arla! Ero din—"

In a flash, she was through the eluvian and the surface rippled with her passing.

Grizzled Maynriel uttered some words in elvish that were incomprehensible to those who were not Dalish, and quite shocking to those who were. He, too, sliced a shallow cut into his palm, and stalked toward the mirror, shaking his head at the recklessness of youth.

"Ero din an ti Arla!" He practically snarled the words, and strode fearlessly through the swirling depths. After a moment, the mirror stilled and grew hard once more, reflecting the stunned faces in the room.

The three adventurers were gone for some time. When they returned, they told their friends that the world had changed.

"But what did you see?" Tara shouted. She was not the only one yelling.

After a panic-stricken wait, she had been ready to follow Merrill, Danith, and Maynriel into the eluvian, when they suddenly reappeared from it, their eyes filled with remembered wonders.

Merrill was too dreamy to reply coherently; Maynriel too overwhelmed. It was Danith who answered.

"Not all the elves of ancient Arlathan perished or were enslaved. There were those who escaped. They have been waiting for news from us for a long, long time. They are waiting to welcome us... home."

Jader offered some new diversions to Loghain. Having no particular respect for it as he would for an ancient Fereldan settlement, he felt free to reimagine and reconstruct it any way he liked. The palace and the chantry certainly needed no other adornment. His attention was currently centered around the gate houses, the barracks, and the dockyards.

All of them were well-built and convenient. The gate houses were given into the charge of reliable Fereldan officers, who set up guard rotas composed of reliable Fereldan soldiers. The barracks were filled with the Fereldan army, with the new Jaderian contingents interspersed in such a way as to make it difficult for them to unite and hold any part of the building effectively if they decided to turn traitor. Loghain toured the barracks and admired them at length. The facilities gave him all sorts of ideas for improvements at West Hill and even at Fort Drakon.

It was at the dockyards that he had the greatest impact. Construction on the additions was complete there. In addition, the shipbuilders had finished work on one splendid new warship, and another was nearly ready. The captains whose ships they were to be were Kirkwallers by birth, and not displeased that Jader had a king and queen who would pay them, since Empress Celene seemed unlikely to meet her financial obligations, either now or in the future. The new ship's name was changed to the *Dragonslayer*, and it was launched with considerable fanfare. As a bow to their dwarven allies, the second ship would be named the *Paragon*.

His engineers were working on the harbor defenses now. An improved wall was under construction, with a number of catapults, ballistae, and trebuchets being installed in the forts on either side of the harbor to prevent any enemy vessel — or even fleet— from sailing into Jader Bay. In addition, a boom was being forged. The existence of the Horn made that a tricky piece of engineering, but the dwarves insisted it could be done.

Looking out to sea, relishing the thought of repelling all enemies, he did not hear people approaching until they were quite close. He turned to see a group of dwarves inspecting the wharves.

"King Loghain!" shouted Astrid, giving him a wave.

"Paragon!"

Brosca was there, and some of the other dwarves he knew,

as well as a few he did not. He was feeling quite friendly toward Astrid at the moment, and not just because of the Airbow. She was doing good work recruiting among the dwarves, and they would have another band of sound engineers traveling to the west.

Brosca had one with her now, and was actually holding his hand. The lad was a mild-looking fellow, very abashed by the high-toned company he was keeping.

"Loghain!" Brosca shouted, bouncing down the stone steps, dragging her not-unwilling captive along. "This is Torvald! He was really nice to me when I was first here spying. He even bought me a drink and a skewer of Jader sausages!"

The dwarf turned a dull red, and bowed deeply. "Your Majesty."

"Well met, Torvald." Loghain said, too amused to laugh at the poor fellow outright. "A friend of Warden Brosca needs no other recommendation to me."

One of the older dwarves —probably a relative— brightened at the words. Loghain prepared to be petitioned for yet another contract.

The journey from the Circle to Jader lasted only three days. It was just enough to be a splendid adventure, and not so much as to render everyone utterly exhausted. First Enchanter Irving was rather enjoying himself. When he grew bored with

the scenery, he arranged himself comfortably on the bedrolls in the lead wagon, and read the books he had brought along. The current one was a delightfully spicy romance in a serious-looking blue leather binding. Since no one else in the wagon could read Antivan, Irving enjoyed the benefits of knowing all the written languages of Thedas, as well as his reputation as a serious scholar. No one had the least idea what Count Fornicatio was doing to his sister-in-law and her mother. He sighed, a bit nostalgic. Dear Wynne had always liked a hot-blooded novel.

"I can't believe that Loghain had the gall to seize the Aeonar!"

Irving sighed, and set down his book. Knight-Commander Greagoir's leather lungs had repeated those words, over and over again, for most of the day, ever since they had come across the small company of Templars who had sworn to fight the Blight for the duration. Irving was thoroughly tired of hearing them.

"Well, he did. It's fairly clear that the staff there had gone rogue."

"Yes, yes, that's what young Desmond said, but it should have been turned over to us to investigate first..."

Irving said nothing more, but returned to his trashy Antivan novel. Ser Desmond, once outer guard of the Aeonar, had had plenty to say about the atrocities he had been shown once the prison was liberated.

"I joined the Templars to make the world a better and safer place, not to torture innocent people..."

Irving smiled tightly, suspecting that "innocent people" did not include mages of any race, age, or gender. At any rate, what Loghain found at the Aeonar had got him exercised enough that he had closed the place down altogether. He had shipped the priests off to Denerim with a fiery letter, and sent the most offensive of the Templars to Orlais. The timeline was not clear to Irving. Had Loghain known about the darkspawn at that time? Probably. The old mage smiled quietly, enjoying the image. He hoped the Templars were set ashore as close to Val Royeaux as possible. Greagoir was still fuming about jurisdiction, but he would simply have to get over it.

The world has changed, he mused, whether Greagoir likes it or not.

They headed quite the formidable little company: ten Templars and thirty-six mages. Some of the mages were quite young: only just past their Harrowing. Greagoir had let Healer apprentices go last time, but had since thought again about it, and had insisted that all mages be Harrowed. No one had gone bonkers and turned into an abomination yet, even when faced with slit-trench latrines.

After sleep, breakfast, and time to reflect on what Danith had told them of the place to which they had traveled by means of the eluvian, the elves had some decisions to make.

Other groups went through the eluvian briefly, and then came back: first Tara, Adaia, Lanaya, and Darach, and then the others. In threes or fours, all the elves saw the place beyond the portal for themselves. It was not the Fade. It was a real place, and astonishing. They had brief, awkward, but excitingly heartfelt conversations with those they met there. The language had diverged a great deal and required patience. Each who returned was rather silent afterwards, feeling humbled and ignorant, but brimful of hope and possibility.

Lanaya said, "Not all elves will wish to leave Thedas. Not all Dalish would exchange a life in the forest for this brave new world. Or not right away, or soon. It will take time, but it would be a great deed."

Nuala whispered. "They have preserved so much of the ancient wisdom, and gone far beyond it, too. I fear our distant cousins think us savages."

Adaia shook her head, "I don't care. It's beautiful! I'd go live there right *now*, if it weren't for the Blight and the Tevinters. Once we've defeated the Archdemon, I think we should rescue as many of our stolen people as we can. We've got loot. We can hire a ship with a trustworthy captain and steal them back from the bastards. We'll free all the slaves we can. Then we'll take them to the eluvian and they can start going through. No one will ever make slaves of us again. The elves have learned their lesson."

Velanna paced restlessly, and burst out in shrill denial. "Let

the Blight take the shemlen! The darkspawn were none of our doing! Let them be consumed by the monsters their pride unleashed. Our people will be safe, at least."

Danith was already irritated by her attitude. She saw Ailill rubbing his head and wondered how he had endured her so long. "Like it or not," she said coldly. "We swore oaths as Wardens. I shall keep mine. If you need a more selfish reason, remember that many elves are in danger from the darkspawn. In order to get them to our new home, we must make the way to it safe. This, I shall do."

She did not particularly like Bronwyn, and Bronwyn would never like her. That did not matter. Her personal honor did: that, and the practical need to make travel as safe as possible.

"Of course we must fight the Blight," Lanaya agreed. "It would be a sad and cowardly thing to leave the land of our ancestors to the darkness. However, I see nothing wrong with the old and frail being made safe, and the little ones, too. We who can fight, *will* fight, honoring our ancient treaty."

Velanna made a face, but did not contradict her.

Tara had been thinking along the same lines, but saw some of the difficulties. "We'll need to get the eluvian safely to the homeland. We'll need a team of reliable people to start setting things up. *I* can't, obviously. I have a duty to the Wardens, just as many of us do. We'll help fight this Blight, we'll rescue those of our people we can, and then we're out of here." She

glanced at Zevran, who was smiling, picturing a world without Crows.

"There is also the possibility..." Danith said, more soberly. "... there is the possibility that the war against the darkspawn might go badly. If so, it would be a way for at least some of our people to escape."

The three Wardens Riordan had sent back east made their way to Jader reluctantly, but with obedient speed. The situation in Lydes had deteriorated in the past few days; the city had rapidly destabilized with the mob of starving refugees inside and outside. The Wardens themselves had been forced to be very persuasive indeed in order to pass through the gates. The elves of Lydes were antagonistic and rebellious; the dwarves were already packing up to go.

It was the latter who first approached the three Grey Wardens. The elderly dwarf in the lead was richly dressed; obviously a community leader. Behind him were a half-dozen younger dwarves. They hailed the Grey Wardens in the main street of Lydes, as they made their way to the East Gate.

"You lot came through only a few days ago," the elderly dwarf asked, his face pasty with fear. "Did you meet the horde? Are the rest of the Wardens dead?"

"No!" Fabrice nearly shouted. "No. We haven't seen the darkspawn yet. Our Senior Warden wants us to contact the Grey Wardens of Ferelden and tell them the situation. We're

on our way to the border."

"We just stopped in Lydes to restock our rations," the archer Minjonet told the dwarves, looking down at them from the superior height of her horse. "Not that's there much to be had here."

"Too true," agreed the dwarf.

He and the other dwarves engaged in a whispered debate. Apparently, more wreckage had washed ashore, and there was speculation that the Archdemon was flying out into the Waking Sea and sinking ships that came too close to Val Royeaux. The old dwarf nodded, "Jader it is, then. After that, we'll see."

They were not the only refugees heading east. All along the Imperial Highway the Wardens passed dispirited, wretched people carrying their worldly goods on their backs, in handcarts, on donkeys. The richer among them had wagons and oxen. Some had guards. Smoke rose along the road, and now and then the stripped bodies and the burned-out skeletons of wagons indicated that guards were definitely a good idea. The refugees had attracted a larger than usual number of bandits, out to make all the coin they could from the misfortunes of others.

The blue and silver Warden armor marked the three companions as hard targets. Bandits did not trouble them, since there was richer, weaker prey. The Wardens were careful, nonetheless, and kept a strict watch at night when

camping in the countryside. Everywhere, people approached their camp, begging for food, begging for help.

"—Please, messieurs, the bandits took everything..."

"—They took my daughter. I beg you, messieurs, she is only thirteen..."

"—My mother is sick. We cannot move her without the wagon... We cannot leave her alone to die..."

Minjonet muttered, "Aren't we going to help them? *Any* of them?"

Clovis always replied, "We have our orders. Wardens' business comes first. Close your eyes and harden your heart to foolish sentiment."

One night a band of desperate men tried to steal the horses, and paid dearly for it. The Wardens left the bodies where they lay and rode on swiftly, not wanting to hear the cries of anguish from the dead men's women and children.

The first wave of refugees had reached Halamshiral before them: the most easily alarmed, the most prudent, the best prepared. The Wardens took the time to report to the Vicomte and tell him about the bandit infestation on the Imperial Highway. Then they galloped away, ahead of the tide of misery. When they reached Solidor on the eleventh, they discovered that their world had changed.

There was no point in going through Gherlen's Pass. The Queen of Ferelden and Acting-Warden-Commander of the Grey Wardens was in Jader, which she had claimed for her kingdom.

"Can she *do* that?" Fabrice wondered out loud.

"Apparently she has," Minjonet replied with a shrug. She had been quiet since the night they had killed the refugees: quiet and dissatisfied. As one of the few female Wardens in Jader, she had taken it into her head that Riordan had sent her back because she was a woman. Clovis thought it might be true. Minjonet was very pretty; very delicate-looking. Her father had been an elf, and she had ended up on her own when her parents died and neither of her parents' families could tolerate such a being in either of their fine homes. Luckily, she had proved to be a brilliant archer quite young, and so had an alternative to the brothels of Jader. She had knocked at the door of the Warden Compound one day, demanding to Join. Riordan had turned her away seven times before he decided it was Fate.

"So..." Clovis said. "It's back to Jader. It will be strange, seeing the Fereldans in our Compound."

They were even more surprised to discover that the Wardens were not there at all, but at the Palace.

Bronwyn was out by the archery butts, playing with her new Airbow, when the deputation arrived. Loghain, practicing

obsessively, had determined that the weapons had a range only little over half that of a long bow, but were accurate almost to that limit. Or *he* was that accurate. Loghain had the eye of a man who trained all his youth as an archer, and it translated well to the Airbow. Bronwyn was not quite so brilliant, but she could hit a target more often than not, at a better range than she could manage with a shortbow. These were good weapons. A smith had shown them the clever bullet mold that could turn out heaps of lead bullets within an hour. Lead was plentiful and cheap, and it took no skill to mold a bullet, unlike the painstaking art of fletching arrows.

"Your Majesty!" called a guard. "Some Orlesian Grey Wardens are here, wanting to talk to you!"

"Take them to the Wardens' dayroom," she ordered. "I'll meet them there." She shrugged, and said to Loghain, "I'd better see them right away."

Loghain snorted his opinion of that, and loaded his Airbow for another round of target shooting.

With her guards on either hand, she strode quickly through the courtyard and up through the shining corridors. The guard beside her threw open the door. Amidst a group of her Wardens were three unknown faces.

"Stay here," she ordered the guards in a low voice, "and don't let anybody else in."

She was dressed for practice, in a white linen shirt under

leather jerkin and breeches, but the newcomers seemed to guess who she was readily enough. Perhaps they had heard about her eyes.

"Warden-Commander," said one of them, the big, stocky fellow. "We come from Senior Warden Riordan." His companions looked at him uneasily, not sure what to do. The young woman then sketched a bow, and muttered, "Your Majesty," under her breath. Bronwyn decided that she was the smart one.

"Welcome," she said briskly, and then gestured at the benches. "Take a seat. I am very interested in your news. Might I know your names?"

The big one shuffled. "Clovis, Commander. And these are Fabrice and Minjonet."

"Have you seen the horde?"

"No, Commander. Riordan sent us back to tell you what we have discovered so far."

With that, he launched into his report: the Archdemon's attack on the army, the panic in the cities, the deteriorating situation on the roads, the defiance of the Sieur de Flambard.

Bronwyn scoffed at that bit of information. "Doesn't like Wardens, does he? I daresay he'll like darkspawn even less. What word from the Wardens of Montsimnard?"

"We have not seen them, Commander. Based on the information from de Flambard and deserters from the army, we know they came upon the camp after the attack by the Archdemon. They rallied a portion of the surviving troops. Then they headed north toward Val Royeaux. We have seen evil things in the Fade, but we know little. It was Riordan's intention to scout the site of the last camp, and then either go north to Val Royeaux, or northwest to Val Foret."

Bronwyn put a map before him and the Jader Wardens used it to trace their route: the places where they had had the most trouble, and the place where they believed the site of the Archdemon's attack on the army to be.

"Very well." Bronwyn considered their report. The refugees were definitely going to be a problem. Plans must be made to accommodate them, or they would have a starving mob in Jader before another few days had passed. She asked, "Did Riordan have any other messages for me?"

Clovis flushed, embarrassed. Fabrice elbowed him, not wanting to speak himself, not wanting to beg. Minjonet rolled her eyes, exasperated, and then glared at Clovis. Knowing there was no way out of this, the swordsman thought best to lay the matter out plainly.

"Our Senior Warden said that you were to come to our aid. He said that the time for petty quarrels is over, and reminds you of your duty as a Warden."

There was a outburst from Bronwyn's people, who were

mightily offended. The outcry rose, louder and louder, alarming the guards outside the closed door. Bronwyn got to her feet, blazing with indignation. She snarled, "He does, does he?"

Minjonet hissed at Clovis, "He did not put it that way, you fool!" She turned to Bronwyn. "I believe that he thinks that things have gone badly for the Wardens of Montsimmard and he is sure that the Wardens of Val Royeaux are dead. Riordan said that you should recruit as many Wardens as you could and then to come. He asked that you show more mercy than your have been shown, and..." The girl wiped her eyes angrily. "...And so do I. I beg you to help us! So many are suffering. These great lumps here do not seem to care when people beg us to protect them, and we ride away and leave them, but I cannot bear it! The Grey Wardens exist to protect all Thedas!" She crumpled to her knees and her voice broke. "I beg you to come to our aid. Forgive us for our stupid pride and our refusal to help you! Come west with us and fight!"

Looking at each other sheepishly, Clovis and Fabrice knelt beside her, heads lowered.

"Get up," Bronwyn said hoarsely. "Get up. Sit." She pointed at the bench, glaring at them until they sat down like recalcitrant schoolchildren. She walked over to the window, and stood there, looking out but seeing nothing, trying to pull herself together. Alistair came up behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Fools," Morrigan sneered.

Leliana was even angrier. "You think she is as bad as you! As bad as the rest of the Wardens, who obeyed the orders that we were to be left to die!"

"Stop!" Bronwyn said. She turned, and put up a hand for silence. "It's not their fault."

She looked at the Orlesians for a long moment, and then spoke.

"I'm well aware of the contempt in which Orlais has always held Ferelden. I know that we Fereldans are regarded as savages; as unfit to live indoors; as skin-clad barbarians who require the guidance and punishment of their betters. At best, mindless peasants fit only to be exploited. Since the beginning of the Blight, I have been constantly under attack. My family was murdered... a massacre instigated by a malicious Orlesian bard."

Leliana bit her lip and looked away.

"But that," said Bronwyn, "was clearly insufficient to slake the spite of the rulers of Orlais. Attempts have been made on my life, on the life of my husband the King, on my brother, on my friends. Only last month, my dear cousin the Arl of South Reach was viciously murdered in the presence of his wife and children by an Orlesian-trained catspaw. Attack after attack has been launched at us, and all the while the darkspawn clawed at our lands. Orlais could hardly have done us more harm, had they openly declared an alliance with the darkspawn."

Clovis gasped with protest, but Fabrice nudged him again, this time for silence. They must let the Queen have her say.

"We fought alone against them," said Bronwyn, "for I was informed by the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra and Antiva that the First Warden had forbidden anyone to come to our assistance. Why? Because, they said, somewhere 'more important' was undoubtedly the real target. Now, no doubt, the First Warden will admire his foresight. However, if we had really hit the darkspawn early, hit them hard with all the power of the Wardens, they might not have had the wherewithal to attack Val Royeaux. We'll never know, of course.

"I have my own theories. My sources warned me that the First Warden was surrounded by Orlesians who would gloat at the destruction of Ferelden. Furthermore, it might well suit the First Warden's purposes for such an 'unimportant' nation to be destroyed, as a warning to the rest of the Thedas to pay their tithes promptly."

"Understand me well," she said, her green eyes fixed on the three Wardens. "I don't give this—" she snapped her fingers "—for the First Warden. I owe him nothing: not respect, not support, and certainly not obedience. He knew that Alistair and I were raw recruits, who knew *nothing* of the essential elements of Warden lore."

Clovis and Fabrice glanced at each other in shock and alarm. Minjonet's complete attention was on Bronwyn. Bronwyn herself paced restlessly, and went on:

"The First Warden threw us away like a market woman throws away spoiled turnips. Not a word of advice, not a copper coin did he vouchsafe us. My only instructions from him were to report like a good child to Montsimmard, leaving my people to be slaughtered and Tainted. I ignored him then, and I intend to go on ignoring him. We did all right, at that. While my 'brother and sister' Wardens have scorned their own obligations and played politics, the Dalish, the dwarves, and the mages of the Fereldan Circle have honored the ancient treaties."

"Ready to march, Boss!" cheered Brosca, raising a tankard. She, Sigrun, and Oghren clanked a loud toast together. Bronwyn gave them a nod, smiling.

"I'm calm again. There's no need to beg for mercy. I've been admonished to be merciful by quite a few... people, over the past few months. In fact, what angered me was your assumption that I would be as petty and malicious as nearly everyone else has been to *me*. It *never* occurred to me for a moment... not a *moment*... not to continue the campaign against the Blight. I know that it would be madness to allow the darkspawn to breed undisturbed. And there's another reason."

She stopped pacing, and looked at them rather sadly.

"The only outside help we have received since the beginning of the Blight was from your own Senior Warden Riordan, and his second, Senior Mage Warden Fiona."

At their manifest astonishment, she smiled grimly.

"Yes. Defying orders and danger, and true to their oath as Grey Wardens, they sought us out in secret. *They* told us what we needed to know in order to prosecute the war. *They* helped us Join new recruits. They are the only people in this whole sorry situation to whom I feel I owe *anything*. They are the real Grey Wardens: the First Warden and his lackeys are mere hacks. So yes, I'll do everything Riordan asks. I'll recruit, I'll march, I'll find him and I'll fight beside him."

Thanks to my reviewers: Josie Lange, Tirion I, Nightbrainzz, imperial queen, Nemrut, NPC200, MsBarrows, Raxiselic, AD Lewis, Kyren, Chiara Crawford, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, KnightOfHolyLight, le-maru, Garm88, BandGeekNinja, RB23G, Isala Uthenera, sizuka2, KrystylSky, jnybot, Mike3207, darksky01, Robbie the Phoenix, Adventfather, JackOfBladesX, Ravus, amanda weber, Phygmalion, Zairazruari, mille libri, Mage, Jenna53, dragonmactir, wassersaeufer, Blinded in a bolthole, Guest, Stygian Styx, Lyssa Terald, Psyche Sinclair, Tsu Doh Nimh, and Costin.

Yay! Four thousand reviews!

Yes, the Airbow somewhat resembles Varric's Bianca, which is a repeating spring-bow. I really don't see what the dwarves wouldn't have previously developed such a weapon. Where would they get the materials for their regular bows? Bone is really not a good substance for long bows or short bows.

Crossbows, yes. Dwarves have next to no access to wood. It is a very expensive imported item. However, they have lots of metal and have built many devices that no doubt required machining. I'm sure they can make good gears, pistons, and springs. A spring bow or an air gun, either pumped or with an air cartridge, seem well within their capabilities. I am trying to avoid using the term "firing the weapon" in reference to it, since it does not involve a chemical component like gunpowder.

The inscription on the eluvian is taken from the elven song "Suledin," which is played during the dungeon escape portion of the Leliana's Song DLC. Another reason that I suspect Leliana's mother was an elf. I can't help it, but the developers must have read my mind. I was about to compose something similar, and then discovered it already existed.

Elves among you know that "Arla" means "home," and that "an" means "place, and that "din" is a negative. Ten DA points to those who decipher the elvish incantation.

As to why Morrigan could use the eluvian under Drake's Fall in the Witch Hunt DLC: we know that she lived among the Dalish for a time before stealing the book about the eluvian. She read about the ritual and it would be easy for her to gather a small amount of elven blood, which she used to open the gate. She used the first incantation shown above, which was the one appropriate to that particular eluvian. Where it took her, I cannot say, but she had reason to

believe that Flemeth could not follow her there.

111. Puppetmasters of Fate

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 111: Puppetmasters of Fate

"Make way!" shouted an outrider, clearing the way for a carriage. "Make way! Move those whores and sheep aside!"

The sheep bleated, and the young women—who would not for the world admit to being whores — swore at him horribly, shaking their fists and making rude gestures. Nonetheless, they scattered, preferring not to be trampled by the six-horse team. A few people jumped up on the stone walls of the Imperial Highway, wanting to peer inside the carriage. Those who did saw three bickering girls.

"Your sewing box is inconveniencing me," Eponine told her younger sister. "Pray move it."

"Forgive me, sister, but there is nowhere else *to* put it."

The great carriage was crowded once more, as they trundled fast over the road to Jader. Perhaps it was even more crowded than before, since their maids had acquired some luggage of their own.

"Ariette, put the sewing box on the floor," Celandine said

firmly to a maid, tired of the noise.

"But..." Eglantine flailed for an excuse. "It might be dirtied."

"No one will look at the bottom," declared the eldest sister, "and the floor is perfectly clean."

The Queen had commanded that they come to Jader. It was very exciting, even though they were not escorted by dear Warden Leliana and gallant Bann Alistair. It felt like going home. Celandine remembered Jader the best, but all of them had memories of lost splendor, and happy recollections of their family all together in the fine family rooms of the Palace Emeraude. It would be delightful to be at a proper Court, even if the monarch were not the Empress of Orlais, but the Queen of Ferelden.

Probably much more delightful, in fact. So far, the Queen had not threatened to kill them.

"Perhaps she will give us official status as her Maids of Honor," mused Eglantine. "That would be very agreeable."

"Perhaps she will give us husbands," Eponine suggested. That was far more to her taste. "And we shall be provided with wedding clothes."

"Perhaps she will proclaim our vocation as cloistered Chantry sisters, and send us to a remote convent in Ferelden," Celandine said gloomily. It seemed to her a very logical way for the Fereldan Queen to dispose of them, while maintaining

her reputation for mercy. She hoped that was not what was about to happen, but she had learned that it was best not to hope for much.

"Oh!" Eglantine cried, rather frightened. "She would not, would she? She had been kind to us so far."

Eponine tried to think sensibly, which was not easy, having had little practice, but she finally said, "I think we would be more useful as rewards given to important men in marriage than as sisters in a convent. More useful to *her*. She does not like the Chantry. Or at least she did not like the Divine, Maker rest her soul."

"That is true," Celandine agreed, gazing moodily at the flat Jader Plain, "but remember it is not all the Queen's decision. Loghain Mac Tir has joined her in Jader, and he is now King. He hates all Orlesians. Perhaps a convent is better than what he would wish for us."

They reached Jader in good time, and were taken directly to the Palace. It was useless for the guards to demand that they keep their heads inside the carriage, for there was simply too much to see. Even the dirty poor people were interesting and picturesque in their own way. The princesses were greeted by the steward of Jader, and by Arl Wulffe, who gave them civil but brisk instructions as to their behavior.

"Your Imperial Highesses. Welcome to Jader. You will be shown to your rooms. Make ready as quickly as you can, because then you'll be taken to make your obeisance to the

King and Queen."

"What will they do to us, monseigneur? I pray you, tell us." Eponine pleaded.

"Nothing terrible. Just greet you and show you off, so you might want to smarten yourself up a bit. These officers will show you your rooms. Don't make trouble."

And with these not-so-gallant words, they were led away. They were still princesses, however, and kept their heads high and their shoulders back, because you never knew when a man of good fortune might be looking.

"Smarten ourselves up a bit?" Celandine muttered. "*Createur!* What a figure of speech!"

"Well, there *is* a smudge on your nose," Eponine pointed out. Celandine scrubbed furiously at her face.

"At last we shall meet the Great Loghain," Eglantine murmured. "I would never have expected *that!*"

Loghain had no doubt that Bronwyn could talk Alistair around into nearly anything. Rather than letting his wife talk the boy into something that might have unpleasant ramifications for his entire life, Loghain decided it was better to have it out honestly with Alistair, man-to-man. He called Alistair to his private room for a talk in which they need not fear an eavesdropper or a pretty woman's disappointed expression.

"Bronwyn thinks you fancy that Orlesian girl," Loghain said abruptly.

Alistair blushed crimson, unable to control his reaction. Loghain saw it, and raised a black brow.

"Well?" he demanded. "*Do you fancy her? The youngest one... whatever her name is... I'm told she's pretty.*"

"They're all pretty," Alistair muttered. "Pretty and golden-haired. Very pretty. They seem nice, too. Not like... I mean..."

"Not much like Arlessa Isolde of wretched memory?" Loghain asked. "She was pretty and golden-haired, too... at least when Eamon took her as his bride, in the teeth of Maric's disapproval."

"Princess Eglantine isn't anything like Arlessa Isolde," Alistair said. "none of them are. They're very sweet and gentle. They like embroidery and music. They've been threatened with death for years and locked up and had cruel things said to them all the time. People who've had that done to them either become that way themselves or they become as different from that as possible."

Loghain smiled briefly. "And you know this from experience?"

"Maybe..." Alistair bristled, somewhat defiant. "I can't see any of them bullying a servant boy just because they can. They're nice to their maids. The Arlessa was horrible to everybody except Connor and the Arl, and she screamed at him, too,

sometimes. She was sickening sweet to Connor, though," he muttered.

Then he shrugged, trying to pretend that the past did not hurt anymore. Truth to tell, he didn't know much about Arl Eamon's family after he had been sent away to the Templars. He had seen the Arlessa a few times with her baby boy before he was cast out. She was always cooing at the pink-faced infant, calling him her '*darling boy*,' her '*sweet child*,' her '*little lord*.' It had hurt horribly, like a dagger in his belly, when he had heard those loving words, the like of which had never been spoken to him.

"So you do fancy the girl," Loghain concluded.

Alistair stared at the floor, feeling mulish. "She's *nice*. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her."

"What would you say to marrying her?"

Alistair was confounded. "*Marry* her? Be her *husband*?" He shook his head, rapidly, stepping back a little. "I don't think she'd like that. I don't want to force anyone to be married to me. That's like... I don't what, but it sounds bad. And she's an imperial princess," he pointed out. Saying something that Loghain thought was remarkably sensible, Alistair added, "I don't want to marry someone who'd look down on me."

"You are the son of Maric," Loghain said. "That's good enough for anyone."

"I wish my father had thought so," Alistair whispered. Loghain looked at him, pained, and Alistair shrugged again. "I'll talk to her," he promised. "If she can stand it, I can stand it."

"Come on then," Loghain said, shoving him lightly toward the door. "They're here and they must be received. Look them over, and try to talk to them. If you don't like the youngest, you could have one of the others instead." He paused. "And if you don't like any of them, you won't be forced to take one."

"Eglantine's all right," Alistair shrugged, very red. "As long as she doesn't have a problem with *me*."

They were *very* pretty, Loghain admitted, if you liked that sort of thing: golden-hair, soft skin, big blue eyes, sweet smiles. He brought himself up sharply, remembering a time when he had liked that sort of thing himself. None of the girls looked a great deal like his first wife Celia, but they were certainly of the same type. He studied them, frowning, which seemed to make them nervous. Either they were brilliant actresses, or they really were not the usual sort of sly Orlesian schemers. The youngest looked at Alistair quite a bit and seemed to like him. For that matter, all the girls seemed to like him. Why not? He was a young and handsome Bann of Ferelden, and a good-natured fellow besides. The girls could do far worse. *Would* do worse, if one of them was bartered to that Duke Prosper in exchange for services rendered.

The Orlesian was standing over there, smirking, looking them over like prime stock. Naturally, he was most interested in the

oldest princess, who seemed to Loghain the quietest of the lot: a bit beaten-down, in fact. Not a complete coward, since she met his eyes when she curtsied with a collected blue gaze. He, however, had plenty of experience detecting fear. More than her sisters, she was not nervous about making some stupid mistake about court etiquette: she was afraid that he'd say —how did Bronwyn put it? —"Off with her head!"

Bronwyn had arranged the seating so the girl would be beside Duke Prosper tonight. Might as well let her get used to him. What about the middle one, then? They'd have to give it more thought.

Bronwyn did not forget her resolution to speak to the hahren of the Jader Alienage. She had a great deal to do before setting out for the west, but she would not neglect this. She sent a group of her Wardens, carefully mixing the races, but under the command of Tara, requiring the presence of the hahren and such of his advisers as he wished to bring with him.

The two informers, now rich beyond the dreams of avarice, had told the other elves plenty about their new Queen. The friendly faces of the Wardens—and the presence of elves among them—reassured the elderly hahren a great deal. They did not hurry him. They chatted pleasantly, as other elves gathered round, excited and curious. The Dalish were asked a number of ignorant, foolish questions, but as they had heard these questions before in Denerim and Gwaren, they were not

taken aback, and had answers prepared.

They could tell them that the elven homeland was a fact, and where it was, and that there was a village there, and that other elves were welcome.

"This is our home," the hahren said, overwhelmed by the knowledge. "Some would never want to leave." Unspoken was the fear of forced resettlement. Tara picked up on that at once.

"No one has to go who doesn't want to," she said, more cheerfully than she felt. "It's just an opportunity." Underneath her words, the secret existence of an even grander opportunity lay like a sleeping dragon. Elves were wanted, elves were respected, elves had a *home*.

That, however, she could not reveal. The elves they had met demanded it. There was to be no pollution of the elven lands by shemlens, shortening elven lives and draining their magic. The group that had seen the reality for themselves had agreed that the knowledge must be confined to a small group. Marethari must be told, and once elves had come to the temple in the Brecilian Forest, more knowledge could be shared. They would have to make some decisions soon. Someone must convey the eluvian safely back to the elven temple, where it could be kept secret. Merrill wanted to go herself, but could not escape her obligations with the army. Nor could the Wardens. The eluvian would have to wait for now, protected by a locked door and some elaborate barrier spells.

They could not even tell all the other elves in their party. Fenris disliked magic, and had no use whatever for the traditions of the Dalish or the insular society of the city elves. He had few ties to his own race, in fact. He was a warrior, and that largely summed up his outlook on life. He had more in common with other warriors — whether elven, human, or dwarven — than he did with anyone else. He greatly admired Queen Bronwyn. He got on better with Carver, Aveline, Toliver, Emrys, and Alistair than with anyone else. He got on well with Leliana and Ser Silas, for that matter.

They could not safely tell anyone among the Dalish clans or city elves unless they could persuade them to come to the homeland in the Brecilian Forest first. Many would never leave their homes. Tara was baffled by this mindset. Why in the Maker's name would the elves want to stay in this sty of an Alienage anyway? People made themselves slaves of the familiar. For that matter, there were plenty of mages afraid to leave the Circle. Tara looked about her, face expressionless, at the tall, shabby, crumbling warrens, so very different than the rest of the city. The place stank of old cabbage and stale urine. There was no open sewer, as in Denerim, but refuse was piled everywhere, and drunken elves lounged outside their doors, gawking at the visitors.

They were gawked at outside the Alienage gates, too; as they walked back to the Palace, escorting the nervous hahren and his frightened daughter and son-in-law, as well as two old cronies. People on the streets gathered, speculating on the crimes committed by the "typical shifty elves," and looking

forward to their just punishment. Others commented on the appearance of the female elves, as if they were dumb animals. Tara, at the head of the detail, turned and glared at a pair of such offenders: dirty, stupid brutes with scruffy beards and broken teeth.

"Look at the knife-ears!"

"Prancing around in front like that! Don't that beat all? What do you think she'd charge for a quick one?"

Zevran was already drifting ominously in their direction, but Tara shook her head at him. Her authority must be made clear. Her gaze flicked to Carver: human and male. He was glad to oblige. A mailed fist in a jaw, an elbow in a throat. Two bodies sprawled on the pavement moaning. The onlookers drew back, startled. Carver gave them a challenging stare. Magister barked cheerfully, and then pissed on one of the louts.

"Watch how you speak to a Warden," snarled Carver, stepping back. He made a point of saluting Tara. "Senior Warden."

"Thank you, Warden Carver," Tara said formally. "And now, let's move on." She did so herself, her step light and swaggering.

The hahren was clearly terrified to be brought before the throne. Bronwyn sighed to herself, acknowledged Loghain's

lifted eyebrows — "*What did you expect?*"— and let Loghain offer some general words about protecting their loyal elven subjects. She then quietly ordered Tara to take their visitors to the little parlor, where they could speak informally.

It was a rather one-sided conversation at first. Luckily, Tara was there, and could start things off with a list of old grievances, garnered during her visit to the Alienage: dilatory refuse removal, sanctions against elves opening shops of any kind, the constant demands for payoffs and bribes, the shorted wages, the difficulty of arranging marriages and funerals through the Chantry, the casual brutality of the rest of the populace. Once the floodgates opened, the elves had *plenty* to say.

Her clerk made notes. Bronwyn listened, sickened and weary.

If I were an elf, how I would hate humans.

Some things could be dealt with immediately. A shop would be authorized in the Alienage, selling foodstuffs and general goods. A city the size of Jader could stand the competition of one small merchant. A proper charter, noting that the shopkeeper sold by appointment of the Crown, would offer some protection from rapacious guards. The shopkeeper, in turn, could offer employment to some, and piece work to others: spinners, weavers, tailors, shoemakers. The hahren could give her the name of a likely candidate. Very likely the woman he mentioned was already keeping such a shop, only illegally.

Loghain had already spoken to the Captain of the City Guard about certain changes that must be made throughout the city. He had put some of his own men in as auditors. At least it was made clear that outright bribery was illegal and would be punished if discovered, rather than tacitly tolerated as part of a guard's rightful perquisites. To offset this loss of income, the wages of the city guards had been raised.

Bronwyn made up her mind to a long talk with the Revered Mother of that very magnificent Chantry. Doubtless elves were not welcome there. Their weddings took place in the Alienage and their poor funerals outside the city walls. Still, there was no reason why one day a quarter at the Chantry could not be set aside for elven weddings, and why some priest, among the dozens, could not be tasked with the duty of seeing the elves off decently to the Maker's side.

Bronwyn's next conversations were with more exalted individuals. Loghain presumed that she would handle this more sensitively than he could — and he was right — but she still felt uncomfortable with what she had to do.

For her part, Princess Celandine was uneasy at being summoned for a private audience with the Queen. It was even more distressing that it was held in the room that had been her family's private family parlor, long ago, before her cousin Celene had seized the throne, forced them into flight and hiding, and then had caught them, bringing down her claws like a cat on trembling mice.

The room had changed somewhat, in the years that it had been used by the newly-appointed Marquis of Jader and his family. The portraits were different; her own embroidery no longer hung on the walls; the old bookcase was gone.

A fire crackled cheerfully in the grate, however, and the carved mantelpiece was aching familiar. Celandine had sat in front of it on her own little stool hundreds of times, learning to sew, playing dolls with her little sisters, singing old songs.

C'était l'histoire du Sire de Framboisy,

Avait pris femme, la plus belle du pays,

La prit trop jeune, bientôt s'en repentit.

Partit en guerre, afin qu'elle murît.

Revint de guerre après cinq ans et d'mi...

Tears dazzled in her eyes, breaking up the firelight into hot little jewels. She made a curtsy to the Queen, and stood, awaiting her fate. Bronwyn briefly explained their plans, gave the name of the prospective husband, and some other pertinent details.

"You don't have to agree to this," Bronwyn continued, glancing at the still, white face. "If the idea is repulsive to you, your sister, the Princess Eponine, is next in seniority. However, if you do refuse, your situation as eldest and thus heiress-presumptive would call her rights to the throne into question

were you to marry and have heirs. You would have to renounce your blood rights, and take vows as a priest."

Celandine knew that Eponine would agree to this plan in an instant. Eponine would be ecstatic, in fact. Eponine was a man-crazy fool.

But was she, Celandine, ready to give up her one chance of marriage, of having children—her greatest desire, of having a reasonably normal life in the sphere into which she had been born? Was it not her duty to accept this — she must admit — very generous and noble offer? Could she not do more good as Empress of even a small, reduced Orlais than as a priest of the chantry?

It took only a moment to make up her mind. She curtseyed again.

"I thank Your Majesty for your wise arrangements on my behalf. I would be most willing to wed my noble cousin Duke Prosper at the conclusion of the war, or whenever you deem the proper time."

"Very well. The betrothal will be announced the night before the army marches. I would prefer that you keep this information to yourself until then, though I suppose you will wish to share it with your sisters. That is all."

The girl was dismissed, and said nothing to her sisters as she passed them by. Eponine was ushered in next. She was nervous, but not particularly fearful. Celandine had not left in

tears, after all. She vaguely recognized the room as part of the family apartments, and looked about with some nostalgia.

"I sent for you to discuss some possible future plans for you," Bronwyn began. "The army will be leaving in a day or two. You and your sisters will remain, and it is extremely important that your conduct be blameless and circumspect. Any shadow cast on your reputations could destroy your future marital prospects."

Eponine, her spirits lifting, made a most beautiful curtsey. "I shall in all ways obey you, Your Majesty."

"It is possible," said Bronwyn, "that any future marriage might take you far away from the land of your birth. Would you find that unbearable?"

"Not at all, Majesty, if it is your will." Eponine did not much care to whom she was married, as long as she was married. She left, and the youngest sister entered the room. She had discovered that she did not really remember the Emerald Palace at all, other than by Celandine's description of it, and so studied the old family parlor with curiosity. Perhaps she might have recognized something, had she been placed in the nursery. That, of course, was no longer appropriate.

She was pale and submissive when told of the plan to match her with the new Arl of Jader. When the identity of said Arl was revealed, she was quite transformed: her face pink with joy and relief.

"I should be most happy to wed the noble Arl Alistair!" she assured Bronwyn. "Most happy. It is exactly what I would wish!"

"Sit," Bronwyn commanded. When the girl had arranged her skirts, Bronwyn gave her a serious look. "Are you aware that Alistair is the natural son of King Maric?"

Eglantine curtsayed, unable to hide her pride in knowing something important. "I am, Majesty."

"As a natural son," Bronwyn continued, "he of course has no right to the throne of Ferelden. However, it is only proper that his birth be recognized and honored, as Maric's sole surviving child. The night before the army marches, Alistair's elevation and your betrothal will be announced. Until then, discuss it only with your sisters. That does not mean that I wish you to include your maids in the discussion."

She had little confidence in the princesses' discretion, and was resigned to leaks. She was quite surprised when Princess Eglantine impulsively knelt and kissed her hand before departing.

As soon as she was gone, Bronwyn rolled her eyes.

"Silly girl..."

Leliana came upstairs to pay a call on the princesses, and found them in the midst of a furious, tearful squabble.

Handkerchiefs were thrown, hands were wrung, tea was spilled. No one was happy, except for Eglantine, who was happy but terribly guilty about it. Leliana stepped back, not wishing to find herself in the midst of such a scene, but she listened from behind the draperies all the same, quite fascinated.

"But what about *me*?" sobbed Eponine. "What about *me*? Am I to be forgotten? Am I to be a prisoner when you go away with your husbands? It is not fair to announce your betrothals while I sit there, shamed and humiliated, like a thing of no value!"

"No one says you are not of value!" Celandine lifted her hands up to the Maker. "You may well make a better match than either of us. My betrothed is old enough to be my father, and has a son younger than me! Why are you angry at us? I advise you to make your complaints to the Queen!"

"I should!" Eponine quavered. "I should do just that! It is so improper for the younger sister to be wed before her elder. I understand why you should be married to Duke Prosper. I understand why you should be declared Empress. You are the eldest—the birthright is yours. But why should Eglantine be married to Bann Alistair? It is not fair!"

"But sister," Eglantine rallied. "You did not think Bann Alistair was high enough in rank to marry! You dismissed him from your consideration. I always liked him."

Eponine wailed, "I like him, too, now that he will rule Jader!"

"Be that as is may," Celandine said. "Eglantine flirted with the gentleman, and you did not. Therefore, he might well have thought you despised him. The Queen is his friend, and very likely asked his opinion. He is to be only an Arl after all. Eglantine will be an Arlessa, which is a horrid word. 'Arlessa Eglantine!' I do not think that sounds well."

"/ like it!" Eglantine declared.

"And she will owe homage to the Fereldan Court, and be the vassal of those lower than she by birth. I do not wish you to be dissatisfied with your lot, Eglantine. If the young man pleases you and you are happy with your choice, then it is you who must live with it, but if Val Royeaux had not fallen, you know that no one would have thought a mere Arl of Ferelden good enough for an Imperial Princess, handsome and gallant as he is."

"He is the son of King Maric!" Eglantine declared proudly. "He is of royal blood!"

That gave her two sisters pause.

"Ah," Celandine considered. "That is true, of course. A son of the left hand, as it were. It is puzzling that he was not publicly acknowledged by the king his father, but such things happen. It is an important consideration. I must say that it makes me feel much better about the marriage."

Eponine sulked. "It makes me feel *worse!*"

Leliana decided she had listened long enough. She made some noise at the door, and came forth and made her curtsy as if she had heard nothing.

"Your Imperial Highnesses..."

"Warden Leliana!" cried Eponine, looking for sympathy. "Something terrible has happened!"

"Hush, sister!" Celandine blushed. "We are not supposed to speak of it before time."

"But Warden Leliana must know! She is in the Queen's confidence!"

Leliana dimpled charmingly. She had known nothing until a few moments before, but she had surmised much.

"Is this about your betrothals?"

"Not about *mine!*" Eponine pouted. "But Celandine will be Empress. That is all very proper. She should have been Empress before, but for Cousin Celene and her horrible Shadows. She is to be married to Duke Prosper."

"My felicitations, Highness," Leliana said to Celandine. "The people of Orlais need leaders to care for them."

Celandine could not conceive of herself as anything resembling a leader, but she had always heard that Duke Prosper was brave and cunning. Perhaps that would do. "You are very kind, Warden Leliana."

"And you, Highness," Leliana said to Eglantine, "will be Arlessa of Jader. It will make the change much easier for the people. And Alistair is a very good person."

Eglantine flushed rosily. "I am fortunate, Warden."

Eponine was still sulking. Leliana smiled. "And you, Highness! I am sure that there is some deep plot involving you! Some important foreign alliance to be made, perhaps?"

That had the desired effect. The sulk melted away, replaced by genuine curiosity.

"The Queen *did* say that my marriage might take me far from my homeland."

"Who could it be, I wonder?" Leliana teased. "There is the Crown Prince of Antiva..."

The squabble became an excited discussion of the current Thedosian dynasties. The princesses, who were sadly behind the times, implored Leliana for the names of every eligible royal known to her.

"Well, the Prince of Starkhaven also has a son of the proper age..."

"Maker!" Aveline groaned. "Once these spears are stuck in something, they're really *stuck!*"

Bronwyn grinned sympathetically. "They do what I asked them

to do. I suppose we mustn't grumble."

They used their swords at first, and then their daggers, to carve the pronged spear heads out of the ox carcasses.

It was gruesome and bloody, but the Wardens needed practice with the formidable dragon-hunting spears forged by Master Wade. They were of two types: one was a standard spear, man-height, light but strong, barbed, and wickedly sharp; the other was shorter—the spring-loaded model with leather straps. If you jammed it into your target properly and flicked the catch, heavy prongs unsheathed, driving straight down and to the sides, making the weapon impossible to remove without digging huge holes in a carcass. The leather harness at the end could be fastened around a warrior's waist and the length adjusted, making one far less likely to fall off the back of an angry, fighting dragon. It took quite a bit of work to dislodge these spears, just as now; and then further work to clean them thoroughly and carefully press the sharp prongs back into the locking position.

These were the weapons that Bronwyn had ordered from Wade, now some months ago. Jowan had overseen the first prototypes, and they were exactly what Bronwyn had wanted. Killing the dragon Flemeth had taught Bronwyn vital lessons about the hazards inherent in attacking such a creature. Dragon hide was tough and smooth: when bloody it was slick and treacherous. If a dragon took off into the air, the chances of staying on its back were not good: not without an edge like this spear-anchor. It would be a rough ride, but at least they would not be dashed to the ground. And swords and daggers

were puny weapons against a dragon. Dwarven axes were better, but forced the warrior to move in very close. The Nevarrans had always used spears, and the long ones forged by Master Wade could both penetrate deeply and slash as well, using the long, barbed head.

Of course, it was unlikely they would have the opportunity to test these weapons before meeting the Archdemon. There was no time to hunt down any wild dragons in the Frostbacks. The closest they could come would be Leopold, Duke Prosper's wyvern, and their new ally would not be pleased if the Wardens, their shape-shifting studies complete, took it into their heads to show up one day to pile on and kill the Orlesian's pet. However, one never knew. Everyone would have some of these spears close at hand. If the Archdemon visited the army, they would be ready.

Using Leopold's harness as a template, a saddlemaker had been commissioned to make copies that would allow two or three people to ride a wyvern into battle, and to provide saddlebags to carry weapons and bombs. Armor, also, was being forged to protect a wyvern's head, back and breast. It was all very rushed, and not the perfect designs one would wish, but they had little time before they must march.

The three Jader Wardens were doing their part, some more readily than others. They had invited the rest of the Wardens into their spacious compound, where there was plenty of space for weapons-practice and even for fairly discreet shape-shifting. Clovis was senior enough that he could access the supplies for the Joining potion, and Niall and Tara had

brewed the base for more of the improved potion.

They had sixteen new recruits who would leave with them. Their Joining could not take place until they had faced darkspawn, survived, and retrieved a vial of darkspawn blood. Some surface dwarves, some Legionnaires, a pair of Dalish elves, two bold elves of Jader, and the rest a miscellany of army veterans seeking adventure along with former subjects of the Orlesian Empire, seeking advancement and the notice of the Queen.

The new Warden recruits were housed in the Warden compound. Astrid, as a Senior Warden, had been put in command of the compound, with her own dwarven Wardens, and Aveline, Toliver, Nuala, Steren, and Oghren to provide a leavening of experience. Petra and Niall were moved over there to accustom the new recruits to the presence of magic and mages. Adaia and Siofranni were moved over there, too, since there was space for their bomb-making, and thus less chance of blowing off the roof of the Palace. The girls were not pleased to leave their cozy room, and quite openly took most of the furnishings with them to the Compound, setting up a new establishment as comfortable as the old.

Bronwyn liked the compound. It was an excellent place for arms practice, out of range of curious eyes, and extremely well designed and equipped. Clovis had shown her around the place. The servants were here, of course, and suitably deferential. She could sense that they did not like the idea of her pawing through Riordan's private room, but there was of course no reason for her to do so, anyway.

It was quite an old structure, purpose-built from Warden funds, and not simply some unused Palace apartments, which was what the Denerim Warden compound amounted to. It was perfectly independent, and had a far, far better library. A pity they would not be spending more time here. She ran her fingers over the titles, wishing for more time to look at them.

And it had its own stables, too. Some of the recruits had their own mounts, which were sheltered and cared for here by the two grooms left behind. Loghain had put out a call for horses, letting it be known that the Crown of Ferelden would pay well for sound horseflesh. Some of the horses, Bronwyn hoped, would be sent east for breeding. Ferelden had been short of horses since the Occupation.

The Antivan Wardens made good time in their fleet of five ships. The fleet put in at Ostwick, and then at Highever for fresh water. At Highever, four passengers— who were *not* Wardens — left the ship. In the bustling chaos of rebuilding Highever, they asked some questions of the locals. They then headed west on the North Road toward West Hill, where they were told Arl Nathaniel Howe was leading his men in support of the King. Quiet and professional, they did nothing to attract attention to themselves.

It was no great distance to the fortress of West Hill. If it was being improved and refurbished, surely it was in need of more servants. Two of the party had succeeded previously with that ploy, and it was unlikely that anyone in young Howe's retinue would recognize them.

The mages rode out to Galehaut again, and studied Leopold at greater length. Jowan was instructed to leave Lily behind, as the dog might find the day bewildering and frightening. This time Velanna joined them. The Dalish elf was quite interested in this form of magic, but had not had time previously to study with Morrigan. She learned quickly, however; not failing to claim that shape-shifting had been an invention of the ancient elves, stolen from them by the thieving shemlen.

Once Anders mastered the change, however, they had to take the lessons elsewhere, for Leopold was growing more and more puzzled and excited by the smell of other wyverns, and more and more determined to break free and meet them. Morrigan, to be sure, had been bold enough to change in the stable and make the wyvern's acquaintance in her new form. Perhaps Leopold had never really seen one of his own kind before. The meeting could have gone very badly, but did not. Leopold was too curious to challenge her, and in fact, as long as this beautiful female did not attempt to steal his meat, he was quite content to have a visitor.

"I am not so sure how he will react to another male, however," Morrigan told her students. They took themselves downwind of the wyvern, and out of sight.

It was not simply a matter of making themselves take the form of a powerful creature. They needed to learn how to move in this form, to fight, to leap, to evade pursuit. Tara, so magically talented otherwise, was the last to succeed in making the change.

"Are you distracted?" Morrigan asked, frowning. "I do not understand why you find this difficult."

"I wasn't around animals until I left the Circle!" Tara protested. "They smell funny!"

Velanna huffed scornfully, which made Tara want to punch her. Even more annoying, Velanna managed to shape-shift immediately after Anders, shifted back and forth to show off, and was now already considering out loud which other animals would be useful.

"Birds are excellent for scouting, and foxes are clever and elusive..."

"Something that's not prey, obviously," muttered Jowan. He thought he might be able to take shape as a mabari, once he mastered the trick of it completely. A mabari would be good. Few animals would attack one, and no human would kill them on sight. No indeed: anyone who saw a mabari was more likely to want to keep it. And no one would be surprised by a *smart* mabari. It would be a very good animal if one wanted to spy. His next attempt to shape-shift was a bizarre combination of dog and wyvern.

"Concentrate!" Morrigan scolded him. "What a pack of children!"

Petra was dutifully concentrating: sprouting odd quills and claws, then abruptly manifesting as a wyvern. Since she was standing too close to Anders and Niall, she knocked them

down, and stumbled, sprawling. Her clumsily swishing tail thudded against a tree.

"Everyone back!" shouted Morrigan. She shifted herself and set about training Petra into how to move in her new form, showing her how to manage four feet, two wings, and a tail. Watching her was even more useful to the mages than her earlier exercises.

Petra was instructed to run, to walk, to leap, to flex her wings, to glide. She was occupied for some time doing that. Velanna could not resist showing how much better she was at it, and kept getting in Petra's way, until a ferocious, snarling Morrigan-wyvern faced her down and made her back off.

They broke off for a hearty meal. The food improved their performance. Jowan and Niall finally succeeded, though they were awkward in their new forms. Morrigan made everyone practice shifting and shifting back, again and again.

Tara watched them until something finally clicked into place in her brain. Apparently, the magic of shape-shifting had nothing to do with relative size. The resulting wyvern was very impressive. Velanna's bristling quills drooped submissively.

Hector Pentaghost and the Wardens of Nevarra first made contact with the darkspawn on the twelfth of Drakonis. There had been no resistance from the remnant of the Orlesian army at the border. Other than a handful guards, there were no Orlesian troops to be found. The Wardens had been

welcomed in, and had passed by the swelling refugee camp outside of Val Chevin. The worthy Revered Mother had approached them for food as soon as they were in sight. Pentaghast saw no reason to offend her; not when more Wardens and more supplies were coming in their wake. He was not overly generous, however, and required news before distributing the goods.

The Templar in command, an attractive young woman, approached him for news in her turn.

"People need to know where they can go to be safe," she said. "We don't know what to tell them. They can't stay here forever."

"I know less than you about the darkspawn attacks. I can tell you that more Wardens are coming from the north. It could be that taking the road northeast to Cumberland or northwest toward Montfort might be the thing to do."

Val Chevin had not fallen, but its southern fields were exposed to darkspawn raids. There was a great deal of hysteria and rumor, and the people they questioned were not as level-headed as the priest at the camp. Nonetheless, they were beginning to get a good picture of what was happening. No Grey Wardens had been seen or heard from moving north from Val Royeaux. That was grim tidings in itself,

In a heavy mist, they left Val Chevin. Not three hours later they came to a fertile field where it appeared that men were sowing grain, bent to their task. As they drew nearer, the

realized that the stooped figures were not putting anything into the ground. They were looting and defiling corpses. And there was an odd rasping sensation.

"Darkspawn!" shouted a scout.

In a flash, the darkspawn charged them, gobbling and mouthing. Pentaghost's horse reared, screaming in protest. He leaped down and tossed the reins to a youngster.

"Horses to the rear! They are of no use here! Archers! Give them a volley!"

Every Nevarran Grey Warden had slain his darkspawn in order to qualify for the Joining. There was a great difference, however, between a handful of darkspawn, in the shadows of the Deep Roads, and a full company of them, loping toward them under the sun. It felt horribly... wrong. A storm of arrows hissed down, taking darkspawn with them. A few: too few. In a moment, the Grey Wardens were engaged, and fighting for their lives.

The twelfth of Drakonis was the last date that former Orlesian subjects could do homage in order to keep their lands. Well-dressed people trickled into Jader, those so indecisive or slothful as to wait for the very last moment. They had kept Loghain and Bronwyn waiting, and so they were made to wait in their turn. Some had sworn to defy the Fereldan Dog Lords to their last breath, but the looming threat of dispossession, poverty, the darkspawn menace, the lack of any credible

allies, and the danger to family still in Jader made them amenable at last.

One anxious, middle-aged woman, Madame de Danancy told them about a neighbor, an aged gentlewoman too old and bed-ridden to come to Court. Her sons were dead, one daughter was in the Chantry in Lydes, and her only grandchild was in the Orlesian army. The woman had been uneasy leaving the old lady alone herself, and asked if some exception might be made for her. Loghain detailed an officer and his company to check out the story. If true, mercy might be shown the old woman. Bronwyn flicked him a glance. Loghain sighed. Madame de Danancy paid her homage, presented quite a nice gift of fine wool, received her writ, and was sent her way, accompanied by the soldiers.

Once the ceremony was complete, it was time to sit down with the map of Jader and the territories they now claimed within their borders, marking down those manors and demesnes which had not submitted. They would be investigated, and unless there was some extraordinary reason, the lands would be forfeited to the Crown, to be granted to someone more loyal.

The very next day, Cauthrien set out to pay some visits, commanding a company of Maric's Shield. The royal holdings increased significantly.

They would hold a last court, a last feast, before the army moved west. There was time to visit the brothels, for those

whose tastes ran in that direction. There was time for a solemn service in the Chantry, for others. Bronwyn and Loghain attended, of course, since it would be foolish to scandalize the devout among their new subjects. The conversation with the Revered Mother had not gone too badly. Borders shifted, and the Chantry occasionally had to accept that their allegiance would henceforth be owed elsewhere.

It was not mentioned between either woman that both the Queen of Ferelden and Grand Cleric had been declared anathema by edict of Divine Beatrix V, and been burnt in effigy in front of the Grand Cathedral. The news had of course come to the Revered Mother's ears, However, given the fact that the Maker's displeasure had fallen rather heavily on Val Royeaux just subsequent to that event, and given that no one knew if the Divine were alive or dead, it was prudent to accept that the wind was now blowing from the east.

The service was quite lovely, and the royal pew was luxuriously cushioned. The choir was disciplined and professional, and the incense of the highest quality. The princesses attended the ceremony with them, and very much enjoyed the outing.

When they returned to the palace, Bronwyn showed Loghain her sketches of a new Ferelden cathedral.

"What's this?" he grunted, squinting at the elevations.
"Denerim already has a cathedral."

"Denerim has a pokey old shed that's not fit for a village of

goatherds," Bronwyn declared. "I know that we've ten places to put every penny, but if we want foreigners to take us seriously, we have to spend some money making Denerim look better. See— I've put it on the south side of town—"

"I see, I see," he waved at her irritably.

Bronwyn was not to be dismissed like a servant. "No, you *don't* see. I want you to look at this. It's very important. If foreigners couldn't sneer at us, they wouldn't have been quite so quick to leave us to our fate. Everything we're hearing indicates that the world is rushing to Orlais because Val Royeaux has been destroyed. Do you think they would have done as much for Denerim? I say we use some of the windfall from our seizure of this territory to make us appear to the world the way we know ourselves to be in our hearts. Now look at this!"

He glared at her, but sat at the table and took a closer look at the drawings. "Marble staircases, I suppose."

"Why not? For the Palace, too. And marble floors."

He muffled a groan. Bronwyn was not done.

"Maybe some greenstone pillars... but we can loot some of those from the quarries here."

He brightened at that idea. "It's not looting if we own it."

There was quite a bit of cheering at that last feast. Quite a bit of drinking, too. Toasts were made to the King and Queen; to the dwarves, to the elves, to the Wardens; to all the members of the Alliance, who would set forth on the morrow. The Orlesians were quite thrilled at the announcement of the betrothal of the Imperial Princess Celandine to Duke Prosper de Montfort. It was also made clear by Loghain that Princess Celandine's rights as heir to the throne of Orlais would be honored and supported by her Fereldan allies.

"Long life to the Empress-elect!" shouted one drunken nobleman. The cry was taken up. *"Vive l'Impératrice Celandine!"*

These words were not well understood by others in the hall.

Corbus scowled. *"I didn't vote for her,"* he muttered.

Wulffe, sitting next to him, leaned over to explain. "It means she's the rightful empress, but hasn't been crowned yet and hasn't started ruling. Personally, I think that we should have gone ahead and had some sort of coronation for her, but Bronwyn thought it would be better to wait so it can be performed in Orlais, and make the Orlesians pay for it. The girl will make a good figurehead for the Orlesians marching with us, and an even better one as we move through Orlais. The Duke's coming with us, of course. We can say we're traveling through Orlais by the authority of Empress Celandine. She'll stay here, of course, well guarded with her sisters. The smiths have forged a royal seal for her. Pretty thing. Loghain's taking that along, of course. The Orlesians

can make up some banners with a golden celandine flower on them if they like. "

"I sort of see," Corbus admitted. "That way it doesn't look like we're conquering the whole country, but helping them out."

"Right you are."

"Good thing that we've got ourselves a credible puppet," Loghain grunted to Bronwyn, his voice low as his cold eyes swept the crowd. "Someone else might try to steal a march on us. There's no one with a better claim than the girl, unless it's that Florestan fellow, but he's likely darkspawn meat by now. You never know, though. We'll have to keep our ears open."

The next declaration, that Alistair FitzMaric was the new Arl of Jader, was received politely by the Jaderians, who did not really know him except as a handsome and modest young man. The Fereldans were pleased and the Wardens overjoyed. The Orlesian response warmed a great deal when his betrothal to Princess Eglantine was announced, and the information circulated quietly of his royal — if irregular — birth. The new subjects seemed to think that they had done well.

More importantly, the alliance with the Orlesian volunteers was strengthened by these evidences of chivalry and respect for the ancient line of Kordilius Drakon. Most of the credit went to Bronwyn, which was not quite fair, but Loghain was perfectly fine with everyone believing her to be the

tenderhearted counter to his own Fereldan barbarism. Then, too, it was noticed that the young couple seemed pleased. The attention of the unattached nobles shifted entirely to Eponine, who rather enjoyed it.

In the bustle in between dances, Morrigan accosted Bronwyn, wanting a word.

Her voice low and her yellow eyes brilliant, Morrigan whispered, "Have you taken proper precautions, now that your Hero has returned to you?"

"I don't quite know—" Bronwyn paused. She did know. "You mean Herb of Grace—"

"Properly speaking, I mean silphium tea. Have you been partaking of it every evening? The coming march will not be any easier than our ventures in the Deep Roads. You cannot risk yourself needlessly."

"It is kind of you to think of me," Bronwyn said warmly. "Very kind. No, I confess I have nothing of the sort about me."

"Do not accuse me of any such muddleheadedness. 'Tis simply practical. I shall bring a cup to your room. Drink it at once. If Loghain insists on tasting it first, 'twill do him no harm." She shrugged, with a smirk. "No good either. And it tastes quite terrible."

True to her word, once the ball was over and the exhausted merrymakers gone, Morrigan, dressed in an elaborately

embroidered dressing gown, appeared at the door of the Queen's apartments. Sneering at the admiring guards, she rapped smartly, and a wide-eyed maid opened the door.

"I have brought the Queen her tea," she declared, much as a champion might present the head of a sworn foe to her liege lady.

Loghain, hearing her voice, opened an inner door. He frowned at the sight of her, that being his default reaction to all sorts of unexpected events, but Morrigan was quite unimpressed, and merely raised her brows at him.

"It's all right," Bronwyn said, emerging from the bedchamber, clad only in a fragile nightdress. She took the painted cup from Morrigan's hands, and sniffed gingerly at the acrid steam.

"You should drink it *at once*," Morrigan demanded.

"Maker! Too hot!" Bronwyn laughed. "Good night, Morrigan. I do appreciate it. I'll gulp it down as quickly as I can. I daresay it won't be so awful that way."

Morrigan stalked away, eyes gleaming. her point gained. Bronwyn would have that tea every night. It was better for her, anyway: safer. The miscarriage was a distressing event that ought not to be repeated. Above all, there must not be more than one pregnant woman present when the Archdemon was slain.

Bronwyn brought the cup back to the bedchamber and set it on the bedside table. The maids were evicted from the room and the door shut firmly after them.

"What's *that*?" asked Loghain, grimacing at the smell emanating from the dainty cup, painted with butterflies.

"Morrigan is trying to take care of me," Bronwyn told him, with a laugh. "It's very kind of her. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but of course I'm not going to drink a contraceptive tea. It's quite improper for a Queen of Ferelden."

The dogs came over to sniff, too. Amber's nose twitched. Scout whuffed with distaste. It smelled like poison. It *was* poison. Human females drank it sometimes, though. Humans ate and drank all sorts of repulsive things.

Loghain thought a moment, wondering if it wasn't a good idea after all. The upcoming campaign promised to be rough. He opened his mouth, and then thought better of it. This was a woman's choice, and Bronwyn must make it for herself.

She opened the window, and carefully poured the contents down the sleek and shining greenstone wall.

"So much for that," she said. "And now, why don't we do some celebrating ourselves? Who knows when we'll next enjoy such a comfortable bed?"

Her dreams were streaked with crimson. Muffled shouts and

screams surrounded her, punctuated by the whistle of arrows and the clash of swords. It was a night without stars, for the smoke of battle hid the Maker's heaven from the earth.

Darkspawn surrounded her, buffeted against her: noisome, reeking, carrying torches. Above her was a stone wall, bristling with weapons. A tall man whose blood sang of "Warden," shouted orders. A great cauldron tipped forward, and out of poured something dark, viscous, and vile. The boiling oil splashed the darkspawn in the lead, whose torches touched the oil off into an inferno. The darkspawn became torches themselves, burning, burning. Oil streamed back in blazing rivulets. Darkspawn slipped and fell into the oil. They thrashed, screeching, as their skin blistered and roasted. More arrows whistled past.

A burst of hot violet flame erupted out of the smoke. The Archdemon roared just over her head, flying low, loosing another blast of flame as it neared the wall. Some stones tumbled, but the wall was strong, and the Archdemon soared up, up, its belly exposed to the defenders there. Strange missiles hurtled toward the Archdemon, each with a pair of weights tumbling apart. They were nets; and one tangled onto the Archdemon outstretched left wing, fouling it.

The beast bellowed, faltering, fluttering. Its horned head snaked back and its teeth tore at the offending net, ripping it away. It lost altitude. Slowed as it was, the archers at the top of the wall loosed a storm of fire arrows, dotting the

Archdemon with spurts of flame. More nets were launched, and one of them struck the creature, the heavy weights slamming hard into its skull. More arrows volleyed. A lucky shot struck just under the right eyesocket, and the arrow lodged there. The Archdemon shrieked again, dazed, and then fought free. It wheeled away and plunged back into the darkness, leaving its minions to burn.

"Bronwyn!"

She moaned, and pushed away the coverlet, feeling smothered. Loghain was beside her, and his arms felt much better. Faint dark green light filtered through the bed curtains.

"I'm awake."

"A bad dream?"

"A good one, actually. I think someone took the Archdemon down a notch. Wardens were fighting it and chased it off. A city or a fortress somewhere. I didn't recognize anyone."

He lay back, and pulled her close, her head resting on his shoulder.

"If the Archdemon were killed, would you know it?"

"Absolutely."

He thought about that for awhile. The Nevarrans almost certainly had reached the Orlesian border. The Wardens

Bronwyn had seen were either Orlesian or Nevarran. Good luck to them in killing the beast. For a moment, he almost proposed leaving them to do it, but knew Bronwyn would never agree. She had no confidence in her fellow Wardens at all.

And then, there was the sheer adventure of it. Tomorrow they would set forth, into the land of the ancient enemy, this time making them dance to a Fereldan tune. Being a puppetmaster was a great deal more satisfying than being a puppet himself.

Thanks to my reviewers: Nemrut, imperial queen, Death Knight's Crowbar, sizuka2, Girl-chama, Chiara Crawford, Kyren, Blinded in a bolthole, Promenius, Juliafied, Massgamer45, Psyche Sinclair, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, le-maru, KnightOfHolyLight, JackOfBladesX, Tirion I, The Flying Hobbo, DjinniGenie, Mike3207, Robbie the Phoenix, Raxiselic, So you want to be an Author, darksky01, Lyssa Terald, D-Ro2593, Isala Uthenera, Jenna53, Ravus, Kalom, Phygmalion, MsBarrows, AD Lewis, Konous the grey, RB23G, Costin, dragonmactire, Guest, Angurvddel, herebedragons66, and jnybot.

Re your questions about the eluvian and where it leads: Not all elves were killed or enslaved at the fall of Arlathan. Some escaped by ship, leaving the eluvian and some clues. Since Thedas can't cover even a quarter of the planet, there must be other continents. The elves went to one of those, to the east of the Amaranthine Ocean, and have developed an

advanced culture, resisting any threat to their coastline. Humans are regarded as humans regard darkspawn: as polluting threats to life as the elves know it. Perhaps a few storm-tossed human sailors or Qunari explorers made landfall there, but they didn't live long. That doesn't mean that it's a perfect solution: the Thedosian elves might have real difficulty adapting to life there on a permanent basis.

The greater celandine is a member of the poppy family and has four yellow petals. The lesser celandine is a member of the buttercup family. I think it's much prettier. That's right, Princess Buttercup.

Here is the complete text of the rhyme Celandine remembered:

*C'était l'histoire du Sire de Framboisy,
Avait pris femme, la plus belle du pays,
La prit trop jeune, bientôt s'en repentit.
Partit en guerre, afin qu'elle murît.
Revint de guerre après cinq ans et d'mi.
N'trouva personne de la cave au chenil.
App'la la belle trois jours et quatre nuits.
Un grand silence, hélas, lui répondit.*

Le pauvre Sire courut dans tout Paris.

Trouva la dame, dans un bal à Clichy,

Corbleu, princesse, que faites-vous ici ?

Voyez, je danse, avecque mes amis

Dans son carosse la r'mène à Framboisy

Il l'empoisonne avec du vert-de-gris.

Et sur sa fosse il sema du persil.

De cette histoire, la morale, la voici :

À jeune femme il faut jeune mari.

In English:

Here is the tale of the Lord of Framboisy,

Who had taken as wife the most beautiful girl in the country.

Took her too young, quickly regretted it

Went to war so that she could mature.

Returned from war after five and a half years,

Found nobody from cellar to kennel.

Called the fair lady for three days and four nights,

A great silence, alas, answered him.

*The poor Lord ran all over Paris,
Found the lady at a ball in Clichy.*

*Egad, princess, what are you doing here?
See, I'm dancing, with my friends,*

*In his coach, brings her back to Framboisy.
He poisons her with verdigris.*

*And on her tomb he sowed parsley,
Here is the moral to this tale:*

A young woman needs a young husband.

112. V for Vendetta

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 112: V for Vendetta

Originally, Nathaniel had thought it likely that the fortress of West Hill would need to withstand a major Orlesian assault. As it had fallen out, the worst they faced were a handful of half-drowned chevaliers, the few survivors of the destroyed Orlesian fleet. Wreckage washed up all along the southern shore of the Waking Sea from Jader to Kilda. One poor fellow had actually clung to a capsized boat for days. The news of the further disaster in Val Royeaux broke his heart, and he died soon after.

That still left the rest. They were entirely dependent on his charity, since they had lost everything: armor, weapons, horses, boots, coin. Those who had burdened themselves with their possessions had been killed by them. The common folk along the coast were out in force, looting the bloated corpses, sifting through trunks, catching the odd horse. Nathaniel did not begrudge the poor their plunder: these were exactly the same people who would have been despoiled and slaughtered had the Orlesians successfully made landfall.

As to the survivors, he saw little point in holding them for

ransom, and was inclined to send them to Jader and let Bronwyn sort them out. New had reached him of the taking of the city, and it had been celebrated at some length. It was also known that Celene's cousins and heirs had fallen into Fereldan hands.

"That is interesting, my darling," remarked Callista, when he told her the news. "It would be a very sensible thing to give one of the princesses in marriage to my cousin Tylus. One of the younger ones, of course. Perhaps that would be a way for a peaceful settlement of the war between Orlais and Nevarra, once this terrible Blight is over."

Nathaniel thought she was making good sense, even though he was hardly objective about his new bride. They had only been married two months, and they had been the happiest two months of his life. That said, marriages were, as he knew well, a traditional way of creating alliances and promoting good will. A marriage might indeed be a way of ending the hostilities between Orlais and Nevarra—at least for a generation or two.

If that was what was in Ferelden's best interests. Was it? The last thing Loghain would want would be Orlais and Nevarra united against Ferelden. It was true, though, that Orlais would likely be savaged by this latest phase of the Blight. And Nevarra had absolutely no reason to attack Ferelden, or to want Orlais to possess Ferelden. It really might not be a bad idea.

"Your cousin isn't betrothed elsewhere?"

"Not anymore. There was a betrothal with Meghan Vael of Starkhaven, but she and her family were murdered. Starkhaven is being ruled by a usurper, Goran Vael."

Nathaniel remembered hearing about the murder of the Vaels. A coup planned by some disaffected nobles and executed by a gang of assassins. The rightful heir, Prince Sebastian, was in exile in Kirkwall. A man always needed to be alert to the unexpected. Father had told him that, but in the end assassins got him, too.

Father should have kept his eyes open.

"I'll write to the King and Queen, my love. They may not know that Prince Tylus is available."

Callista smiled, and returned to her book. She liked to sit with him in his rather ramshackle office here in this rather ramshackle fortress while he completed the ridiculous amounts of necessary paperwork. It was disappointing to be so far from the action. He would include a plea to be permitted to come west with them in the letter as well.

It seemed unlikely that all of Loghain's improvements along the coast would be needed. No one could predict the future, so he did not consider the coin spent to be wasted. Certainly all the improvements he was overseeing here in West Hill were long overdue.

There was a knock at the door.

"Supper, my lord."

"Enter."

A pair of menservants entered, bearing covered dishes from the kitchens. The cooks here were not bad. Nathaniel and Callista had a pleasant custom of having their late supper together and alone, away from the mob of soldiers and engineers. The meal was arranged, and the menservants stood behind the two chairs, with punctilious ceremony.

"Supper is served, my lord and lady." said the shorter one.

The big one said, "The cook made dumplings, just like you wanted, my lady."

"Oh! How nice!" Callista laughed. "I shall bring some of Nevarra to Ferelden, if only in the form of dumplings!"

"Fine with me," Nathaniel agreed absently, still intent on his letter. He gestured the servants away. "We'll summon you when we want the dishes removed."

The servants glanced at each other, faintly annoyed.

"You are sure you wouldn't like us to serve the soup, my lord?"

"I can serve it," Callista said. She looked up from her book. "I'll wait until you're done, my lord."

"As you wish, my lady," Nathaniel said. "I need to finish this

letter while the ideas are clear in my mind."

She gave him a sweet smile, guessing his thoughts. He called her "my lady" in front of the servants. Perhaps it was silly and old-fashioned, but it seemed undignified and uncouth to reveal so much of his feelings as to call her by the names he used when alone with her. Nor was it respectful to call her by her first name except when alone or among equals. She knew what he meant when he said "my lady," and that was what mattered.

His parchment fluttered, caught in a draught. The shutters had not been closed properly, and a sharp breeze blew threw the crack. Annoying. The shutters should be closed after sunset, when the wind turned and it grew cool. He was too busy with his letter to get up.

Then he noticed that the servants had not yet left the room.

"You are dismissed."

"Yes, my lord." said the big one. "Perhaps I might close the shutters for you first."

"Do it, and then go."

The shorter fellow was smiling at Callista, standing a bit too close to her. Nathaniel frowned, and the tip of his quill broke. Even more annoyed, he took up his penknife to mend it.

The tall fellow was fumbling with the shutters. Did he not know

what he was doing? Nathaniel took another look, and then realized he had never seen either of those servants before.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes, my lord," the short fellow said, beaming. "Just taken on. And a splendid opportunity, if I may be so bold as to say it."

Nathaniel later could not have said just what about the men made him uneasy. He had had too many close calls in the Free Marches not to trust his instincts.

"Since you're here," he said to the short servant. "Go ahead and start serving."

The fellow bowed obsequiously, smirked, and set out ladling out the rich, creamy shieldfin soup.

"My lady," Nathaniel said casually to Callista. "If you would have a look at this letter, I'd be obliged." He wanted her behind the desk, whatever happened.

"Of course, my da—lord."

She rose lithely, and was beside him in a moment, discreetly pressing against him. He touched her hand, and whispered "Stay here," on a thread of breath.

Without warning, the big fellow slammed into him from the side, wrapping a huge arm around Nathaniel's throat. Callista fell to the floor with a cry, and the short man tossed aside the ladle, drawing a dagger. He vaulted over the dining table,

scattering goblets and sweetmeats over the stone floor.

His attacker was strong, but obviously considered Nathaniel to be some soft-headed noble, unable to protect himself. Nathaniel shifted his grip on the penknife, struck backwards, and drove the sharp little blade directly into the side of the assassin's neck. Then he jerked it sideways.

The big fellow staggered back, howling. Nathaniel elbowed him away, grabbed up the heavy inkwell with his left hand and used it to parry the shorter man's dagger. He dropped the pen knife, and his belt knife was in his hand in a split-second. Callista was staying down, bless her. The big man was down, too, bright arterial blood bubbling through this hand.

The shutters rattled, and another man burst through the window and dropped to the floor. Nathaniel swore, and kicked his chair in the man's path, tripping him up. He grabbed his short attacker's wrist, yanked him close and drove his blade into his belly. A shocked squeal answered him. Then he turned to engaged the third man, who unfortunately had a sword.

"Callista! Run!" he shouted. He moved in close to spoil the swordsman's advantage, and kneed him hard. The man grunted, but was unfortunately wearing armor there. The assassin kicked high, jamming his boot into Nathaniel's chest and shoving hard. He lifted his sword for a cut —

And was drenched with hot shieldfin soup. Callista trembled for a moment. and then hit him with the tureen, too.

At Nathaniel's orders, the guards quickly and quietly rounded up all the newer servants. During their search, they found a young woman lurking behind the stables, holding the reins of four horses.

"She was the one in charge of their escape, my lord," a captain told Nathaniel. "A new dairymaid. Nice as you please, currying favor with the housekeeper. Quick with a knife, though. Cut up a few of the boys before they brought her down. Cunning lot. They didn't all come together. Two and two. The girl and the fellow with the sword claimed to be brother and sister from Kirkwall. The two dead men arrived later, with a recommendation from Bann Reginalda. Probably forged, but who would know to check?"

Nathaniel hoped the swordsman would live. He had ingested some of the spilled soup, and was puking up his guts now. The Healers assigned to West Hill assured Nathaniel that the man would live, but only *wished* he were dead. The soup had been laced with a very nasty poison indeed. From the description of what it would have done, Nathaniel guessed that it was what was used on his brother Thomas.

The dead men and the prisoners had been searched thoroughly, and were quite obviously Crows from the discreet tattoos and certain other aspects of their gear. Nathaniel had spent eight years in the Free Marches, after all, and knew quite a bit about the Crows. Since the Crows had killed his father, brother, and sister, he had learned ever more.

The message left on the scene by his family's murderers had

left no doubt of the perpetrators or their patron.

"Blood will have blood. Nemo me impune lacessit."

Nathaniel listened to the captain's report, and nodded. There was no reason to waste time.

"Let's have a talk with our feathered friends."

He resented every moment that he must spend on this filth. He should be with Callista, calming and comforting her, and telling how splendid she'd been. Instead, he would have to drag out every bit of useful information from foreign assassins. He had not realized that the Crows operated in Ferelden. Perhaps they had not, until his father had made a point of angering a powerful Antivan.

The girl was young, but she knew what to expect. She had a face that would have been pretty, had it not been old and hard before its time. She also had ridged scars on her arms from knife fights. In the corner of the cell, the swordsman lay in a heap, pale and sweaty, but no longer vomiting.

"Talk," Nathaniel ordered, without preamble.

The girl spat on the straw of the cell floor. A guard cuffed her hard.

"Suit yourself," Nathaniel said. "Your lives are already forfeit. You, girl, are a horse thief, and that's a hanging offense. You," he said to the swordsman, "tried to assassinate me.

Since you were conspiring together— and don't try to pretend you weren't — you are both guilty of petty treason, as I am in command of this fortress. The penalty for that is drawing and quartering. That could mean a very long and unpleasant last day for you. I suggest you talk now, and convince me that you only deserve a quick, clean hanging."

"What do you want to know?" the man shrugged. "You must know we are Crows. If you kill us, others will come, and then others after them, until the contract is fulfilled."

"Who took out this contract on me?"

The girl sneered at him. The man said, with honest surprise, "It is nothing new. It is the old contract. Signora Livia Fortuny discovered that it had not been fulfilled, as you were alive. The contract is on the Howe family. Signora Fortuny declared vendetta against you all. The Crows honor their obligations."

"By killing my *wife*? She's only a Howe by marriage!"

The girl rolled her eyes. The man gave Nathaniel a sickly smile. "If I may point it out to you, Arl Howe, Signorina Oriana Fortuny was only a *Cousland* by marriage. It did not save her from your father."

After some consideration, Nathaniel ordered the prisoners to be put in separate cells, where communication was impossible. Unpleasant as the prospect was, he would need to gather every bit of information he could from these assassins. Then he would need to do some hard bargaining

with people who had little reason to show him mercy.

Two days, two excruciating interrogations, and two executions later, Nathaniel had a plan. He hired some reliable agents, who put him touch with more. Their job was to go to Antiva and rout out every bit of information available about House Fortuny. Nathaniel knew quite a bit, but it needed to be kept up-to-date. It was also necessary to expose this very nasty threat. Callista wrote to her aunt and cousins in Nevarra. Nathaniel wrote to Loghain and to Anora. And then he wrote another letter, to be sent by diplomatic channels to Antiva.

Nathaniel Howe, Arl of Amaranthine, greets Livia Fortuny, Matriarch of House Fortuny.

Honored Signora:

I am unable to accept the present which you in your generosity wished to bestow upon me. Those charged with the delivery have been rewarded as I deemed appropriate. Do not attempt this again.

My father, Rendon Howe, was guilty of many things, but he was alone in his guilt. What he did, he paid for with his life. My innocent brother and sister paid as well. Three of mine for two of yours. Let their blood suffice. I have made my peace with the Couslands, whose grievance is far greater than yours, but who have risen above it.

I will let pass the recent attempt on my life, but I am less

inclined to forgive the insult to my lady wife, Arlessa Callista Pentaghast Howe, the niece of Queen Melantha of Nevarra. You will agree, I think, that however much you may despise the nobility of Ferelden, an attack on the royal house of Van Markham and the noble and formidable Pentaghasts could have consequences unpleasant to you and yours. A letter even now is on its way to Nevarra, expressing dismay at the conduct of those who interfere with soldiers who are engaged in the campaign against the Blight.

Let me make myself yet more clear: I am no stranger to the northern reaches of Thedas. I have friends and servants there yet. Any further attempts to harm the Howes will be met by a disproportionate response against the Fortunys. You have children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins. I know their names and where they live. If by some chance you were to succeed in your designs against me, I have made arrangements for the complete annihilation of your House.

Withdraw your contract with the Crows.

Think well on this letter, Honored Signora. It would be best if it were the last communication of any kind between us.

Respectfully,

Nathaniel Howe

Travel was certainly a dirty business. The distance between the Circle and Denerim seemed infinite and unbearable. Enchanter Finn had spent the last few days stowed like a bag of bad oats in a creaking, jolting wagon. He slept, mostly, since he discovered that trying to read in a moving wagon disturbed his digestion.

"Out!" rumbled Ser Clancy, one of his Templar guards. "We're here!"

"Here?" Finn roused himself cautiously, rubbing the agonizing crick in his neck. And his robes were *rumped*. "Of course we're *'here,'*" he muttered. "Where else could we be? The question is where *'here'* is."

He clambered awkwardly out of the wagon, and found himself in front of Denerim Cathedral.

"Oh."

It was raining. Not a heavy rain, to be sure, but enough to draw up one's hood and think of hot soup. Ser Clancy pointed his gauntleted hand. "That's where you're supposed to be." Another Templar reached into the wagon and retrieved Finn's lumpy duffel bag. He shoved it into Finn's arms, knocking the breath out of him.

"Move along, now."

Ser Clancy was still pointing, waiting for him to obey. It was never wise to keep Templars waiting. Too many muscles.

"Er, nice traveling with you, too."

He walked toward the house pointed to by the Templar and smiled back at them a little weakly. He avoided a puddle, unhappy at the prospect of mud on his boots. The Templars kept staring at him, obviously expecting him to make a mad dash for freedom. Finn held his head high, and entered the house indicated. He wiped his boots diligently on the little mat provided.

"And who are you?" asked a Chantry sister seated at the table inside

"Florian Phineas Horatio Aldebrant, Esquire. At your service."

Sister Ursula stared at the young man, baffled. Then she said slowly, "Oh! You're that *mage*..."

"I am indeed. Could I come in? It's raining, you see, and my boots are getting unpleasantly damp. Oh, look, there's a stain on my robe. Might I have a cup of tea? I'm a bit chilled."

"Yes, of course. Wait here, while I tell Bethany you've arrived." She rose and went through the inner doorway. Finn peered through and saw blue light: a mage at work healing. This must be the right place. The Ferelden Free Clinic.

It was dreadfully small compared to Kinloch Hold, and it seemed very untidy to Finn. The fine carpet was thick with muddy footprints. There were too many people crowded the waiting room: dirty people in dirty clothes who smelled...

well... *dirty*. There was a small child scampering about, its nose running. It made a dash at Finn and attempted put unclean hands upon his pristine robes.

"Don't do that," Finn warned, twitching his robes away.

"Mamma!" the infant terror roared.

The mother, peacefully resting on the bench, eyes closed, murmured, "Don't mind him, ser. He'll settle down soon. Come here, sweeting. Mamma will give you a confit."

The sweeting grinned up at Finn, like some horrible feral monster. Finn stepped away and hastened to the inner door.

"Here now!" said a gangling figure in Templar armor. "Wait your turn! Is your name on the list?"

"I am not a... er.... a patient," Finn explained. "I'm here from the Circle to assist. As an assistant. And the sister said I could have a cup of tea."

"Ser Otto!" the lad hallooed. "It's that mage fellow!"

Ser Otto emerged from the kitchen, and looked quizzically at the dapper young mage. Finn thought him very imposing. For a moment the young mage's self-assurance faltered. He had never had any trouble with Templars, mainly because he had always done exactly as he was told and spent as much time as possible in the library. This Templar was not scowling, but he was very, very tall. Finn tried an ingratiating smile.

"Ah! Good Ser! My traveling papers," Finn said, presenting them like a shield. "I have orders to assist at the Fereldan Free Clinic located in Threadneedle Street. This is said clinic, is it not?"

"It is," Otto agreed, looking past him with some concern at the patient on an examining table. "Mistress Bethany Hawke here is in charge."

He gestured at the pretty young woman who had glowed blue earlier. Certainly a mage, but not dressed like any Circle mage Finn had ever seen. She had on a rather nice wool gown, but over it— of all things— was an apron. Or at least Finn thought it might be. He had never actually seen such an article of clothing, but had read of them in books. He had heard that the Tranquil in the Circle's kitchens wore them, but that was not a place Finn had ever visited.

Bethany smiled slightly, brushing her hair out of her eyes with the back of her arm. "Good day to you."

She was busy with a nasty burn. The big fellow on the examining table was bearing it stoically. A very nasty, angry-looking burn indeed, probably from forging, Finn supposed. Hot metal was a perilous thing. Sometimes the Tranquil were hurt, crafting metal. The girl's hands bloomed blue again. The burn faded to a dull pink, and the man breathed deeply.

"That's better," said Bethany.

"Maker bless you, Mistress Bethany," the fellow said, rubbing

his arm, looking at the healing burn in wonder. "Maker's Breath! Don't hurt a bit now. Me mum'll bring by some of her dried-apple pies. We haven't coin to pay."

"That's quite all right," the girl assured the man. "Apple pie is my favorite. We'll all enjoy it so much."

Ser Otto helped the man up from the examining table. Still rubbing his arm, utterly amazed, the man, dirty face and all, smiled shyly at the girl and touched his forelock in quite a respectful way. If he were not so very dirty, Finn would have suspected him of blushing. He walked out through the reception room, and took a cloak from a nail, wrapping up against the rain.

The lay sister came back, bearing a thick earthenware mug for Finn. "And here's your cup of tea. We always have a pot in the kitchen."

"Really? That's... very nice." It appeared he himself might be visiting a kitchen in the near future.

"Thank you, Sister Ursula," Bethany said to the sister, who gave her quite a nice smile, and resumed her post in the waiting room.

Finn looked about him, not sure what to do. Otto patted his shoulder. "Here, lad. Sit down over there by the fire and drink your tea. Put your bag down... over there."

"I'll just finish up here," said Bethany, "and then we'll talk."

The infant horror in the waiting room set up another wail. Bethany sighed.

"—after I find out what wrong— *now*— with little Bartholomew Gitts."

Finn had a crawling feeling that he should be offering to lend a hand, but drank his tea instead. He was no good with children. And children were no good with him.

Mistress Bethany Hawke was a mage, but people were being very polite to her. She seemed to know her business, too. Finn watched, breathing in the aroma of excellent Highever Honeygrass tea, while she dealt summarily with the snotty-nosed young Master Gitts. Not a mere cold. The beginnings of a fairly serious throat infection. Yes, that was right. The little monster was given a blast of healing energy and a dose of elfroot syrup. Had it not been for the infection that Finn could sense himself, he would have suspected the brat of shamming in order to scam a spoonful of the sugary tonic. He had done it himself, in his feckless childhood.

The slatternly mother probably liked the stuff, too.

"If you could just see your way clear to give us a bottle," the woman whined, "I wouldn't have to drag him all the way here when he's poorly."

"I'm sorry, Mistress Gitts," Bethany replied gently. "But I am not permitted to hand out large quantities of medicaments. They could be lost or stolen. The spoonful I gave

Bartholomew should be quite enough. All he needs now is a good night's sleep."

"I'm not TIRED!" bellowed Master Bartholomew.

"Yes," Ser Otto told him, lifting him bodily from the examining table and setting him on his feet. "You are. Good bye. Maker keep you."

Such a very polite Templar, Finn noted. Very commanding too. Finn almost felt ready for a good night's sleep himself. The grumbling mother gave the child the demanded confit and was on her way. Without a proper thank you, Finn noted.

Bethany washed her hands at the nearby basin, and then dried them carefully. Finn applauded her precautions, beginning to understand the reason for the apron. She put out a very pretty — and clean — hand to him.

"Bethany Hawke. This is Ser Otto, and Ser Kevan is at the door. Sister Ursula gave you your tea. Ser Irminic comes in now and then. You're Enchanter Florian, I presume?"

He bowed, properly. "Florian Phineas Horatio Aldebrant, Esquire. At your service." The 'esquire' was perhaps presumptuous in a mage, but his father really was a knight of Ferelden, with his own manor in the Dragon's Peak bannorn. The son of a knight had the right to the honor of "esquire." If he had not manifested as mage in his thirteenth year, he might well have been addressed as "Ser Florian" himself by now.

They were still looking at him in the kindest way. He wilted. "But everyone calls me Finn."

"Well, Finn, what do you know how to do?"

"I'm a qualified Healer," he told her, quite proud of himself. "I'm also the Circle's best linguist—fluent in Arcanum, Tevene, Antivan, and Orlesian— and their foremost expert on ancient Tevinter history."

There were still three people left in the waiting room. The eldest of them scoffed, clearly overhearing Finn.

"Ancient History! Aye, there's coin in that!"

The rest of the waiting room cackled appreciatively.

Finn cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "I suppose people consider me a bookworm. The First Enchanter said I needed to see more of the world than the library. I must say I'm looking forward to the opportunity to work here in Denerim. My parents don't live far away. Ser Otto: might I be allowed to write to them? Would they be permitted to visit? Possibly?"

Bethany caught Otto's eye, amused.

"I think it very likely," said Ser Otto. "But first, why don't you see if you can help Bethany take care of the last of the patients?"

"Oh! Yes... of course."

Even when the clinic closed for the evening, there was a bell that rang inside the house for emergencies. Sister Ursula put up the "closed" sign, and arranged the table near the fire in the large clinic room for a meal. Within a short time, a servant arrived in a carriage, of all things, bringing in covered dishes and baskets containing a delicious-smelling supper.

Meanwhile, Ser Kevan, hardly more than a boy, showed Finn around the little house, and had him put his bag in the very nice bedchamber.

"This is yours," the boy told him. "Unless somebody needs it when they're having a baby or something. But mostly it's yours. Sister Ursula sleeps in the cathedral dormitory. One or two of us Templars always stays here watching the place. We have a little room off the kitchen."

Finn looked about him with growing satisfaction. This was nice. This was very nice indeed. It was nicer than his quarters at the Circle. It was nicer than his old room at home. It had a door. He would have privacy. He could arrange his books on the table at the foot of the bed. He had a few of his very own, gifts from his parents. Finn knew he was far luckier than most of his fellow mages. His parents still cared about him, and they were permitted to correspond, which they did, very frequently.

Wait... were there only *two* bedchambers...?

"But where does Mistress Bethany sleep?" he asked, rather

puzzled. Perhaps they made her sleep in the dormitory at the Cathedral, though that seemed an odd situation for a mage.

"She sleeps at home, of course," said Kevan, regarding him as he would a half-wit, but willing enough to gossip. "She lives with her mother, Arlessa Leandra, doesn't she?"

"But she has a Templar guard."

"Of course she does," Kevan said, his patience visible. "A crazy man killed her stepfather right on the doorstep of the Cathedral only a month ago! Somebody has to look after her. And we keep order here so the patients don't run rough-shod all over the place. She comes here in that carriage every morning, with an escort. They bring supper in that carriage every night, and take her home. We get breakfast and dinner from the Cathedral refectory, and supper from Bryland House. Come on, I'm starving."

Finn was very good at keeping his ears open. Outright questioning of Templars had always been an unwise move in the Circle. Better to simply listen and learn. These Templars were certainly the pleasantest he had met, but he had no desire to be irritating on his first day.

"I'm so glad you're here, Finn," Bethany said over the excellent steak and mushroom pie. "I don't have to worry about people trying to find me at my mother's at night. If I have to go out to deliver a baby, someone will be here to see people. That's going to be a great help. I have other commitments, too. Ser Otto and I plan to go to the Alienage

now and then to see if the elves need help. And there are a few others... friends and family of a sort."

Sister Ursula asked, "How is Arlessa Habren?"

Bethany smiled thinly. "As well as I can make her. Her husband is very solicitous." Seeing Finn's confusion, she explained. "The Arlessa of Denerim. She's expecting a child."

Sister Ursula added, "She is Mistress Bethany's step-sister!"

Apparently the good sister was very impressed by Bethany Hawke's lofty connections. Daughter of the Arlessa of South Reach; stepsister of the Arlessa of Denerim. Finn was fairly impressed, too. The connections might well explain why he had never seen her at the Circle.

They talked over the cases they had treated today, and Bethany filled Finn in about local ailments and the various women in the neighborhood who might give birth any day. Finn felt a little queasy at the prospect. He had healed illnesses and wounds, but there had never been any call at the Circle to do anything so disturbingly messy as deliver a child. Finn could not remember ever seeing a baby up close.

"I don't actually have a lot of experience with midwifery. Perhaps I should observe for now."

Bethany was obviously much too nice to laugh at him, but Finn suspected she wanted to.

Anora was thrilled to be back in Denerim. Even better was to be back in Denerim with Fergus. After considerable thought, they decided to live in Highever House, and travel back and forth to the Palace or Fort Drakon as needed for their work. Spring was stirring in the capital, and the footman-gardener was getting the rooftop garden in order. It was one of Anora's favorite places in the world. Sitting amongst the roses, she could see most of Denerim, while most of Denerim could not see that she was watching.

"Kane is worthless," Fergus told her bluntly, when they at last had the luxury of privacy in their bedchamber. "Not raised as a nobleman, and no natural talent for it. No interest in learning, either. The officers have been doing their duty, by and large, but it's time for a thorough inspection. The new works along the harbor haven't made the progress I expected."

Anora knew that if Fergus was disappointed, Father would be livid. "It's a good thing we're back. That Tevinter slaver ship could arrive at any time." She paused, uneasy. "If it hasn't already."

"I checked. Properly. They haven't come yet. Our own people are on alert in Highever, and I trust them. Hawke has Amaranthine sewn up. *There's* a fellow who's not about to loosen his grip on what's his! Too bad the Arl of Denerim isn't more like him."

Anora was not as charmed by Bann Adam as her husband, but agreed that he would have been a far more competent Arl than any of the Kendalls that Fate had thrown Fereldan's way.

"I heard something interesting," Anora said, sipping her mulled wine. "There is a free clinic in Ferelden now. Bethany Hawke talked the Grand Cleric into supporting her. Some Templars are on the premises: Ser Otto and Alfstanna's brother Irminric. Arl Bryland left Bethany a house in the Market district, quite near the Cathedral. She's healing people there."

Fergus paused, in the act of getting into bed.

"I thought she'd still be in South Reach."

"No, the ladies returned to Denerim not long ago. It's quite a wonderful idea, isn't it? So incredibly generous of Bethany to use her inheritance for the public good. I think I shall visit, but I'll give her a bit of warning first, naturally."

"Arlessa Leandra will be calling on you. You'll want to hear what she thinks of it."

Between them they heard the gossip of the salons and the barracks; of the state offices and the market. Some of it was encouraging. Some of it was ominous. Much of it was self-contradictory.

—The Arlessa of Denerim had gone mad, and her long-suffering husband had locked her up in her room. Others said that the Arl was a fiend, who locked up his innocent wife so he could have orgies at his estate.

—The Arl of Denerim cared only for dressing up in fine armor

and cutting a great figure. His duties were left to his steward, his seneschal, the captain of the city guard, and the harbormaster. They were mostly good men, but needed someone in authority to mediate their internecine disputes. Or, if you preferred, the Arl was in league with the Orlesians, and was siphoning off Fereldan gold.

—The Arlessa of South Reach had been driven from the arling by the small-minded prejudices of the locals and the intransigence of functionaries. She was in poor spirits. Her niece was on the point of riding off to the army alone. Her daughter had opened a free clinic and was as popular as ever. Others said that her daughter was a sinister blood mage, who had deceived the Grand Cleric herself. Her stepson Lord Lothar spent most of his time with the Arl of Denerim's sisters in their nursery. Alternatively, her stepson was locked in the dungeons, and she was planning to kill him and take South Reach for herself.

—A group of minor banns were discontent at the absence of the King and Queen. Who cared about foreign wars? It was the Crown's business to rule Ferelden. If the Queen wanted to play the heroine and fight darkspawn, then Loghain should let her wander off and come back home himself. Unless he was trying to get her with child, in which case, he should come home as soon as that was accomplished.

—The weather was holding well, and with luck, Ferelden should have another good harvest. The fishing fleet had also done well. Rare timber from the Brecilian Forest was selling at the highest price in memory, and Antiva wanted all the

Fereldan wool on the market. Naysayers opined that it was all too good to last. The crash was coming: famine, pestilence, and war.

—The conspirators being Arl Bryland's murder had been caught, and were found to be Crows, acting on the orders of his daughter Lady Habren. Or the conspirators had been found to be Orlesian agents. Or they were Templars. Or they were blood mages.

—The elves were getting above themselves, and needed a good set-down. There were too many of them on the roads, giving honest folk a fright. The Queen was too soft on them, she favored elves too much: giving them land, giving them privileges, building them fancy lodgings. The Queen should look after her *real* subjects. There were few who disputed this, other than the elves themselves.

—Quite a few people thought that the Queen was an avatar of Andraste herself, and thus her war against the Blight was an Exalted March.

Anora did not particularly care for that last rumor, though it had its uses.

The very next night, she and Fergus supped with the Arlessa of South Reach. Bethany, who usually took her dinner and supper at the clinic, was present for the meal. She was in rather good spirits.

Better spirits than the Arlessa, Lothar, and Charade. While

the widowed Arlessa's feelings were quite understandable, they had affected the young boy and her niece, who had little to take their minds off their situation.

"It's a good thing you have friends and playmates here in Denerim," Fergus said to Lothar.

"Yes, my lord," Lothar replied, dutiful and not entirely convinced. "It's better than South Reach. But they're *girls*, my lord. They play with *dolls*. Even Jewel is awfully lady-like for a mabari. They play house and I always have to be the husband."

"Being a husband is no bad thing," Fergus told him, quite straight-faced. Anora covered her mouth with her hand, and kicked him under the table.

Lothar scowled. "Being a husband *every day* is. I know Corbus can't leave the army, but I wish Bevin would come to Denerim. We could play war for a change."

"Everybody's playing war. I wish *I* could play house," Charade muttered.

They spoke briefly of the rest of the family. Arlessa Habren was still quite ill, and Bethany was calling on her. She had not come out in public since her father's death. Anora caught Bethany's eye, letting her know that they would be discussing this in private.

Fergus asked Lothar, "Doesn't she come to play with you

sometimes?"

"Never," Lothar said flatly. "She hates Faline and Jancey as much as she hates me."

"Lothar!" Leandra scolded him gently. "You mustn't say such things! Of course your sister doesn't hate you. Or Arl Kane's sisters, either."

"Yes, my lady," Lothar agreed listlessly, with a sad old man's smile on his young face.

After the boy was sent to bed, Anora gave them all a serious look.

"Let us treat each other as friends and allies," she said.

"What's wrong with Habren?"

"Mad as a dancing dwarf," Charade declared.

"I'm not sure she's mad... not exactly..." Bethany said. "I come to the estate regularly to see how she's doing. She's three months gone with child, and it's made her ill, as it often does at that stage. She's done some wild and violent things: attacked the governess, tried to throw Faline's puppy out the window—"

Fergus raised his brows.

"—She attacked Kane himself. Attacked me. Attacked Mother. She rages and screams and threatens. Mind you, I don't know if she does it because she's mad, or because

Kane has locked her up. She's been spoiled and unreasonable from the time I first met her. She's used to getting her way. Without her father, there's no one to take her part. It could be that her reason is affected by her pregnancy. It's also possible that she did something in the heat of anger, and Kane locked her up for it, which has exacerbated her condition. It's hard to tell. She's completely incapable of being polite to me, so I'm not the most objective observer."

Fergus nodded, rather concerned. Habren was his cousin, after all. "Is Kane abusing her? Beating her?"

"I've seen no evidence of it. Now and then I've seen a few bruises, but she's so wild and furious when I'm there that it's possible that they might be self-inflicted, or caused when Kane defends himself. He told me he's hiring a nurse to stay with her. That would be for the best."

Anora had had enough of Habren, whom she had always disliked. "If you see evidence of abuse, let us know, of course. Now let us move on to more interesting topics. Do tell us about your clinic."

The supper, altogether, was a mine of information. Even at the end, when the guests were seen to the door, Charade managed to whisper a request to Anora to speak to her alone the next day.

"I want to ride out and join the army, Your Grace," Charade told Anora, as they sat together in the rooftop garden of

Highever House. "More specifically, I want to join Rothgar. He's going to be out west until Maker knows when. Adam gave me the money for my dowry. I'm going to go out there, hunt my man down, drag him to the nearest priest, and marry him. And I'm going to stay by his side and fight with him." She laughed, embarrassed. "At his side. Not *with* him. Not *against* him. Well, not much, I hope."

"Your aunt will miss you," Anora said gently.

"My aunt never knew of my existence until about six months ago. Bethany is here in town. If my aunt wants to see more of her, she can go to the clinic a few times a week and help her. They have breakfast together every day. If Bethany married a nobleman and lived in his house, my aunt wouldn't complain. And she has Lothar to care for. She does a good job seeing after him. She's made friends, too. I don't see the point of delaying my life indefinitely so she has someone to sit with her and receive guests. So I've got a plan."

Anora inclined her head, ready to listen.

"You send regular couriers to the army. I'm a good horsewoman, and I know how to take care of myself. Send me with the next rider. I even have the money for my own horses. Rothgar must be somewhere near West Hill. I'll stop there and hear the news."

"And then the hunting down, dragging to the priest, and marrying, I take it," said Anora.

"Exactly."

"I sent dispatches to the King two days ago. If nothing extraordinary happens, I will send the next batch four days from now. Can you be ready by then?"

"Absolutely."

"Don't take five hundred sovereigns with you," Anora advised. "It would be very heavy. Lord Rothgar will simply have to trust that you're good for it."

Charade had not yet left for the west when the harbormaster sent urgent word that a Tevinter ship was sailing into Denerim harbor

Fergus was prepared for this, though he had not expected the Tevinters to come quite so soon. A number of scenarios had been considered, and there was always the possibility that it was a bona fide diplomatic mission. It would not do to simply attack the ship on docking. The ship was headed for the South Docks, which made sense. Whether it was a diplomatic mission, which would go to the Palace, or a slaver gang, which would head toward their underground compound, the South Docks would be the place to seek harbor.

There were two entrances to the slaver compound: one in the tenement in Runagate Court, and one behind The Condemned Man, a dockyards tavern. The latter was a short walk to the south end of the docks. The former was reached by

Amaranthine Street, a (comparatively) wide and twisting lane that flowed into King's Way. A number of ways had been scouted to reach either in advance of the suspects. Fergus and some of his men were well-positioned to observe, in a warehouse on the corner of Amaranthine Street and South Docks Lane.

If these were indeed the slavers, they would have no reason to think that their usual protections were not in place: the befuddled harbormaster, the incurious officials. They would be on the lookout for their sister ship, which was in harbor, and "crewed" by a number of city guardsmen and Templars in disguise. There was also one of the army mages aboard. He was well-versed in the Litany of Adralla, a sovereign protection against Blood Magic.

He had borrowed the new mage from the clinic today, young Enchanter Florian, as he was something of an expert on Tevinter. With him were Ser Otto and Ser Irminric. Young Kevan had been left behind, since someone had to remain at the clinic. The Templars were eager for the adventure, unsurprisingly.

"You're with me," Fergus told the mage and Templars. "We're going to observe, at first. If they go to the slave ship or to the underground compound, we'll move in on them immediately. "I'll want you to advise me on Tevinter lore. If these are diplomats, they'll need to be greeted properly."

"Er... I've never *been* to Tevinter, you understand," said Finn, somewhat embarrassed. "I just know the language and

history."

"That's more than I know," Fergus said, with a snort of laughter. "We don't want to insult them if they're not criminals."

"Of course not. If they are, of course..."

"Then we show no mercy. And you, I'm told, know the Litany of Adralla in case of Blood Magic."

"Of course. Bethany was so disappointed not to come here today."

Otto gave Irminric a look. Personally, he thought Bethany a more powerful and quick-witted mage than Finn, and actually better suited to this kind of challenge, but noblemen were sometimes blinded by chivalry. Odd, in the brother of the formidable Girl Warden.

Sure enough, Fergus shook his head. "I wouldn't put Bethany is this kind of danger. She's a sweet young girl, and her brother's a good friend of mine."

Finn also privately thought that Bethany was likely a far more formidable mage than Teyrn Fergus realized, but perhaps it was for the best. Bethany was a good public face for mages in Denerim: pretty, gentle, and well-mannered. None of them could picture Bethany in a fight, though Finn suspected that she was quite powerful enough to defend herself.

A slight stir in the crowd. There was Kane, in his golden parade armor, with his dog, his bodyguards, and the captain of the Denerim City Guard. Fergus cursed silently. He had been notified of the event, as Denerim was, after all, his responsibility. He was *supposed* to stay out of the way. Instead, he had decided to come and watch the excitement, no doubt wanting to make sure that if they confiscated this splendid ship, he got his rightful share. Not only was the armor attracting attention, but all Denerim knew the man's handsome face.

"Who's that, my lord?" whispered Finn.

"The new Arl of Denerim," Fergus growled, knowing that it would be improper to express his opinion publicly. Kane was a mistake and a misfortune in his opinion. Yes, he had the bloodright, but nothing else to recommend him but his pretty looks. At least Anora and Bronwyn saw through the façade.

Kane was chatting with the harbormaster, who could hardly tell him to be quiet. Did the man not understand that this was a delicate operation? On the other hand, Fergus could not ignore Kane's rights, without raising some perfectly justified questions and angry commentary from his fellow nobles.

The ship was drawing close to the docks now, moving in gracefully. *Vindicta* was its name. A fine, large vessel, with a big stern deck cabin that must be home to an important man. In fact, were it a legitimate mission, the leader would likely stay on board, and simply send a messenger to the Palace, with an official notice of his presence.

It took time. Fergus watched, almost unblinking, noting the signals that everyone was in position. Kane had at last gone inside the harbormaster's office, and was out of sight. There was a welcoming party at the underground compound too, with lookouts posted outside to alert them. A good man headed that: Sergeant Kylon of the City Guard. In fact, the man had ten times the sense of his captain, though none of his superior's influential friends and patrons.

The ship was docking. After a long wait, the passengers disembarked down a gangplank. A tall man with an oiled beard in luxurious robes was surrounded by henchman and servants. Crates of luggage were unloaded. A party was told off, and moved in the direction of the other Tevinter ship, some distance away. The harbormaster, warned in advance, did not approach them, nor did they attempt to report to his office. They were asking no questions at all. That did not bode well.

Finn was sure that the leader must be a magister, but all important Tevinters were, of course. They had to be tolerated in diplomatic missions, because they were the elite of their nation.

All right. The party going to the ship would be arrested at the site. It might be innocent enough: naturally the crew of any Tevinter ship would be curious about fellow countrymen. Fergus hoped the rest of the Tevinters moved on quickly enough not to observe the arrests, and also that they would be done quietly enough not to alarm their fellows or cause a riot at the docks. Another group was watching the ship. How

the crew were treated depended on what the magister did next.

The magister did not turn south toward the tavern, but instead moved toward Amaranthine Street. They were walking confidently, moving along, their numbers and bodyguards formidable enough to cause others to avoid them. The guards shadowed them, trailing through the alleys, crouched on the roofs. A signal, and Fergus stepped out of his own observation post with his party, and they followed the Tevinters up Amaranthine Street. Finn made a face, not liking the situation, but seeing no way out of it.

And then the magister turned left into Runagate Court.

"That's that," Fergus muttered.

Unknown to the Tevinters, they were surrounded, and this was the signal to attack. Fergus and his men moved in from the back and sides.

Kylon and his men stepped out of the tenement, surprising the the Tevinters. Kylon walked forward, holding up his badge of office.

"I am Sergeant Daniel Kylon of the Denerim City Guard. I arrest you in the name of the Crown for the crime of slaving. Lay down your weapons, and you will be spared!"

The magister actually laughed, a light, urbane sound.

"My dear fellow, you must be joking..." His staff was lifted, and instantly, Ser Otto, next to Fergus, called down a Holy Smite. Two of the Tevinters collapsed, and the magister staggered. With furious curses, the battle was joined.

Finn had never seen Blood Magic before. He had heard the whispers and the dirty sniggers—the same sort one heard when the lads were talking about girls. He had heard the warnings and read of the consequences. Seeing it was some entirely different. Arms were slashed, and blood misted in magical whirlwinds. Finn gabbled out the Litany, stammering and gasping, genuinely frightened. It was all too clear what would have happened without the Litany, without the Templars, without a well-prepared armed company and archers on the roofs. The Tevinters' bodyguards went down very fast, but the mages, led by the magister himself, put up a powerful defense. Ser Irminic used another Smite, and disabled the younger mages, but once again, the magister was barely rocked by it. Still there were more Fereldans than Tevinters, and they were winning.

And then it went pear-shaped.

"Fasta vass!" shouted the magister. "To the ship!"

He pointed his staff, and blew a hole through the wall of the neighboring house. Screams rose up from inside the dwelling. Fergus roared, "Take him down! Take him down!" and the massed company ran at the magister.

Finn had never in his life been so terrified. Feeling feeble and

totally outclassed, he focused on healing the injured and babbling out the Litany to thwart the blood spells. A young woman ran from the house, carrying a bleeding toddler. The magister slipped behind them, using them as shields. A handful of his followers followed, casting spells back at the Fereldans.

A pair of powerful young mages were cornered in the ruins, and refused to surrender, determined to do all the damage they could. A soldier screamed, clutching his head, while his blood boiled.

"Finn! Get over here!" Fergus shouted. He had his shield up and ran low. The panicked Tevinters were missing some of their casts, demoralized by the overwhelming force against them. Kylon, who knew every alley in Denerim, squeezed through a narrow passage and then was around the building. He barreled into the fleeing magister head on, knocking him down.

Pinned under the Fereldan, with a sword's sharp edge to his throat, the magister cried. "I surrender! I surrender!"

In the pandemonium, no one else could hear him. Kylon pressed the sword in, his blood up. The skin of the magister's throat dented a little.

"I'll make it worth your while," the magister croaked. "I have riches on my ship. Riches beyond your dreams. I have gold!" He managed an ingratiating smile. "Why don't we leave them to it, eh?" he said, flicking a glance at the bloody fight going

on in the ruined house. "You and I... we're men of the world... come with me to my ship and we'll talk..."

"Don't move!" Kylon snarled. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

In truth he was fairly alarmed. He had his sword to the man's throat, but this was a blood mage, and not just any blood mage, but a Tevinter magister. Who knew what he could do? The slightest gesture could bring a horde of demons down on them. He could just kill this man, but he was the leader, and Teyrn Fergus said he wanted to question him.

"No," the magister wheezed, the smile stretching into a grin. "I think you're a sensible man. After all, you caught me, and the others are just flailing about. Don't be a fool. They'll take it all for themselves and give you a pat on the head. Let me up, and there'll be chest of gold, all for you..."

"Don't move!"

"Hmmm... how to convince you?" The magister knit his brow, thinking. He moved his head, just a little up and to the side.

Enough to draw blood from Kylon's sword. It swirled into a mist. One moment the guard sergeant was looking down at the magister's grinning face, and then the next he was in the air, flying, flying, the world eerily silent.

He slammed into the house and lay dazed.

The concussion brought down more of the back wall, but the

magister was already up and running toward the docks. The Tevinters in the house and the courtyard outside were down, dead or Smitten. Fergus tore past, jumping over the remains of the back wall, and saw the robed figure making a dash down the street.

"Shoot him!" he roared, running. "Shoot him! Finn! Otto! Irminric! Come on!"

Arrows whistled down, but the magister seemed untouchable, protected by a bubble of silver light. Finn, wondering how he could be in a running battle in the streets of Denerim against a Tevinter magister, puffed along in the rear. Men on the rooftops shouted to the men on the docks.

"Finn!" yelled Fergus, turning the corner onto Dockyard Lane. "What's that shell around him?"

"It's a force field!" Finn gasped back, "But he can't keep it up forever. I don't think he can cast through it, either!"

Fergus was running in heavy armor, but he was more accustomed to running than the magister, and in far better condition. Otto and Irminric were keeping up with him effortlessly.

"We got to get closer!" said Otto. "When he drops the shield, we'll both smite him!"

Irminric grunted agreement. "Be ready with the Litany, Finn!"

The Litany took energy, and Finn's was flagging. He hoped he would have enough for another go.

Ahead of them, a crowd of men were on the dock by the *Vindicta*, including Kane, holding forth to the captain of the City Guard and the harbormaster. Fergus cursed their stupidity. Sunlight glinted on the Arl's bright head and golden armor. They were all gossiping instead of keeping watch. The shouts penetrated their talk, and they turn to look, open-mouthed and gormless, at the dark figure of the magister running straight at them.

Fergus was only yards from the magister when the mage dropped his shield and slammed a fist of energy into the group of notables barring the way to his ship. Kane's golden armor made him a visible target. Everyone standing by the gangplank was knocked off his feet. Half a dozen of them toppled into the water, including Kane, his dog, the harbormaster, and the captain.

Instantly, the pursuers were on the magister, and number of unpleasant things happened to him.

He was hit with two Holy Smites at close range, which disabled him; Finn babbled out the Litany, which made it impossible for him to use blood magic; and Fergus beheaded him with a sweep of his sword, which made all the rest moot.

Kane went into the water, surprised, disbelieving. Kane went into the water, just as he thought he had a real grasp on

being an arl. Kane went into the water with plans yet to be achieved. He had just given the girls their own ponies, and they were planning a picnic in the country. He was expecting an heir. He was making friends.

He struck out, trying to swim to the surface, but the glittering armor weighed him down. Thrashing, he clutched at the captain of the guard, who was fighting with a buckle, trying to escape the armor that was killing him. The man kicked at him frantically, but Kane only tightened his grip, determined to cling to anything that could save him.

Above him was the sun, a circle of light swimming in the waves, growing smaller and dimmer as he sank. Kane stared up at it, still disbelieving, until his bursting lungs betrayed him, and he gasped, taking a last deep breath... of ocean.

The tangled bodies sank further, a single strap on the captain's armor connecting them briefly until the eddies pushed them apart. Curious fish passed by the dead men. After a time, some drew closer.

Up on the docks, a rescue mission was organized. Finn finally stopped vomiting, and was helped along by a sympathetic Otto.

Kane's dog was beside himself: barking frantically, paddling about, trying to find some bit of his human that he could seize on, in order to drag him to safety.

Fergus shouted, "Ten sovereigns to anyone who can rescue the Arl!" He rebuked himself, and added, "Who rescues anyone!"

Men and elves plunged into the troubled water. The word was passed excitedly, all down the docks, and figures dove in, came up for another breath, and went down again.

Kylon dashed up, bruised but relieved to see that the magister was dead.

"They've secured the prisoners, my lord. If one so much as bites his lip, he'll be killed. "

"Well done, Kylon."

The sergeant shook his head. "Not so well done, my lord. I had him. I had him, and I should have killed him on the spot."

Ser Otto said, "You are not the first to be overcome by a blood mage, and this was the most powerful I've ever seen. We are fortunate he did no greater harm."

"He did harm enough," Fergus grunted, watching the desperate scene below. Kane had been down a long time. "Somebody get a rope around that dog and get him out of the water."

"Bloody hell!" shouted a man in the water. "He bit me, my lord!"

Otto quietly told the horrified Kylon what had happened. The

sergeant immediately began unbuckling his armor, wanting to help.

"Don't," said Fergus. "We already have a crowd down there. I offered a reward."

A elf rose to the surface, clutching what looked like a handful of sodden clothing. A rope was lowered, and the harbormaster was hauled up, slack and unconscious. Finn set to work reviving the man, and he was soon coughing but alert, astonished to be alive.

The blond elf who had saved him scrambled up the pier to stand, wet and panting, nearby. Fergus tapped him on the shoulder.

"Well done! What's your name?"

"Taeodor Cibrae, my lord."

"Come to Highever House, and you'll get the rest of your reward," said Fergus, digging into his purse. He drew out two sovereigns, and pressed them into the elf's palm. "For now, take this on account."

"My lord!" cried the elf, overjoyed.

The dog was at last so exhausted that he could no longer fight off the well-meaning man who was trying to save him. People who cared nothing for drowned arls hurried to help the poor faithful mabari, and Finn was pressed into doing what he could

for him. Fergus, as a Ferelden, was willing to pay for a dog what he would for anyone else.

Two other men were drawn out of the water: both were harbor employees, and one was dead. Fergus still paid the man who found him something for his pains. That left Kane and the guard captain.

"Anyone in armor would sink like a stone," Irminric said heavily. "We may never recover the bodies."

"Maker's Breath!" Fergus groaned. Was Denerim cursed? Was the title "Arl of Denerim" cursed? And how was he supposed to break the news to Habren? What if Habren ended up ruling Denerim on behalf of her child? It was all a disaster. A bizarre, unlooked-for happenstance. Why couldn't the stupid popinjay have stayed at home where he belonged?

"Maybe one or both of them got his armor off and swam further down the bay," Otto counseled. "We need not give up hope yet."

They busied themselves there at the docks for over an hour, while the divers kept up their efforts. Twenty sovereigns was serious money, and well worth the trouble. In the meantime, the *Vindicta* was secured and its crew taken under guard to Fort Drakon for questioning. The army mage stationed on the other ship was left at the docks for any further medical help that might be required. Fergus and his party walked back to Runagate Court to see what needed to be done there.

They had managed to capture one of the mages and three of the bodyguards. The mage was young and terrified, and the Templars stood guard over him. Finn went to work healing the injured, while Fergus and Kylon listened to the lamentations of the woman whose house had been destroyed, and the sobs of her little girl. The child had been hurt by splinters, but Finn had put that right. The terror of the explosion was not so easily overcome.

"What am I to do?" the young woman cried, over and over.
"What am I to do? I've lost everything!"

Not quite everything, an examination found, but her spinning wheel, the source of her livelihood, had indeed been destroyed, along with all of her unspun wool. That caused her to burst out in tears again.

"I owe Master Pinchbeck for that! He'll have my skin for the debt!"

Unable to bear a crying woman, Fergus told her to go to Highever House with her child, and they'd find work for her. Likely he was dumping his problem on Anora—or more likely the housekeeper—but he trusted either woman to find a fair solution.

He felt guilty. Perhaps he should have attacked the moment the Tevinters left the ship. Perhaps they should have killed them all the moment they docked. It would have saved lives, but how could they make a practice of killing foreigners on sight? Perhaps Kylon should not have followed lawful

procedure and identified himself. Who was to say? What happened, had happened.

No word came from the docks about the Arl or the captain. As far as Fergus was concerned, Kylon would get the promotion. That was an easy decision. It was also worrying that a mage had caused so much harm. It might cause a backlash against the new freedoms for mages serving in the army... for Bethany, selflessly working to heal people. Fergus decided that the way to present it was that it had been done by an armed party of foreign slavers. Yes, there were mages, but there were plenty of warriors, too. A slaver gang. That was the tale that would be told publicly,

The real problem was that they had lost yet another Arl of Denerim.

"Tell me he left a will," groaned Anora.

They were in the arl's study, closeted with his steward, his seneschal, and his secretary. Unsurprisingly, the men were deeply shocked by the sudden event. The Teyrn and Teyrna of Highever had come to call, telling them that Arl Kane was almost certainly drowned in the harbor. A freak happenstance. With them was the Arl's mabari, exhausted and heartbroken. The dog dashed away and ran upstairs to the nursery, to find what was left of his pack.

"He did indeed, Your Grace," the steward assured her. "The Arl was punctilious where his family was concerned. He left all

his personal fortune—his gold, his movables, his jewelry, and clothing— to his sisters, in equal parts. His wife, Arlessa Habren, was left nothing at all. Nor was the unborn child provided for. I advised his lordship against it, but he would have it so. Naturally, a child of the Arl would inherit the entailed holdings of the Arling of Denerim, but this is a posthumous child, which can never be acknowledged by his father, and so the legal situation is somewhat murky. It would be a matter for the Landsmeet to decide if this child should inherit, or rather the Lady Faline, who is otherwise the presumptive heir, and who is named as such in his will."

"Did Kane name a personal guardian for his sisters, in case of his death?" asked Fergus.

"Yes. Arlessa Leandra of South Reach. His instruction is that his wife, Arlessa Habren, is never under any circumstances to serve in that capacity." The steward grimaced. "As to the arling, he names... me... to continue as steward, until Lady Faline is of age. I realize that this is a situation that may not satisfy the Landsmeet or the Crown. Some may feel that Arlessa Habren should hold the arling in trust for her unborn child."

Anora exchanged a look with Fergus. They knew that neither Loghain nor Bronwyn would tolerate Habren as ruling Arlessa of Denerim for a moment. However, she did have certain rights that had to be observed for decency's sake. Nor could she be summarily ejected from the estate. Someone must talk to her. Unfortunately, it looked like it was going to be... them.

Bethany was summoned, as Habren's Healer, as well as Arlessa Leandra and Charade, who would break the news to the girls.

"We'll take care of them," Charade assured Anora. "But don't include us in the conversation with Habren. She hates us, and it would just make her angry."

Leandra sighed, but did not attempt to contradict the truth this time.

It had to be faced. Anora looked a great deal more composed than Fergus felt, as they approached Habren's private apartments. The steward unlocked them, and stood aside.

"I'll go first," Fergus said, uneasy about Habren's temper.

No one was in the parlor. Fergus pushed the next door open, and called out, "Habren? It's Fergus Cousland. Are you all right? Habren?"

It was a large, luxuriously furnished bedchamber, but it smelled unclean. Anora made a little grimace of distaste as she followed her husband. Bethany sniffed the air for any scent of illness or infection. The steward, even more uneasy, followed behind.

The big bed was in the far corner, and the bed curtains were closed. A tray of half-eaten food was on the table by the bed.

"Habren!" Fergus called again. "Are you here?" All sorts of

hideous possibilities flashed through his brain.

With a snap, the bed curtains were torn back, and Habren burst out of the bed, dressed only in a soiled nightshift. Her pregnancy was not noticeable. It had been only three months, after all.

"Fergus!" she shrieked. "Get me out of here!"

Bethany found her a dressing gown, and Habren snatched it from her without acknowledgement.

"Kane's been keeping me a prisoner!" she shouted, stuffing her arms into the sleeves. "Where is he?" She stared at Anora, and moderated her tone slightly. "What are you doing here?"

It was a very rude question, asked rudely. Anora's face hardened.

"We have news for you, Arlessa," she said. "It would best if you sat down."

"Kane could be back anytime!" Habren protested. "I've got to get away! You don't know what he—"

"Habren!" Fergus shouted. "Just sit down and listen!"

In the little parlor, Fergus quietly told her the day's events.

"It's likely he drowned, Habren," he finished. "We may never find the body. He went in to the water wearing armor."

His cousin's sulky face lit with joy.

"Praise the Maker!" Habren declared. "The bastard deserved it! Can you believe that he dared to keep *me* a prisoner? I want those horrible little sisters of his out of here before sundown!"

Her four visitors studied her keenly. This was Habren: rude, unkind, and obnoxious, but she did not seem to be insane.

"That is not possible," Anora told her. "You are not ruling Arlessa, but Dowager Arlessa once more. Your child, if born alive and healthy, might be the heir to Denerim, but Lady Faline also has a claim, and was declared the heir in your husband's will."

"But—"

Anora ignored the interruption. "It is a matter for the King's wisdom and the Landsmeet's ratification. As Chancellor of the realm, this is my ruling in the interim: the steward here will administer the arling under my general supervision, and the seneschal the household. You will have complete freedom of movement, and an appropriate allowance. However, I understand that the Arl's sisters are on the floor above. You are not to go there or otherwise visit or harass them. They will be visited by Arless Leandra of South Reach and others as the Arlessa deems proper, since she is their personal guardian. The girls will also be provided with an allowance. You are not to interfere with them, nor with the administration of the arling. If you disobey this decree, it will be regarded as

your abdication of all rights of inheritance on your behalf and on that of your child."

"This is an outrage!" Habren hissed. "You've always hated me!"

"Habren, don't be stupid," Fergus growled.

Habren subsided somewhat. Fergus was a little like her father, and he had actually come looking for her, unlike anybody else.

"It is my decree," Anora said coldly, "as Chancellor of the realm. Leave those girls alone. I understand that Mistress Bethany here has been your Healer—"

"I never want to see her again!"

"As you wish," Bethany said calmly, never wanting to see Habren again, either.

"Then you will have to engage your own Healer or midwife. I will arrange with the seneschal for the first payment of your allowance, Arlessa Habren," said Anora. "This is a temporary measure. Your husband left you no coin or other means of support in his will. Do not overspend your allowance, for no more will be forthcoming until the beginning of the next quarter. Do not expect a decision from the Landsmeet until the national emergency of the Blight is over, or until the child is born. That's all I've got to say." She rose to her feet, wanting to leave.

"I'll see to arranging the funeral," Fergus told her more kindly. "But we'll want to wait. Perhaps there's been a miracle, or perhaps..."

"Well, I wouldn't arrange *anything* for him," Habren declared. "The Maker has avenged me, as far as I'm concerned, and good on Him. Do as you please. Send a maid to me," she told the steward. "I'm going out to the market."

Then, gracelessly, grudgingly, she gave Anora a nod of acknowledgement, and turned her back on them all, looking for something to wear.

Thanks to my reviewers: amac1688, Robbie the Phoenix, spirally, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, KnightOfHolyLight, imperial queen, DjinniGenie, RakeeshJ4, AD Lewis, Kyren, Chiara Crawford, Blinded in a bolthole, Mike3207, RaZoRMandiblez, Nemrut, le-maru, Isala Utherera, reality deviant, mille libri, darksky01, Raxiselic, Vizantir, JackOfBladesX, Jenna53, Zute, jnybot, Herebedragons66, Phygmalion, Cjonwalrus, Guest, Acalla, dragonmactir, Fenrir666, MsBarrows, karinfan23, Psyche Sinclair, the darks light, anon, and Josie Lange.

I gave Kylon the first name Daniel as a shout-out to mille libri and her wonderful stories "Freely We Serve" and "Dangerous to Travel to Known Places."

Yes, the magister was Caladrius from canon. It will take time

to interrogate all the prisoners. I wanted to wrap up some of my subplots, before sending my heroes west.

My new website is up, with book reviews, links to literature I like, and links to my own original fiction. You can visit me at [The Day Dream](http://TheDayDream.com): (remove spaces) sn carhart dot net.

113. The Alliance Sets Forth

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 113: The Alliance Sets Forth

Just as the army was preparing to leave Jader, the first wave of refugees arrived. Some of them were deserters from the Imperial army, saying nothing about their experiences for fear of hanging. Some of them included eyewitnesses to the fall of Val Royeaux. These survivors had plenty to say. Leliana and Silas tasked themselves with hearing these stories and matching the information with what the Wardens had seen in the Fade. The tale they heard next was one of the worst.

The haggard woman was halting in her speech: sometimes searching for the right words of power and horror. Her gestures were broad and eccentric. It was not surprising that some considered her mad.

"I saw them. I saw them ripping up the children. The children... I saw their faces... ugly. They peeled the skin back and stuck the heads on sticks. I ran fast, holding the baby. I ran and ran, and then I heard them coming up from the noble quarter, so I ran back to the south toward the docks. They caught some of the people behind me, and such a squealing there was! I got into a doorway, and made the

baby be quiet. The door was open, and so I climbed up to a window and jumped to the roof next door. I ran and ran over the roofs until I could see the ships. They threw me on a boat and I thought I was safe. And then I looked to see why the baby was so, so quiet, and I then I knew I'd held him too tight..."

She was penniless, of course. Penniless and starving. The Chantry was worried about the expense of providing for these poor people, some of whom had once been rich, and were dressed in rags of silk. Bronwyn was not very sympathetic to the Chantry's position.

"Let them bloody well sell a few of those gold vessels, and buy grain for the poor! I expect them to set up something to feed these people. How much would it cost to have cauldrons of soup or porridge, anyway? The Chantry's dripping in gold and jewels, so I don't want them to come poor-mouthing to the steward! There are the naval barracks, half empty by the docks. That will provide temporary housing for a great many people. Oh—and we're confiscating the townhouses of Madame de Frontenac and the Sieur de Lys. I'll give orders to house people there—and not just one to two noble families, either. I wish I had a good practical Fereldan noblewoman here to organize things. I think I'll write to Bann Alfstanna or see if old Seria MacCoo is hale enough to travel. She'd sort them out."

She sent a note to the Revered Mother, outlining her expectations, and then had to speak to the woman herself

when the priest raced across the square, agog at the Queen's demands.

"We're at war, Revered Mother," Bronwyn said shortly. "We're at war with an enemy that will not permit the Chantry to be neutral. In fact, we know that they made a special target of the Grand Cathedral. I cannot believe that you cannot feed the poor for the duration of the emergency. Grain is stockpiled high in the granaries, and the Chantry's coffers — don't attempt to deny it—are overflowing. I want this done."

"But..." the priest flailed, trying to make the young woman understand. "There are so *many* of them! How can we take the time to assess them? How can we be sure which are deserving orthodox Andrasteans, and which are heretics and rascals? Some people with coin to buy food might cheat, and dress in rags to obtain that to which they have no right! Even some bad elements in the city— elves, apostates, and the like — might attempt to take advantage of the Chantry's generosity!"

"You're right. There's no time to "assess" them. So don't. Feed them! I'd rather a rascal had a full belly than innocent victims went starving! Just make them form a line and have some Templars on hand to keep order and keep bullies from pushing their way ahead of others. That's the best we can do for now."

The woman was gaping at her, horrified at the idea of putting sanctified grain in the maws of the scum of the earth.

Bronwyn was unimpressed at the priest's obvious prejudice against elves. And some of those despised apostates had come knocking at Bronwyn's door— so to speak— willing to serve in the army or as Grey Wardens. Nonetheless, this was the Revered Mother of Jader, and there was no time to find someone more broad-minded to replace her. Bronwyn did not want to leave bad feeling behind her, and tried tact.

"A good deed is a good deed, even if bestowed on the unworthy. And there are so many in need. Some of them might have done wrong in their lives... who hasn't? But many are suffering innocents. Think of the good will ...the prestige the Chantry will gain by saving so many lives. Even among those rascals you speak of, there may be hearts to be softened by good works."

That was true enough, and the Revered Mother was somewhat mollified. Besides, quite a few healthy young orphans had come to the Chantry. In no time at all, they would be useful servants of the Maker.

The last, most unpleasant duty, was to choose which Wardens would be left behind.

Riordan had felt he needed all his Wardens, trusting to the depth of Orlesian recruiting and the immense resources of the Grey Warden fortress at Montsimmard. Bronwyn worried over the matter, and finally decided that a small band of Fereldan Wardens must be left behind at Jader. In the west, anything was possible. Someone must remain to recruit more in case

of disaster. For that matter, someone must remain behind in case messages came from other Warden posts, or other Wardens arrived in Jader, which was not impossible. Two Wardens were still in Denerim: Idunn and Ketil. They were not enough to raise another army of Wardens in the wake of catastrophe.

First she met with her original team of Wardens: Anders, Tara, Leliana, Danith, Astrid, and Brosca. In this group she also included comparative latecomers like Jowan, Carver, Adaia, and Oghren. They were the core of the Fereldan Wardens, and she needed their input before making serious decisions about the order.

Not one of them wanted to be left out of the coming campaign. She sympathized with their feelings, but wanted sound leadership at her back.

"Leave some of the people who Joined in the south," Astrid urged. "Some are quite experienced now, and perfectly reliable."

"At least one of each race," Tara suggested.

"And a mage," Anders declared. "At least one of them has to be a mage. You want to keep drawing in those apostates, while the Chantry's got its pants down."

"Really!" Leliana protested.

Carver grinned, but then said, "Why not a lottery? Leave it to

the Maker... or the Ancestors, or the Creators... or to Fate. A lottery for the mages and a lottery for each race of warriors. At least four. Put the best of them in charge."

"In Jader," Danith said slowly, "it would be wise for a human—and *not* a mage—to be called leader."

The other looked at her in amazement, but she held her ground. "Whoever is in command will have to deal with the leaders of this city: with the head priest and the steward... perhaps with others in power. They will be more likely to deal fairly with another human. It is the practical solution. And it should definitely not be a mage."

"Wisely spoken," Bronwyn said, pleasantly surprised at Danith's clear-eyed appraisal of their situation. "In the end, it might also depend on the relative abilities of those chosen. But I think a lottery is for the best, and the method least likely to cause hard feelings."

The lottery was held immediately. While there were no tears, there was no celebration either. Petra, for the mages; Catriona, for the humans; Askil, for the dwarves, and Ailill for the elves. The —winners?—losers?—resigned themselves to their fate, listened quietly to Bronwyn's briefing as to their duties, and agreed that they would be staying at the Grey Warden compound.

Petra, who already had a room there, put a very good face on her feelings. "It's very nice. We'll all be very comfortable there. It has excellent facilities for training and recruiting."

Bronwyn was thinking rapidly. She did not know Catriona very well, but Tara and Brosca thought well of her. Very likely, she would perform adequately as leader, though Loghain had mentioned that the archer had little use for the Chantry. That would have to be downplayed. She would have a private word with Catriona. The woman seemed downcast at the prospect of bidding farewell to her friends, but there were no tears or recriminations.

Askil was clearly not pleased, but Astrid, who had led him in the past few months, clapped a hand on his shoulder and said something in his ear. He nodded, took a deep breath, and seemed to accept his fate.

Ailill was not at all happy at the outcome. He had spent a long, unpleasant period underground in Orzammar and the Deep Roads, and had been looking forward to an adventure with his people. The Dalish crowded around him, whispering. To Bronwyn's surprise, Tara joined them. Ailill listened to them, bit his lip, and seemed in better spirits.

Bronwyn could not guess what was behind these stoic masks. If she had, she might have been offended, or disapproving, or even sympathetic. She also would have been reassured that all of them accepted their situation and even saw certain advantages in it.

Petra had resigned herself to a hideous experience in the course of which she would probably be horribly killed. She had no great opinion of her own combat skills. Going west did not sound glorious to her; it sounded like a death sentence for

most. At worst there was the horror of capture rather than death. It would not do to show her relief, but in fact, she felt like one who had been pardoned at the foot of the gallows. She was an experienced teacher: she could spot talent, and would be glad to do her part in recruiting and training. All things considered, she felt she would be more effective here than she would in the west.

Askil regarded himself as Astrid's loyal retainer. She had quickly pointed out to him how well he could serve her here in Jader, so close to Orzammar. Here, he could keep his finger on the pulse of the dwarven kingdom. He could send her messages, and relay word from her to her friends. In fact, from Astrid's point of view, the choice was ideal for her purposes. Askil took a great deal of comfort from that. He, too, would recruit: the best possible candidates to support his Paragon.

Ailill, too, had taken comfort in his friend's words. There was so much he could do here to help his fellow elves. First of all, he could guard the eluvian. It would be quickly moved to the Wardens' Compound and put under barrier enchantments. Furthermore, more Dalish might well be arriving; travelers from distant clans. It was imperative that someone be here to make them welcome and to share certain facts with their Keepers. Then too, there was good he could do in the Alienage, and elves who could be won away from wage-slavery and squalor. It would also be a way to keep the fact of the Dalish role in the alliance visible to the shemlens.

Catriona's feelings were the most confused. She did not fear

combat. She did not fear darkspawn. If taken, she had ways of ending herself quickly. That was a consideration, after all, even if taken by other humans. The things she feared in life were other than death: she feared being crippled and becoming a burden to her family; she feared leaving her brother and his children to misery and starvation. She had recently sent him a large amount of coin, but she knew how quickly a large family could swallow it up. Her brother was not well. If he died, his children— all under twelve — would be left to the mercy of neighbors and the Chantry, and Catriona had not confidence in either. She had been toying with the idea of contacting Jem and telling him to move to Soldier's Peak outright. If she was going to be here in Jader for some time, though, she might ask him to come here. She had asked about: it was not all that unusual for a Jader Warden to get employment for their relatives, and the Compound was short of help at the moment, with the departure of Riordan's Wardens and much of their support staff. The more she thought about it, the better she liked the idea, and the more she wondered if the Maker weren't finally giving her a huge leg up in life.

The Kinloch Hold Circle contingent arrived at Jader, last of all the allies, and discovered it had nearly missed the war. The army was forming up to march out, and a harried marshal found a place for them in the long column. There was only time to rest the animals and swallow a meal before they would be leaving.

Many of the mages had never seen a city — or did not remember seeing a city— and those who had certainly had never seen a city like Jader. They were lucky in the weather the day they arrived, and could walk beside their supply wagons, eagerly taking in the sights.

Most of the Templars had never been out of Ferelden, and were open in their admiration as well, noting down places they would like to visit at more length someday.

And no one would ever see it more splendid than it was today, as the army of the alliance against the Blight prepared to go to war. A rainbow of heraldry burst forth on shields, banners, and pennants; every color, every creature, every symbol was represented. Orlesian heraldry was far more complex than Ferelden: where a noble Fereldan house might be symbolized by a bear or a bull or a raven, Orlesians had made an art and a science of heraldry; the complex symbols telling the story of their families' bloodlines for generations.

Shields were divided by fesses, by pales, by saltires, and crosses, and chevrons. They were parted by bends, and those of bastards were marked with the bend sinister. Shields were marshaled or quartered, all painted with all the traditional tinctures: gules, sable, purpure, argent, azure, and or. Chevaliers bore elaborate crests on their helmets. Distant members of the same clan differenced their arms with individual cadences: crescents, mullets, marlets, annulets, and roses. It made a brave display. Fereldans studied these works of art with admiration and envy.

Greagoir had visited Val Royeaux years before, traveling by ship from Amaranthine. Irving had seen Cumberland. Both were greater cities than Jader, but Jader was really quite beautiful and distinctive and well worth a look. A pity they would not have chance to explore the city.

They were received courteously by the King and Queen, but the conversation was not a long one, for everyone was incredibly busy. Both the Knight-Commander and the First Enchanter were taken aback when the Queen thanked them for anticipating her needs, and announced she was conscripting ten mages and two Templars.

"Not instantly, of course," she said, smiling. "But in the next day or so. Think about whom you think would do best."

Greagoir swallowed a remark that after what happened to Cullen he had no desire to give a Templar to the Grey Wardens ever again. Irving's smile was a bit forced. They bowed away from the frenzy surrounding the command group, accepted the place they were assigned in the order of march, and hoped that the Queen would forget about them.

There were disputes over precedence among the Orlesians: fists were shaken and insults were exchanged. Bann Cauthrien, riding down the column, shouted at the fools to get into line.

"Find a place! Get in anywhere you bloody well can! This isn't a tournament! Don't you know we're at war?"

The disputants were silenced, but vowed revenge on each other at some future date. Or at least that they would slip into line ahead of their rivals at the next stop.

At long last, it was time to go. The Revered Mother stood on the steps of the Chantry and held up her hand in benediction:

"Maker watch over and bless all people and creatures engaged in this noble enterprise: humans, elves, and dwarves alike; may He bless the horses that carry them and the oxen that pull the wagons. May he bless the brave dogs who fight loyally beside their masters—"

Scout was pleased at this, and flicked a glance up at Bronwyn, panting happily.

"Bless the King and Queen, and give them the wisdom and courage to lead us to victory. Bless the nobles with daring and prudence alike, and the officers with initiative and good sense. Bless all our soldiers with the spirit of endurance and loyalty, and keep them from harm. In the name of the Maker and His Prophet Andraste, so let it be."

She knew how to project her voice, and so many people crammed into Emerald Square heard her. Blessings were echoed and repeated, a deep reverent ocean of sound.

Bronwyn unslung the gold-fitted dragon horn, the trophy from her fight for the Ashes, and lifted it to her lips. She sounded it; and the music filled the square and rang through the streets. As the notes died away, army buglers took the cue to ring out

the order to march.

Side by side, Bronwyn and Loghain rode through the square and into the Golden Road, their horses trampling early flowers and pine branches flung there by their subjects. Their dogs were beside them, wearing heavy studded collars, happy to be going on a long, long walk. Behind them were Wardens, golems, knights, men-at-arms, a few volunteer companies of militia, including a determined little band of Jader elves, armed only with knives and carrying simple red banners. The earth trembled underfoot.

They were watched by the entire population of Jader, high and low. The Wardens remaining saluted them from the palace steps. A little higher on the steps, the princesses, gloriously dressed, bade farewell to the King and Queen, to Duke Prosper, to Arl Alistair, to Arls Corbus and Wulffe, to dear Warden Leliana, and all the others they had met in the course of their strange adventures.

"It will be dull without them," said Eglantine, waving her handkerchief.

"Very dull," agreed Eponine. "Who knows when we shall see them again?"

Celandine said nothing, not thinking that living in the beautiful palace of Jader was a dull thing at all. There were pleasant people to talk to, and new books to read. There would be company to dine with, and the palace gardens were large and lovely. She was rather afraid of Duke Prosper, and could wait

perfectly well for him to return. The Queen had found a lady to act as their chaperone: a noblewoman of Jader whose younger brother had high hopes of royal generosity if he served well in the campaign. Lady Felice was pleasant enough, and knew all the gossip and some new embroidery stitches.

The army picked up more units as it passed the barracks. More yet joined outside the city, where some of the local lords had encamped with their levies, and where the Dalish awaited them. There too, was the big cage on wheels, which gave the entire procession an carnival air; the big cage that carried the wyvern Leopold. The Revered Mother had not mentioned him by name, but under the general grouping of "creatures," he could be said to be traveling under the Maker's blessing.

"She didn't bless the mages," Anders snarked.

"She blessed all the humans and elves," said Carver.

"Therefore, she blessed the mages, since they are human or elf. She didn't bless all bearers of greatswords, either. Or all archers."

"It would have been nice if she had," Nevin muttered.

Their first stop, of course, would be Chateau—no, *Castle* Solidor. It was little over a half-day's journey, but it gave them to chance to shake out problems in their marching order and find problems with teams, with wheels, with loads, with proximity to rivals and enemies, with supply wagon

distribution.

The new Wardens marched with their comrades, but were sheltered in between the veterans. Astrid, Tara, and Danith had assigned a mentor to all the recruits, partly to orient them, but mostly to keep an eye on them and make sure they did not get into fights with other units, or run away.

Silas Corthwaite had decided to stay with the Warden party. He had passed on his messages as instructed, and did not want to be left out of what was certain to be the greatest struggle in many ages. Every sword was needed: even his own. He could see no justification whatever in keeping safe in Denerim. If anything, he wanted to go back and see if there was anything left to salvage, any survivors to rescue. And it was good to be traveling with Leliana again. He had almost forgotten what a wonderful companion she was.

Fenris, too, wanted to be a part of this. He had never been part of anything greater than himself, really; never before had comrades or friends. He felt almost like an elven knight of old, well-armed, well-armored, astride his own horse, going to face the greatest evil of the age. Even the mages seemed ennobled by the order they served. These were good people, under good leaders, and that was a new and splendid thing in Fenris' experience. Carver had dropped a few hints that the only hope of someone infected with darkspawn Taint was to become a Grey Warden. Infection was fairly likely, once they came to grips with the monsters. If that was what it took, Fenris had no fear of it. In fact, perhaps it would be for the best. Danarius could never claim a Grey Warden.

Where was Danarius? Probably hiding in Minrathous, as far from the Blight as possible. Fenris knew enough about his former master to understand that he was essentially a coward, hiding behind his magic, hiding behind his position, hiding behind his slaves and the weight and power of custom and political institutions. However rare and valuable Fenris was, Danarius would rate his life as far more valuable, and would do nothing to risk it.

"If I did decide to be a Warden..." he murmured.

Carver's head swiveled in his direction, and the young man's face lit in a smile.

"Then you'd be making a very good choice. Talk to Bronwyn. I'm sure she'd be glad if you did."

"I could hardly approach the Queen—"

"Of course you could. I'll come with you, if you like. We'll be having a Joining soon for the new people. Or maybe you could have a private Joining first. Think it over." He turned in his saddle, and whispered loudly to Jowan.

"Fenris is thinking about Joining!"

"You should," Jowan said seriously. "You really should. You'll never have an opportunity to do something more important."

Fenris mulled that over, as Solidor grew closer. Would he make this commitment? It was a serious, life-long one.

Perhaps nobles like the Queen and Alistair could find a way to slip the leash, but clearly, for everyone else, once a Warden, always a Warden.

Brosca was enjoying the trip, sitting next to Torvald in one of the Wardens' supply wagons. This was the one with all sorts of dangerous bombs, grenades, and poisons in it, so it was important to keep it well guarded.

"I think a second set of gears would make all the difference, only smaller ones. I can machine them and try a new prototype—"

Torvald was babbling happily about the Airbows, and how he was working on them and learning all about them. Brosca let him babble, happy that he was happy.

He was a nice guy. Brosca had not met many before, especially in her Orzammar days. Orzammar didn't breed "nice."

Other than in the Wardens. Most of the Wardens actually were nice guys. Maybe it was Bronwyn's influence. She was nice herself, and expected everybody to be the same. It smoothed life's rough edges away, sort of. The ones who weren't nice, like that Walther, had had their comeuppance, right enough.

And Brosca had been honest with Torvald. She had told him upfront about her Warden sweetheart who died. As time had

passed, Brosca's conviction that she and Cullen had been a couple had hardened into unquestionable past history. They would still have been together, if the dragon hadn't got him. She had a keepsake, and a sweet memory of kissing him, and he was enshrined in her heart as The One.

But of course, life went on, and there was no reason not to enjoy the company of a nice guy. A nice, *dwarven* guy. And Torvald really respected her because she was a Warden. That was new and refreshing. Not many people had ever *respected* her. Respect was a heady brew.

Adaia was in the back of the wagon with Siofranni, their legs dangling over the end. It was a fine day for a journey, and fun to see the rest of the host behind them, the shem knights eating their dust.

"I hope we can settle the Archdemon soon," she croaked to Siofranni, squeezing her hand. "I've got scores to settle before we can take off for... *you* know where. We're going to be rich by the time this is over... rich enough to *buy* a ship if we like instead of hiring one. I don't want to leave anybody in an Alienage ever again. I don't want to ever live in an Alienage myself. I know I owe Bronwyn, but once the Archdemon is dead and the Blight's over, I reckon we're square."

Siofranni agreed. "I thought it was beautiful, the place beyond the eluvian. I love civilization. I love baths and real soap. I like to wear silk dresses at dinner. I'm proud to be Dalish, yes, but everything is just so hard *all the time*."

"I like civilization, too, when I'm on top," Adaia said wryly. "On the bottom of the heap, not so much. As far as I'm concerned, the Tevinters can learn to cook their own food and wash their own clothes. They can learn to use their magic for that. I want to get our people out, and safe. Then we're leaving. We'll get on our ship and sail down the coast, away from the shemlen cities. We'll pass on through to our new home and leave all this behind without a regret."

"As long as I can have a bath—"

"—With real soap," Adaia finished for her, laughing. "Those elves looked pretty clean to me!"

It was good to march beside the aravels, good to be near the hall, good to be surrounded by elvhen kin. Danith strode along, glad to be out of the green city. It was better here, marching on the road, breathing the scent of fresh young leaves, in the company of her friends. The Dalish Wardens were a clan to themselves, close as brothers and sisters by blood, which they were... in a way.

What would come of this war with the darkspawn? Four times the darkspawn had risen, and each time the Grey Wardens had defeated them and beaten them back into the Deep Roads. Danith felt in her heart that it would be so once more. There was nothing the Archdemon could attack them with that they could not defeat.

But how long would it take? Other Blights had lasted for

decades, slipping over the limits of one age and spilling into another. Many had died, many had been Tainted, and much must have been lost.

The Dales had been lost, for example, over a bitter quarrel over strategy and alliance during the Second Blight. The shemlens had nursed a grudge because the elves had not come to their aid when demanded, and had retaliated by the destruction of the lands given to the elves by the word of the Prophet Andraste.

And now Bronwyn had come, like a second Andraste, offering the elves a home once more. How long would that last? Certainly as long as Bronwyn lived—as long as Loghain lived, too—but then the old quarrels would rise, and the humans would want all the Brecilian Forest for themselves. It would surprise them, would it not, if they came to make war and found the land empty and deserted? That was the ending Danith hoped for. And yet...

What she had seen beyond the eluvian was beautiful and rich, but it was not Dalish. If she wished to be Dalish she must remain in Thedas. She saw little to suggest that the Dalish customs and traditions would be welcome or even understood. Those elegant, civilized people... what did they know of *Vir Tanadahl*, of the hard, clean life of the forest? It would seem to them alien, barbaric... or simply quaint.

What could she hope for herself? She was a Warden, bound to the Tainted underbelly of Thedas. Would the Taint sing to her in her sleep in that land far away? Or would it be muted,

diminished, even silent? Could she learn to adapt to a new world, among those strangers with elven faces?

Nuala was looking at her, concerned. Danith managed a smile for her and marched on.

"Falkor, move those engineers into the wagons with the ballistae," Astrid ordered. "Just a few with every one of the wagons. If something happens, I want them to be able to get them down and assembled *fast*."

"Yes, Paragon."

Life was good. Astrid was building up her personal force of dwarf Wardens and binding the dwarven army closer to her with every day. Let Bhelen play politics from the safety of the Assembly. If her plans worked out, he and the deshyrs would be irrelevant in the wider scheme of things. Then, too, Astrid was determined that Orzammar would have a permanent force of Wardens of its own. It was absurd that there was no Warden base in dwarven lands.

She flexed her elbow, adjusting the harness of her golden hand. It was a constant reminder of all that Bhelen's scheming had cost her: family, friends, the throne itself. Her hand could not be replaced, but when the Blight was over and won, not even the crown would be beyond her reach. It would be some... compensation.

She glanced to the side and saw Alistair chatting with Emrys.

Praise the Ancestors that she had avoided *that* entanglement! She had been lonely; she had been at loose ends. Believing that she had a future only in the Grey Wardens, she had been ready to make the best of it, by connecting herself to the powers within it.

What an escape! For both of them, really. Alistair was doing quite well for himself—despite himself— as a human noble. He was betrothed to the insipid little Orlesian, who would simper and smile, and tell him how wonderful he was. Just what he needed. What he did *not* need was a relationship with a dwarf, however well-born.

Conversely, if she had burdened herself with a human husband, the chances of being declared a Paragon might have been seriously compromised. Mixed marriages were unacceptable in Orzammar. And imagine the scandal had she produced a human child! Of course that was unlikely, with Morrigan going about, dispensing contraceptive tea like a noble giving alms.

Astrid laughed to herself, and speculated on an acceptable consort, once she herself was Queen of Orzammar. She noticed— but chose to loftily ignore— Oghren's jaundiced reactions to her schemes. He was very loyal to Bronwyn and was not part of Astrid's personal coterie. If that was his choice, so be it. She hoped he liked the surface.

"You ride well," Zevran complimented Tara, with measured praise. "There was a time, *cara mia*, that you were... shall we

say 'not so good,' but you have learned. You ride well, and appear to great advantage on horseback."

Tara smiled at him, enjoying the day. Zevran appeared to great advantage at the moment himself. The loot they had won had allowed them to buy the very best in gear and accoutrements. Handsome armor that *fit*; soft leggings and the finest boots. People sometimes looked twice at them, thinking them short humans at first by their expensive garb. And no one, not knowing them well, could tell that Tara was a mage. She promised herself that she would never wear robes again.

Robes were strange and ugly garb. She thought that even most Tevinter robes she had seen in books were fairly ugly. Bizarre, too. Obviously, there were traditional elements, and then there were details that were meant to provide some sort of protection, like the odd metal plaques placed over women's abdomens. That dated from a time when magic was held to damage the unborn. If that was so, why did only female *mag*es wear them?

Actually, most robes were archaic versions of noble clothing of different places and periods, ossified by custom and Circle bureaucracy into official wear. Some were enchanted, true, but mostly they were inconvenient and uncomfortable—all designed to mark a mage and make it difficult to run away. Almost any other garb was better. As a Warden, she could afford the best.

She had never had so much as now; now when they were

about to hazard all.

"Zevran," she began, and hesitated.

"What is it, my dear one?"

"Do you ever consider just... chucking it all and running off?"

"Always, but only with you."

"Sometimes I do. I just want this to be over. I wouldn't really run away, but I'd like to. Have you thought about what it would be like to live in a place where being an elf is *normal*? Where everybody is an elf?"

Zevran's golden face contracted in thought. "I have. You must understand, *bella*, that I have a more cautious view of most people's motives than you. This place we have seen... yes, it is beautiful... yes, we were greeted in friendship. But where there are no humans or dwarves, elves will find things among themselves to divide them. People are like that. The blue-eyed will despise those whose eyes are brown. The brunettes might look down upon the blonds. Those with certain talents will be lauded; those without will form the underclass."

"They don't say it was like that in ancient Arlathan. They say it was perfect there."

Zevran's smile was a study in skepticism. "So they say. But who knows? Perhaps it was a paradise indeed for the great lords of the elven realm. If I may ask, however — who cooked

the meals? Who grew the crops? Who gathered the fuel or cared for their beasts? I find it impossible to believe that there were no gradations in class or status. To do so would be contrary to all that I have observed. Everywhere, at every time, there are hewers of wood and drawers of water. These hewers and drawers might be slaves in one place, or contented free workers in another; but nowhere are all equal, because all are not equal in ability, in looks, in cleverness, in..." he shrugged, "mere luck. We know very little about those strangers. What little we know is good, and better than what we know about Thedas. I simply point out that there are always dark sides to everything. Even the sun cannot shine upon us constantly."

Tara considered that. "Sometimes I wonder what we will do there. Surely we'll have to do something useful."

"With your great command of magic, you will always be useful. Also decorative."

"Decorative, yourself!" She laughed. "It'll be... different."

"Indeed. I wonder how I shall come to be considered useful. My only skills lie in killing people in various ways, and in making myself agreeable."

"Those are pretty impressive skills. Especially the second."

Loghain swore that if one more swaggering young Orlesian tried to flirt with Bronwyn, he would call the impudent pup out,

hack him apart, and toss his bits to the dogs. He had seen Fereldan noblemen swagger and strut for the benefit of ladies, but he had never in his life seen such goings-on as among these half-women.

You would think this was a party, for the chevaliers were dressed in silk tabards over their armor, their eyes painted, their tresses curled. Squires carried their ridiculous beplumed and beribboned helmets, crested with dragons, with lions, with bereskarns, with sea monsters. They reeked of perfume, and batted their unnaturally long lashes at the Queen, turning this way and that so the sun would reflect off their armor just so. Preening pillocks. He was sending them in as the vanguard. Let them flirt with the darkspawn.

Val Chevin was dying. Hector Pentaghast acknowledged it, even though he was glad that the Wardens' holding action had enabled much of the population to escape. They had been ferried away by sea, since the docks were still under their control. The poor souls would be conveyed to any place that would take them in. It was inevitable that Cumberland would shut its gates to the refugees when the press of them became unbearable. The ships would then go further along the coast: most north to Kirkwall, to Ostwick, perhaps to the thinly populated islands of the Archipelago; a few would go south, dropping off the survivors at Jader and at various places along the Fereldan coast. No one would want to go on the south-bound ships except for the ones destined for Jader, fearing vengeful, savage Fereldans. Pentaghast had found the

Fereldans he had met perfect pleasant and civilized, if some of them were a bit young and unsophisticated. No doubt the Orlesians knew that Fereldans had little reason to love them after the long years of brutal occupation.

The darkspawn did not seem particularly interested in taking the city. However, they were leaching life from the fields and fouling the rivers. The big refugee camp to the north had pulled up stakes and headed off further north to Arlesans. Pentaghast had advised Revered Mother Dorothea to take them even further, perhaps toward Hunter Fell. He did not envy her the hardships ahead.

Inside the city, the wells still provided clean water, but anyone drinking or washing from the Chevin was almost certainly doomed to Blight disease. Pentaghast had conscripted many of the sick adults, but it was not a feasible solution for the very old and the very young. Oddly enough, he had tried the Joining on a Blighted young pregnant woman, and she had lived, with no detectable harm to the unborn child. Assigned to light duty in the kitchens, she was doing her part.

He had sent out scouts. Some had come back to report; others had been swallowed by the unknown. The darkspawn had diffused over a wide area. They had not reached Montfort, but no one had been able to get through to see if Val Foret still stood. He had sent a small ship south to the mouth of the river Orne, to see if anyone could manage the half-day's march between the river and Val Foret. Another of the ships he had sent would go to Highever, to send a message to the Fereldans about his movements. Even if the

Fereldans hated Orlais, they must know that time was of the essence.

The Archdemon, for some reason, had not returned. If it did, and it burned the docks, it would no longer be possible to supply Val Chevin by sea. And yet, this delay...this stalemate was entirely in the Archdemon's favor. Pentaghast needed more men. He needed more Wardens. Where were they?

To be fair, they could only travel so fast, and so even had they left immediately, they would still be days away. Weisshaupt was the closest on the Imperial Highway, and it was from the Wardens of the Anderfels that Pentaghast hoped for relief.

Reinhard Wildauer, First Warden of Thedas, was beyond exasperated. "*Another* brawl?"

"I'm afraid so, First Warden. And it's going to get worse. The Templars are furious."

Wildauer was already worn out by the time he reached Cumberland. Simply mediating the growing, burning hostility between his own Wardens of the Anderfels and the Tevinter contingent was taking entirely too much time and energy. And that was not to mention the hostility that the Tevinters were provoking in the cities along the Imperial Highway.

The Tevinters boasted a huge proportion of mages: very powerful, aggressive mages, who had not been humbled by

years of living in a Circle or being on the run from the Templars. Some of the Tevinter mage Wardens were members of prominent families, and very well-connected, indeed. Some were apostates, escaped from the lands of the White Chantry and recruited into the privileged status of Tevinter Grey Warden mage. These were especially vocal, arrogant, and deplorably self-satisfied. Their attitude was infecting the Circle mages who were traveling with his own Wardens. It was infecting the Anderfel mages Wardens themselves.

And so many mages, strutting openly in the streets of Gallisa, of Theordis, of Parrhae, and now in Cumberland itself was deemed an affront to the Chantry. Everywhere, one saw the Templars attempting to challenge mages on the street, only to be told by the mages that they were Grey Wardens and not under Chantry authority. Sometimes that worked. Sometimes the Templars pointed out the complete lack of Warden insignia. For that matter, quite a few mages claiming to be Wardens were not. If they tried that, and a Warden was present, the First Warden had ordered that they be taken into custody by the Wardens—by any means necessary — and forcibly conscripted. If they wanted to play at being Wardens, then by the Maker, they would *be* Wardens. He had picked up quite a few apostates in this fashion.

Some had run away; some had not, glad of a meal and the Wardens' protection.

Then there was the problem of the Tevinter baggage train. Many of the servitors were slaves, and some had fled into the

anonymity of Nevarran cities. The Tevinters had protested furiously. The Nevarrans were put in an unpleasant position, but few Watchmen would arrest a slave. The Tevinters mostly relied on bounty hunters, and those always spelled trouble.

Quarrels, back-biting and all, the Wardens had been made welcome in the Prince's city of Cumberland, and told something of what the Nevarran Wardens were facing. A pair of Wardens had ridden in hard, evading the darkspawn, all the way from Val Chevin to give a report, and to ask for more support from the Nevarran royal army. The Prince invited the First Warden to the meeting. The two Wardens, a man and a woman named Borthus and Athis, made a good impression on all the notables.

"No one's really got past the darkspawn screening Val Foret and lived to tell about it. We don't know if the city has fallen or not. We don't even know if they've been attacked. For all we know, the Archdemon might have led the horde south, west, or east. In the old days, we could have ridden griffons high above and seen the movements from the air. For now, we're fighting blind."

"We live in the world as it is, and we must work with what we have," Wildauer said stiffly. He hated to be reminded of griffons. Any mention of them made him feel mildly defensive. The creatures were dead and gone, and it was not his fault, but that of a long-dead predecessor, who had cut costs with foolish economy. Or perhaps it was a disease spread by the Qunari. There were various theories, all now of academic interest only. Whatever had happened was all blood under the

bridge now. Grey Warden scouts must see the world as ordinary mortals these days: from the ground.

"Is there any word from the Fereldans?" Borthus asked outright. The First Warden was puzzled, but Prince Tylus could make that clear.

"We have heard that Commander Bronwyn — now Queen Bronwyn — means to lead her coalition of dwarves, Dalish, and Fereldans west into Orlais in pursuit of the horde. Very dutiful of her. The country, of course, is leaderless and in turmoil. We understand that a number of high Orlesian nobles have joined under her banner, including Duke Prosper de Montfort. We don't know where Queen Bronwyn is at the moment, but at least she means to provide us with a second front."

Wildauer snorted his dismissal of that crazy barbarian girl, but the Prince of Cumberland gave his due to his new Fereldan allies.

"Very good of her," he said feelingly. "If someone doesn't stop or distract the darkspawn, we could have them in Cumberland before Summerday!"

The Alliance stood at the Frostback Gates at Solidor, and for a moment, everyone took a deep breath before undertaking the march to challenge the Archdemon.

With the mountains at their backs, the green fields of Orlais

spread out before them, rolling and lush in springtime garb. In the distance lay the Halamshiral Hills, and further on, under the vault of heaven, lay their destiny.

Bronwyn saw the look on Loghain's face, and found it impossible not to tease him.

"It's only Orlais. You're not invading the Black City!"

He snorted, a gloomy sort of laugh. "There's not much to choose between them, for that matter!" He gazed at the fair country before him, and said, "I never thought I would set foot in Orlais, unless it was as a captive being taken to torture and execution. Only you could persuade to step over this border."

Now she laughed in her turn, and quoted a children's geography, learned by rote under old Aldous' tutelage. "*The Orlesians are a gay and polite people, fond of dancing and light wines.*"

"And with the addition of masks, daggers in the back, poison in the cup, ridiculous clothes, and intolerable arrogance, you have a fairly good picture of our new allies. Maker help us."

Thanks to my reviewers: Imperial queen, Girl-chama, PoptartProdigy, sizuka2, JTheClivz, KnightOfHolyLight, Chiara Crawford, MsBarrows, Blinded in a bolthole, DjinniGenie, Raxiselic, Kyren, wassersaeufer, anon, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, le-maru, Garm88, Tirion I, Fenrir666, Nemrut, timunderwood9, Mike3207, Robbie The Phoenix,

Chandagnac, JackOfBladesX, Phygmalion, AD Lewis, Jenna53, darksky01, jnybot, mille libri, dragonmactir, Mage, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Brenediction, Guest, New Zealand 5, Lyssa Terald, and Josie Lange.

The quote: 'The Orlesians are a gay and polite people, fond of dancing and light wines,' is a paraphrase from Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, by Kate Douglas Wiggin, which if you have not read, you should not scorn. It's actually a very good novel for young girls. I'm fond of 19th and early 20th century children's literature. The quote is of course about the French. Here is the rest of the passage:

"I asked the teacher what light wines were, and he thought it was something like new cider, or maybe ginger pop. I can see Paris as plain as day by just shutting my eyes. The beautiful ladies are always gayly dancing around with pink sunshades and bead purses, and the grand gentlemen are politely dancing and drinking ginger pop. But you can see Milltown most every day with your eyes wide open," Rebecca said wistfully.

"Milltown ain't no great, neither," replied Mr. Cobb, with the air of having visited all the cities of the earth and found them as naught.

To an unsigned guest reviewer who said: "It was mentioned last time that Habren was Dowager Arlessa because she never consummated her marriage with Urien. That couldn't be considered the case this time-her marriage with Kane was

consummated. Anora will need to come up with a good reason why she's Dowager Arlessa and not Arlessa."

My answer: Nope. Doesn't work that way. Habren was lucky even to be considered a Dowager Arlessa from her first marriage, since the marriage with Urien was unconsummated. She is unquestionably a Dowager Arlessa now, but her marriage to Kane give her no right to inherit the Arling. None. When King George VI died, his wife Queen Elizabeth did not inherit the throne. His daughter Elizabeth did. If the Duke of X dies, his Duchess does not inherit the privileges of his title. His heir does. That is why, in canon, Loghain's claim that Anora is the rightful queen is absolutely laughable. Being married to someone does not give you inheritance rights to a title, unless specific provisions for that are made, as in granting the Crown Matrimonial.

114. Over the Hills and Far Away

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 114: Over the Hills and Far Away

With the Orlesian fleet destroyed, Isabela was eager to put to sea again. Partying in Highever was great fun, but nothing compared with a deck under her feet and the winds whipping through her hair. She had a little flotilla of her own now, and was a power to be reckoned with in these waters. And so, she stood at the helm of *The Siren's Call*, contemplating her options.

Obviously, she couldn't bite the hand that fed her, so to speak, so Fereldan ships were safe. Everyone else, however, was fair game ...

There was Kirkwall shipping, and Ostwick shipping, and heaps of other wallowing merchantmen that would be ripe for plucking. There were also the rogue vessels of the Felicisima Armada, which were the enemies of all. They were harder nuts to crack, but always full of yummy golden goodness inside.

Theoretically, she was under orders to protect the Fereldan north coast, which now extended all the way to Jader, but that

could be achieved perfectly well with some serious patrolling of this end of the Waking Sea. If she just happened to spot a desirable prize, it could be justified as necessary training for the lads to keep their hand in.

Her biggest prize, the Orlesian warship, *Empress Area*, was still in drydock being repaired. Isabela was going to rename it, of course, since she thought the first Orlesian empress' name was terribly silly. It would be her flagship, eventually, with the loveliest, most luxurious stern cabin imaginable, and, in the right hands, the potential for maneuverability that would make an old salt weep. Isabela herself was the model for the figurehead at the bow.

"Hmmm. What's in a name?... *Terror*' is always nice, but maybe a little generic," she considered. "*Pearl of the Waking Sea*'... *The Black Pearl*'... or just *The Pearl*'....hmmm... good times there. *The Revenge?* *Isabela's Revenge?* *The Best Revenge?*... I rather like that one...Or maybe something patriotic? *The Red Queen*'... *The Dragon Queen*'... Not *The Girl Warden!* That sounds too goody-goody for words. Nothing about dogs, and nothing about land battles. Boring. *Red Queen*' really isn't bad, and who's to say which queen I mean? I could commission red sails! That would be very impressive."

A mist fell at evening, cool and white. Visibility diminished to alm

ost nothing. The lookout aloft was alert for gathering storms

and other vessels.

"To starboard!" he shouted. "Captain! I think it's a Qunari dreadnought!"

This created something of an alarm. The rest of the crew on deck rushed to the rail to see.

"Shit!" growled Isabela, forsaking all daydreams instantly. "Show me!"

Some big was moving fast off their starboard side. Something quite a bit bigger than the *Siren's Call*.

"Battlestations, Captain?"

"Oh, yes, but quietly."

"We're not going to try to take them on?" squeaked her nice new elven mage.

"I don't see how that could be a good idea, Sketch," she replied. "But if they put the moves on us, we'll bloody well fight back!"

But the big deadnought was not interested in engaging the *bas*. Its commander, called Karasten—for that was his rank as an infantry commander—was in the Waking Sea to investigate the report of the destruction of the city of Val Royeaux. He had been given a well-equipped force and a large dreadnought. His mission was to gather intelligence and determine if it was, in fact true. If so, was the land in such

confusion that it might be ripe for the Qun?

There was another issue at stake. After the so-called "Exalted March," The Tome of Koslun had been kept by the *bas* in their city of Val Royeaux. The Llomeryn Accords, which had ended the war between the *bas* of the White Chantry and the Qunari, had decreed that the Tome of Koslun was to be returned to the Qunari. It was a foundational work by their greatest philosopher. The Orlesians had proved dilatory, and the book had not yet been returned. If necessary, Karasten was to determine the feasibility of an expedition to penetrate into the city and seize the volume. If opportunity came his way, he was to use his best judgment and attempt to recover it himself. It was believed to be kept in the Grand Cathedral.

Last in priority was to obtain information about the scouting party sent to Ferelden under a Sten of the Beresaad. The Sten's mission was to comprehend the nature of the Blight phenomenon and report to the Arishok, but no word had been heard of him. He was presumed dead, but those who knew him considered that particular Sten a resourceful soldier. Perhaps he was still gathering data, and had not yet found a way to return to Qunandar.

So Karasten and his dreadnought slipped past the Narrows, and entered the western portion of the Waking Sea. The ship was in good condition. They had watered first on the little island of Estwatch, and then again on the Wounded Coast, not far from Kirkwall. This had given Tallis, a member of the Ben-Hassrath traveling with them, the chance to make a brief reconnaissance of the city, for purposes she did not divulge.

They had also undertaken some repairs there. Presumably there would be considerable traffic on the seas near Val Royeaux. Though the darkspawn were considered dangerous, they could not affect the ship in any way. According to intelligence, they could not even swim. The dreadnought would provide a secure base for their explorations.

Isabela followed the ship for some time, keeping her distance, hoping they would not take offense and come about for an attack. The dreadnought was hugging the northern coast, and appeared to be heading for Cumberland, so she turned aside at last, and followed a new heading to Jader, just to let the Powers That Be know that a Qunari vessel was in the neighborhood.

Karasten was informed that the pursuing vessel had dropped out of sight. He merely grunted. Only a fool would attack a Qunari dreadnought, armed as it was with twenty cannon on each side, each capable of firing a twenty-pound ball. Gaatlök was the great secret of the Qunari, and a defense against the *bas*. Once into the harbor of Val Royeaux, they could bombard the city prior to making a landing.

Their water tanks were deep, and Qunari could go without water for some time. Karasten had determined that they would make no more stops until they reached Val Royeaux. Surprise could be of paramount importance. They knew little about the darkspawn, but warning an enemy of one's arrival was never prudent.

In three days, they entered Val Royeaux's excellent harbor. It was at the mouth of the River Royeaux, and a superb deep water port. Karasten surveyed the area from a distance with some concern though his spyglass. It bore all the marks of a devastating sack. Smoke rose lazily from the upper city. It appeared that part of the dockyards had also suffered a major fire.

There were no ships afloat in harbor. There were some half-submerged hulks, however. He must be vigilant for underwater hazards. Something had sunk a great many ships in the harbor, and the worthless *bas* had not cleared the wreckage. To be just, it could well be that there were no *bas* available. There were no signs of movement visible. Just to be on safe side, he gave the order to ready the port cannons.

He was approached by his second-in-command, First Sten.

"Shall I ready a ship's boat for the scouting party, Karasten?"

"Do so. It is clear that we will not be able to go much further into the harbor with so much debris."

The Ben-Hassrath, Tallis, came forward. As she was of the elven race, she was a tiny figure among the huge, horned warriors; but she carried authority with her, and all treated her with respect.

"I shall lead the scouting part myself. Expect me back before dark. That's when the darkspawn become active."

"As you wish, Ben-Hassrath."

Soundings were taken, and lookouts leaned over the water to watch for hidden dangers. With careful maneuvering, they were able to get a little closer before they were forced to drop anchor and launch the boat. First Sten took the helm. Ten warriors joined him, and acted as oarsmen. One of the *saarebas* in the ship's complement was unchained from the rest and ordered into the boat. Tallis sat in the bow, scanning the ruined docks as the oarsmen brought them to a usable pier.

From the dreadnought, Karasten watched impassively, but his eyes missed nothing. In time, the landing party moved out of sight, making their way carefully through the ruins. Tallis had been provided with a reliable map of the city, though of course much would be altered with the manifest destruction before them. The darkspawn creatures appeared to be nothing if not thorough. Were they formidable opponents in themselves? That remained to be seen. He had read a book about the prior Blights during the voyage, but it seemed to be largely fictional. All of the myths and legends centered around creatures called Old Gods. It pointed up the primitive survivals of the cultures unenlightened by the Qun. According to the legends, then, these Blights were triggered by the release of an imprisoned Old God—a High Dragon—which was renamed an "Archdemon." This Archdemon led a horde of darkspawn to the surface for a lengthy rampage. There had been four such Blights, all ending when the Archdemon was slain. The last had ended two hundred years before the arrival of the Qunari.

Karasten had never seen a dragon himself, but he had read about them. Mature dragons were large and dangerous beasts, but were largely extinct, except on the border of Nevarra and Orlais. High Dragons had not been seen in many ages, though there were rumors that the young Queen of Ferelden had slain one. *Bas* —their undisciplined minds untethered to reality — always exaggerated their deeds. That the reputed Dragonslayer was a female made the Qunari even more certain that this was an invention, or a metaphor for some sort of religious rite.

Time passed; Karasten made certain that the gunners remained at their posts, and that the hands were alert. He sent a second watch up into the crow's nest, so that none would grow weary and inattentive. A quick meal was brought to those at their posts, including himself. Karasten would not have his men distracted by hunger.

There was still no sign of movement in the dockyard buildings. As Tallis had said, it was known that these darkspawn creatures disliked sunlight and were more active at night.

He glanced at his own map, estimating distances. By now, if not hampered by collapsed buildings, Tallis and First Sten should be nearly at the site of the Grand Cathedral. An elevation drawing of the city indicated that the twin towers of the cathedral should be visible from the waterfront, but Karasten could not make them out. Evidently, they had indeed fallen as reported.

That "report" was mysterious. It was utterly impossible that a

messenger could have witnessed this event on the twenty-sixth of Guardian and reached Qunandar to report it. Yes, the report itself now appeared to be true, but how was the message sent? Rumor had it that the Grey Warden had seen this attack in the Fade, but that seemed fantastical and foolish. Prophecy was mere superstition. It could be that the legendary sending stones of the elves were used. If so, someone must have more of the stones somewhere in Rivain. Karasten believed that an expedition was underway there to uncover their location. The locals could be made to talk with the right incentives. The Grey Warden post in Dairsmuid might be vulnerable to a well-planned raid, since many of them had departed to fight the Blight.

The Grey Wardens, too... Secret societies had no place in an efficiently administered polity. They did not respond to gamek, and when encountered fought creditably. They were rarely captured, and then little information could be got from them. It was generally best to simply kill them. The rest of Thedas seemed to put considerable faith in the notion that the Grey Wardens were the ones to deal with this "Blight." Why could not well-trained, well-motivated Qunari warriors do likewise? Indeed, why could they not do *better*?

The sun was sinking in the western sky, and the landing party had not yet returned. Karasten did not allow himself to worry. There was still plenty of time. In the best case scenario, Tallis was even now returning with the Tome of Koslun in her hands.

"Karasten!" shouted the lookout in the crow's nest, pointing.
"Karasten! Something in the sky! It is not a cloud!"

The sky? Odd. No danger save bad weather could come from the sky. A storm would be inconvenient. Karasten searched the skies, and then saw the curious little black dot. A bird?

He peered through the spyglass, and, involuntarily, he shuddered. No bird. A dragon, and apparently a large one. It was headed their way.

"Cannon crews stand by!" he shouted. Two points northwest, elevation forty-five degrees!"

The problem was, that the altitude was relative. As the dragon swooped closer, its position in the sky was revealed to be very far above them. With grim certainty, Karasten acknowledged that he was seeing a High Dragon, and that they were all in great danger.

"Karasten!" shouted a gunnery officer. "We cannot elevate the cannons any higher!"

"Weigh anchor!" Karasten shouted. "Hoist the mainsail!" The tide was coming out, which was in their favor. There was no lee wind to drive them aground. They might well need to stand out to sea. The dragon's flight toward them appeared to be deliberate.

Abruptly, it swooped to the ground, nearly disappearing for a moment, and then it soared almost vertically. Something was clutched in the front talons; something small and struggling that was carelessly released and fell a long way to the ground. Karasten looked through the spyglass again. He could

not be sure, but wasn't that the *saarebas*? The dragon came on. Something on the ground was running toward the docks. The harness, the weapons! In front, the tiny figure! They were definitely three of the landing party!

"Archers! Make ready!" He commanded. "Give cover!"

It was useless. Behind the running Qunari were a mob of monstrous creatures. These, then, were darkspawn. At first Karasten took them for dwarves by their size, but the run was a curious bandy-legged waddle; awkward-looking, but terribly fast. The fleeing Qunari were dragged down, and disappeared under the darkspawn. One—Tallis— had escaped them, and sprinted ahead of them to the pier. She dove into the water, and began striking out strongly for the ship. The darkspawn crowded at the docks, jeering. It was impossible to send a boat out for her. She would survive or not, on her own.

"Fire on the docks!" he commanded.

A great booming noise, and smoke filled the air. Cannonballs whistled through the air and exploded. Several were aimed well enough to blast the big knot of darkspawn apart. They killed their fellow Qunari as well. Perhaps it was a mercy.

The Archdemon roared, executing a complex, graceful maneuver in midair. The long neck swiveled toward the ship.

"Helmsman!" shouted Karasten. "Get us out of this harbor!" In a sudden burst of inspiration, he ordered, "Unchain the

Saarebas and bring them up on deck." *Saarebas* were used on land, and cannon at sea. but magic could do what science could not, and fire a curse straight overhead. An officer went below decks to carry out the order.

Slowly, painfully slowly, the ship began inching away from the shores of Val Royeaux. Too slowly. The Archdemon seemed to hover briefly, and then climbed for altitude. Abruptly, it dropped, coming up fast on their stern.

"Archers! Loose!"

The feeble arrows were no more than straws in the wind against the armored hide of the Archdemon. The stern canon fired, but the trajectory of the cannonballs was hopelessly shallow.

The dragon had all the advantage. Its jaws gaped wide, and purple flames bloomed, scorching the dreadnought from stern to bowsprit, roasting most of those on deck who did not leap into the sea. The two *saarebas*, chained together, did not have time to gather their power or realize the source of the danger clearly. They were knocked over the side, and drowned, weighed down by their chains and iron collars. The dragon passed on, and pulled up. Tilting into a turn, it came back for another run. The sails were already aflame. It came down low, bellowing. Another blast of flame, and whole port side was burning.

The lifeboats on the starboard side and the number two collapsible boat were still usable. It would not take long for

these flames to reach the gaatlok magazine.

"Abandon ship!"

The boats were launched, and the ship was evacuated. The Archdemon, mildly amused, watched them, coming in now and then to pick them off in the water.

The explosion took it entirely by surprise. A white light, bright as dragonfire, burst forth suddenly, and then there were a thunderous succession of roars, so close together they seemed one. The deck of the ship seemed to detach, break up into a thousand pieces, and fly up in the air. The shock wave caught the Archdemon in mid-flap before it was struck by a mass of debris. Wounded, it squealed in an earsplitting convulsion of pain, and sheered away, flying toward shore and its nest.

With immense effort, the collapsible boat was assembled and righted. Sharks took four of the men as they labored in the water. Burned and injured, fifteen survivors—including Karasten and the intrepid Tallis —rowed away from Val Royeaux in the sheltering darkness, heading south for the opposite coast of Orlais. Their destination was the mouth of the River Orne. Surely it was out of the flying range of the dragon.

The city of Halamshiral knew that the Red Queen was coming.

Specifically, the Vicomte de Brangelome, the ruler of the city

in the absence of its lord Duke Enguerrand, knew that the Alliance against the Blight was headed in his direction. The latter nobleman had been in Val Royeaux, and was very likely dead, but no one could be certain of that. He might well make an appearance eventually, and the Vicomte would have to account for his conduct to him.

Duke Prosper sent him a message, advising him that it would be wise — very wise — to open his gates to the Allied army and give them every assistance in his power.

"Let me put it this way, my friend. If you open your gates, the Fereldans will be gone within a day or so, on their way to fight the Archdemon in the west, which is something we would all like very much. If you defy the army, and close your gates, they are likely to set up camp outside your walls and lay siege to the city. That will be unpleasant —for you— and it will delay our campaign. I speak with the authority of Empress Celandine, the rightful heiress by blood."

In the end, the Vicomte decided it was safer to open the gates than to hazard a siege. Halamshiral was packed with frightened refugees, and he had to keep the gates open, anyway, in order to keep the refugees flowing toward the Fereldan border.

As the army's path crossed with more refugees the stories grew wilder, more shocking, more violent. Some of the refugees were owing up to having been in the army the night it was destroyed by the Archdemon. One man was traveling

with his brother, who was now blind from burns he had suffered. It was too late to cure his eyes, but the army mages could ease his pain. No one demanded that the two men somehow go back and fight. They had a little farm in the foothills of the Frostbacks, and were technically citizens of Ferelden now. Loghain sent a note with them to the castellan of Solidor to give them assistance, once he heard their whole story from beginning to end. The tale of the Archdemon's destruction of the Orlesian camp was an awful warning. He gave thought to how to keep watch for an airborne menace.

And in Halamshiral, they came across the first refugees who were obviously infected with Blight sickness. "Came across" was a mild, and thus inaccurate way to put it. Refugees, grey and blotchy with Taint, were discovered in the Market, and in a screaming panic, they were lynched and burned to death by a mob. Two guards were killed and three injured trying to stop the riot. The army stepped in, and it got very ugly very quickly.

Bronwyn eventually moved in with her Wardens, telling the people to stay in their homes, and that if anyone was infected with the Blight disease, to come to the Wardens. The disease, she said, could sometimes be cured by the Wardens, and the sooner they reported to them the better. A handful of people turned themselves in, and were seen no more by the citizens of Halamshiral. The Healers did what they could for them, but Bronwyn did not give much for the chances of any of them but one, a big, robust warrior, who might live long enough to face the darkspawn.

Prosper had also sent out an order of muster to the nobles of

the Dales. It would take some time for it to reach many of them: the minor nobles at least, who were the backbone of the chevalier class. An audience was held, and some names were enrolled in the alliance. Some names were not, and Prosper noted those down for future retribution.

To say that Halamshiral left a bad taste in everyone's mouth was not overstating the matter. The Dalish found the city horrifying for complex historical reasons. This had been the actual elven capital of the Dales, founded by the free elves who had been Andraste's loyal allies. "*The End of the Journey*," they had called it in their tongue.

"But it wasn't, was it?" Tara said bitterly. "A brief intermission at best, and now you couldn't tell it from any other human city. It even has an Alienage! How sick is that?"

"Calm yourself, *bella mia*," Zevran soothed her. "The world is the world."

"They should at least have changed the name. It's gloating and horrible," she muttered.

The Dalish hated it, too, looking almost in vain for traces of Elven architecture. It was all gone: either razed completely, or faced over with fresh stone. Only in the arches for the gates there remained some of the ancient grace, and there the inscriptions had been chiseled away, and replaced by terra cotta friezes of triumphant chevaliers.

"I *hate* this," Siofranni whispered to Danith, as they took their

turns standing guard. The locals came to stare at them, talking loudly, as if the elves were deaf, or did not understand common speech.

"I hate it too, *lethallan*," Danith murmured back, "but we must bear it a little longer." In truth, it felt like they were miscreants, held up for the scorn of shemlen. It was just the sort of thing that made her question why she was risking her life for these awful people. She was not sure she could make Bronwyn understand, but she must try. Too much time in a place like this would shatter the allegiance of the Dalish. There was too much history here; too much terrible history and too much present humiliation.

She went with some other elves—Adaia, Siofranni, and Cathair — to the Halamshiral Alienage. It was large and old—possibly the oldest Alienage in Thedas, since it was here that the first captive elves were rounded up after the fall of the Dales, and here that they were told that they were to serve their human masters thenceforth.

Some of the Jader elves came with them. Danith was far more accustomed to city elves now, and so was able to sense that these elves were more like Adaia Tabris than the usual run of 'flat ears.' They were outspoken and aggressive. They had had enough, but were not sure what their options were.

"One thing is sure," Adaia declared forcefully, in her low, croaking voice. "Bronwyn is the best friend the elves have had in ages... or that we're ever likely to have. Now's the time for

change. The Orlesians are all running around in confusion. The elves are going to do their part by fighting against the Blight. But for those who can't fight, I'd advise moving out and going east. They're plenty of room in the new elven land in Fereldan. It would be safer, too."

"Some have talked about leaving the Alienage," the local hahren confessed. "The question always is: where would be better? Where could we go?"

Siofranni said, "It's better in the Elven Village. It's getting built up now, there in the land Bronwyn gave us. A real elven town, with no shemlen to tell us what to do! We can give you a map. The Fereldan soldiers have been ordered not to mistreat elves. This may be the safest time ever for elves to travel."

"Yes," agreed Danith. "This is the time. Either the Blight will continue and the darkspawn will spread and the world will become more dangerous; or we will defeat the Blight, and a new shemlen ruler will take command here in Orlais. They will want to establish their authority, and they will tighten their grip on the elves."

The hahren could well see this. Once any rebuilding started, elves would be in demand for their cheap labor. If the shems feared losing such labor, travel would be restricted, as it often was. Right now, there were no restrictions, and the Vicomte had other things on his mind than the elves. In fact, he was glad for the refugees to be on their way. The hahren furrowed his brow in thought, making plans. The visitors could not know that he had long and bitter personal grievances against the

rulers of Halamshiral, and would be glad to shake the dust of it from his feet.

"We can't all go at once. We'd be noticed. Groups can go, though; mixing in the rest of the refugees."

A Jader elf said, "And some of your young people should come with us! We're going to fight! We've sworn to follow Queen Bronwyn, and when she goes back to Ferelden, we'll be able to follow her there with the army. We could use more fighters."

"I'll go with you," a young woman said. "I'd rather fight darkspawn for Queen Bronwyn than stay here. I hate this place."

Bronwyn disliked Halamshiral herself.

"We've got to move on," Bronwyn said to Loghain. "The elves are getting restless. Danith's come to talk to me. The local humans are treating them badly."

"Of course they're restless," Loghain agreed. He was restless himself. He was in a foreign city, and a foreign city not conquered by Ferelden. He was here as a guest, and being a guest of the Orlesians made him want to vomit up any and all comestibles they put before him. Everything felt *wrong*.

But they attended the Chantry service, where Bronwyn was made much of and Loghain glared at. That was bracing; that

was something he could sink his teeth into. He didn't mind being hated himself, as long as the bloody Orlesians hated only him, and would leave his people alone.

They collected what supplies they could, though they were probably taking food out of the mouths of refugees. More came to the city with each new day.

The main thing was to keep their communications open. Loghain sent back regular messages. An important one involved the fleet. They needed to move. Now that the Orlesian threat was at the bottom of the sea, he wanted some ships available: a squadron at Jader, and two or three at the port of Lydes, in case they had people to evacuate that he did not wish to leave to the kindness of the Orlesians along the Imperial Highway.

More came to join the army, and one individual arrived who nearly caused the collapse of the alliance.

Boniface Clery was the grandson of a minor chevalier who had been killed at the Battle of River Dane, thirty-one years before. The death of Ser Laurence Clery had led to the subsequent impoverishment of the family, due to inheritance taxes and loss of patronage. Thirty years later, the son, the grandmother, the aunts and uncles and cousins were still sitting in the tiny unimproved manor left to them south of Halamshiral, not lifting a hand to better themselves—for that would mean soiling their hands and heritage with *trade*—but instead blaming the man they believed had ruined their lives.

Their hatred for all things Fereldan was bitter and unrelenting. None of them had actually been to Ferelden or met a native of that country, but the word was synonymous with every evil under the sun.

When news came that their ancient enemy had dared to enter Orlais and put himself within reach of their revenge, every member of the family demanded that young Boniface uphold their honor by killing Loghain Mac Tir.

Did they not understand about the Blight? That was a question that was asked again and again later on. Had they not heard that the Empress was dead, killed by filthy darkspawn? Did they not grasp that their own lives could soon be in danger? If they did comprehend any of these things, apparently they had no importance in comparison with their personal feud with the King of Ferelden, who did not even know of their existence.

Did they understand the political ramifications of such an assassination? That was difficult to say. It was clear that they believed that their cherished heir could kill a Fereldan without consequences.

It was easy enough to get close. The young man came on the pretext of doing homage on behalf of his father for their manor. It was an amusing ceremony. Ser Boniface was doing homage by proxy to Duke Prosper, who was accepting it as a proxy for Empress Celandine.

Loghain and Bronwyn were on their chairs of state nearby, acting as witnesses. Boniface of course recognized Loghain,

who was probably one of the most recognizable men in Thedas, even if he had not been daily described to him as the personal enemy of the Clerys.

He was a good-looking young man, even if his clothes and armor were old-fashioned and his horse was of questionable quality. His fellow Orlesians sneered at him, but the Fereldan monarchs did not; nor, to his credit, did Prosper, who clearly understood the importance of every sword in the campaign. The young man dropped gracefully to one knee to offer homage, and rose, suddenly pivoting to the side, his dagger in his hand, launched toward Loghain.

What happened next was both embarrassing and nearly fatal — for the would-be assassin.

Loghain was alert, because he constantly expected Orlesians to try to kill him. He was in armor, too; his trophy River Dane armor, not caring a particle if it hurt the Orlesians' feelings or not. He was surrounded by loyal retainers, and accompanied by two mabari. His wife, at his side, had killed dragons.

But it was Loghain himself who dealt with the attack, responding instantly, rising since he could not side-step, catching the young man's wrist in a steely grip.

With his left fist, he slammed hard into his attacker's elbow. There was too much armor there to succeed in breaking his arm, but the shock caused Boniface to drop the dagger. Instantly every Fereldan had drawn a weapon, and fallen in a protective circle around Loghain.

"You killed my grandfather!" Boniface shrieked, as Loghain forced him to his knees. "You ruined my family!"

Loghain stared at him, nonplussed, and then snorted a laugh and punched the boy out.

"'Killed his *grandfather*?' That's a new one." He glared at Prosper. "So, Duke? This was your scheme all along?"

"Of course not!"

It could have been quite the disaster. Since the Fereldans were drawing their weapons, the Orlesians went for theirs. Prosper stepped out in front and called for order.

"Hear me! Hear me! We shall not fight each other!"

Very visibly, he dropped his sword,

And his belt knife, And his boot knife. And the other boot knife. And even the dirk hidden up his left sleeve.

"All right," said Bronwyn, "We'll all drop our weapons on three. One... two..."

An awful pause.

"... three."

She cast the Keening Blade down with a clang. With some hesitation, the blades were lowered, and sheathed, and an uneasy peace was restored. Loghain had not bothered to

draw his sword at all.

Then there was the difficulty about what to do with the assassin. It was obviously undesirable for Fereldans to kill Orlesian nobles out of hand. Prosper had his own men seize him and take him away.

"I shall have to make an example of him," he sighed. "Stupid boy. I don't suppose you would care to conscript him?"

Bronwyn frowned, and glanced at Loghain. He shrugged.

"Give me some time to consider it," she said. "I have to think about how my people would react to it, and if it would be perceived as a reward. That's unacceptable. On the other hand, so much reckless anger deserves a proper outlet."

Prosper met with the local nobles and upper clergy in private. There he stated his firm conviction that Bronwyn was indeed Andraste's True Champion, and specially favored by the Maker. He read sections from his bound copy of the Conclave's minutes. The burning in effigy in Val Royeaux was brought up, and abruptly slapped down with Prosper's eyewitness account and the grim facts of what happened immediately after.

"Opposing her is clearly offensive to the Maker," Prosper concluded. "Whatever you may think of Loghain Mac Tir, the man is her husband, the King of Ferelden, and a tactician without peer. We must face this darkspawn threat immediately and with great resolve, and we must be grateful

for the allies that the Maker has sent our way."

The Revered Mother of Halamshiral was pious and a bit doddering, but was deeply impressed. Most of the nobles were likewise convinced, and those who were not were convinced by Prosper's pragmatic arguments about the wisdom of letting the Fereldans lead in the fight against the Blight. Other nobles cherished a secret passion for the Red Queen, and hoped to win her notice by brave deeds. Then, too, they needed a leader of their own. Empress Celandine sounded promising, and offered a more secure future than an Orlais fractured into a hundred little principalities.

Prosper gave the same lecture, only with rather less courtesy, to Boniface Clery in the Halamshiral dungeons, and explained that though he was being given the great and undeserved opportunity of becoming a Grey Warden to expiate his cowardly and shameful attack on a guest, he would also have to suffer a public punishment for such an attack.

So, instead of a public beheading, Boniface Clery was given twenty lashes in the Market; not before a distinguished group of nobles, but before the mob of the city, who found the plight of a young nobleman in difficulties irresistibly funny. Afterwards, he was turned over to the Grey Warden Aveline Valen, whom Bronwyn thought was the best choice to make him shape up. As for the boy's family, they were a matter for Prosper de Montfort's justice, and Bronwyn did not envy them.

They departed soon after, with more elves joining the band from Jader. Loghain found their red banners rather ridiculous.

Prosper thought them ominous.

Civil society had collapsed in Lydes.

Bronwyn knew that things were bad there, based on the stories she's heard from refugees running away from the city. As they approached, it obvious that the situation had deteriorated rapidly. Smoke rose in the distance, and they feared the darkspawn had attacked.

It was not darkspawn. Perhaps, in some ways, it was worse.

Off to the side of the road ahead of them, there was what appeared to be a battle, until they rode closer and saw it was a massacre. One side had weapons of glittering steel; their victims were unarmed, huddled together kneeling, hands raised in submission, mouths screaming for mercy. Corpses sprawled in the undergrowth. People were dragging out struggling figures and holding them over logs while a squad of men with axes and greatswords beheaded them. Some of the victims were very small. With each blow the frenzied mob cheered, as the triumphant headsmen displayed their bloody prizes.

"They're killing elves! They're killing children!" Tara cried. She loosed a fireball at the mob. It exploded among them, knocking the attackers down and burning some. Two, on fire, rushed shrieking into the underbrush.

Loghain swore, and ordered a company of pikemen forward.

With shield and pikes, they could dominate a crowd better than most without engaging in talk, which was pointless with such a mob. As he came closer, he realized he could barely understand their jargon, anyway. Bronwyn, of course, was horrified at the slaughter, and had to know what was happening.

"Stop!" she shouted in Orlesian. "What are you doing, killing unarmed elves? You!" she pointed at a big man with an axe. "Tell me!"

"The elves are in league with the darkspawn!" the man sputtered. "The priest told us so! They summoned the creatures to attack Orlais!"

Shouts and cheers echoed this bizarre claim.

"What priest?" Bronwyn demanded, livid. "Point her out to me! I want to see this priest who thinks she knows more about darkspawn than a Grey Warden!"

There were hesitant murmurs of *'Mother Sidoine!'* and scattered protests. Bronwyn ignored them.

"Well? Priest! Come out, you coward! Surely you're proud of your handiwork!"

"Oh, Bronwyn!" Leliana whispered, pleading. "Don't!"

A few worthy citizens tried to shield the woman, but most flinched away. The priest was young, with short-cropped hair

and wild eyes. She stepped forward defiantly, her chin lifted.

"Je n'ai pas peur de toi, hérétique! Je suis la servante fidèle du Créateur!"

Beside herself with rage, Bronwyn jumped down from her horse and grabbed the woman by the throat.

"Liar! Mentreuse! Lâche! Tu aimes tant le sang?! Alors bois-en!"

Bronwyn dragged her over to the pile of headless corpses and pushed her face into a child's gory throat, rubbing it in.

"Had your fill of blood yet? Maybe you want a little more!"

She dragged the woman up, showing the crowd the blood-smeared face, and then threw the priest to the ground in contempt.

"Here's your true enemy!" she raged in Orlesian. "Here's the one who summoned evil into your midst! This woman made you pawns in her lust for cruelty. She lied to you about the darkspawn, about which she knows nothing!" She shouted, "The darkspawn acknowledge no allies! They are mindless monsters. To say that anyone: elf, human, or dwarf could be in league with them is a lie!"

The priest groaned, and tried to struggle to her feet. Bronwyn stamped on her back with a dragonbone boot.

"Ai-je dit que tu pouvais te lever?" In Fereldan, Bronwyn snarled, "Maker deliver me from troublesome priests!"

Ser Silas slid down from his mount, and walked up behind her, his Templar armor an ensign of authority, his hands up in a soothing gesture.

"La Reine Rouge a raison," he said, his voice pitched to persuade. "This priest is demented. She knows nothing of darkspawn. Her heart is full of fear, and she lashes out blindly. Your own Revered Mother cannot preach such wicked foolishness!"

Loghain watched the crowd with growing concern. They were cowed, but still dangerous, feeling strong in the anonymity of a mob. A group of Wardens rushed forward to help the survivors: a pitiful band of no more than a score. Most were children, protected by the bodies of their elders. Some were injured badly, and Anders and Niall instantly hurried to treat them, including a small, unconscious boy, his arm hanging by bloody shreds. At the sight of the arcane blue light, the crowd went berserk.

"Magie!" howled a woman. *"Sorciers infâmes!"*

A rock bounced off Bronwyn's helmet. Loghain had had enough.

"Pikemen! Move in! You Wardens, get those elves out of the way!"

Quite a few people ended up dead, and those dead were all citizens of Lydes. Prosper did not care, as they were commoners and of little use, other than the headsmen who had shown skill. They, alas, were dead, along with the rabble-rousing priest. Prosper did not like that sort, either. Priests ought to do as they were told by their rulers. Not many of the Orlesians had witnessed the confrontation, and those who had were only puzzled that the Red Queen had bothered to bandy words with peasants, rather than simply riding them down. She had a soft heart for children, apparently: even elven children. Some noblewoman were like that.

They discovered, as the survivors were helped into wagons, that these poor few represented the last of the Alienage of Lydes. There had been a series of purges, and those who could flee had been allowed through the gates. Not satisfied with killing most of the elves and driving the rest from their homes with nothing, a mob had pursued them, determined to exact vengeance for every imagined wrong.

Quite a bit of the army began setting up camp outside the walls. The Dalish, for obvious reasons, were not about to enter a city that had treated elves in such a way. It was unthinkable to take the elven survivors of the massacre back into Lydes. Prosper knew he must go and meet with the city officials, and he and Loghain preferred that Bronwyn stayed far from sights that would certainly enrage her. A group of Healers, including some Wardens, accompanied Prosper into Lydes.

And inside the city it was equally bad. No guards were at the

gates. The strong force that entered Lydes discovered that the smoke was rising from burning bodies... not on pyres, but bound to stakes. These were accused mages, and over fifty people had been murdered in this way. Not only people: a cat had been burned along with one woman, for some insane reason. Some bodies were reduced to bone and ash, some were only charred in places, the naked dead bodies exposed, the faces contorted in their final expressions of mortal agony. Some of the dead bore the marks of shocking torture and mutilation.

"Where are the priests?" Prosper asked aloud. "Where are the Templars? Where are the city guards, for that matter?"

There were no signs of any such individuals. Looters were running unhindered about the city, but melted away at the sight of soldiers.

Unbelievably, the lynchings were still going on. Even as troops marched into the Chantry square, a battered twelve-year-old boy was being chained to a stake in front of the Chantry. All sorts of the things had been heaped together to fuel the flames: broken furniture, shop signs, house walls—even a spinning wheel. It was, of course, not necessary to reduce the suspected mage to ashes: only that he die of smoke inhalation or burns, preferably the latter.

Nearby, a fire had already caught, and flames were licking up, closer and closer to a young girl. Her scanty, bloody shift caught fire, and burned from the hem up, exposing her to the taunting, raucous crowd. The girl shrieked as her skin

blistered, but her cries of agony were drowned by the roar of delight as her long hair burned like a torch.

By the time rescue reached her, she had been burned over most of her body. The mob had fled, terrified at the sight of soldiers, the strong among them trampling the weak.

Apparently, from the gabbling nonsense the soldiers could get out of the people they caught, these people tied to stakes were mages.

"That's ridiculous!" Niall protested. "The only way you could burn a mage at the stake is if you had Templars or other mages to suppress their magic. If you tried to bind a mage and set him on fire, he'd break free, and probably become an abomination."

There were manifestly no abominations in the Chantry square, so Prosper accepted that the dead were victims of hysteria. He paused, lip curling at the hideous sight of the burned girl.

"Will she live?"

"It's going to take a lot of work," Anders predicted, after the girl was put into a healing coma. "And she'll likely never be the same."

Some of the soldiers were sent to the Chantry, and found the doors barred and the lower windows boarded over. There had been an unsuccessful attempt to set the building on fire. After some pounding, and Prosper's declaration of who he was and

that yes, he had a large force at his disposal, the doors were unbarred and some Templars poked their heads out. Prosper demanded an audience with the Revered Mother.

There had been an attempt to maintain order, he was told, but everything had fallen apart. People were frantic when Blight disease appeared in the city. The refugees were blamed, and many were killed. A young priest, Mother Sidoine, had defied the hierarchy and had taken to the streets, leading wild mobs against the "enemies of the Faithful." Mother Sidoine preached that Blight disease was an infallible sign of sin, telling her believers that striking out against evil magic would protect them. Elves were inferior creatures, prone to sin, and thus a source of disease. They were natural allies of the darkspawn, also creatures of sin. The Alienage, she declared, must be cleansed. So, too, must the mansions of the rich, who employed elves.

"Yes," Prosper said calmly, "I believe I have met the young woman. She will trouble you no more."

Relief was expressed at that, as under her instigation, the steward had been stoned to death on the steps of the palace, and Templars had been mobbed and killed in the streets when they attempted to protect suspected mages. The Chantry itself had been attacked, and at last there was nothing for it but to batten down for a siege. Now that a duly constituted authority was in the city, of course, the doors could be opened once more, and a service of thanksgiving be celebrated.

Prosper and his guard rode up to Lydes Palace to see the body of the steward hanging over the entrance. Inside it was in chaos, overrun by looters, bandits, charlatans, whores, and thugs. After a lengthy, nasty fight to gain control, they found some survivors, mostly servants. The Marquis of Lydes, his Marquise, and their two oldest children had been in Val Royeaux when it fell. Prosper knew them well. However, hiding under a bed was the youngest daughter, five years old. In the room were the bodies of her two older sisters, seven and ten, her governess, and four maidservants, human and elven, all of whom had been raped and slaughtered. The little girl was in shock, and had not yet spoken.

It was a drain on men and resources, but a strong garrison must be set up here under a reliable man, and order restored by draconian means. The mobs would be dispersed where they were found, and looters were to be hanged on the spot. He sent a message to Bronwyn and Loghain that the city was a mess, and that he must stay here a day or two to put down the disorder.

Little Lady Florette was a concern. Very likely she was now the rightful Marquise of Lydes, but she obviously could not be left in this place with no reputable women to care for her, and the situation so tense.

Bronwyn offered a rational, humane solution.

"Why can't she stay with the princesses? I think they would be very kind to her."

Thus it was settled. The child, well-guarded, would be taken to Jader, and would live with the Imperial Princesses as their little maid-of-honor. They would pet and pamper her, and perhaps she would heal somewhat from her horrible experiences. Prosper de Montfort was not completely heartless toward children, most especially if the child was pretty, extremely wellborn, and potentially a great heiress. It would be convenient if she was well-disposed toward him. His son Cyril might need a demesne of his own someday, especially if Montfort was lost.

Clovis, the Warden of Jader, approached Bronwyn with "private Warden business," and after hearing him out, she found it was one more thing to cause her worry.

"You know, of course, Commander, that the most essential task after killing the Archdemon is to preserve its blood. Without it, there will be no more Wardens for the next Blight."

Bronwyn had not thought of it at all, and was rather taken aback. Yes, she could see it was essential, but how to manage it? Or, at least, manage it *discreetly*? If a group of Warden mages started pumping Archdemon blood into kegs, the entire allied army would label them as Blood Mages before the next dawn—and rightly, too.

Everyone would want to see the Archdemon and probably take a poke at it with their sword, once it was safely dead. She would have to make up some ridiculous lie about 'infection,' perhaps, so they would back off until the blood was

drained, preserved, and stored. What a bother. She met with the mages, and warned them. Then she sent a party into Lydes, and bought up every clean barrel in the city.

"How have the Wardens kept this secret all these years?" puzzled Tara. "What a giveaway! 'Er... stand back while we drain the Tainted Old God completely of blood. Move along. Nothing to see here."

The army set out from Lydes, wondering what further horrors they would encounter in their march. The elves of Jader and Halamshiral were becoming militant and hostile toward their fellow Orlesians. Loghain hated Orlais the more he saw of it; and the longer they were here, the larger the Orlesian contingent grew.

Bronwyn had worries of her own.

"And now we have to deal with that fellow in Verchiel who hates Wardens!"

She was anxious to meet the darkspawn and get her new people joined. Many were quite ill. She suspected that Clery boy would survive, surly and sullen as he was, brooding over his realization that the world had played him for a fool. The Wardens closed ranks around him, backing up Aveline, his mentor, giving him no chance for further bad behavior. Minjonet helped too. Of the three Jader Wardens, she blended best into the Fereldan Grey Wardens, and had made friends rather quickly with Aveline and Leliana. She also

seemed to like Nevin quite well. The new elves among them were finding their way, encouraged by Adaia not to take rubbish from anybody. Boniface discovered early that he could not bully his fellow recruits, whatever their race.

On the other hand, no one mocked him for his old-fashioned armor. His family was not hounding him, demanding that he right all their wrongs while they did nothing themselves. And he had a newer, better horse, courtesy of the Wardens.

As the army moved toward Verchiel, a new marching song rippled through the Fereldan ranks. Leliana laughed, and immediately took it up.

*Here's forty coppers in your hand
For those who'll join our fearless band;
To list and fight the foe today
Over the hills and far away.*

*O'er the hills and o'er the way
We'll live to fight another day.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.*

*When duty calls me, I must go
To stand and face another foe
but part of me will always stray
Over the hills and far away.*

*When evil stalks upon the land
I'll neither hold nor stay my hand*

*But fight to win a better day
Over the hills and far away.*

*O'er the hills and o'er the way
We'll live to fight another day.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.*

Thanks to my reviewers: New Zealand 5, Guest, Fenrir666, Lyssa Terald, Josie Lange, Phygmalion, KnightOfHolyLight, AD Lewis, DjinniGenie, Girl-chama, Anime-StarWars-fanzach, Raxiselic, Tirion I, Chiara Crawford, Nemrut, Mike3207, le-maru, Psyche Sinclair, Blinded in a bolthole, Chandagnac, Granoc, MsBarrows, Brenediction, LordCoake, JackOfBladesX, Ellyanah, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Robbie the Phoenix, PhantomX0990, sizuka2, darksky01, Guile, jnybot, imperial queen, dragonmactir, Guile, mille libri and lemonjay.

"Je n'ai pas peur de toi, hérétique! Je suis la servante fidèle du Créateur!"= "I am not afraid of you, heretic! I am a faithful handmaiden of the Maker!"

"Ai-je dit que tu pouvais lever?" = "Did I say you could get up?" Bronwyn is very angry, and is rudely using the familiar "tu" to the priest, instead of the polite "vous." But the priest was rude first.

Thanks to sizuka2 for the words and ideas about "Over the

Hills and Far away." Go, Sharpe!

Here follows a rant about Tallis, the Ben-Hassrath, and how much I hate certain aspects of Qunari culture. This is optional reading.

Ben-Hassrath means "the Heart of the Many" in Qunari. Here is what the Dragon Age wiki says about them:

"The purpose of the Ben-Hassrath is protecting the faith and the innocents. Ben-Hassrath are considered priests. For Qunari they are leaders who maintain unity, which Qunari believe to be a strength."

Sounds nice, doesn't it? Awww, they protect the innocents...

"Ben-Hassrath primarily act as enforcers of religious law in the Qunari society who are responsible for policing the populace. and "re-educating" both the Qunari who do not follow the established norms and new converts."

Here, the truth comes out. They're the Gestapo. That word 're-education'... That's always the big giveaway that we're dealing with a merciless totalitarian society.

"They also act as spies and assassins for the Qunari as well as perform other clandestine missions."

And they're also the KGB! (Or that hated figure, the political officer) We already know that if you misbehave or fail to submit to reeducation among the Qunari, they'll fry your

brain with gamek. The Ben-Hassrath also kill other people.

"Both genders can be Ben-Hassrath but they're separated by specialization: female Ben-Hassrath watch and re-educate adult females and children, while male Ben-Hassrath deal with adult males. Male Qunari can join the Ben-Hassrath despite the fact that they fall under the priesthood. Female Ben-Hassrath learn how to fight—but in a different manner from a soldier, and unlike the soldiers the Ben-Hassrath do not live by their blade."

So for all Sten's preaching about how woman cannot be warriors, the Qunari are fine with female assassins. This is splitting hairs to a ridiculous degree, and only an indoctrinated Qunari would be taken in by it. Tallis does in fact live by her blade. And by her lies, I'll grant you.

"In fact, it seems that the Ben-Hassrath prefer to use non-violent means to achieve their goals, as Tallis argues: 'There are other paths. They do not all need to lead to the same destination.'"

And she says this to people just as she's about to kill them. She gives them a choice between running away like a coward—and probably being executed as a traitor—and fighting her. In other words, it's the usual Qunari choice: "Do as I say, or I'll kill you." Then, after she kills them, Tallis always looks sorrowful and stuff. That's how you know she's really a good guy. Tallis enlists a band of four strong fighters to support her. That's a clear indication that she knows from

the first that her mission will not be completed by 'non-violent' means.

"Most of the Ben-Hassrath are hornless, therefore Qunari consider a lack of horns to be very intimidating. The Qunari prefer Ben-Hassrath from races other than Qunari to be spies in foreign lands since they are better suited to this role."

Yes, because eight-foot-tall giants stand out. Sorry for the rant. I absolutely loathe the whole moral premise of Mark of the Assassin, and I find Tallis a horrid, prosing, hypocritical Mary-Sue. I hate her more than any other character in canon, including Rendon Howe. I find Hawke supporting her absolutely incredible to the point the plot breaks down. Why would he want to help conceal the existence of Qunari agents? The Qunari are enemies of Kirkwall!

115. The Wild Swans of Highever

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 115: The Wild Swans of Highever

On the way out of Lydes, they were overtaken by a company of Fereldans who wished to serve at the front. It was a miscellany of freeholders, scouts, unemployed artisans, sprinkled with and officered by those who called themselves mercenaries, but were certainly bandits in lean times. They traveled light and moved fast, being only too skilled in living off the land and the people dwelling there.

Among the company were some friends of Brosca, who recognized them with a whoop.

"Bustrum! Ostap! Come on! Join us over here! Thorwald, you remember them, don't you?"

Thorwald managed a weak smile, remembered the intimidating chaperones who had loomed over his first meeting with Brosca.

Brosca, of course, was really glad to see the Avvars, and gave a shout to Bronwyn.

"Bronwyn! Look! It's Bustrum and Ostap!"

Some were shocked at her familiar tone, but Bronwyn turned to see what Brosca wanted. She was pleased to see the Avvar scouts herself, and waved them forward to speak to her.

The two men loped up the column to her, not the least weary after their forced march, and gave her the brisk nods that passed for bows among the Avvars.

"Well met, Avvar friends. I thought you were staying in the foothills by the Frostback Gates."

"There are great doings here in the west, Lady Queen," rumbled Bustrum. "Rumors of the great war of our time. We wish to see new lands in which to fight, for Korth the Mountain Father smiles on the willing warrior. There must be representatives of our people who will sing the tale in our villages one day. "

Bronwyn laughed. "I hope we're all around to sing of it then. Who is your captain?"

"You are, Lady, if you will have us."

"Did you wish to join the Wardens?"

The two men exchanged glances, and shrugged. Ostap answered, "If it comes to that, we would not object."

They were given a place among the Wardens, and marched on sturdily. Brosca remarked on their strength to Sigrun.

"If the oxen get tired, those two can pull the wagons."

By the time they were halfway to Verchiel, Bronwyn and Loghain had a much better grasp of their situation. A patrol had gone north to the port of Lydes, where they discovered that three Fereldan ships and their warriors had more or less taken control of the port. There had been multiple attempts to bribe each of the three captains by people desperate to flee Orlais. One enterprising fellow had gone in a fishing boat to Jader, and urged some shipmasters there to come to the port to take on passengers—some of whom would pay anything. The three Fereldan ships were very valuable where they were, in case they had wounded or refugees they did not trust to the hazards of the road back through Orlais.

Along the Imperial Highway they met more survivors, including a few former captains who had heard there was some sort of nobleman claiming to speak for the new Empress. Some of these were decent sorts, and willing to swear allegiance to Prosper as the Empress' proxy. Not all wanted to go west.

"Monseigneur, we're needed here, too!" one grizzled veteran protested. "We're the only ones keeping order in the Dales. The peasants have revolted in the south and are burning manors. There's talk of bands of apostate mages roaming the land. Down by Falais, some bandits haven taken over an entire village, and their leader calls himself a baron now!"

"If the darkspawn win," Prosper countered. "None of that will matter."

He saw the man's point, however, and allowed his company to act for the Imperial Crown in the countryside. As long as they spread the word about "Empress Celandine," they would have a degree of legitimacy.

As they went on, Bronwyn expected to see more refugees, but they did not. The theory was that anyone who could leave Verchiel had already left, and whoever was escaping the area around the mouth of the Orne was going south or west, or following the coast to the port of Lydes. It made sense. According to the Nevarran lore Jowan and Carver had picked up, dragons had a long flying range, and theoretically could cross the Waking Sea at Val Royeaux. It was an unpleasant thought.

They were also seeing more cases of Blight disease, and more Taint in the landscape. More dead, too. The game shot by hunters was carefully checked to make sure it was safe for consumption.

One of their hunters was attacked by a pack of desperate bandits. He managed to make it to safety, and a punitive party was sent to track them down. There was something of a scrap, since the bandits had taken over an abandoned farmhouse. Afterwards, it was clear that all of the bandits had been riddled with Taint. and the Wardens were hastily summoned.

"They'll all infected," Jowan told Bronwyn. "And all the victims the bandits kidnapped: women, girls, boys...It's bad. Most of them are already ghouls."

Bronwyn ordered the area cleared.

"This is Warden business."

The dead bandits were thrown in a ditch. The prisoners—grey-skinned, hollow-eyed, raving—were examined. At first glance, it appeared that all of them were beyond saving.

"The only thing we can give them now is peace," said Jowan.

Anders tensed. "Quick to give up on them, aren't you? Who's going to cut their throats? You?"

"I was thinking we'd give them all some Quiet Death..."

"I don't kill my patients!"

"Lower your voices!" Bronwyn hissed. "These people have suffered enough. What do you suggest, Anders? That we make that little girl over there undergo the Joining instead? That's a far worse way to die, and you know it!"

He looked sick and hunted. "I can't just kill them," he whispered. "Some of them might make it. They deserve a chance!"

"And what are we going to do with child Wardens?"

Anders threw up his hands in exasperation. "I don't know! They can carry messages! They can help Adaia! They can do anything but lie there and die!"

Jowan shook his head. "You're condemning them to a short life of nightmares and violence. How can they gather darkspawn blood? I thought we were holding off on the Joining for our new people until they could face the darkspawn."

"We'll give them a choice," said Bronwyn.

She knelt by one woman huddled in a corner, whimpering over her blighted hands.

"Your only chance is to become a Grey Warden. It might cure you. Would you like to try?"

Tears trickled from the greying eyes. The woman shook her head. "I just want it to be over! Over!"

Jowan gave her some Quiet Death to drink, and eased her back onto the floor as she died painlessly. Two of the women were beyond comprehending what was said to them. In the end, Bronwyn had the two of them, the three girls and two boys—the elder perhaps thirteen—taken into storeroom of the little house, and the Joining potion administered to them. None of them survived. It was ugly, but at least none of them were quite aware of what was happening.

"Let's not do that again," Bronwyn muttered, her throat thick.

"Bronwyn! There's another one!"

The little boy was hiding behind a kitchen cupboard. He

screamed, fingers scrabbling on the dirty boards, as Brosca hauled him out. He stared wildly at Bronwyn with sunken eyes and sobbed in terror at the armored, bloody figures surrounding him.

"Don't kill me! Please don't kill me! I'll be good!" He clasped his hands and began babbling out the Chant.

*"O Maker, hear my cry:
Guide me through the blackest nights
Steel my heart against..."*

He paused, confused.

"Steel my heart against..." He sobbed, "I don't remember what I'm supposed to steel my heart against!"

Leliana stooped down by him and took him in her arms. *"Steel my heart against the temptation of the wicked."* she quoted. "You were doing very well. Don't be frightened. We're here to help you." She looked up at Bronwyn, blue eyes imploring.

Bronwyn sighed. "All right. We have some medicine that may help you if you're brave and drink it right up."

He whimpered, "It's poison?"

"No," Bronwyn answered, feeling like the foulest liar in the world. "It tastes terrible, but I've drunk it and I'm still alive. Drink it down." She signaled to Anders, who looked thoroughly sick, but it had been his idea, after all.

Miraculously, they soon had a small Grey Warden. Alistair gently took the sleeping lad up with him on his horse. The bodies were burned, as was the farmhouse, the barns, and all the sheds. Anything that looked like Taint was set ablaze as well. They rode back to camp in silence.

A few hours later, they learned that the boy's name was Pepin, that he was ten years old, and that he was the son of one of the bandits. The father, they also learned, had not always been a bandit, but was a bookbinder by trade. Father and son had escaped from Val Royeaux, and on the road had fallen in with some other refugees. In the end, they had done what was necessary to survive, like so many others. He was told, and seemed to accept, that his father had been sick because of the darkspawn, and that had caused him to do wicked things that he would not have done otherwise. Quinn was assigned to be his mentor, much to the bigger boy's bewilderment.

"I didn't reckon I'd ever be in charge of anything," he mumbled.

Bronwyn said, "Well, you're in charge of Pepin. Make sure he eats, sleeps, washes, and doesn't get into trouble."

They had been forced to burn all his clothing. Of course they had no armor that would fit a scrawny ten-year-old. Some elven clothing was made to fit, and the smallest Grey Warden tunic was belted over all. Some of the other camp boys were quite jealous of what they deemed Pepin's splendid

appearance, and no one outside of the Wardens and Loghain understood that the boy was really, himself, a Grey Warden.

"And he now has thirty years," Loghain remarked. "That will make him, what? Forty when he dies of Grey Warden old age?"

"It's better than dying of it at ten," Bronwyn maintained, hoping that it was. "And who's to say he'll make it that far? We have yet to meet the Archdemon."

There was some debate about where to go after Verchiel. Should they go to Montsimnard? It would be the easy route, lying as it did on the Imperial Highway. It might also not be the wisest route if Val Royeaux was their destination. The Imperial Highway looped all the way around Lake Celestine. That would be a ridiculous detour for the army, though Prosper worried about the situation in cities like Val Firmin and Val Celeste. Instead, some distance southwest of of Verchiel, a road —La Voie Verte—branched off from the Imperial Highway toward the River Orne and ultimately to Val Royeaux. Loghain persisted in calling it the Greenway, and it was so marked on his exquisitely detailed map of Orlais. That road, too, would not take them on a direct route the mouth of the River Orne, but a little upriver, the place where Emperor Drakon long ago decreed that the bridge would be built. After the bridge, two roads diverged again. One led west to Val Foret and the other traveled almost due north to Val Royeaux.

"The Imperial army camped on the west side of the river, the

night it was attacked," Loghain mused over dinner in camp. "They intended to go south and cross the bridge... here. The other side of the river is marshy and difficult to cross, it seems."

Prosper agreed with that. "Quite impossible on horseback. Impossible for wagons, too. For that matter, the darkspawn may be there by now, but the marshes are treacherous and a bad place for a battle. If they are not Blighted, they are only good for shooting birds. There is good hunting there: ducks, geese, even swans. The Empress was very fond of roast swan, presented in its feathers." A touch of nostalgia colored his voice.

"Well, I certainly hope nobody tries to serve that to *me*," Bronwyn laughed. "Couslands can't eat swans."

Astrid, a few seats away, overheard her. She had never seen a real swan, but she had seen pictures of them in books. They were supposed to be remarkably graceful birds.

"What's the matter with swans?" she asked. "Are they poison?"

"Certainly not!" Prosper replied. "They are a royal dish, and only the Empress and those nobles she favored were permitted to eat them. They require careful preparation, but with the right sauce, they are quite magnificent. Is there also such a sumptuary law in Ferelden?"

"Not that I've heard of," Loghain shrugged. "I find them too oily

and leathery to trouble with, and..." he found himself about to refer to Celia, and her impassioned pleas to spare the birds, and decided that would be impolitic. "Some people find them too beautiful to hunt. They'd rather see them swimming in an ornamental pond in their gardens than serve them at the table."

"And that's certainly the case in Highever," Bronwyn declared. "It's tradition. No Cousland can eat a swan. It's a crime to shoot them in Highever."

"Why?" asked Leliana. She smiled, and quickly swallowed a bite. "There's a story about it, isn't there? Do tell it, please, Your Majesty!"

"In order to add it to your collection?" Bronwyn teased.

"Story! Story!" demanded Carver, a bit tipsy. He turned pink as Loghain nailed him with an icy gaze. Gathering his courage. "We Wardens used to tell stories among ourselves. We haven't in ages."

"It's true," sighed Leliana, "We did. Even when it was just a few of us. I remember that Her Majesty told the very first story when she traveled only with Arl Alistair, Morrigan, Sten, and me. Just five of us, and how simple our mission seemed then."

"Our mission continues," said Sten, speaking up. "At the time, we were asked to participate in story telling, that our Commander might comprehend our natures more clearly. It is

not illogical."

"I remember that story," Alistair said, wagging his brows at Bronwyn. "It was pretty gruesome."

"'Twas an excellent story, and a sensible warning against blind trust." Morrigan maintained.

"So tell us about the swans," Astrid said, settling back into her seat.

Voices around the trestle tables hushed, as word spread that the Queen would tell a story. The Fereldans were pleased, and the Orlesians charmed. Berthold de Guesclin watched her, heart burning oddly. He was not alone in his feelings. Old and young, from Arl Wulffe to Arl Corbus, waited in anticipation. Little Pepin could not quite stop eating — for he had never been so hungry— but munched more quietly, looking on in wonder, clinging to Quinn's side. The Avvars drank mead from their horns, glad they had chosen to be here among heroes, and hear the tales of old. Fenris hung on every word, his green eyes glittering in the torchlight.

Bronwyn saw there was no getting out of it. "If I must. This is an tale of the Couslands. It seems odd to share it in such a faraway land."

Bronwyn's story of The Wild Swans of Highever

There was once a daughter of the Teyrn of Highever, whom a

jealous stepmother transformed into a swan.

Her father was filled with grief and rage. The false stepmother he slew, and he sent far away to the Circle of Magi to ask for help returning his daughter to her human form.

Meanwhile he put a chain of gold about the swan's neck, so all would know her as his daughter, and he and his huntsmen kept watch on her as she swam about the pond near the castle.

But the Circle was slow to respond, and the teyrn waited long for their aid. One day, as the breath of autumn chilled the air, a flight of swans passed overhead. One of the swans called out to the teyrn's daughter, and she spread her wings and flew away after them, far away over the Waking Sea.

The winter was long and sad, and the teyrn mourned his lost daughter. He kept a great mage at the castle, hoping against hope that someday his daughter would return and be delivered.

The spring came, and there was a flutter of white seen by the pond. The teyrn hastened there, followed by the great mage and the teyrn's huntsmen. They made their way through the tall reeds, and saw that up ahead a swan had made a nest. The teyrn saw a swan on the nest, and about her neck was a golden chain. He called out gladly, but suddenly there was a cry and a great blow, as the swan's mate rose up out of the reeds and attacked the teyrn with his mighty wings, and stabbed at him with his powerful beak.

The teyrn was angry, and called his huntsmen to shoot the swan, but the mage told him it was too late: his daughter had taken a mate, and as it is the swan's way to mate for life, there was nothing to be done. No longer was she a maiden in swan form, but a wild swan who was once the Teyrn of Highever's daughter.

So the teyrn went sadly away, grieving each day: grieving when he saw the two beautiful birds swimming together on the pond, twining their necks together in the way of swans; grieving at the sight of their cygnets following along behind. The wild swans left in the autumn, but returned for many a year, until one spring they did not, and the nest among the reeds stood empty; and the teyrn died soon after.

But from that time to this, it is a hanging offense to shoot a swan within the teyrnir of Highever, and no Cousland may harm one anywhere, lest he be named kinslayer. And that is the story of the Wild Swans of Highever.

"The Queen is wise," Ostap muttered to Bustrum. "the Lady of the Skies forbids the killing of swans!"

"I knew that Couslands didn't eat swans," Corbus told Wulffe. "But I didn't know why. I'll never eat a swan as long as I live!"

Wulffe snorted and slapped him on the back. For that matter, the Wulfes never ate swans either.

Prosper felt oddly like a cannibal, thinking back on magnificent

feasts. Quite a charming story, though, if in the old style.

They saw grim sights as they neared Verchiel. Smoke rose on the horizon. At one point they came across the remains of some sort of skirmish. Astrid and Falkor got down and turned over some of the bodies.

Bronwyn rode up and looked over the repulsive, rotting remains, and shook her head. "Humans can be their own worst enemies." To Astrid she said, "And we haven't yet come across any Orlesian Wardens. Where are they?"

"Apparently they're all west of Verchiel by now. Do you think everyone from Montsimnard went north?"

"I can't believe that would be a sensible thing to do. The Orlesians must have left some sort of garrison at Montsimnard. I'm considering sending a courier there."

"Not a bad idea. It will have to be a Warden. Or two. Maybe three would be smarter. If there's anything to coordinate with, we should give it a try."

"Maybe we can spare one of the Jader Wardens. He's likely to be known to the Wardens in Montsimnard. Clovis irritates me, and he's got a good horse.. His questionable attitude won't matter, as long as I send sound people of our own. We might be delayed at Verchiel anyway."

"At least we've not yet seen darkspawn."

"There is that." Bronwyn thought about it. "I haven't sensed them either. It's almost like being blind..."

They both laughed, and a little later Anders and Morrigan were requested to fly ahead and see what there was to see in Verchiel.

Well, darkspawn were to be seen, first of all. The city was surrounded by the creatures, their numbers increasing daily, gibbering and shaking weapons at the defenders on the walls. It was not the horde, or if it was, it was only a small contingent. They were certainly enough to be dangerous. No one was traveling in or out of the city, and the nearby farms had been destroyed. So far, the archers on the walls were enough to keep the creatures at bay.

Flying into Verchiel proved fairly dangerous. That was not just because of what was outside the barred city gates, but because there was a great deal of tension inside, and there was one district in Verchiel in which a hawk or a raven looked positively tasty.

The mages in bird form learned that once the elves had done their part to build up the city's defenses, they were returned to the Alienage, which was then locked down. The elves were starving. De Flambard cared nothing about that. The Alienage was not near a curtain wall, and the elves were of no further use. He would have let them go their way, had it not been imperative to keep the gates shut. While the elves had no bows and arrows to shoot birds, they threw rocks very

accurately, and some had slingshots to give them greater range. The birds fled away quickly, evading the snares, the missiles, and the bitter, hungry curses.

The rest of Verchiel was not particularly well-fed, either, but they were not yet starving. A great deal of food had been stored away, and it was being doled out sparingly in order to last as long as possible. There was much resentment about that, and a growing fear of the darkspawn. It was still advisable for Anders and Morrigan to be very careful. Flying through open windows and listening to conversations out of sight proved the safest mode of espionage.

Aside from the elves, it was clear that the Sieur de Flambard was not popular with the city, but admired by his soldiers. They thought he had shown remarkable foresight.

"Knows what he's doing, he does," a guard maintained. "He kept the sick out, so at least we don't have Blight Plague. If any cases are found, his lordship's given the order to shoot full of arrows from a distance!"

"That's a mercy," agreed his fellow. "We don't need the darkspawn plague here like it is out in the country!"

The Sieur de Flambard also enjoyed the support of the Chantry. Perhaps the Revered Mother was afraid of him, and perhaps not, but even the Templars were obeying his orders. He, for his part, was giving them a free hand with any mages found in the city. As it was impossible to transport them to a Circle, they were being quietly executed in the lower levels of

the Chantry. Anders was so enraged by this piece of news that he nearly lost control of his shape.

Morrigan carefully penetrated a little deeper into the central Keep, where de Flambard had taken up residence. Eventually Anders followed her, wanting a look at the man.

He looked... like a normal person. An anxious, worried person. The worst part was that he thought he was doing his best. He was surrounded by captains and clerks, trying to hold the city together, trying to deal with the darkspawn noose tightening around the city's throat. He simply did not consider elves and mages to be citizens... or even people.

Morrigan studied the Orlesian more dispassionately. This was man who might need to die very soon. There was no time to bandy words with a fool.

They spent a little longer, eavesdropping out of sight in the halls of power. They listened to what the man's subordinates said behind his back. Then they listened to what was being said in the street. At last they flew high, high, high above the walls, and away from the city.

They returned to the column, keeping far beyond bowshot. They discreetly came down amid the trees ahead of Bronwyn and Loghain, and then walked out in human form. Loghain snorted at the sight of them, but was glad of their information.

"The darkspawn have reached Verchiel," Anders reported.

"Not the horde itself, but some fairly strong bands. A few hundred all together, spread out on the plain. It's bad enough there that the city is locked down. The city archers are keeping the darkspawn back so far, but I suspect not for long."

Morrigan added, "The nobleman who commands the city is a masterful man, and not without some talent, but he dares not lead a sally out to crush the invaders, lest he be locked out himself. The people are angry with him and his men. The washerwomen whine that their children are hungry, and that their leader does nothing to drive the darkspawn away."

"Not all the city dislikes him." said Anders. "The Chantry thinks he's just the thing because he doesn't care if they execute every mage they find. The elves hate him, but they're locked up and starving, and soon won't be a problem."

Loghain was unimpressed by all of it. "So his strategy is to hide behind his walls and let the darkspawn take what they want. How long does he think that will work?"

"They're well supplied, and the food is being rationed. That's the reason that the people are angry. I don't know what he plans beyond that. Eventually they'll be swamped. He must know that. If more ogres show up, they could get past the arrows and batter down the gates."

Bronwyn felt a rush of anger. "He's probably planning to keep holding on until somebody else solves the problem for him. He has no intention of helping. Just clinging to what he has. And

once the Blight is over, he'll congratulate himself for his cleverness."

They met briefly with their commanders, discussing the mage's report. Prosper looked at Anders and Morrigan, a bit puzzled, wondering how they could have gleaned so much information in such a short time. Did they see far-off events in a crystal? He had heard of such things, and wondered what he could offer these mages to change their allegiance. The man was a Warden, and spoken for, but the woman was beautiful and obviously highly intelligent. He had noticed her before at the Fereldan Court. She was quite the prize. He must find a pretext to give her an impressive gift.

"The Sieur de Flambard hates and fears Grey Wardens," said Bronwyn to the council assembled. "Therefore, Wardens will defeat the darkspawn force surrounding Verchiel. We'll attack at dawn, with the sun at our backs."

"Surely with some support," Loghain objected. "Your mage scouts indicate that there are between three to five hundred darkspawn— perhaps more under the cover of the forest."

Prosper observed the conversation without speaking; curious about how these two would conduct themselves when they did not agree. Bronwyn seemed very determined.

"Support in reserve only. I have a strong force of Wardens, including some auxiliaries and six golems. I have a large number of recruits: over eighty, in fact. I need to see how they

conduct themselves against darkspawn for the first time. I'd also like to protect the rest of the army from possible infection as long as possible. I need to try out some new tactics against the darkspawn. Most of all, however, I want to rub in de Flambard's face the importance of the Grey Wardens."

She turned to Knight-Commander Greagoir and First Enchanter Irving with a smile. "And now I really must ask for the names of the recruits I previously requested. I believe it was ten mages and two Templars."

The two old men sighed. She had not forgotten about them after all. Grudgingly, Greagoir wrote out a list with Irving's input, and it was handed over. Bronwyn smiled on them.

"Send them to the Warden camp right away. They need to hear the briefing tonight and have a bit of time to settle in."

She then shared with them the tactical surprise she had planned for the darkspawn. There were gasps of shock all around—some admiring, like Prosper, and some very disapproving, like Greagoir. Corbus' face was a study in hopeless longing. The Fereldans were certainly surprised by the idea, but not as much so as the Orlesians, who thought the days of myth and legend were once again upon them. The Dwarves thought it a good joke on the darkspawn, and the Dalish considered it a very sound scheme, and secretly planned to use it themselves in future.

Loghain was not exactly shocked — and did not allow a flicker of amazement to appear on his stony face. If she could pull

this off, it would change the prospects of the campaign. Was he jealous of the adventure? Maybe a little. It really was — what was the word Cailan had loved so much? — yes: it was *glorious*.

It seemed less glorious when various noblemen and chevaliers approached Bronwyn for her "favor." Loghain was just about to draw his sword, when he remembered hearing about some ridiculous Orlesian custom, in which a man requested a "favor"— a glove, a ribbon, or some such— from a lady he admired to carry into battle as a keepsake. Bronwyn looked a little taken aback herself.

She rallied, though, and smiled. "Only His Majesty the King may have my favor."

Loghain was quite pleased, though he wondered what kind of favor she meant. Knowing her, it could be a spare gauntlet or a boot knife. On further consideration, the boot knife was not at all a bad idea...

A sizable force indeed. Riordan had urged her to do some serious recruiting, and she had. Some of them were unwell, and her Healers would have to do their best

She had eighteen mage recruits, and was fairly chuffed about that. Even if only half of them survived the battle and the Joining, she would have a significant magical force. Her current mages were spread too thin: ten Circle mage and eight apostates would be a tremendous help. She turned them

over to her experienced mages for assessment. If there were quality Healers among them, they would be charged with that duty, and no other tomorrow.

Morrigan, Anders, and she had traced out a rough map of the country around Verchiel. The darkspawn were based in three crude camps, and were more active at night. With the dawn, they tended to settle down and seek the shade of the rocks and trees. The Grey Wardens would strike them hard, just as they were least prepared for it. Advance teams each would move out fast, to be supported by the rest. She read out the names of the advance teams, and explained just what that would mean. Fenris looked mildly horrified, but did not refuse outright.

Nor did the six mages, on whom the plan rested. Not even Morrigan objected. Bronwyn made her orders clear, especially what to do at certain crucial points.

Then there were the six golems, which, ironically Bronwyn put under Shale's command. Astrid laughed out loud, but agreed. She could not command the golems herself without forgoing the adventure of being in the advance party, and that was an experience not to be missed.

Bronwyn went on with her briefing: "All of you, including the golems, will be given a bag of grenades. Thank you, Adaia and Siofranni, for your tireless work. All of you who will be throwing: you have seen the damage radius of these weapons. Do your best not to hit your comrades," she said, lifting a brow. "The point of this battle is to kill *darkspawn*."

There were some wry chuckles. Soldiers were always injuring their own side in battle. It was regrettable, but inevitable.

Then it was time to address the recruits. Some of them looked grey and frail. Some looked desperate. Most looked at least willing. It was their only chance, after all.

"You have each been assigned to one of four parties, under the command of Wardens Aveline, Emrys, Oghren, or Clovis. You will obey your officer. Each of you will be given one of these."

She held up a little crystal vial.

"It is nearly unbreakable. In the aftermath of the battle, you are to collect a vial's worth of darkspawn blood. That is something expected of all Wardens, and is a proof of your participation in the struggle against the Blight. Keep the vial and present it to your officer when you are asked. That will not be until nightfall, when we have sorted out the situation around Verchiel."

Little Pepin whispered in Quinn's ear. The bigger boy shook his head, and Pepin tugged on his arm, dissatisfied.

"Is there a problem, Pepin?" Bronwyn asked.

The boy shrank away behind Quinn's broad shoulders. Quinn gave Bronwyn a grin.

"He just wanted to know if he was going to be in the battle."

The Wardens laughed— some of them not very kindly. Bronwyn gave those a look, and said, "Of course not, Pepin. You need more time to grow strong and well. You will remain here in camp with... " She thought about it. "With Arl Corbus. We need a Warden to represent us among the rest of the army."

She fixed the Wardens with a stern eye, calling them to attention. "The four support parties will advance on foot." She saw the look in Boniface Clery's eye. "The advance *must* be on foot, because horses will not approach the darkspawn unless specially trained, and we have few of those horses. Untrained horses will bolt, and be worse than useless. In the future, if you have the ability to train horses and wish to make your mount more effective, we can work on that. There is no time now."

There was just time for a meal, a final look at the necessary gear, and some sleep. They would be up before dawn, moving into position. The army would be watching, as well as the Sieur de Flambard in Verchiel. This was to be the Grey Wardens' show — Bronwyn's show —it it must be a great success.

Morrigan was in the process of brewing the women's tea, when a young page appeared before her, bowing, presenting her with an a little inlaid box and a letter.

"Madame Morrigan," he said. "This is for you. There is no need for a return message."

He vanished into the maze of tents. Morrigan turned the box over, eyeing it with suspicion, and then opened the letter instead.

Madame—

Permit me the honor of presenting to you this trifle as a token of my respect and esteem. Your extraordinary talents and ready wit have made you remarkable even in this company. I will not trouble you with expressing sentiments that you are perhaps not prepared to hear. It will be enough if the gift is of some small use to you in the future.

Believe me, Madame, your devoted admirer,

Prosper de Montfort

She smirked, her vanity flattered, but for all that she opened the box very carefully. One never knew.

"Ah..."

A ring. Quite a magnificent ring, in fact. Pure and heavy gold was elaborately, fantastically chased in the form of a two serpents facing one another. Held between their fangs was a large emerald. Morrigan studied it with the eye of a woman who had recently discovered jewelry and taken the trouble to learn good from bad. The emerald was a fine one, with a glint of blue deep within the green. Looking closer, she saw...

A hinge, and a hiding place beneath the stone. A poison ring.

She had heard of such things: read of them in old books. What did the duke mean by it? That he thought she was poisonous? Or that she might be in need of such tricks? The letter was respectful enough; in fact, it sounded like the man was attempting to pay court to her. If she wished to be some sort of pampered concubine—which she did not—very likely she could do worse.

But the ring was pleasing to her. She found that it fit well enough on a forefinger. The weight pleased her too. She would wear it, and tell Anders that it was plunder. And so it was, in a way... As to the secret compartment, she would give some thought as to what to put there.

Guards were posted, and the army settled down for the night. In the Wardens' camp, Leliana and Aeron sang a duet, sweet and melancholy. Three of the recruits had some talent, too, and joined in. It was something to remember. Bronwyn hoped the bass would survive: he had quite a fine voice. One of the women had a little dulcimer, and it made a pleasant addition to the lutes.

*"The minstrel boy to the war is gone,
In the ranks of death you'll find him;
His father's sword he has girded on,
And his wild harp slung behind him..."*

She leaned against a tree, looking at her people as they gathered to hear the entertainment. How many would among the living tomorrow? Some of them were young: not as young

as Quinn and Pepin, sitting there open-mouthed and entranced by the music; but too young for this. Of course, war and the demands of war always fell heavily on the young.

Velanna was scowling and dissatisfied. Danith spoke quietly in her ear, probably telling her to settle down. When the singers were done and applauded, there was more music: this time from the Dalish.

*"Hahren na melana sahlín
emma ir abelas
souver'inan isala hamin
vhenan him dor'felas
in uthenera na revas"*

Bronwyn smiled, remembering the song from her wedding. She had never thought to ask what it meant, but it was beautiful.

Oghren and Sigrun had organized a game of Wicked Grace and were gloating over their winnings. Bronwyn gave them a wink. Better for Oghren to be gambling than drinking. Oh, wait: he was doing that, too. Morrigan was making her blasted awful tea in a cauldron over a campfire. Anders did not want the women afflicted with Blight disease to take any, since it might interfere with the potions he was already giving them. There were unlikely to become pregnant in their current state, anyway.

Ah, look there: Adaia and Siofranni were curled up together in the shadows, kissing passionately. They seemed happy. That

was always a good thing. And Nuala and Steren were also curled up together, but sound asleep.

It was time for her to sleep, too. Or at least to turn in.

She and Loghain had a lovely big tent now, given to them by the citizens of Jader. It was red, alas, and so sleeping in it made her think of being inside a dragon's mouth. But it really was quite big and lovely. It even had a partition in the back to given them a separate place to sleep. While anyone could hear anything going on in a tent, it gave a pleasant illusion of privacy.

Morrigan ran her down as the tent doorway, a steaming cup in hand, a stern look in her yellow eyes. Bronwyn took the cup, and smiled.

"Thank you. You should get some sleep yourself."

"I shall," Morrigan said stiffly. "As soon as I prevent our female companions from making fools of themselves."

The tent guards looked straight ahead, pretending to hear and see nothing. Bronwyn suspected that they had plenty to discuss when off duty.

"Good night, Morrigan."

Loghain always said he was unable to sleep, the night before a battle. Bronwyn was excited, but thought she would nod off easily enough, after some proper, thorough love-making. She

slipped out of her clothes and into the wide camp bed, waving the servants off. Where was Loghain? She could hear him, some distance away, conferring with his officers. There... that was Cauthrien, and that... was Corbus. And there was the gruff voice of Arl Wulffe. The conversation sounded like it was concluding. Bronwyn blew out the candle, and lay in the red-tinted darkness, listening to the familiar noises of a camp at night.

The Dalish were still singing.

"vir sulahn'nehn

vir dirthera

vir samahl la numin

vir 'lath sa'vunin'"

Loghain said goodnight, and Bronwyn listened to his approaching footsteps, smiling to herself. Soon after, the partition flap opened, and Loghain entered, trying to be quiet.

"I hear you," Bronwyn said softly.

In the chilly grey light before dawn, preparations were made. The Wardens moved out to the open field west of the camp, within sight of the city of Verchiel, and then stood aside to give the six most experienced mages some needed room. There was a change of air pressure, and a mighty work of magic. Then there were cries of wonder.

"Those are wyverns?" yelled Quinn, almost babbling. "They're

a lot bigger than I'd thought they'd be. They're really big. Are you sure they can only carry three? Because they're really, really big."

Morrigan, Anders, Tara, Niall, Jowan, and Velanna had all shifted into their wyvern form. The sight impressed even Shale.

"How novel... how refreshing to feel petite. Indeed, I feel positively dainty. Is it your plan for the mages to simply knock the darkspawn about with their tails? That might do it, you know."

"It might!" Bronwyn laughed. "This is something in the nature of an experiment. Come on, you lot, we need to put this harness on them."

The other Wardens wanted to crowd close, to touch the wyverns, to examine them in delight and awe. Ostap and Bustrum were as awestruck as the rest, but perhaps not as surprised. These were, after all, the days of high adventure. They were fortunate to be living in them.

To the wyvern mages, Bronwyn said, "Do you remember what I said about bounding along? It would probably snap our necks. A nice, fast, smooth run at the darkspawn is what we're hoping for."

Wyvern Morrigan scoffed, sounding just like her human self. Wyvern Velanna bridled scornfully. Bronwyn only smiled. She was not too worried about Velanna following orders, since

two of her passengers were Dalish—Steren and Nuala—and she would likely take pains not to deliberately harm them.

Bronwyn was riding into battle on the back of a wyvern herself, along with Leliana and Zevran. Morrigan did not care a pin for either of the latter, but Bronwyn flattered herself that Morrigan wanted her alive and well at least a little longer.

Adaia and Siofranni were handing out bags of grenades, helped by the Glavonak brothers and some of their new engineers. Thorwald draped a bag over Broasca's shoulders and was rewarded with a deep kiss that left him red and grinning.

Wyverns were far taller at the shoulder than a horse. Bronwyn could use the harness to vault up into her saddle, but a number of others used the mounting blocks cobbled together for them. Zevran was second in the composite saddle and Leliana was third, giving her the space to use her bow freely.

There were Carver and Astrid, laughing together, climbing up onto Jowan's wide blue back. Fenris joined them, smiling somewhat ruefully, but smiling all the same. Those in the foot company looked on with various expressions of envy or deep, deep relief.

It was possible to sense the darkspawn ahead. Some must be coming their way, alerted by the shared Taint. They were in for a surprise.

Meanwhile, half the army had come out to see them. Once the

wyverns were spotted, there was a rush, slowed by a few responsible officers.

"Are those *griffons*?" demanded one soldier, giddy with excitement.

"They're wyverns," declared Bann Cauthrien, her face carefully expressionless, her belly roiling with the desire to jump right on the back of one of the creatures and race off to battle. She added, "Everyone knows that griffons are extinct. And white."

Maeve managed to smooth down Junior Warden Pepin's hair and tunic, and make a brief bob to Arls Wulffe and Corbus.

"The Queen ordered Warden Pepin to stay with Arl Corbus," she told them.

Arl Wulffe bit back a laugh. Corbus, briefly distracted from the wonder of wyverns, was very curious about the little boy. He supposed he was like a page to the Wardens. He could practice his Orlesian with him, maybe. He was about Lothar's age, and Corbus missed his brother terribly at the moment. Lothar would have loved the wyverns.

Prosper managed to smile graciously at the sight before them. It was all he could do not to saddle up Leopold and go, too. For that matter, he wondered how Leopold was faring, and if he could smell this band of his own kind. If he did, he might well break loose and follow them. Prosper ordered a flunkey to warn the grooms, and then sighed a bit. Another

time, perhaps.

Loghain hardly knew what to say. There was Bronwyn up there, going into battle on a heraldic monster, off to fight other monsters. She looked her way and flicked him a jaunty salute. He lifted his hand in response, but could not manage a smile in response. He did not trust any one of those mages not to go mad and turn on their own people. They needed watching. Still, it was quite the sight. A little hot flame of excitement warned the icy-hard surface of his pragmatism.

For their part, the mages in wyvern shape were fairly excited themselves: their huge eyes seeing shapes and colors denied to mere humans; their ears picking the tread of distant feet; their muzzles smelling the Taint even this far away.

The dogs were rather startled by the wyverns, but the more experienced of them, like Scout, knew that these were not enemies, but packmates in strange new shapes. They prepared to run into battle with their friends, pleased at the chance to tear at the evil-smelling enemies.

Once all the riders were settled into the harness, Bronwyn raised her arm and then dropped it, shouting, "Forward!"

The wyverns set off at a quick pace, careful not to jar their riders. The gait was extremely smooth and surprisingly silent, not at all what Bronwyn had expected. The wyverns picked up speed and then each moved toward the assigned targets. Darkspawn milled around a huge bonfires outside the city walls. They squawked with surprise and outrage at the huge

shapes heading in their direction. Bronwyn laughed, feeling tall and terrible on the back of this creature, and readied her first grenade. Behind her sounded Leliana's squeal of delight and Zevran's excited laughter.

Once in range. Wyvern Morrigan spat a mass of green venom at them. It was larger than a man's head, and splattered over the darkspawn in front, glowing ominously on impact. The poisoned darkspawn tottered, some tearing at their envenomed flesh. Morrigan crashed through their ranks, scattering them like toys. She turned quickly for another go, and Bronwyn clutched at the saddle, swaying precariously.

"Blessed Andraste!" cried Leliana. "This is *fun!*"

Bronwyn threw a grenade among some fallen darkspawn. It exploded, shaking its targets. A darkspawn rolled over, spitting blood. More explosions crashed around the battlefield as wyverns and their passengers reached their targets. Far behind came a "hurrah!" as the Wardens on foot trotted up to support them. The dogs darted in and out, knocking down bewildered darkspawn, ripping out their throats.

An ogre roared, off to their left, beating its massive chest and challenging the wyverns.

"Morrigan!" shouted Bronwyn. "Let's get him!"

They charged. The speed was intoxicating. The ogre bent, reaching for a log to use as a club. Before it could straighten, the wyvern was on it, slamming into its side, knocking it off

balance, clawing and spitting on it. Practically touching it, Bronwyn tossed a tar bomb into the ogre's face, blinding it. Leliana's arrow thudded into the throat, and Zevran threw a concussive grenade at its feet. They flashed past as it stumbled and fell.

Bronwyn glimpsed a big wyvern — it must be Tara— shaking a hurlock in fanged jaws, and then tossing it away, knocking down a half-dozen darkspawn. A flick from another wyvern's tail bludgeoned another band, shattering their very bones. Green venom dripped from scabby, Tainted bodies, slowing them, making them clumsy and weak.

It was a delirium of violence, unhampered by conscience or the demands of honor. They rushed on, nearly to the city walls, hardly noticing the little figures up there watching them and gesturing in excitement. There was time for one more run before the reinforcements reached them. Bronwyn gave a yell, and Morrigan circled back. She charged again, quick as a snake, and shattered a group of genlocks that had rallied against them. Two went down under Morrigan's clawed feet, and were shredded instantly, with barely a moment to utter their weird croaking death cry.

Bronwyn grabbed for her horn, and sounded a call.

Then, just as planned, she and the other melee fighters leaped down into the fray to close with the darkspawn. The wyverns moved to the outskirts of the fight, killing darkspawn stragglers, and acting as fighting platforms for the archers and grenadiers they carried.

Within moments, the others charged in on foot. Some, like Boniface Clery, were ferocious in battle; eager to prove all sorts of things to themselves. Some were hesitant and frightened, not the stuff of warriors. If they could survive this, Bronwyn had plans for some Warden support staff. Behind the foot soldiers the earth shook.

The golems had arrived, smashing the darkspawn down, moving astonishingly fast for creatures of stone and metal. Nothing the darkspawn did had much affect on them. They simply plowed through, grabbing up hurlocks and genlocks alike and crushing their skulls.

Bursts of light and color flashed around them, as the mages did their part. They had been ordered to be careful with their magic, and avoid hurting their own people with wide-area spells. Nonetheless, they could use targeted spells to great effect. Equally usefully, they could counter the malign magic of the darkspawn emissaries and heal their comrades.

The darkspawn nearby were annihilated, but the Wardens heard more fighting to the southwest, and charged toward it, letting the wyverns dash on ahead. Another ogre was discovered, and the wyverns pounced gleefully, rendering the monster one glowing mass of green venom before it toppled.

A half-dozen genlock archers made a stand behind some rocks. An arrow whizzed past Bronwyn's ear: close enough to make her angry.

"There!" she shouted, pointing. "Up there!"

A wyvern — possibly Anders, though it moved so fast it was difficult to tell — tore the stones asunder, spilling the darkspawn to the ground, when they were ripped apart by the dogs.

The scratchy sensation of nearby darkspawn was fading. Bronwyn divided her people once again into their patrols, and they combed the plains around the city for darkspawn stragglers. By midmorning, they were certain that the darkspawn were dead, and then they set about burning the bodies.

They were not unscathed. They had lost seven of the recruits, and there were injuries and wounds to be attended to. Bronwyn let the mages work, while she gathered her people together to assess their condition. Quite of few of them were ready for another go, if an enemy dared to show his face. Some of the recruits were in shock, but she knew that not all of them were the stuff of heroes. She made mental notes and instructed the wyverns to hold their forms. There was still Verchiel to be dealt with. She vaulted back into Morrigan's saddle, since looking menacing was the best card she had to play at the moment

And with that, Loghain decided it was time to send a herald to Verchiel. The Sieur de Flambard could hardly have missed the spectacle outside his own gates.

Unsurprisingly, Olivier de Flambard still did not want to open the gates of his city. Not to Duke Prosper de Montfort, not to

the Grey Wardens, and certainly not to Loghain Mac Tir. On the other hand, his city had been saved for the moment, against all hope and reason. He had seen warriors in Grey Warden tunics riding on what must be wyverns. No matter how often he rubbed his eyes, the wyverns were still there. Two... four... no *six* of them. They were very impressive. The leader of the party, dressed in splendid red plate, had vaulted onto the back of one of the creatures, and was directing operations from there.

A herald, escorted by horsemen bearing the arms of both Orlais and Ferelden, rode up to the gate before him.

"In the name of the Alliance against the darkspawn," shouted the herald. "In the names of Queen Bronwyn and King Loghain; in the name of Duke Prosper de Montfort, speaking for the Empress-Elect Celandine; in the name of Astrid, Paragon of Orzammar, I bid you open your gates in friendship!"

"I hold the city," the Sieur declared. "I owe allegiance to no one else— not even to the very impressive chevalier on the wyvern."

"Yes," the herald replied. "We were told you would say that. You are commanded to give the army of the alliance against the darkspawn every assistance in your power, as a loyal subject of Empress Celandine."

"I know of no Empress Celandine," replied de Flambard, from the safety of his thick walls and high towers. "Is that chevalier

the Duke?"

"It is not," replied the herald. "That lady is the Queen and Warden-Commander of Ferelden, Bronwyn Cousland. It is to her you owe your salvation. And while you may not know of Empress Celandine, who is a friend and intimate of Queen Bronwyn and King Loghain, she knows about you. Consider if you wish hereafter to be her loyal servant—or her enemy."

De Flambard had been terribly impressed by the battle before the city gates, but he had no idea of the size of the force this "alliance" could command. If it was no more than a thousand or more, he felt he could easily hold Verchiel against them. If they were more... then he would have to be prudent. Furthermore, there were other large creatures on the plain before him, like men of stone or metal, and he did not know what they were—only that they were powerful. They did not seem vulnerable to arrows, and could likely breach the gates. And this...alliance... *had* solved his darkspawn problem... for the moment.

"I do not parley with underlings," he declared. "I will speak only to the leaders of this 'alliance.'" He punctuated his words by leaving the gate tower. However, he immediately swung down, and watched the herald through an arrow slit, invisible to the party.

The herald rode back and conferred with... yes, it must really be the Red Queen out there... She was much more impressive than any Fereldan had the right to be. And given the size of the army emerging out of the trees and moving on

to the plain, he was just as glad he had not been rude to the envoy.

Especially so, since the Queen looked in his direction, and urged her terrifying steed to make for the gate. Her people followed her, warriors, wyverns, mages, stone-men, and metal-men alike. Maker, there were even *dogs* down there! It was not like an army at all, but something fantastic from a storybook.

The rest of the army, off in the distance, was approaching as well. Presumably Prosper de Montfort was among the horsemen in front. De Flambard had seen the duke once, but had never been presented to him, since the difference in their rank was so great. And the big man in silverite armor beside him. Maker! That really might be the notorious Loghain!

But here already was the Red Queen. De Flambard climbed back up to the tower to meet her. She pushed back her helmet and tossed it down to a dwarf, flashing her a brief winning smile. Then she turned her face to de Flambard and the smile was, alas, gone.

"You are the Sieur de Flambard, I presume?"

"I am he, Your Majesty. Everyone knows who you are."

"Good. That saves time. You have been holding this city against the darkspawn. As there are no darkspawn inside, I'll say, 'Good on you.' I understand you do not care much for Grey Wardens, but as Grey Wardens saved you today, I trust

I won't hear the kind of hard words you had for my comrade, Senior Warden Riordan."

De Flambard shivered with dread. Oh... she knew about that, somehow. Did she know everything? Courtesy, at this point, was imperative.

"I am indeed most grateful for Your Majesty's timely arrival."

"So you should be. Open the gates. I daresay Duke Prosper will wish to confer with you about internal Orlesian affairs, and relay the commands of the new Empress-elect. As her allies, I believe my party will remain in our nearby camp, and not tax your hospitality. I do have other demands of you, however. I want every suspected mage given into my custody. They are useful in battle. And I want you to open the gates of the Alienage at once."

He regarded her blankly, not quite understanding the relevance of elves to matters of war and state. The mages? It would displease the Revered Mother greatly, but of the two, he would prefer her wrath to that of the woman before him. Yes, the mages might be put to good use. But...

"The elves, Majesty?"

Bronwyn eyed him coldly. "You heard me. Your elves are imprisoned and starving in their Alienage. You cannot hide anything about the state of your city from me. I already know everything. Open the gates. Some of my own people will be visiting the Alienage. Do not dream of contradicting me."

He did not dream of it. He thought of himself as a hard man; a brave man; even a ruthless man. He also thought he was not stupid, or a bad leader of his own men; nor did he wish harm to the citizens of Vercheil, whom he protected. If the Red Queen wanted the mages and the elves for her own purposes, she was welcome to every last one of them.

"It shall be as you say, Your Majesty."

"I'm glad to hear it." She lightly slapped the neck of her fearsome mount, and spoke in an undertone that carried quite audibly to the listening ears of de Flambard and the Verchiel garrison. "If he hadn't been sensible, the Maker would have struck him down before the next dawn, most likely."

The wyvern huffed, in what sounded like an eerily malicious laugh.

Guards were posted to watch the western approaches to the city, alert for another darkspawn incursion. Most of the Fereldans returned to camp, wanting to have as little to do with Verchiel as possible. Loghain was entirely too twitchy to tolerate staying in the palace, and Bronwyn saw little benefit in it. She had brought a bathtub in a wagon, and their camp bed was perfectly comfortable.

A party of Wardens did enter the city in order to collect the mages. There was brief unpleasantness at the Chantry, but it did not last long. The Wardens seemed to already know where the mages were being kept, and practically led the way

there. It all smacked of dark sorcery to the Templars, but no one wanted to fight to the death for a handful of apostates and maleficarum. Let the Fereldans have them, and be cursed by them. A proclamation was also posted in the market that offered army service to any mage who wished to join the alliance. The gates would be open until the army left. If they wished to seek sanctuary, they must do it now.

There was only a brief window of opportunity for the elves as well. There was a very populous Alienage in Verchiel, and great hunger and misery there. They could be given some victuals, but were urged to leave the Alienage. The fit and willing could serve the army and perhaps volunteer for the Wardens. Others could travel to the port of Lydes, avoiding the city of Lydes itself. There they could take ship for the elven homeland in Ferelden. They could choose either a four-day journey to West Hill, where they could follow the roads to the Brecilian Forest, or they could spend another eight days or so at sea, and be taken nearly to the homeland itself. If they wished to remain in Verchiel and starve, of course, that too was their choice.

There was a dwarven quarter in the city, also. The news that a Paragon of Orzammar was one of the leaders of the alliance thrilled them. No greater event could happen in their lifetimes. The dwarves of Verchiel streamed out, bringing tribute, offering their services. A line formed in front of Astrid's tent of dwarves who wished to see their Paragon for themselves.

Astrid, enthroned on a camp stool, welcomed them with royal

grace. It was very pleasant to be a Paragon. Her ranks swelled with new recruits, and there were some fine craftsmen among them.

"Not all surfacers can adjust to life underground," she confided in Falkor. "I think I'll treat with Bronwyn for surface rights above one of our thaigs. A dwarven trading post with easier access to surface markets would be a fine thing for our people."

In her mind's eye, she could see the dwarven kingdom spreading out, the population growing, their power secure. She might even establish communications with long-lost Kal-Sharok someday, and the dwarves once more would be the united force they ought to be in the affairs of Thedas.

They would hold the Joining that night.

In their scouting expedition, Morrigan and Anders had spotted a deserted manor, not far from the south side of the city. It seemed a good venue to Bronwyn, and she sent an advance party to check it out for lingering darkspawn.

Danith reported it clear, after a brief skirmish.

"There were some half-dozen of the creatures, but no signs of digging."

Sigrun confirmed this. "A cellar, but no tunnels. There's quite a bit of room there, Commander. Plenty of room for the recruits

to sleep it off, and a place where we can stow the bodies."

"All right," said Bronwyn. "Take a larger party with you and make it ready. Leliana knows where the Joining regalia is. The mages are tired, but maybe Tara and Niall can go and start working on the Joining potion. We'll move the recruits out at twilight. Remind them to bring their vials."

Next, she had to let Loghain know the plan.

"So they certainly won't be fit to march for another day or so."

"Not realistically. And quite honestly, the shape-shifters are tired. I recommend scouting the area around Verchiel and keeping it secure until the day after tomorrow."

They studied the map together. Verchiel seemed safe enough to the south and east, but was very vulnerable from north and west. A mounted patrol would be sent a short distance down the Imperial Highway which ran southwest toward Montsimnard. Another would venture along the Greenway.

"I mean to send some couriers to Montsimnard," Bronwyn said, "but we need to get through the Joining first."

"Surely you don't need every single Warden to be present."

"No..." Bronwyn agreed, hesitating. "But I need quite a few in case of a panic. I'll join them in groups, just as I did before, since I've got— Maker!— I've got so many recruits! We'll need a lot of people there. Now that you bring it up, though, I

agree that there should be some Wardens in that patrol on the Imperial Highway. If it seems safe enough, they could go on through to Montsimmard, after the rest turn back."

Thinking about it a little more, she came up with a roster. "Carver, Jowan, Clovis, and... Nevin. They should have an archer, and he sustained no serious wounds in the battle. They all ride well, and Carver and Jowan have experience dealing with foreign Wardens. They'll be sorry to miss the Joining, but we really need to know what's happening in Montsimmard."

"So you're really not going to Join?" Carver asked Fenris, disappointed.

"I am not," said the white-haired elf. "It is another leash, and I want no more of them. I am content to serve the Queen and her Wardens, but I will do so of my own free will, not out of compulsion."

"Well, then," Jowan said, more cheerfully. "Why don't you join us, instead?"

"I am not sure I understand you."

"We're going to try to get through to Montsimmard! Right now, while we've got the afternoon before us. If we ride hard and aren't challenged, we might make it before full dark. The King's sending out a patrol along the Imperial Highway. They'll escort us part of the way, and if it's clear, we'll keep on going.

Come on!"

Thanks to my reviewers: imperial queen, So you want to be an Author, Raxiselic, KnightOfHolyLight, RakeeshJ4, Blinded in a bolthole, Aoi24, IgnusDei, Nemrut, Chiara Crawford, darksky01, Isabeau of Greenlea, the darks light, Brenediction, Kyren, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Guest, Chandagac, le-maru, timunderwood9, Phygmalion, Tirion I, Jenna53, Atrilial, amanda weber, Guile, Mike3207, Vaanarash, sizuka2, Girl-chama, Lyssa Terald, jnybot, AD Lewis, Costin, dragonmactir, Zero, FloridaMagpie, and mille libri.

My own suspicion about Bronwyn's story is that it predates the Couslands, who coopted it into their family history when they took over Highever. Ostap and Bustrum's remarks indicate that there was a ancient religious taboo regarding swans.

116. Tower of Shadows

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 116: Tower of Shadows

The messengers to Montsimmard, together with their escort, galloped southwest on the Imperial Highway. Berthold de Guesclin, Lord of Chateau Corbelin, had begged to be of the party, for his home was half a day's ride north of Montsimmard, though not particularly close to the Highway. In the end, Bronwyn allowed him to go with a dozen of his men.

They saw no one on the road. There were villages along the Imperial Highway in between Verchiel and Montsimmard, but they appeared to be largely deserted. If there were people in the huts and cottages, they were hiding from view. Nor did they see cattle or sheep, nor even chickens. Now and then they spotted a bewildered, abandoned dog, its ribs prominent. Some of them flinched away. Some tried to follow, barking hopefully. It was spring, but there were no farmers in the fields. There would be famine in the Heartlands if this were the pattern everywhere. Clovis, who knew this road, looked about him anxiously, shaking his head.

"This isn't right," he told them, as if they needed telling. "This is not normal."

De Guesclin said nothing at all, but his eyes were haunted. His men talked quietly among themselves. Some of them, too, had family at the chateau.

It was mid-afternoon when they came upon the first barrier on the Imperial Highway. The Wardens sensed no darkspawn nearby, so it was certainly the work of bandits. They kept their eyes on the trees on either side of the road, while the captain of the troop ordered four men down to move the overturned wagon and the crates aside. Silence surrounded them. They all sensed that they were being watched, but whoever it was did not wish a fight with twenty-seven armed men and a pair of mabarais. Magister and Lily growled, their heads down, and the foliage swayed against the wind, gently and quietly.

"We can go with you a bit farther," the captain murmured to Carver. "We'll need to turn back in a bit, but we can see you past this."

"No," said Carver. "Turn back now. If you come back through here in a few minutes, they'll be ready and waiting. Go now. We'll go on."

"If I see another barrier," Jowan muttered. "I'll blast it, and we'll ride on."

It was another hour before they saw the signpost marking the turn-off to Corbelin. Carver could not help sympathizing with De Guesclin, but thought riding into the countryside was a reckless thing, under the circumstance.

"Why don't you come with us to Montsimmard?" he suggested. "If it's been bad this way, everyone might already have evacuated, and Montsimmard would be the sensible place to go."

He thought De Guesclin would shout at him, but the Orlesian pulled himself together, and then shook his head.

"No. No. I shall go home, and see what has happened. It is true that they would evacuate to Montsimmard if there were danger. My wife, Heloise, is a woman of good sense. First I shall go home."

The Orlesians rode down the ramp to the narrow dirt road that led west. De Guesclin gave a wave of farewell, and he and his men disappeared among the trees lining the way.

"I wonder if we'll see them again," said Jowan.

Nevin snorted. "I don't give much for their chances."

They rode on, and Jowan now and then cast Haste on them. It was a startling experience for Clovis, and Nevin had only heard about it and not experienced it for himself. The dogs loved it, and the horses appeared not to notice it at all.

Some distance on they came upon another village and saw signs of life. In this case, people were packing up a wagon, and hitching a sorry pair of oxen to it. Carver signaled a halt, and they trotted down to speak to the people, nearly getting shot for their pains. A tall boy with a bow drew down on them.

"Don't come any closer! I'll shoot!"

"We are Grey Wardens!" shouted Clovis. "We will do you no harm. We only want to ask if you have seen other Wardens on the Highway."

The people by the wagons murmured among themselves. An old man, and old woman. A middle-aged man, face lined with worry. A girl of about twelve, and two boys, maybe six and eight. In the wagon, lying on a pallet, was a white-faced woman with a bundle in her arms.

"Maybe I can help her," Jowan whispered to Carver.

Carver put his hand up, well in sight of the boy archer. "Can we talk? We have a Healer with us."

They puzzled over his accent, but did not recognize it as Fereldan. These were peasants from the Orlesian Heartlands, so parochial that anyone from the next village was accounted a foreigner. The middle-aged man, evidently the woman's husband, frowned at them, but muttered something to the boy, who lowered his bow.

They approached slowly, making no threatening moves. When within speaking range, they dismounted, and led their horses forward. The people were plainly frightened, but knew the uselessness of trying to flee mounted armed men. The girl slid behind her father, peering out at them with large hazel eyes. She was rather pretty now, but the life of a peasant would soon enough render her as worn and faded as the woman in

the wagon.

Jowan slipped past the others, and then past the man, with an apologetic glance. The elderly couple glared in suspicion.

"While our brother Warden sees to your woman," said Clovis, catching the husband's attention, "we want to ask you what you have seen around here lately. Any Wardens on the Highway? Men in silver and blue?"

The man shook his head. "No, soldiers, but not like that."

"How long ago?"

A debate ensued among the peasants. Many, many days, they agreed, but they did not agree about just how many. They had seen pikemen marching, and rich people in fine robes with handsome staffs, but no other Grey Wardens. It was perhaps at the beginning of the month, but they did not know what day it was. The rest of the village had fled ten days before. Darkspawn had attacked and made away with some women. Luckily the sick woman had just given birth and was safely indoors with her daughter at her side. Something had killed the sheep and cattle. All they had left were a pair of milk goats and the oxen for the wagon. They could not leave until today because the woman was too sick. She had begged them to leave her and save themselves, but they would not.

"Where are you going?" Carver asked.

"South. South. The creatures come from the north, so we go

south, into the Dales. We have cousins in Thradaille."

Fenris said quietly, "Perhaps they should come with us to Montsimnard. There would be walls to protect them."

The peasants were horrified at the idea, horrified at being spoken to by an actual elf, and rather horrified that an elf had spoken up in front of the chevaliers. They expected him to be beaten for his impudence, but he was a strange creature, taller than they, armored and armed like a chevalier himself.

"We will go to our cousins," the man mumbled, obstinate with fear.

"Fine, fine, go east and south," Carver agreed. "As far as you can."

Meanwhile, Jowan had examined the woman and the baby. Neither was in very good shape. The woman had lost a great deal of blood, and was feverish. She was not producing any milk, and the old woman and the girl were keeping the newborn alive with goats' milk.

The infection could be cured, and the damage from childbirth repaired fairly easily. A good dose of a healing potion would probably get the woman's milk started again. Jowan decided to see how she responded first to the potion before using visible magic. These people might react badly. He fetched the potion from his saddlebag, and poured it into his traveling cup for the woman to drink from. It was silver, a piece of loot, and the peasants were awed at the sight of it. Perhaps they

thought it more important than the potion itself.

It seemed to do her a great deal of good. This pleased the family, obviously. Uneasily, Jowan put his hands on her belly and released his mana. A gasp rose up at the sight of the healing blue light. Lily, the dog, watched in awe, tail vibrating. Her human was best, the kindest, the noblest in the world.

"A mage!" whispered the oldest boy.

"Don't be afraid!" Carver yelled. "He's a Grey Warden! He's approved by the Chantry!"

Jowan tried to take the baby, but the girl snatched it away, eyes wild. Meanwhile, the mother sat up in the wagon, much improved. She put out her arms for the child, and the girl yielded it up reluctantly. Pleadingly, the woman lifted the whimpering infant to Jowan. He gave her a weak smile, and took the baby in one arm, and laid his other hand on the little body, reaching out with his senses for any problems. He did what he could.

"He needs food, mostly," he told the mother.

"It is a girl," she smiled, a little amused at him.

"Right. *She* needs food. Your milk should come in again. Give her all the milk she wants. Goat's milk, too, if she'll take it, but yours is best."

"I think you must be a very good man, Grey Warden," said the

mother, taking a happier child back into her arms. "What is your name?"

"Er, Jowan."

"Then her name will be Joanna," said the woman.

"I thought she was Ronette!" protested the grandmother.

"Joanna."

The tips of Jowan's ears turned pink. Carver pulled him away, grinning.

While the allied army was very curious about what the Grey Wardens were up to, they were not permitted to spy. Both Fereldans and Orlesians were forbidden to stray toward the deserted manor where the Grey Wardens were welcoming the new member of the order. Guards were posted, with strict orders to let no one through. Sunset faded to twilight, and it was time for the Joining.

The Warden auxiliaries were left in camp to their own devices. Morrigan, as usual, pretended not to care, and declared that she was busy washing her hair anyway. Zevran proposed a card game to Silas, and Sten meditated upon the Qun.

Pepin whined until Quinn brought him along. He was, after all, a Grey Warden. Bronwyn was exasperated beyond words. The child's nightmares were already terrible: what would

happen if he saw someone die horribly during the Joining? She had a word with Tara, who promised a sleeping potion for the boy in a cup of warm milk. He was a child, anyway, and should not stay up late.

Another thing she must take care of tonight: she would have to promote more Wardens. Alistair, Astrid, Danith, and Tara were Senior Wardens, but she should just go ahead and promote the rest of that first Joining, plus the others who had Joined before the big event at Ostagar. Anders would have to be a Senior Warden whether he liked it or not. Then Leliana, Brosca, Adaia, Carver, Jowan and Oghren. She really had no idea what kind of command structure the Wardens had, but she wanted these individuals to enjoy some recognition.

How many of her fifty-three recruits would survive? She had no idea, but the improved potion should make a great difference. She thought briefly of Avernus, the malignant old spider in his web. He was a dangerous creature, but she owed him a great deal.

The recruits were gathered by a bonfire in the manor courtyard. Building it had allowed them to throw a great deal of trash into the blaze, and had considerably cleaned up the courtyard in the process. The pyre for those who did not survive was being built a little way away, but would be directly behind this bonfire in line of sight from the camp, thus eliminating some questions.

Inside, the little hall had been more or less put in order. The darkspawn had been through there, but had not stayed long.

A good fire blazed forth, taking the chill off the spring night. Tables were righted, and the candlesticks arranged and the candles lit. The Joining potion was in a tall goblet. To either side of the hall, rooms had been arranged for the living and the dead. Leliana felt the living should at least have the comfort of a blanket between them and the hard stone. Later on, they would put a big pot of porridge on the fire to feed the mob of Wardens and the recruits as they awakened.

While Bronwyn believed that the recruits needed to continue acclimating with every race, there was no time to arrange them artistically in diverse groups for purposes of the Joining. All the dwarves wanted to be in the Paragon's Joining group, and as there were eight of them, that was feasible. Oghren would help Astrid keep order. She would let that party go first, out of respect for Astrid's title and prestige among her own people.

The fourteen non-magical elves were split into two, and were under the supervision of Danith and Adaia. Only two were Dalish. Bronwyn had never Joined any city elves other than Adaia, and was curious about how they would conduct themselves. Most had done decently in the battle.

The largest single party were the mages, both human and elven. Twenty-one of them, around half from the Fereldan Circle. Those all knew Tara and Anders, and mages seemed to do well in the Joining anyway, so there would be two groups of them.

There were also the non-magical humans, under the care of

Alistair and Leliana. Those ten would be split: five and five. Some of them were quite ill from the Blight, and Bronwyn hoped for the best for them. If Pepin could survive, surely some of them could as well.

Speaking of Pepin...

"Quinn! You're supposed to be watching Pepin! Keep him away from the candles."

The little boy was fascinated by the preparations. He had had no real ceremony himself, but simply a dose of potion, and remembered nothing about it anyway. He vibrated around the mysterious-looking room, bursting with questions.

"Are those candlesticks gold? Is that wine in the big cup? Do I get to taste it? Why is it taking so long? Why is everybody so serious? Isn't the King coming? Are we going to sleep here all night? Will we all have bad dreams about the dragon?"

Bronwyn grabbed a bony little shoulder as he ran past, and pulled him up in front of her. She leaned over to look him in the eye, and the boy shrank back, intimidated by her green eyes.

"Pepin!"

"Oui, Madame?"

"This is a very serious occasion and you have to behave yourself. You will stand with Quinn when the recruits come in and you cannot say one word."

He took a breath for another question, but she cut him off.

"*Not one word.* Yes, we're going to sleep here tonight. Maeve brought your blanket. It's in a room upstairs. The candlesticks *are* gold, and you mustn't touch them until you're grown up. You also can't talk about any of this to anybody except Wardens."

"Not anybody?"

"No."

"Not even Arl Corbus? Not even the King?"

"Not even the King, and *certainly* not Arl Corbus. This is just for Wardens. I'm serious. If you chatter to other people, you will be punished."

"I'll get a whipping?"

"The worst whipping of your life. And we would be very, very disappointed with you."

That sobered him. "I promise to be good!" He ran to Quinn, and the older boy put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, Pepin. Let's help them take the rest of the blankets upstairs."

Very soon, everything was in order, and they could start. Bronwyn called in all the Wardens who were not supervising recruits, and had a word with them. She glanced over at

Quinn and Pepin, and said, "Please go and make sure the kitchen is ready. I'm not sure we remembered to bring those honey cakes. Go and see, and come right back." She gave Quinn a meaning look. "And Pepin should drink the cup of milk that left Tara left for him."

The boys dashed off to the kitchen. The honey cakes should delay them long enough.

"All right, Wardens, this won't take long. Brosca here stands as my second today —"

Brosca swelled with pride at that.

"— and she understands what has to be done. I am relying on you as well. We all hope and pray that all our recruits will survive this ordeal. However, it is likely that some will perish. I am assigning teams to care for each recruits as they go through the Joining. Toliver and Aeron, Cathair and Darach, Hakan and Soren: it will be your responsibility to break the recruits' fall. After the group is Joined, take them to either the room to my left if they die, and to the salon to my right if they survive. The rest of you must bear witness and help them as needed. Some recruits might be panicked by the sight of the Joining. They cannot change their minds. They must Join, or they will die. If they try to fight or flee, they must be brought to reason, and quickly. There is no turning back once they enter this room."

Aveline spoke up. "Does that ever happen?"

"It happened at my own Joining," Bronwyn said frankly. "Alistair was there. The first recruit died, and the second tried to escape. The Warden-Commander ran him through. Then it was my turn. I had quite a bit to think about, I can tell you."

There were grim laughs. Maeve did not laugh, remembering how frightened she had been herself.

"We'll help them," she promised. "If anybody's scared, I'll hold their hand."

"Whatever it takes," Bronwyn agreed. "Now, where are those boys? Someone bring them here, and make them wash their sticky fingers!"

They were at last in some sort of order, and quiet, and Bronwyn nodded to Brosca to open the door. Pepin was already nodding off. Maeve found a bench, and let the boy lean against her.

Astrid entered, followed by the dwarven recruits and Oghren bringing up the rear. In a moment, Bronwyn was reciting the words of the Joining:

"Join us, brothers and sisters, join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant, join us in the duty that cannot be forsworn..."

The improved potion made quite a difference. It did not save all the recruits, but they had a much higher proportion of

survivals this time. Bronwyn had hoped that all the mages would make it, but they had not. The apostates had done marginally better than the Circle mages. Nonetheless, there were now thirty-seven new Wardens. They had more than doubled their number. That was something to celebrate, while they mourned their losses. The casualties had been highest among those already afflicted with Blight disease, which surprised no one. The two Templars had survived, and at some point Bronwyn would have to discuss their lyrium habit with them. Since the surviving recruits would sleep for hours, they took care of the dead. Most of the bodies were laid on the pyre, and Leliana recited a bit of the Chant for them before it was set alight. The two Dalish who had died were buried, according to their customs, and young trees planted over their graves.

No doubt there would be questions, but that was just too bad. Greagoir and Irving would ask after every one of their people, but Bronwyn was not obliged to tell them anything. Besides, they would be moving out soon, and everyone would be too busy to pry into Grey Warden affairs.

Bronwyn took out her roster and began writing in the new names, marking the dead as appropriate. She was particularly glad that both Ostap and Bustrum had survived the rite. They had seemed perfect candidates to her, but there were mysteries to the Joining that she had not yet plumbed. Brosca was pleased too: as pleased as a new mother whose infants have done something adorably clever.

The next official pay date was not until Summerday at the end

of Bloomingtide. She would give all the new recruits a prorated payment from today until then. Who knew how many of them would actually be alive for celebrate Summerday? Bronwyn decided to announce the promotions to Senior Warden once everyone was awake.

Without their escort, the Warden party galloped on, hoping to reach Montsimmard before dark. The countryside flashed past: some fields tentatively green, some showing ominous streaks of greyish black. Even the green was not a good sign, if one looked closely; for it was the not the green of sprouting crops, but the green of weeds taking what had been productive land.

Darkspawn attempted to ambush them at one bend in the road, but surprised by their speed, missed all their bowshots. It was a small band of scouts, and Carver considered riding past, but even a small band of darkspawn could do great harm. They pulled up with an effort, turned and charged down on the creatures. Jowan, true to his word, shot a fireball that knocked the creatures flying. It was an impressive feat from horseback at the gallop. Nevin shot a hurlock in the face, and the scabby head smashed back against the retaining wall of the Highway. The dogs, too, did their part. They were still growing, but were already big and strong and unafraid.

Clovis seemed rather impressed that they had managed to deal with the darkspawn without dismounting or without their horses shying and panicking.

"I think the dogs help," said Carver. "If the dogs aren't afraid, the horses will follow. Not always, but I think the road under their hooves helped, too."

"And the fact," Fenris added, rather drily, "that the creatures were downwind of us, and thus the horses could not pick up their odor."

Carver laughed. "That's true!"

They rode on, wanting to get to Montsimmard before full dark. At Haste, it was impossible to talk, so they galloped on in silence, watching the road ahead and to the sides.

They were in rolling country now, which forced them to slow a bit. It would be too reckless to dash over the top of a blind hill, not knowing what was just below the crest. Then too, they were forced to stop and rest the horses when they crossed a stream that seemed free of Taint.

Another hill, and the distant city of Montsimmard was revealed in the last golden rays of sunset. The riders drew rein to admire it instinctively. It was well worth looking at.

The name was true enough; or at least, if the city was not built on a mountain, it was built on a wide, broad outcrop of granite. A high hill, then, and an ancient settlement, for the natural defenses were clearly superb, and they had been improved by the finest engineering into something truly formidable.

"So that's Montsimnard," Carver said. "The darkspawn would be hard put to it to crack *that*."

Clovis shook his head. "And yet they did— in the Third Blight. The Archdemon Toth stretched its wings over Orlais, and Montsimnard burned. This fortified city rose from its ashes: bigger, stronger."

Jowan pointed to a massive white tower that soared over the rest of the city. "Is that the Circle of Magi in Montsimnard?"

"No. That is the *Tour des Ombres*. You know that in Orlesian, the Grey Wardens are called *Les Gardes des Ombres*. It is the watch tower of our order in Orlais."

"Tower of Shadows," smiled Carver. "That's... poetic."

Clovis pointed to a round structure. "The Circle is housed over there— in the circular building. It has a round courtyard inside, too. The mages take their exercise there, for they aren't allowed out of their confinement often, unless they are conscripted."

"A fine city," Fenris approved. "The moat is full. Is it deep?"

"Aye, it is," Clovis assured him. "Very deep and the sides are smooth and straight. It is no easy matter to swim the moat, and even less easy to climb out of it. Once we raise the drawbridge, it will be well nigh impossible for darkspawn to storm the city; and the foundation is granite, which is too hard for their primitive mining skills."

"That's right," Carver said, remembering. "Soldier's Peak in Ferelden is built on granite too. That's why Commander Asturian built the Warden fortress in the Coast Mountains."

"Soldier's Peak?" Clovis asked. "I had not heard of this place."

Jowan elbowed Carver. Perhaps they shouldn't be talking so much. "Oh," Carver shrugged. "It's an old abandoned outpost we found. Empty for years."

Nevin, unimpressed by talk of architecture, spoke up. "Maybe we should get a move on. Just saying."

"Right."

They spurred their horses forward, and the dogs ran silently at their heels, glad that today's journey was almost over.

Intervening hills blocked their view of the city as they rode, but when it was once again revealed, they saw a lot of activity on the walls and in front of the gate that faced the Imperial Highway.

A figure rose up from the underbrush some distance from the road and hailed them.

"Wardens!"

Cautiously, they drew rein and turned to look for the speaker. Clovis' reluctant smile burst forth, and he jumped from his horse, striding forward.

"Riordan!"

The Senior Warden of Jader was not alone, but with a patrol of six other Wardens. Clovis knew them all, of course, and after greeting Riordan with an embrace and a kiss on each cheek, he saluted the others likewise as well. Carver and Jowan glanced at each other from the corners of their eyes, uncomfortable with Orlesian physicality. Nevin diplomatically changed a snort to a cough. Fenris looked on impassively. All nations had their own ways, from Tevinter to the Fog Warriors of Seheron; from the Qunari to the peoples of the Free Marches. He had found Fereldans as different from the rest as the others, and the fact the Orlesians had such a ritual greeting was no longer odd to him after traveling from Jader to Montsimmard. Only the Fereldans would persist in finding it bizarre.

"You found Bronwyn?" Riordan asked Clovis urgently. "Will she come?"

"She is almost here," Clovis assured him. "She is in Verchiel as of this moment, and these brothers," he gestured to the Fereldans, "have come with me to hear news of the order in Orlais."

He then introduced the Wardens, and then nodded to Fenris. "This is our comrade Fenris, an estimable warrior. He has not yet decided to Join us, but fights well at our side."

"Welcome! Welcome all you," Riordan said, his dark, bearded face brightening in the joy of meeting other Wardens. He

repeated their names carefully. "Carver... Jowan... Nevin... and Fenris. And your fine hounds, as well. You are most welcome in Montsimmard. Come. The night draws on, and we shall all be safer within the city's walls."

He debriefed them as they walked, wanting to know the number and kind of any darkspawn they had seen on the road, the situation in Verchiel, how many Wardens Bronwyn had brought with her, and the size of any support troops that had escorted her west. He made no bones about admitting that she had surpassed his hopes.

"And she was able to persuade the Sieur de Flambard to open his gates? That is more than I could manage!"

"She was sitting astride a wyvern at the time," Carver told him. "That probably helped."

Riordan looked rather blank, and some of his men chuckled, imagining that Carver was joking.

Clovis shrugged. "She was, indeed. It's a long story. She put the fear of the Maker into that fool. Darkspawn menaced the city, but Queen Bronwyn led the Wardens against them. De Flambard then opened his gates and many fled the city. Some volunteered to Join us. She is having a Joining this very night. Meanwhile, patrols are going out to scout the country around their camp. They are thinking of moving up to the Orne."

"Then you must share what we learned before they march into another disaster!" Riordan tensed. "The army first... and then

most of the Wardens of Montsimmard... I will tell you more, but after you have dined."

Montsimmard gave the impression of being a far older city than Jader. That was not actually true, for there had been a little seaside village at Jader a thousand years before, but a great many of that city's beauties and improvement were the work of rulers in the Blessed Age. Montsimmard had kept the shape it had assumed at the end of the Towers Age, after the reconstruction following the Third Blight. That made the public buildings of Montsimmard five hundred years older than the green fantasies of the Emerald City. Some structures in Denerim were as old, or even older, mostly especially Kinloch Hold and Fort Drakon, but the Tower of Shadows was also the work of ancient peoples.

"it is the earliest Grey Warden structure outside the Anderfels," said Riordan, "and one of the few buildings in Montsimmard to have survived the Third Blight."

Jowan, having spent most of his life in the Circle of Magi at Kinloch Hold, was at once uneasy and perfectly familiar with the concept of a life lived vertically. It would be a long way up from the base of the tower to the crenelated top. Still, the view would be worth it.

The general atmosphere within Montsimmard was tense and anxious. Everyone seemed to know Riordan, and most greeted the Wardens in a friendly enough way, but everyone also looked worried. In the Market, a handful of Templars

were gathered outside the very old Chantry, glancing the Wardens' way with thinly veiled hostility. Not far away was the curious round building that put them all in mind of a beehive, massive and constructed of rough grey stone. That was the Montsimnard Circle, built quite close to the Chantry itself.

"How many mages live there?" Jowan asked quietly. He would love to get into the Montsimnard Circle and see it for himself, but decided he would wait until he had the authority of his superiors to go in. They likely had a fabulous library, and they also might be home to mages who would prefer to be elsewhere.

"Not many, any more," Riordan said. "Many left with the Montsimnard Wardens, and Orlais did not have a full complement of Wardens to begin with. No one was expecting a Blight."

Once inside the city gates, it became clear that the Grey Wardens possessed more than an old tower. In fact, the Grey Wardens occupied a city within a city. There was an inner wall and an inner gate leading to the most impressive section of Montsimnard. The Tower of Shadows was fronted by a long stone hall pierced with a metal-shod double door and tall pointed-arched windows. Surrounding an impressive square in front of that building, and ranged along the narrow streets leading off from it, were stables and armories, workshops and smithies, taverns and brothels, shops and private dwellings. The Warden's Quarter in Montsimnard alone had room for a thousand Wardens, and with them wives and children, servants and artisans, parasites and whores. The rest of the

city could readily accommodate the allied army. Montsimnard had always been a garrison town.

Servants came to take their horses, and other began unloading what little gear they had brought with them.

"It will be taken to your quarters," said Riordan.

They were not led directly into the tower, but through the long, imposing building instead. An entrance hall was decorated with banners overhead. Through a door was a long gallery, the walls of which were covered with portraits of Wardens of times past, and some fairly splendid paintings of great battles. They paused before one, which was simply immense. In a dark and roiling sky, white griffons did battle against a vast and tainted Archdemon. Tiny figures fell to their deaths from their wounded mounts. Below, a sea of darkspawn charged desperate heroes in a nightmare struggle of evil against good.

"The Battle of Ayesleigh," said Nevin, reading the label.

"That's really something. I could look at that all day and see something different."

"Many of the figures are said to be painted from life," Riordan told them. He pointed to the upper right. "That is Garahel on Moranth."

"Bloody great shame about the griffons," muttered Carver. "But riding on wyverns was pretty neat."

Riordan shook his head. "I'll want to hear more about that. But

first, I'll have the housekeeper show you your quarters. The supper bell should ring soon. I can introduce you to some of the others then." He gestured to the Orlesian. "Clovis, come with me."

The guest quarters were quite large and comfortable, though they were all in the same room. These, of course were not "guest quarters for visiting dignitaries," but "guest quarters for visiting Wardens." Four neat but narrow beds were arranged along a whitewashed wall, and their gear was piled at the foot of each. There was even hot water for washing. They set to with good will.

"Some place, eh?" chuckled Nevin, as he scrubbed the road filth away. "Pretty fancy."

"Actually, I think the Nevarran set-up is better," Carver said, slipping on a fresh shirt. "I haven't seen all this all yet, but I'll bet they don't have a place to swim."

Jowan agreed. "The Nevarrans seemed more cheerful, too. Of course, their country's capital hadn't been blasted by the darkspawn, either."

Soon, a distant bell sounded, and a young Warden knocked on the door.

"I'm to lead you to the Great Hall."

They fell into step behind him, walking quickly, attracted by the savory smells. The Warden ahead of them opened the

door, and announced them.

"The Grey Wardens of Ferelden: Carver, Jowan, and Nevin, and their companion, Monsieur Fenris."

"Whew!" Nevin whistled, looking about him. "Now *this* is what I call refined."

"Shhh!" Jowan gave him a hard nudge.

The Great Hall of Montsimmard was fairly amazing, even for men who had seen the glories of Jader and the splendors of Nevarra. A great deal of coin had been spent on this chamber, over many ages. The vaulted ceiling was gilded in places, and the floor was polished marble. At the head table, Riordan stood by a throne-like chair. In all that vast place there were only some fifty or so Wardens.

"You will sit here, if you please," the young Warden said, gesturing them to some places at a table running perpendicular to Riordan's. "But do not sit until His Imperial Highness enters."

He left, while the astonished Wardens mouthed "*His Imperial Highness?*" at each other.

Only moments later, "*His Imperial Highness, Prince Florestan*" was announced.

Being a prince, he was surrounded by a retinue of advisers and bodyguards, pressing close beside and behind him. One

of them hissed, "You should be announced as Emperor! It is an outrage!"

Fenris raised an eyebrow, wondering what a rival claimant for the throne of Orlais would do to Queen Bronwyn's alliance.

The prince and his followers swept past, the prince and one of his men going to join Riordan, and the rest taking places at another table. Carver was glad of that, since he was wildly curious, and wanted to talk about them behind their backs.

The Prince took the gilded chair beside Riordan, and everyone else sat down. Carver rolled his eyes at his friends. Among her Wardens, Bronwyn did not demand such formality, and she was a *queen*.

"Typical Orlesians," he muttered. Jowan elbowed him, too.

"We're eating their food," he softly admonished.

Well, that was true, but Carver was still put out. The Prince was even wearing a mask. It covered the upper part of his face, including his nose, and swept down to the jawline on either side. Only his mouth was uncovered, allowing him to eat without removing it. It was a fairly elaborate mask, too: silverite and leather, boldly enameled in purple and gold. He was the only one in the room wearing a mask. Maybe it was a princely thing.

Food was served, luckily, and the Wardens had no thought for lesser interests. It was all very good, and not ridiculously

elaborate. When the first edge of their hunger was blunted, they overheard Riordan mention them by name.

"—and our brave Fereldan brothers have come with good news, my prince. If I may present them..."

They stood and bowed in the prince's direction. He gave them a nod, but because of the mask it was impossible to read his face. Beside him was a man in rich garments, whom it was easy to guess was a noble and not a Warden. He looked the Fereldan contingent with a hard, dissatisfied expression.

"There's going to be trouble," sighed Jowan.

"Oh, really?" snorted Carver. "You think?"

They enjoyed their meal, nonetheless, and introduced themselves to the Wardens at their table. Most of them were from Jader, and thought very well of Riordan. One taciturn, scarred fellow was presented as a "survivor from the Montsimnard Wardens." This begged the question of what he had survived. and they soon had the whole story.

It was not a happy one. Hearing it, Carver wished more than ever than Wardens still had griffons.

The Montsimnard Wardens had found the remains of the Imperial Army. That the Fereldans already knew. What they did not know was what had followed, which was a horrific ambush by the darkspawn north of the Orne. The Wardens had sensed the darkspawn, indeed, but they had not sensed

all of them until too late. The Warden-Commander of Orlais and his brother were killed, and many of their Wardens with them. The troops that had joined with the Wardens had been decimated. It was thought that there had been survivors, but that they had either hid in the marshes south of the river, or had fled west. The surviving Wardens fell back on Montsimmard. They had fought well enough that the pursuit was not very determined. Some darkspawn had wandered over the Orne bridge, but had dispersed, and probably were the creatures the Fereldans had fought at Verchiel.

Some Wardens had been cut off from the rest, and those who had managed to survive had trickled in many days later. Some who were thought to be alive had not been seen at all.

Riordan, arriving at the Orne, had rounded up a few survivors, as well as some refugees. That was, in fact, where they had found Prince Florestan and his little band of followers. And then the Wardens had made an attempt to get through to the city of Val Foret, but none of the Orlesians wanted to talk about that.

"Riordan will tell you himself."

And so he did, but not until he had questioned his guests. After supper, they were taken to to a chamber high in the Tower of Shadows. There, they found themselves brought before a council of sorts: Riordan, some of his most experienced Wardens, some local nobles, and Prince Florestan. With the prince were Corot, his right-hand man, and one of his bodyguards, a huge, silent man the prince

addressed as Ursus.

The first bit of information that had the Orlesians upset was the news that Jader was now part of Ferelden. Riordan listened impassively, but most of the others were quite indignant that the Fereldans would take advantage of the Blight in such a way. Carver thought they were shameless hypocrites, but he was not there to get in a fight.

"And you have allied with local Orlesians?" Riordan asked.

"Well... yes. The most prominent is Duke Prosper —"

"Prosper de Montfort!" shouted Corot. "The man is a traitor! He is known to be in Fereldan pay!"

Carver rolled his eyes. "I don't think Fereldan could afford to pay him, actually. He's really rich. No, he came and joined up with us, and he's done a good job talking a lot of the locals into helping against the Blight." He decided that he might as well tell them the truth. "Once they know that he's speaking for the new Empress—"

That got everyone's attention.

Prince Florestan asked, "If I may... what Empress would that be?"

Jowan and Nevin were wincing. Carver wondered if he'd gone too far.

"Princess Celandine. She's the oldest of the three princesses.

They call her Empress-elect. It was my understanding that she had the best claim."

"I knew it!" Corot exploded. "I knew that some bastard would make use of one of those little—"

"Corot," the prince cut him off quietly. "Do take care as to how you speak of a lady, and one of the few members of my remaining family."

"But Your Majesty—"

"I am not the Emperor," Florestan said. "Celandine's claim is better than mine. If she wants to be empress, why should I challenge her? Maker help her." He turned his masked face to the Fereldans. "Is she with the army?"

"No, Your Highness," said Carver. "She's safe in Jader with her sisters. The old countess who used to be their keeper tried to have them killed when we took Solidor, but we fought off the assassins."

A brief silence, marked only with Corot's furious puffing. Then Prince Florestan spoke. "So Celene left instructions to kill them rather than let them be taken. Once that would have surprised me. I am glad they are safe, even though they are prisoners."

The Fereldans were somewhat confused. Jowan ventured. "I don't think they *are* prisoners... exactly. Queen Bronwyn would never let anyone treat them badly. I got the impression

that they are enjoying life in Jader."

"Ah... Queen Bronwyn," said the prince, an oddly sad inflection in his voice. "I have every confidence in that lady's honor. I witnessed myself how those who sullied her name were punished. And *she* is with the army, I take it?"

"Leading from the front, You Highness. She's united all the people using the Grey Warden treaties: dwarves, elves, mages. Now the Fereldans and Orlesians are fighting side by side. She found the Ashes of Andraste and she's ridden dragons and wyverns. She'll end this Blight, if anybody will."

The prince's mouth curled up in a half-smile. "Then perhaps everything was for the best. I should like to see her once in life, all the same."

"Your Highness," Fenris spoke up. "It is our understanding that you were in Val Royeaux when it was attacked. It was feared that no one had survived, and yet you have. It will give hope to a great many in the army who fear for their families."

"They are right to fear," the prince said grimly. "If they had family in Val Royeaux, they must accept that there is a strong likelihood that they are dead. I survived only because of the strength and loyalty of Ursus there, not by any merit or virtue of my own."

Carver was sobered by the image. "You must have had a terrible experience."

"Ha. What I had was an epiphany, my friends. The world changed for me. I found that I was no safer from the hammerstrokes of Fate than any peasant. I became just a frightened man in a mob of frightened men. I saw my country, full of overweening pride, brought low by an enemy that could not be tricked with lies, swayed by prayers, or bought with gold. The Maker did not intervene to save me, nor to save innocent women and children. I saw men escape because they trampled on the decent and caring. I saw that my fancied swordsmanship and valor were dust in the wind. I survived because the son of my old nurse, my milk-brother, is a better man than I am, and because he is a man whose daily labor caused him to know a passage used by dairymaids and footmen that had not been discovered by the darkspawn."

Behind him, Ursus looked rather sheepish. Florestan noticed it and smiled, reaching out to pat the big man on the back. "It's all true, my friend. You're a better man than I am." With a wry shrug, he added. "Prettier than I am too, now. I do not wear this mask as an affectation, I assure you, but to spare others the sight of my appearance and myself their horror. Amidst all we lost that night my good looks are certainly but a trifle, but I do rather miss them."

Ursus blurted out, "I don't think you look so bad."

All the men laughed, and not unkindly. It broke the tension, and Riordan had wine passed around.

Riordan said, "We will all be changed men before this Blight ends. Let us think of the best way to help this army that has

come to our aid."

They discussed prospects for approaching the horde, which appeared to be very thoroughly entrenched north of the Orne, all the way to Val Royeaux. Riordan eventually told the story of how his Wardens had crossed the Orne and found a number of refugees, including the prince. They had not been far from Val Foret when they had been attacked by a large body of darkspawn, and had withdrawn, with heavy losses. They had fallen back on Montsimnard, and the arrival of the allied army was the answer to all their prayers.

More questions were asked about the party that had escorted them. Riordan knew Berthold de Gueslin, of course. Florestan knew the name but could not recall the man's face.

Carver said, "We tried to persuade him to come here with us, but he wanted to go home first. He's the lord of Chateau Corbelin. Do you know if everything's all right there?"

"Corbelin?" Riordan asked. "Yes, I know the place. It is well fortified. I tried to persuade Madame de Guesclin to come to Montsimnard, but she felt that she had a duty to hold the chateau for her husband. They were still alive the last time I was there, about mid-month, but the fields and flocks had been destroyed. I left four Wardens there as a observation post. If a large force attacks them, our lookouts at the top of the tower will be able to see the signal fire."

"I hope they're all right," said Jowan.

Carver was more interested in the idea of a signal. "You always have lookouts posted on top of the tower?"

"Always."

"Could we see?" Carver asked. "That must be quite the view. During the day."

"It is equally beautiful at night," remarked Prince Florestan. "The young Warden is right. Let us take our wine up to the top and enjoy the starlight."

It was a long walk up the winding stairs, but definitely worth it. The top of the tower was huge: wide and flat enough for griffons to land there. Carver supposed that had been the point, long ago. The stars were just coming out, and the sky was an immense bowl overhead. Riordan pointed to the north-north-east.

"There is Val Royeaux. Night after night we saw it burning. You can still see the smoke hanging above the city. Val Foret is there." He gestured just west of north. "So far we have seen no sign of a great conflagration, so we have hope." He pointed off to a distant, wooded hill. "Chateau Corbelin is there. As you see, there is no signal fire."

Neither of them mentioned that the lookouts might not have seen a signal fire in the brightness of day, nor that darkspawn did not always set fire to the places they seized and render uninhabited. It was better to cling to hope, however slippery a spar that was.

Back at the camp near Verchiel, the Warden's escort returned at dusk, and reported what they had seen on the road to Montsimnard. No traffic; some bandit activity; no darkspawn. The captain showed Loghain the exact place on the map where he had parted company with the Wardens and De Guesclin's party.

"I can't claim I saw much danger, Majesty; but it all felt *wrong*. A road like that should have people on it, even in wartime. I got the feeling that anyone who could get out, had got out days ago and kept running."

Loghain dismissed him, and studied the map a little longer. Bronwyn would be gone all night, initiating those poor wretches into the Grey Wardens. He hoped she got some use out of them. He approved of a larger force of Wardens. The more Wardens she had, the better Bronwyn's chances of not being the one to have to put paid to the Archdemon. He was not so pleased about her accepting all these Orlesians into the Fereldan Grey Wardens. Perhaps she could leave the Orlesians here after the Blight was over.

How much farther should they march into Orlais? They had reached the edge of the Heartlands. Another day would put them into the Orne Valley. Beyond that Loghain was loath to go. The one thing they must not do is overextend themselves. They had a long, but not impracticable communication and supply line stretching back to Jader and beyond. How much farther could they stretch it? Word had come from the port of Lydes that more ships had arrived, and were staying in port,

awaiting orders. That was certainly a help, there were many imponderables to concern him. The cooperation of the lord of Verchiel was not something upon which Loghain cared to stake his life. Lydes was held together only by the garrison Duke Prosper had placed there; the deputy ruling Halamshiral was not a strong man. They were all potentially weak links, and losing one of them would throw the entire campaign into crisis and possible catastrophe.

Depending on what they heard from Montsimnard, it might be a better base for their operations out here in the west, but it, too was dangerously far from Ferelden.

Much depended on what the patrol on the Greenway found, and they had not yet returned. Loghain was uneasy about them. They were going straight toward the source of the darkspawn. He traced their route along the map with his forefinger. Only so far, and no farther, and the moment they met resistance, they were to withdraw. It was useless to sit up all night for them. He decided to lie down and rest his eyes.

Voices approached his tent: excited talk was heading his way. Loghain blinked, and realized that he had slept for hours. Rousing himself, he listened to the voices. One sounded like Captain Travis, who had let the patrol up the Greenway. Loghain rose from his bed, threw on a tunic, and thrust aside the tent flap. The east was silver grey shading to rose. It was just before sunrise.

"What is it?"

"My lord king!" Travis was stirred up, clearly. "We were able to penetrate as far as the Orne Bridge. We saw darkspawn here and there in the distance on the way, but, as you commanded, did not pursue them."

"Show me where," Loghain ordered, beckoning the man into the tent. He gestured at the map, and Travis was able to point out the sites. Travis lowered his voice, to give the next news.

"We also came upon a small camp of soldiers near the Orne Bridge."

"Orlesian stragglers?"

"No, my king." Travis gave Loghain a grim look. "A small force of Qunari. They weren't particularly friendly, either, but we talked to them."

In the same pale morning light, the new Wardens began awakening to their new life: mages first, as usual. In the kitchen, with forced civility, Leliana and and Maeve bickered over the seasoning of the breakfast porridge. It hardly mattered which spice was used. Everyone would be starving, and whether cinnamon or nutmeg was added, the porridge would taste infinitely better than darkspawn blood.

Thanks to my reviewers: RakeeshJ4, Nemrut, Chiara Crawford, Melysande, imperial queen, Anime-StarWars-fanzach, AD Lewis, Psyche Sinclair, Benediction,

KnightOfHolyLight, DjinniGenie, Fenrir666, Garm88, lemaru, MsBarrows, Mike3207, ellechiM, JackOfBladesX, Robbie the Phoenix, OverseerBishop, Vaanarash, sizuka2, mille libri, Lyssa Terald, Blinded in a bolthole, New Zealand 5, Phygmalion, Jenna53, darksky01, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Guile, kitza, dragonmactir, Guest, Kel, Herebedragons66, and PhantomX0990.

Writing about the Joining always reminds me of my sorority initiation. Ah, good times. Don't ask me if we had to drink blood. We didn't, but it was pretty cool and mysterious, all the same. And nobody died.

Riordan is incorrect about the Tower of Shadows. He does not know about the Warden prison in the Vimmarks, which predates the Tower of Shadows by over 200 years.

I am aware that Empress Celene regarded Florestan as stupid and biddable. Beware the unreliable narrator. Her opinion hardly matters now, anyway.

117. Like Gods, We Live Forever

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 117: "Like Gods, We Live Forever."

The Wardens of Antiva reached Jader on the twentieth of Drakonis. The Marcher Wardens from Ansburg arrived there four days later. The Rivainni Wardens had decided to go to Cumberland, and arrived there later still.

Warden-Commander Enzo Visconti of Antiva found Jader under Fereldan control, but could not complain of the Warden facilities in the city. The Compound had been left under the command of Warden Catriona, whom he found pleasant and business-like, and very pleased that Wardens had come to help.

Visconti was in his last years as a Warden, and expected his Calling at any time. He had resented the First Wardens sanctions against helping Ferelden very much indeed, and as soon as they were lifted, had hurried to take part in the only Blight he would ever see. However unconventional Warden-Commander Bronwyn Cousland was, she had performed some very impressive diplomacy in uniting the races and nations against the Blight. According to the couriers, she and her army were somewhere on the Imperial Highway, heading

ultimately toward the site of an Orlesian disaster on the River Orne. She should be easy enough to follow, if he got his people in order and hurried to support her. Though Antiva was famed for its horses, Visconti had brought none. Horses did not travel well by sea, especially on such a long voyage. Nor did horses deal well with darkspawn. Better to force-march the Wardens. A day of rest to get their land legs back, and they would go at all speed to join this Warden Queen.

Thus, the Antivans were already in Halamshiral by the time the Marchers were ready to leave Jader. The cities and villages along the Imperial Highway were bemused by the additional Wardens. It did quite a bit to keep them honest.

Riordan, his hopes very much raised by the knowledge that an army was not a day away and ready to stand with him against the Blight, began making new plans as soon as he awakened early the next morning. As people met for their breakfast, he outlined his ideas.

"My friends," he said to the Fereldan contingent, "perhaps you would care to go with me today on a patrol. We shall first check on the people at Chateau Corbelin and its village, and see if de Guesclin made it through safely to his home."

"I'd like that," said Carver. "Maybe we could talk them into evacuating here. This seems a lot safer than an isolated castle."

"Or at least the women and children could come," said Jowan.

"That is my hope," Riordan agreed. "They are exposed where they are, and who knows if the horde might not come marching south? For that matter, I have little idea where the horde is. I now know they are not in Vercheil, thanks to you. I assume that quite a few remain in Val Royeaux. Other than that, I am nearly blind."

Jowan bit his lip. He wished he could shape-shift into a bird. Morrigan had bullied him into wyvern shape for the battle, and he felt he could manage that shape reliably on his own now, but the essential art of shape-shifting was difficult for him, and he did not think he could attain a shape on his own. A bird was more helpful than anything else. Maybe he could find some way to persuade Morrigan to coach him into a hawk shape like hers. Then he could be a useful scout, too.

"We could have a look at Beau Rivage and Plaquemine while we're out," suggested a Warden.

"So we shall." Riordan explained to the Fereldans, "There are two other villages in the general area. They were supposed to be evacuated, and I know some of the people are here in Montsimmard, but they might still be inhabited by stragglers, looters, or even darkspawn scouts."

Fenris thought that was a sensible idea. "We saw people ourselves who evacuated late due to illness. Who knows if the old and sick are still hiding in their houses, unable to escape?"

A troubling notion, and the men ate in silence for awhile. The doors opened and the Prince arrived with his people to join

them.

"You are going out today, Riordan?" Florestan asked, rather cheerfully.

"I am, Highness. A patrol out to Corbelin and the surrounding villages. I want to scout the area before I go to meet with our allies. I would like to find the army today, but if the patrol takes time, it will have to be tomorrow."

"A splendid idea! It would be good to know that Madame de Guesclin is safe. What would you say, Riordan, if I were to go with you?"

His adviser Corot appeared about to have a seizure. His bodyguard was resigned. Riordan tried to be tactful.

"Your Highness, perhaps it would be best if we first made certain the area was clear of darkpsawn—"

Carver impulsively blurted out, "Don't go! I was at King's Mountain!" He blushed red, as all eyes turned to him. "Sorry, Your Highness, but I was at King's Mountain. What happened to King Cailan was horrible. It broke everybody's heart. Darkspawn don't care who they hurt."

Riordan said smoothly, "I would not have put it so baldly, Your Highness, but my young brother is right."

Florestan wanted to know more. "I know that darkspawn are no respecters of persons. I understand what a terrible,

shocking event the fate of King Cailan must have been. You were at the battle yourself?"

"I was, Your Highness, and not far from the King. Then the ogre charged, faster than you could imagine. It snatched up the King in a huge fist and gloated over him, drooling. You can't imagine what it was like. My brother charged in and killed the creature. We fought off the darkspawn, and we thought it was going to be all right, but later that night we learned that the King had contracted the Blight sickness, and then he died, after horrible suffering."

"Ah! I am sorry," said Florestan. "From all reports, your King Cailan was a brave and gallant young man. His death was much mourned at the Empress' Court." Which was perfectly true. Celene had regretted Cailan's death very much, though Florestan did not know all the reasons why. He added, still curious. "And so it was your brother who was the brave knight who challenged the monster? A noble deed!"

Carver was tongue-tied, exasperated at Adam's heroics coming once again to loom over him like a great stone golem. It was completely his own fault this time. He managed a choking, "Thank you, Your Highness."

Jowan tried to help. "Carver's brother is Adam Hawke, the Bann of the city of Amaranthine, Your Highness."

"I see!" Florestan thought he did, and felt even more comfortable and at his ease in this company. "A noble deed by one of noble family!" He was even more disposed to like

the young Warden who led the Fereldans, and smiled. "I bow to your judgement, Riordan. I would not wish to make additional trouble for you. By all means, scout the area and see to the de Guesclins. However, if you find the danger minimal, I must really insist on traveling with you when you go to meet the formidable Red Queen!"

He chatted some more, and was quite pleasant with the guests, even going so far as to take notice of the dogs.

"Ah! The famed Fereldan mabaris! What splendid animals!"

Fenris hid his amusement, for this was the surest way to Carver and Jowan's good graces. For that matter, Nevin saw nothing odd about it. Instantly, the dogs were the topic of discussion and were properly presented to the prince.

"Your Highness, this is Lily, and this fellow is Magister—"

"Magister?"

"The dogs were prisoners of some Tevinter blood mages, but we rescued them and gave them good homes."

"So I see! You have had your share of adventures, my friends."

More pleased with the result of Carver's outburst than not, Riordan gathered some ten Wardens of his own, and with the Fereldans and their friend Fenris they soon rode out of

Montsimnard. After some distance they turned north to Chateau Corbelin and its nearby village, also named Corbelin.

Riordan was not so pleased that the prince wished to travel with them when they went to meet with the leaders of the army, but he saw no way to refuse. He himself was very eager to meet with Bronwyn, offer Montsimnard as a base, and get a feel for her plans.

So far, they sensed no darkspawn, nor did they see signs of Taint. The dogs were useful creatures, and Riordan saw the sense in using them in such a manner. Perhaps that was something that could be considered here in Orlais someday.

They had been lucky, which was good and bad. Montsimnard had not been made the Archdemon's target. If they were lucky, it meant that somewhere, others were not so lucky. He was still smarting over his failure to get through to Val Foret. He had sent Fiona with a patrol south on the Imperial Highway, to go all the way around Lake Celestine, warn the people in Val Firmin, and approach Val Foret from the south. So far, he had heard nothing from her.

Something occurred to him, and he called Carver over. As they rode side by side, Riordan lowered his voice. "Was the Joining tried on King Cailan?"

Carver made a face. "Yes. Alistair told me about it. It killed him. He was going to die anyway, so Bronwyn was desperate. They tried it, but it just didn't work, and then they cleared up all the evidence of it. And then, this poor old mage

got blamed for everything, and some Templars tracked her down and killed her. It was all just awful. King Loghain told him not to fight, but he wouldn't listen."

"Ah. I am sorry. It would have been interesting, had it succeeded. Then we would have had a Warden King instead of a Warden Queen."

"I think we're better off with a Warden Queen," said Carver. "She's a real hero. King Cailan just thought he was."

Jowan gathered his courage and remarked, "I notice, Senior Warden, that you don't seem to have many mages under your command. Is that usual?"

Riordan sighed, thinking back over old quarrels. "It's true. The Chantry has been difficult for many years about recruitment. Here, in the heart of the Chantry's power, we have had to be careful. My senior mage is on a mission elsewhere, and my other mages were killed during our advance west of the Orne. Many mages from the Montsimmard Circle left with those Wardens, and we found none of them. They are either dead, or dispersed. The Revered Mother and the local Templars are not inclined to release any more to us."

"Can't you just... conscript them?"

Riordan laughed. "I could, though it is difficult to conscript without the individual's name. I supposed I could simply conscript the entire Circle, but there is no precedent for that!" He grew grim. "Granted, most of those left are too young or

too old for the Wardens, but their ages would not save them if the darkspawn attack."

"Maybe a Warden could pay a visit, just to do some research in their library? That way you might meet some likely candidates."

"Not a bad idea. I'll consider it."

Chateau Corbelin showed no sign of the Taint, and after some disbelief, the inhabitants opened its gates, relieved to find that they were not forgotten. De Guesclin was there, smiling and happy, holding the hand of his lady and one of his little girls. Mathilde de Guesclin was no beauty, as her aristocratic heritage had made her rather horse-faced, but she was a pleasant, sensible woman, and was glad to make the Wardens welcome.

"I feel obligated," said De Guesclin, "to return to the army, but I want my wife and children to be safe. Can you wait a few hours while we pack? The women and children of the castle, too? Mathilde says most of the village is gone."

"Pack," Riordan said. "We will check out the village and also do a sweep by Beau Rivage and Plaquemine. When we return, we will go to Montsimmard together." Shrugging, he turned to Carver. "I suppose that we will not be seeing Bronwyn until tomorrow."

Once her new Grey Wardens were awake and fed, it was

time for Bronwyn to give them The Talk. Quinn and Maeve took Pepin outside to play, since he was too young to understand this, and would become restless.

Most of the new Wardens took the news of the changes in their lives fairly well. The dreams, the hunger, the ever-present duty: these were balanced by the ability to sense darkspawn and the additional strength, speed, and stamina. Bronwyn overheard one Circle mage tell Tara, "Better to be good for something than to be good for nothing."

Bronwyn talked to them at length: assuring them that they would have food, shelter, clothing, and family with the Wardens for the rest of their lives. They would never be cast off. If they were mages, they would be protected by the Wardens from the Chantry. Elves, dwarves, and humans were equally Wardens. No Warden was another's servant. As Wardens, they should address her as Bronwyn, or as Commander. Then too, Wardens were paid according to rank, not according to race. The new recruits were all due good coin from the day before to Summerday, the next pay date.

This all went down well. Less happily received was the news that their fertility might be somewhat affected. A Warden mage, she told them, had somewhat improved the potion, which had kept a higher proportion of them alive than in the past, and might have solved the fertility problem, but that was as yet unknown. She also told them about the Calling, and that the potion might counteract that as well.

"However, it's all experimental. I'd prefer you didn't discuss it

with Wardens from other countries, lest we raise false hopes. There is the central matter of being a Warden that I must still reveal to you. This is the greatest secret of the order, and the reason for our existence. Listen well, and then seal your lips. Blabbing Warden secrets calls for the harshest punishment."

Which led her into a digression about her rules for Warden behavior and her prescribed punishments. There was nothing there that sounded excessively harsh or unreasonable to anyone, whether they were soldiers, mages, or unlucky citizens dragged into an unplanned war by the Blight. The mildest punishment was loss of pay—or at least Bronwyn deemed it the mildest punishment. To the people before her, it was a serious matter.

A city elf muttered to his friend, "Nobody wants to miss out on that kind of coin!" This evoked mutters, which were entirely of agreement. Young Warden Boniface tried to look haughty, but to a penniless young nobleman, the amount of pay sounded good, too. His bitch of a grandmother, of course, would want him to send it all to her. He wondered if the Queen would make him obey her. He hoped not.

"All right," said Bronwyn. "Ordinarily this important secret is not revealed to new Wardens until they've served for a year. We want to make sure you settle in and don't run away. We don't want to panic you, for that matter. Still you've all faced darkspawn, and you all survived. You've seen they can be killed. You'll all do your part in the Fifth Blight, and that's something to be very, very proud of. So here it is:

"Only a Warden can kill the Archdemon." She let her words sink in for a moment.

Bustrum looked puzzled, and said, "But Lady... everyone knows that. Only Wardens can end the Blight. This is no secret."

Bronwyn smiled, and did not correct him about his mode of address. That would take time. "The secret is in the why, my friend. For that matter, there are many who doubt the Wardens. There are many, like the Sieur de Flambard, who fancy themselves mighty heroes who do not need Grey Wardens to protect them. They are mistaken. Only Grey Wardens can end a Blight, because only a Grey Warden can kill an Archdemon. If anyone else were to attempt it, it could result in disaster for Thedas. Let me explain why. Pass the cider around. I don't know about you, but I find that storytelling is thirsty work!"

There was laughter... mostly quite cheerful. The good food and good drink had won the poor. Those who were used to as good or better were drawn in by the adventure and the chance for personal glory. They listened intently, waiting for the other shoe to drop, as it were.

"All right," said Bronwyn. "A brief history lesson. In the days of the First Blight, almost all of Thedas— surface Thedas — was ruled by the Tevinter Imperium, which claimed the greatest army the world has ever seen. And yet the First Blight lasted nearly two hundred years. How could the mighty Tevinters not kill a dragon, however big? There are Wardens here who've

participated in killing two High Dragons, and numerous lesser dragonkind."

A dwarf duster lifted his cup in salute. "We know *you* have, Dragonslayer!"

"I never killed one alone," Bronwyn told them. "It's always been a group effort. In the Frostbacks five of us killed a High Dragon. One of us— our dear friend Cullen, a former Templar — died protecting us so we could get in the lethal blows. Still, it was a very big dragon and we killed it. I don't know how big Dumat was, but the Tevinters were unable to kill it, until the Grey Wardens came along. It ravaged all Thedas, and ultimately led to the collapse of the Imperium."

"Well..." Constant, one the Templars, temporized. "It was Our Lady Andraste who defeated the Tevinters."

"Very true," Bronwyn agreed, "but she wisely saw her opportunity in the weakened state of the Imperium in the wake of the First Blight. The world was exhausted, and it would have been far worse without the first Grey Wardens. They drank the Joining potion just as you did, and with it came the power to end the life of the Archdemon. We still know the names of some of the heroes who saved our world: the lovers Corin and Neriah who killed the Archdemon Zazikel in the Second Blight; Caius Corvanni who killed Toth in the Third; the elven hero Garahel whose slaying of Andoral at the battle of Ayesleigh ended the Fourth Blight..."

"Wait..." whispered a city elf. "There's an *elven hero*?"

"Shhhh," Adaia whispered back. "Maybe you can get Bronwyn to tell the story. It's really neat. Yeah, a real elven hero. Garahel."

"However," Bronwyn said seriously, "What can any of you tell me about the later careers of those heroes?"

"They didn't have later careers," said Brosca. "'Cos they were all *dead*. Killed in the battle."

A questioning silence followed.

Bronwyn gave them a nod. "It's true, but there's more to it than that. I can't explain it all, because we only know a bit about the end of the Second, Third, and Fourth Blights. The Wardens who struck the killing blow perished. About the First Blight, all we know is that all the original Wardens were killed in the final battle. But as to the rest, every Warden who struck the final blow against an Archdemon died. And it has to be a Warden. Others thought they had killed the Archdemon Dumat in the First Blight, but it wouldn't stay dead. Its spirit traveled to the nearest darkspawn, and it rose again. The Old God's shape-shifting ability resulted in a new, healthy, reconstituted Archdemon. That's why the First Blight went on and on."

Everyone was thinking hard. Bronwyn did not torture them with curiosity for long.

"A darkspawn is a soulless creature. A Grey Warden is not. It is thought that if a Grey Warden strikes the final blow, the Archdemon's spirit is drawn to that Grey Warden by their

shared Taint. The souls meet and both Warden and Archdemon perish. It's the only way to win. I, for one, accept that challenge and that fate. If I must perish so that the world may live, so be it."

Some look horrified. Some—many more — looked enraptured. Bustrum and Ostap glanced at each other, and then nodded sagely. Bronwyn went on.

"But I can't do it alone. Once I learned how to kill the Archdemon, I understood why the Warden went aloft on griffons and surrounded the Archdemon. It wasn't just to kill the creature, but to prevent the disaster of someone who was not a Warden getting off a lucky shot that would appear to kill the Archdemon, but wouldn't. Imagine if that happened: everyone would be celebrating a dead Old God, while the actual Archdemon, possessing the body of a little genlock perhaps, crept out of sight until it could regather its strength and fall on the unsuspecting world with even greater fury. When we meet the Archdemon, we Wardens have got to get in and get close and do the job ourselves. The mission of the army with us is to engage the darkspawn and give us a chance at the Archdemon. King Loghain knows enough to know that."

"Too bad we don't have griffons," said Boniface. "Now I understand why they were important, and not just for show."

"No, they weren't just for show," Bronwyn agreed. "Their purpose was to give the Grey Wardens an edge when fighting an aerial enemy. We no longer have that edge. In the future,

we might be able to train wyverns — or better, dragons—to carry us. That's a long term project and we don't have time for it now. I have no idea why the Grey Wardens haven't done it, but there's no point in recriminations."

"If Carver were here," Aveline said, smiling, "he'd tell you about the time the Commander rode a dragon."

There was quite a bit of interest in this. Bronwyn laughed. "Some other time. It took off flying with me on its back. I do know that there are people who have managed to tame dragons, but as I say, that will be a task when the Blight is over and won."

"And now we have wyverns!" Sigrun declared, still thrilled at the memory.

"We have wyverns," Bronwyn nodded, "or rather mage wyverns. Our mages who could shape-shift gave us a great tactical advantage in the last battle. Wyverns, however, have a very limited flying range. They glide rather than fly. There are other tactics to use against the Archdemon. In our fight against one in the Korcari Wilds, we used ballistae with explosive bolts to damage the creature's wings and bring it down. it was still a very hard fight, but I was able to get on its back and get at its brain through the back of its skull. I've noticed that dragons will usually land to attack an enemy, if they can. As soon as they do, you got to damage them in every possible way."

She then quickly described all the vulnerable points of a

dragon, hoping it would sink in.

"Above all you have to destroy its ability to fly. In the Frostbacks, when the dragon was on the ground I was able to nail an explosive bomb to the dragon's wingjoint. It flew off, but came back to flame us again. Tara there hit the bomb with a fireball when it was still high in the air. The bomb blew the wing apart. Yes, that was quite the sight. The fall injured it so badly that we could finish it off."

Astrid spoke up. "That's why we have ballistae teams who can set up them up quickly and carriages for them that let us elevate them to shoot into the air. I want some of you to train with them. I think a ballistae bolt fired by a Warden would settle the Archdemon perfectly well, if it hit in a vital spot."

"I wonder..." said Niall. "You know that's less than a handful of events to judge from. Maybe the Archdemon's soul would be drawn to the Warden closest at the moment of death."

"An interesting idea," Bronwyn granted, "though that's not Warden lore."

Actually she thought that a very interesting idea indeed. Perhaps not all would be lost if some non-Warden caused the Archdemon to die. Nonetheless, a Warden must be close by, lest the Archdemon regenerate.

"You don't think..." Adaia ventured. "You don't think that the Warden's *soul* is killed as well as the body?"

The dwarves, for the most part, rolled their eyes, Astrid among them. However frail the souls that animated elves and humans, surely the spirit of a dwarf was of stronger stuff, and would not disperse simply because of a collision with a lunatic dragon god. Nor were they the only ones who rejected the idea.

"No!" Leliana objected. "I do not believe that at all. A soul cannot be destroyed." She quoted:

*"I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.
For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."*

"Well said," Bronwyn said, inclined to be optimistic about it, remembering her dream in which she had seen her family. "Nothing can destroy our spirits. For all we know, the Old God's spirit isn't killed either. Perhaps it, too, instead of a miserable existence in a Tainted, corrupt container, is freed to move on to spheres we can only imagine. Whether we go to the Maker, the Stone, or the Creators, death in this world is only the beginning. Like gods, we live forever."

A good exit line, but of course there were training arrangements to make, and responsibilities to assign. And there were a handful of people she wished to deal with immediately.

"If Alistair and Astrid have a moment to join me, I'd like to meet with the following new recruits: Laurel, Tygon, Oliane, and Darius."

Two of them were Circle mages, two were refugees who had been Blighted and saved by the Joining. None of them had particularly distinguished themselves in the battle for their courage or skill at arms, but they had other skills that could be put to good use elsewhere. For that matter the mages might improve with further training, which no one had the time to give them here at the forefront of the army, other than Morrigan force-feeding them shape-shifting.

Bronwyn was brief. "I'm sending you four to Jader. Warden Catriona is in charge there, and you're to help her. Petra's there too, and she can give Laurel and Tygon some training in battlemagic."

Tygone was embarrassed, but not as embarrassed as Laurel, who turned dark pink.

"I'm sorry. I've never been any good with elemental magic. I did my best."

"You did fine. You got your blood, and you healed some wounded, and you survived the Joining. Nonetheless, I want to keep some Wardens in reserve, and some supplemental training can only make you more effective. Oliane, I understand that you were a nobleman's housekeeper..."

"Assistant housekeeper, Your Majesty," the young elf said shyly.

"Call me Commander. Be that as it may, we have a big compound in Jader. Some of the servants remained, but not

all. I would prefer to have Wardens who can be trusted with our secrets in responsible posts. We also have a castle in Ferelden that will require organization, when we can get back to it. I don't want to send you there alone, but eventually we want Soldier's Peak to be our primary home. As to you Darius, I was told that you were an Imperial tax collector."

"I never actually asked people for money, Your— er— Commander," the small, slender man said. "I kept records. I maintained archives. I'm a scholar, not a fighter."

"Good. We need scholars and archivists, too. Soldier's Peak's library is in poor condition, though Warden Leliana did what she could with it. You might talk to her before you leave. I'm sending the four of you with the courier escort to the Port of Lydes, where you'll take ship for Jader. I'll have a letter for Catriona, and some letters for Denerim that Catriona needs to see get sent."

No one seemed about to break down in hysterics, which was a relief. You never knew about people. Bronwyn passed on the order to return to camp, and went to see to her horse. Others lingered. Alistair was impressed at the size the force they now commanded. He thought, all things considered, that morale was good.

Some indeed, seemed quite excited. A group of warriors had collected around Ostap and Bustrum, who appeared to be telling some sort of Avvar legend.

"—just as in the days of old. Animals go blindly to the sacrifice, the gods gave knowledge to men. When the Kings or Queens were dedicated, they knew their fate. In three years, or seven, or nine, whenever the custom was, the term would end and the gods would call them. Or sometimes they would go when there was great sickness or a danger. And they went consenting, or they were no true rulers, and power would not fall to them to lead the people. When the people chose among the Royal Kin, that was the sign; that the true ruler would choose a short life with glory, and to walk with the gods, rather than live long, unknown, like the stall-fed ox."

One of the Orlesians looked tense and rather sad, glancing over at Bronwyn. "Are you saying—"

Bustrum went on. "Later the custom altered. Perhaps they had a King they could not spare, or war or plague had thinned the Kindred. Or perhaps a god showed them a hidden thing. They ceased to offer the King or Queen at a set time. They kept their ruler for the extreme sacrifice, to appease the gods in their great angers, when they had sent no rain, or the cattle died, or in a hard war. And it was no one's place to say, 'It is time to make the offering.' The King was nearest to the gods, because he had consented to his fate."

The ex-Templar Constant grimaced. "Andraste did not volunteer to be burned—"

The other Templar, Ronan, interrupted him. "—but she *chose* to lead the people against the magisters. She must have always known what might happen to her."

Alistair shook his head, shivering over the implications. He decided not to think about it.

Theology. Ugh.

Then he walked on, and so missed the rest of the conversation.

Loghain heard Captain Travis' report from start to finish, and considered it carefully. A servant brought him some hot cider and a bacon roll, and he had just enough time to swallow both before Prosper de Montfort burst on the scene.

"It's true?" he demanded. "There are Qunari by the River Orne?"

"So it would seem. The scouts only saw a dozen or so, though there may be more. All Qunari warriors, though they had an elf girl with them—some sort of servant or other."

Prosper's expression was quite the study. He stepped closer and dropped his voice for Loghain's ears only. "Qunari do not bring servants to war. If there is an elf with them, she is something very different, and very dangerous." He grew impatient at Loghain's hesitation. "Listen to me, King Loghain. You may know more of war than I, but I know a very great deal about the Qunari. I have made a study of them. I traveled to Par Vollen in my youth. I get regular reports of them. I speak their language. If they are here in the Orlesian heartland, it bodes no good."

"You distrust the Qunari," Loghain said, quite interested in this development. De Montfort spoke Qunari? That was quite the feat. Loghain had heard it was the most difficult language in Thedas, since it was not related to any of the others.

"Qunari are dangerous, and they dream always of coverting Thedas to the Qun. May I speak to this captain of yours? I would like him to describe the elf."

"Very well. Why not?" He told the guard. "Summon Captain Travis."

Travis came immediately, wiping his face, and looking like he longed for his cot and some sleep. Nonetheless, he answered Prosper's questions readily enough.

"Like I told His Majesty, my lord. The Qunari said their ship was wrecked and they rowed to the mouth of the Orne."

"You saw an elf among them, I understand?"

"Yes, my lord— just an elf girl. Young, passably pretty. The whole party looked a bit... beat down, but pretending not to be."

With forced patience, Prosper probed on. "Was the girl performing any camp chores? Cooking, cleaning?"

"No," the captain answered slowly. "Now that you mention it. She wasn't. She was standing by the leader when we rode up."

"Was she armed?"

"Yes. Yes she was. She wore a pair of daggers and she was dressed in green leather and a bit of mail— more like a scout than a camp girl." He frowned, retrieving the memory. "Sort of brown or reddish brown hair. She left the talking to the leader, but he turned and spoke to her. Big fellow, name of Karasten. Big horns on his head. On all the men's heads, too. Wouldn't have guessed they were the same as that Qunari who's in the Queen's retinue."

"Most of that race are horned," Prosper said, dismissing that remark. More interesting were other things in the report. "A Karasten! And you saw only a dozen with him?" He turned to Loghain. "Qunaris do not have proper names, but rather are designated by occupation or rank. A Karasten is a senior officer of the Qunari military. He would have commanded a dreadnought."

"Travis said their camp was well-organized, but not well-supplied." He gave the captain a nod to fill Duke Prosper in.

"It's true, my lord. Based on what I saw, I believe the shipwreck story. They don't have much beyond their weapons, and they're living off the game they killed. And there are some wounded men among them. Some nasty burns, it looked like, though it was hard to tell."

"Did Karasten call the elf girl by name?"

"Yes... Tanis, Taris..."

"Tallis?"

"That's it, my lord. Tallis. She had a nice smile. I remember that. I didn't get close. This sounds ridiculous, I know, but I just had a bad feeling about them."

"You were wise, my friend. They would have killed you, if they'd had the chance. We need to talk at length with those Qunari, but we need to go in force."

Loghain was suspicious of all foreigners by nature and experience, and so he did not despise Prosper for being concerned about the Qunari. It had been clear to him, too, that there was more to the story than the Qunari had told Travis. Fortunately, the captain had had the presence of mind not to tell them all about the allied army. Let the Qunari be surprised by that, and see how they liked it.

"Yes," he said. "I want to meet this Karasten fellow myself."

The captain was dismissed, and Loghain raised a brow.

"Tallis? You know this woman? A spy?"

"Worse. Much worse. She is a member of a the Ben-Hassrath, which is in a sense their priesthood and also their institution of political enforcement. They discipline those who have failed in their duty. They are also agents and assassins when necessary. I am puzzled that they would send a woman, for the Qunari separate the duties by gender very strictly. Generally, a female member of the Ben-Hassrath would punish women and children, but certain among them are

chosen for their ability to blend in abroad. An elf woman would be a formidable agent. She is highly-placed, or I miss my guess."

"An elf woman is a *Qunari*?" Loghain asked, puzzled. "How can she be both an elf and a Qunari? She is in their pay, you mean? Like a bard?"

"No, I mean she is a Qunari. Put aside your image of elves as slaves or servants... or even as bards. She is playing no game. She is a highly-placed official of their government. She would scorn the idea of performing her duties for pay. Do not confuse the race of Kossith with the Qunari. The Qun is a philosophy, and open to all races. Most Qunari are indeed Kossith, but not all. If this elf is Ben-Hassrath, then she has embraced the Qun with the zealotry of the convert, and will thus be doubly dangerous. If they sent a Benn-Hassrath to Orlais, they had a specific, vitally important mission in mind. Her name... 'Tallis'... It means something like 'one who solves problems.'"

"A "Fixer?" Well, you obviously know more about them than I," Loghain granted, finding it both ominous and extremely interesting. Also rather amusing. It was pleasant to see an Orlesian worried about invaders in his own land. "Bronwyn has a Qunari among her companions, but I've never heard much more about him than that he's a good fighter. He served well down at Ostagar."

"Is he Qunari, or Tal'Vashoth?"

"I have no idea what you mean."

"Tal'Vashoth have renounced their allegiance to the Qun. What is the fellow's name?"

"Bronwyn and Alistair call him Sten."

Prosper de Montfort blew out a long, long breath. "He is a Qunari officer. I had noticed him, of course. I thought him a Tal'Vashoth mercenary— a renegade who has renounced the authority of the Qun, but it would seem not. Would you mind very much, if this Sten— which means 'lieutenant,' by the way, answered a few questions?"

"We can do that, though perhaps we should wait until Bronwyn is back. He's her man, after all."

Bronwyn was back fairly soon, though not soon enough for Prosper's anxiety. She was eager to hear about the patrols, though rather surprised by the questions about Sten.

"Yes, he's a soldier. He told me that he was sent on a mission by his Arishok to find out the answer to the question "*What is the Blight?*" I think he found out more than he planned."

"He was sent alone?"

Bronwyn was a little puzzled by Duke Prosper's intensity, but answered readily enough, leaving aside Sten's horrible crime. He was attempting to atone for it, after all.

"No. He had a small force with him, but he told me they were all killed by darkspawn. Sten was badly wounded, and woke up some time later in a cottage. No one seemed to know anything much about his men. He went rather berserk when he found he'd lost his sword somewhere in the Hinterlands, which I understand is a disgrace among his people."

"That is so," Prosper nodded in satisfaction. "A great disgrace. He could never return to them without it. They would execute him. So that is why he stayed with you?"

"Not at all. I found that sword at the Frostback Fair for him. Such a lucky chance. He was frightfully grateful and said I must be an ash... an ashkaari." She laughed. "That means someone who finds out secrets and truths. I think it also means some sort of teacher or philosopher, too. He told us a very amusing story relating to them."

"You found his sword," said Loghain. "So he was free to go. Why didn't he?"

Bronwyn shrugged. "I daresay he'd prefer to be able to report the whole story to his officer. He seems content in our company, though he did not want to be a Grey Warden, so I didn't force the matter." She studied both men in her turn.

"Why so many questions about a lone Qunari?"

Loghain glanced over at Prosper, "Because, my dear girl, there seems to be more to it than that. He is no longer a lone Qunari. The Greenway patrol came across a band of them, 'shipwrecked,' they said. Led by a high-ranking officer, and

with some sort of government official with them."

"There is that," agreed Prosper, "and more. The Arishok who gave your Sten his orders is not simply an officer. The Arishok commands the Qunari army. With the Arigena and the Ariqun, he is one of the three rulers of the Qunari people. Your Sten received his orders at the highest level. This is no mere idle questioning, but a serious reconnaissance by a foreign power."

"I daresay," Bronwyn said patiently. "Any Qunari could come to our country and find out as much. People are free to travel in Ferelden. Sten will no doubt have all sorts of things to report, but nothing I feel we need fear or be ashamed of. He is a brave soldier, and has shown remarkable personal loyalty to me, above all when I was badly wounded in the Deep Roads. I am not about to start treating Sten as an enemy. I think it's much more interesting to discover what these other high-ranking Qunari are doing here. Have they talked?"

"No," said Loghain. "I thought we might go have a word, and bring that Sten of yours along. Duke Prosper here understands their language, but there's no need to tell them that."

"All right," Bronwyn said. "Just as long as it's done in the proper spirit. I think well of Sten, and I would not want him to have any reason to question my honor."

She spoke very decidedly, and Loghain and Prosper exchanged another look, expressing the uselessness of

debating the dangers of such an individual so close to a crowned head. Prosper did not wish to quarrel with the Fereldans on such a matter, but vowed to have his own people watch this Sten very carefully.

As for Loghain, he resolved to deal with the matter in his own way and in his own time, and to be very careful that Bronwyn never knew anything about it.

Sten arrived, was somewhat bemused to hear of the arrival of the Qunari. He grew sober—even for him—at the news that a member of the Benn-Hessrath was of the party.

Bronwyn felt very much in the position of being Sten's advocate. She knew Loghain was suspicious of foreigners, but was surprised at Prosper's attitude. Then she reconsidered. Why shouldn't he be as xenophobic as Loghain, when it came to the arrival of armed foreigners on his home soil? Of course, a party of fifteen was not exactly a credible invasion force.

"Do you know why they might be in Orlais, Sten?" she asked.

The Qunari frowned massively in thought.

"A karasten? A member of the Benn-Hassrath? A mission of great importance, surely. Their rank is far higher than mine, and I would not be privy to their secrets."

"Orlais does not have regular diplomatic dealings with the Qunari," Prosper said, his face hard with suspicion. "Why

now? Why come to Orlais when we are under attack? Might they be coming for the same reason as you? To learn more about the Blight?"

"It is... possible," Sten granted. Then, thinking more about it, he added, "Or perhaps they have come for a thing of ours."

"What thing?" Loghain asked, pouncing.

"In the course of the formal cessation of hostilities between the lands of the *bas* and those of the Qun, certain agreements were made. Not all were kept," said Sten.

Neither Bronwyn nor Loghain missed the slight flaring of Prosper's nostrils at the word '*bas*.' They would have to get back to that later.

"You are speaking of the Llomerynn Accords, I presume," said Bronwyn. "What part of them was not kept?"

"Your Chantry had in its possession a Qunari artifact of great cultural value. In the peace talk, it was agreed this artifact was to be returned to us. It has not been, thus far. It could be that if they knew this land was in turmoil, they would attempt to retrieve it, fearing for its safety."

Prosper smiled grimly. "The Tome of Koslun."

Sten inclined his head in assent. "It is so. A priceless book of wisdom, fundamental to the Qun. Your Chantry has had it in its possession for two hundred years.. If the city of Val

Royeaux has been occupied by the darkspawn creatures, the Tome could be in danger of destruction. It is the only thing in the whole of Orlais that the Qunari people would value."

"Good of you to tell us about it," Loghain remarked. Bronwyn glared at him.

Sten was unruffled. "It is no secret. We have requested the return of the Tome time and again. Your people have no use for it. It would be logical to return it."

"You know of this Tome, then, my lord," Bronwyn asked Prosper. "Do you know where it is? Was it on display at the Grand Cathedral?"

"I believe it to be in the Grand Cathedral, but not on display. No indeed. It was, to my understanding, locked away in the Cathedral vaults as a work of deepest heresy, but possibly valuable as a bargaining piece. As to why it has not already been returned, I think that was a matter of politics."

Loghain sneered. "Intricate politics, since the Accords were signed nearly a hundred fifty years ago!"

"No one in the Chantry wants the reputation of being complicit with heretics." Prosper spread his hands, and shrugged. "No one wished to go to the trouble of returning it. It would be a matter of some delicacy, since there would be those who would wish to possess it, besides the Qun."

"You speak of the Tevinters, of course," said Bronwyn.

Sten made a noise of disgust. Prosper nodded, smiling grimly.

"The Imperium would certainly like to have it, to study, looking for an edge in their ongoing war against the Qunari, and to strike a demoralizing blow against them."

"We're certainly no friends of Tevinter. Would you object to the Qunari having this book returned to them?" Loghain asked. "If it is locked in a vault, then it might well have survived the fall of the city."

"Indeed it might." Prosper actually laughed. "If the Qunari can pry it from the darkspawn's clutches, they can have it and welcome!"

Actually, the thought was very amusing, in a grim way. If the Qunari perished fighting the darkspawn, that would suit Prosper de Montfort very well indeed.

"We shall go to them tomorrow," Bronwyn said, "and you, Sten, will come with us. I'm sure you will have much to say to one another."

Sten nodded and went his way. Bronwyn turned to Prosper.

"So?"

"I think he's telling the truth, as far as it goes. If I may venture to do so, do not trust too much in his loyalty. Do you know what the word '*bas*' means? When he spoke of the 'lands of the '*bas*'?"

"I'm sure you want to tell us," snorted Loghain.

"I do. It means 'thing,' implying 'pointless, *useless* thing.' That is the charming name the Qunari people use for anything not of the Qun. They truly despise us, you see, and consider nothing not of the Qun to have value. It's important to always bear that in mind when dealing with them."

The Qunari castaways had shown no inclination to come east, or in fact do anything but what they had come to do. If the allies wanted to know the truth of their mission, they would have to go to them and ask.

Ordinarily, the allied command would send the Qunari a summons to come to them, but it would likely be ignored, and either result in a fight or simply in them looking weak. It was better to go themselves with a large scouting party to the Orne Bridge. It was a long day's journey, and they would have to camp nearby, but Bronwyn wanted to see the area for herself anyway. They would be moving the whole army west in a day or so.

Thus, she brought half of the Wardens, along with her loyal auxiliaries. Sten, of course, needed to be there anyway. He was showing no emotion about meeting those of his own kind, but Bronwyn thought he surely must be glad, after so many months among strangers, at the prospect of speaking his own language and seeing his fellow countrymen.

Signs of Blight were everywhere, and very likely spreading, as

they did until purified with fire. There were signs of the darkspawn having traveled the road as well: the usual bloody trophies. These, too, were burned. They moved more slowly as they approached the site of the Qunari camp. Travis described it to the Dalish scouts, who moved in, silent and invisible. It was arranged that the Dalish Wardens would make contact first. Sten agreed that this was wise, as Qunari would not be so reflexively hostile at the appearance of elves. He also warned that the mages should be discreet, for many Qunari soldiers would be alarmed at the sight of an unleashed *saarebas*.

The Qunari camp was a neat but crude affair. They had lookouts, of course, but they were not that hard to spot, or difficult for the Dalish to evade. The Qunari were not so familiar with the plants, animals, and climates of the colder south, and their woodcraft was not quite equal to fading into the alien environment. Contact was then made, when Danith slipped out from cover, Darach and Cathair at her back.

"Good day to you!" She called out, her hands out and in view. "I am the Grey Warden Danith. We heard that you were here, and I have come to see if you need help, and if you would tell me about any darkspawn you have seen."

There was an tense moment, when it hung in the balance whether or not the Qunari leader would order an attack, but the small elf woman at his side whispered in his ear, and the huge warrior relaxed. He nodded at his men, and they lowered their weapons.

"We require no assistance, elf. What we have seen is our own affair."

Danith was not particularly offended by his conduct. Sten was often this abrupt. He did not mean to be rude: it was the way of his people. On the other hand, Danith would not be surprised if this Qunari *meant* to be rude.

She gave him a slight smile. "I am properly addressed as 'Warden,' Karasten," she said, "for that is my function. Is that not the Qunari way?"

"It is," he answered.

"Very well. You do not have to speak to me, but I advise you to speak to my Commander, who is now arriving, along with King Loghain, Paragon Astrid, Keeper Merrill, and Duke Prosper, the other leaders of the allied army. They are not much interested in shipwrecked Qunari, but they are *very* interested in tracing the movements of the darkspawn."

"Your war means nothing to us," Karasten declared.

"I don't think that's true at all," Danith said, contradicting him to his face. "I don't think you would be here if it weren't for the Blight. However, our leaders will soon arrive, in command of a substantial force. They are inclined to treat you as guests in this land, which is very much to your advantage. Think on it."

Her eyes briefly met those of the elf woman at the Karasten's side, and then she turned away, and vanished into the trees.

Almost immediately, there was the sound of hoofbeats, and horses entered the clearing where the Qunari were encamped. Karasten knew his men outnumbered, but did not automatically grant them as outclassed. The warriors were humans, dwarves, and elves, after all; not Kossith, which were traditionally chosen as warriors for their superior size and strength.

But with them, on a large warhorse, was a Kossith. A hornless Kossith.

"Tal'Vashoth!" muttered one of the Karasten's men, and spat on the ground.

"I wonder..." murmured Tallis.

Loghain had told his companions not to dismount. They were not here to make friends, but to question potentially hostile interlopers. Prosper could not agree more. His part would be to listen very carefully. Sten was behind them, with a group of Wardens

Thus it was Bronwyn who first addressed the Qunari.

"Greetings to you, Qunari travelers! I am Bronwyn, Queen and Warden-Commander of Ferelden. With me are King Loghain, and Duke Prosper de Montfort, speaking for the new Empress of Orlais. This is Paragon Astrid of Orzammar, also a Grey Warden, and Keeper Merrill of the Dalish. Also with us is Sten of the Beresaad, who has traveled with me for some time, seeking the answer to the question posed to him by the

Arishok: *'What is the Blight?'*"

"*Shanedan*, Queen and Commander," said Karasten. "We see our brother has taken no harm, though he has been gone long."

"I have learned much," Sten replied. "I have fought the darkspawn both on the earth and under the earth. The Blight is a danger to all, and must be overcome."

"Knowing this," said Karasten, with dangerous calm, "you remain among the *bas*, and do not make your report?"

"It seems to me," said Sten, "that you already know how dangerous the darkspawn are. I see wounded men among you."

Loghain asked, "Where and when did you meet the darkspawn?"

Karasten gave him a blank stare. "I need answer no questions of yours."

"Really?" Loghain remarked, an edge in his voice. "Perhaps we'll have to see about that."

The elf, Tallis, spoke into the rising tension. "Why don't we all... calm down?"

Bronwyn smiled, "I am perfectly calm, Tallis. We are all perfectly happy to speak to a member of the Ben-Hassrath."

Tallis made the slightest movement of surprise.

Bronwyn's smile broadened. "I think we can be of considerable assistance to one another. We want to know what you've seen of the the darkspawn. That is a perfectly reasonable question. And I think you're seeking something yourself."

Tallis shrugged. "All right. Let's talk. Just you and me."

Much to the displeasure of her husband and everyone else who cared about her, Bronwyn dismounted and walked apart with Tallis, towering over the slender elf woman.

"I am not an Orlesian," Bronwyn said. "I don't play games. You came in a dreadnought, I believe, and you're looking for the Tome of Koslun."

Tallis' face was a civil blank. "Sten of the Beresaad's been talkative. Interesting."

"Not at all. We deduced it for ourselves. We brought him along in case we had language difficulties, and also because I consider him a friend, and I thought it would give him pleasure to see his own people once more. Perhaps I was wrong."

"He will be judged on his merits. Meanwhile, what are your intentions?"

"I *intend* to fight the Blight. If your party would like to join with us under our command, you would be welcome."

"Qunari do not submit to the commands of others."

"That is simply not true," Bronwyn said, clinging to the shreds of her patience. Tallis had a snippy manner of speech that irritated her. She looked tired, though, and perhaps her hardships deserved some forbearance. "Sten has been a loyal soldier throughout our adventure. You are... what? A little over a dozen. You wish to find your Tome of Koslun. I have already spoken to Duke Prosper about it. If you can retrieve it, you are perfectly welcome to it. Nobody else cares about it. What I *do* care about is hearing about any contact you've had with the darkspawn. There have been no storms in the past several days. How did your ship happen to sink? Carelessness? Inefficiency? Did you—"

"The Archdemon sank it," Tallis interrupted her, stung by the implication of incompetence. "At least I think it was the Archdemon."

"Very large dragon... reddish purple in color... looks like it's rotting... white eyes? That Archdemon?"

"Sounds like it. Well. Yes. It was."

"Did it attack you at sea? In the open water? Where did this take place?"

"Er... in the harbor at Val Royeaux." Tallis shrugged. She saw no reason to keep this part of the story a secret.

"You sailed straight into the harbor of a city that had just been

destroyed by the darkspawn?" Bronwyn gave her a look. "That was... reckless."

"Not all of it's destroyed. Bits are still standing. Here and there. Besides, we didn't *know* it had been destroyed by the darkspawn. That was the story you Grey Wardens were spreading. We thought it was worth checking out."

"I don't think I care for the way you phrased that. It is the duty of the Grey Wardens to warn the people of the Blight. 'Spreading a story' suggests that we're spreading lies. The Archdemon, as you apparently noticed, is no lie."

"Fine. Whatever. We've only come to take back what is rightfully ours."

"And no one is challenging your claim. However, we do have to know what is going on in our theater of operations. So the Archdemon attacked you. How did it happen to notice you were in harbor? Did anyone make a landing? Enter the city?"

"I don't see how it benefits us to tell you anything."

Bronwyn took another look at the elf, and reined in her temper. "Then you're not thinking clearly. It benefits you because if you cooperate and do your part, you can walk away with your book. If you get in our way, we will have to consider you allies of the darkspawn, and therefore our enemies."

"Obviously we're not 'allies' of the darkspawn. That's

ridiculous."

"Hardly ridiculous when you're hiding valuable information that might help shorten our war."

"Your war. Not ours. I think we're pretty safe on our islands."

Bronwyn understood her. Oh, yes. She entirely understood that the elf— this Ben-Hassrath— was taking the long view, and saw great advantage to the Qunari people the more damaged and wounded Ferelden and Orlais—all the nations of Thedas— were by the Blight. It was disgusting and opportunistic, but since the Qunari saw no value in any culture other than their own, it made a horrible kind of sense. For that matter, it was not so different from the Orlesians sitting back, happy to see Ferelden ravaged. The unpleasant difference was that the Qunari was right. Very likely they were perfectly safe, with deep ocean beds between them and the continent. Nothing in the Shaperate maps indicated that the dwarves had ever attempted to dig under the ocean proper. If they couldn't do it, neither could the darkspawn.

"Keep your secrets," Bronwyn said finally, with a shrug. "Our army is coming along this road soon. Stay out of our way. You should know that darkspawn spread disease. If any of you fall sick, you can seek Healing among the Wardens. We have the greatest expertise in that." She turned and started walking away.

"That's it?" Tallis asked, surprised. "You really don't care about what I've seen?"

"I don't play games," Bronwyn said, and kept on walking. "If you want to help fight darkspawn, come see me. Otherwise, you can rot here in this swamp for all I care."

She swung onto her horse, and gave Loghain an expressive look.

"Let's go."

"A moment!" growled Karasten. "Go and good riddance, but Sten remains. It is time for him to return to his duty."

Sten clearly had been expecting this. "The Arishok's orders supercede all others."

"The Arishok did not order you to consort with *bas*," said Karasten. "You can complete your mission among your own people. I speak for the Arishok in this."

"And I speak for the Qun," Tallis said. "Choose your path, Sten. You can be of the Qun... or not."

A pause.

"I am of the Qun."

With a deep breath, Sten dismounted. His hand touched Trampler's withers lightly.

"Panahedan."

"The horse would be useful," grunted a Qunari.

"It is not mine," replied Sten. He turned to Bronwyn. "It seems that our paths part here, Warden."

"Not forever, I hope," said Bronwyn, disappointed and grieved, but trying not to show it. "My thanks for your good company. You and your sword will always be welcome." She caught his eye, willing him to understand how much she meant it.

"Let us go," Prosper sneered. "It is clear that these oxmen know nothing of value."

Bronwyn glared at him in surprise, wondering why he was being so deliberately provocative. The Qunari bristled, and conversed briskly in their own language. Prosper fumbled with his bridle, delaying their departure, and then they rode off.

Loghain, rather amused, turned in his saddle to question Prosper. "What was that little puppetshow about back there?"

Prosper was smirking at Bronwyn. "Did the Ben-Hassrath tell you they had wounded the Archdemon?"

"No!" She would have laughed, had she not been so unhappy about Sten. "All I got was that the Archdemon attacked their ship when they tried to sail into Val Royeaux."

"It appears that as the Archdemon flamed them, the gaatlok magazine — the place where they store their explosive black powder — was set afire and exploded. From what I could gather, the creature flew away screaming." He snorted. "Of

course the dreadnought was entirely destroyed, and only a few survived in a lifeboat. Rather a pyrrhic victory."

"So what did the elf tell you?" Loghain asked Bronwyn.

"Not much in words. She did let slip that they were sunk in the harbor of Val Royeaux. She wouldn't tell me if they came ashore, but I believe they must have. That's probably what roused the Archdemon. She made clear that the Qunari High Command feels secure on its islands and has no problem with the rest of Thedas being destabilized by the darkspawn."

Loghain growled. Bronwyn smiled a bit sadly. "What was most interesting was what she did *not* say and possibly does not know. I think she must have gone into Val Royeaux herself. She's in the early stages of Blight disease. She can become a Warden, or die."

While the rest of the leadership began moving the army up to the Orne, Bronwyn took a party of Wardens across the river. They moved past the Qunari camp, which was well guarded. Bronwyn looked, but could see no sign of Sten.

Nobody was happy about Sten. Alistair was not happy at his choice, and others wondered why Bronwyn had not ordered him to stay with her.

"How could she?" Leliana asked those questioners, exasperated. "She had no authority over Sten. He was a volunteer. He chose to go back to his people—to an officer

who *did* have authority. You mustn't blame Bronwyn, and it is not Sten's fault either!"

Nonetheless, they could not help wondering about him. Even Morrigan, who was more suspicious of Qunari the more she knew about them, was used to having him about. There was some concern that the Qunaris might harm him.

Bronwyn did not think so. It would be madness to waste the abilities and experience of a valuable officer and warrior when they were already so few in number, and the Qunari claimed to abhor waste. That did not mean they would feel obligated to treat Sten *well*. There was little she could do about it until Tallis came to her as her condition worsened. Instead, Bronwyn focused on their exploration of the land beyond the river, as they approached the site of the Imperial Army's destruction.

There was yet more sign of the Taint. Trees drooped, blackened and dying. The underbrush was dry and crisped, with a nasty greyish-white scale on the leaves. The air was heavy with the smell of death and decay.

Now and then they were attacked by wild animals, Blighted and distorted. It was a madness, and a pitiful and dangerous thing. Most dangerous was a white-eyed she-bear. With a hollow roar, it rushed them, drooling mouth agape. After it was put down, the Dalish tracked it back to its lair where its dead cubs lay rotting.

Further up the road, they met darkspawn, and that is where

events turned very unpleasant indeed.

Thanks to my reviewers: Imperial queen, JTheClivaz, Chiara Crawford, Nemrut, sizuka2, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, KnightOfHolyLight, Rexiselic, Melysande, DjinniGenie, Death Knight's Crowbar, JackOfBladesX, Mike3207, Blinded in a bolthole, Costin, le-marus, Herebedragons66, Robbie the Phoenix, Fenrir666, Phygmalion, AD Lewis, Ravus, Jenna53, Guile, Kel, darksky01, dragonmactir, and jnybot.

I totally made up Caius Corvanni, the Warden who ended the Third Blight. There is nothing in the DA wiki about who ended that one, so I made some deductions. It was a joint army of Orlesians and Tevinters who fought the final battle at Hunter Fell. If an Orlesian Warden had ended the Blight, the Orlesians would never have shut up about it. Therefore, my guess is that it was a Tevinter Warden. Moreover, since nobody even knows his name in the southern lands, let's guess that it was a mage. So, yeah. My head canon about the end of the Third Blight is that Toth was taken down by a powerful Tevinter mage Warden. Bronwyn only knows about him because she read about him at the Shaperate, which possesses information that the human nations would find annoying for cultural and religious reasons.

A big chunk of Bustrum's story is borrowed from Mary Renault's wonderful historical novel about the hero Theseus, The King Must Die.

118. A Dreadful Leaden Sky

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 118: A Dreadful Leaden Sky

At the same time that the army's advance party made contact with the darkspawn, Sten was being debriefed by his superiors.

"I respectfully disagree," he said, in his self-possessed, deep rumble. "I do not believe that Par Vollen is, as you claim, safe from the Blight. From the darkspawn, perhaps. Nothing, however, prevents the Archdemon from flying across the Northern Passage and burning our cities and fields to ashes. Furthermore, we know that this creature can enthrall others. It could enthrall other, lesser dragons, to serve it."

"Dragons are largely extinct," Karasten objected.

"I have fought dragons myself," said Sten, his face stony, falling into his normal demeanor when dealing with Qunari superior officers. It was to be regretted, but he could not but feel that Bronwyn was a more satisfactory leader than the ones before him. "We killed a High Dragon in the Korcari Wilds. The Wardens' party repeatedly faced dragons: in the Brecilian Forest, in an underground cavern system under

Amaranthine, and in the Frostbacks, where one of the party was killed by another High Dragon. From the reports Bronwyn received from the Nevarran-Orlesian border, dragons have made a resurgence. A hostile dragon could well prove a threat. We must be prepared for all possibilities."

Karasten and Tallis exchanged a glance, remembering the disaster in the harbor. They had been completely unprepared for the dragon's devastating attack. In this, Sten was correct: they must immediately begin formulating effective strategies against such an enemy.

"Furthermore," Sten continued, "as I planned to report to the Arishok, there is strong evidence that our people have had contact with the darkspawn in the past: or at least the Kossith race has had such contact."

"Clarify," ordered Karasten, intrigued in spite of himself.

"Very well. The darkspawn are of various kinds: hurlocks, genlocks, sharlocks, and ogres. They are physically and functionally different to a remarkable degree. There appears to be little understanding of the reason for this, but I believe my explorations with the Warden-Commander have caused me to have new insight."

"Go on," said Tallis.

"In a portion of the Deep Roads called the Dead Trenches, we saw the Archdemon. We also discovered how darkspawn reproduce themselves. It was an ugly revelation. We learned

that the creatures kidnap females of the races of Thedas and through violent and abusive means impregnate them. I will not dwell on the method, but it enables the females to spawn hundreds, perhaps thousands of offspring. The nature of these offspring depends on the female's race: the Broodmother we discovered was originally a dwarf woman. She spawned genlocks. A human woman would spawn hurlocks, and an elf woman sharlocks, also called shrieks."

Revulsion twisted Tallis' mouth, remembering the squealing creatures pursuing her through the horrible streets of Val Royeaux. The idea that they might have wanted not to kill her, but to... No, she wasn't going to think about it. "You saw one of these things... one of these Broodmothers?"

"Saw it and gave it the mercy of death. It was immense and distorted, and its mind and memory were long since gone. It was, however, a formidable opponent, despite its inability to move from the spot."

"Formidable in what way?" Karasten asked, pressing for useful details. "And how did you destroy it?"

"It could spit poison that blinded. It also wielded powerful tentacles that could crush and rend. Its hands had developed sharp claws, which made close encounters hazardous. However, because of the massive layers of fat, the most vulnerable area is the head." He frowned and continued. "The Grey Wardens are anxious to reach Val Royeaux, the vanquished city, because they fear that a large number of women would have been captured and modified in this way,

thus creating the danger of a huge increase to the darkspawn horde within the next month or so."

Karasten nodded, trying to picture such a creature. If the Grey Wardens found a nest of such creatures, they would have to kill them with sword and axe, or with arrows and magic. How much more efficient would be the use of gaatlok. Not that the Qunari would offer it to them. For that matter, they had only one small keg of their own.

"What is your argument for previous contact between the darkspawn and the Kossith?" he asked.

Sten replied, "In the existence of the creatures known as ogres."

This required some lengthy description. Neither Karasten nor Tallis liked to believe it, but Sten was quite positive that the heritage of the Kossith was apparent in the huge horned creatures.

"They are not numerous, which makes me think that there were not many Kossith Broodmothers. However, in my readings in the dwarven Shaperate — a most admirable and informative archive— I learned that the ogres were known in previous Blights, though not in the First. At some point, Kossith women were captured by the darkspawn. No other conclusion is logical."

Tallis took a deep breath, and revealed an obscure secret. "There's evidence to suggest that an early attempt at a

southern settlement was made by Kossith during what the *bas* call the Towers Age. This was very far to the south, in what is now the Korcari Wilds of Ferelden. It's one of many reasons that the Salasari is interested in that land. The settlement was a failure for many reasons—including the harsh and inclement winters that prevented regular communication. A rescue expedition discovered some evidence of a massacre, and no survivors. If this massacre was committed by the darkspawn, they might well have taken prisoners. Yes, your conclusion is logical."

She squared her shoulders, ignoring the general malaise that had plagued her since they had landed in this dismal swamp.

"But none of this is a good enough reason to involve ourselves in the Blight at this point. There's no advantage to the Qunari people in wasting our resources to protect the lands of the *bas*. If the Blight moves north, we might be forced to reconsider. For now we'll hold to our mission. We'll follow in the wake of the Wardens' army, using them as a cover to find our way to the Tome of Koslun."

As the army forged its way westward, the sky darkened. A heavy layer of grey cloud blotted out the sun, but it did not smell like rain. The air grew heavy and oppressive.

The allies had little idea what they would encounter across the Orne. A party of scouts moved out ahead the the main body of the army, crossing the ancient stone bridge over the river, feeling their way along the Greenway, moving slowly and

cautiously.

The scouts included Wardens: Danith, Cathair, Darach. They sensed the darkspawn almost immediately, and moreover sensed that there were a lot of them to the right— the northern side— of the mossy narrow road. They immediately sent a soldier back to warn Bronwyn about what was ahead of them. The young man glanced back at them with wide and wild eyes, and took off running.

"Where are they?" whispered Cathair, moving carefully toward the trees. "I see nothing. I hear nothing."

Nothing indeed. The forest was unnaturally silent. Not even a bird call rose from the branches. The air itself was still, as if bespelled. Dying foliage drooped sadly around them, darkening the way ahead. Even the grass of the Greenway was dull and greying.

"They're here," murmured Danith, tilting her head toward a fallen branch just ahead, its black and Blighted leaves shredded. "I *smell* them."

Without further speech, they instinctively moved back to back, presenting a defensive triangle, bows at the ready. The other Dalish and the human soldiers in the party, alarmed, mimicked them, ready and watchful. Time stretched out beyond endurance. Everyone's breath grew shallow, as they tried to be quiet; quiet as mice, quiet as the grave.

"Atch-aaagghhh!"

Danith jumped at the young soldier's sneeze. He was bent almost double, unable to stop. Sneeze after sneeze rang out through the waiting woods.

At the third sneeze, the ground beneath them erupted.

Darkspawn burst out from under the dead moss and the rotting leaves. The earth heaved, and breathed out corruption as the creatures rose up and charged.

"Kill them!" shouted Danith. "Kill them all!"

The range was short: too short. She could only get off two arrows before the closest were on them. She dropped her bow behind her and unsheathed her daggers, skewering the first hurlock that lunged her way.

"I hope Bronwyn comes soon!" shouted Cathair. He gritted his teeth as he stabbed a darkspawn, and then shoved it aside, freeing his blade.

The melee was brutal. Darkspawn chuckled and squawked; humans and elves cursed. Now and then a shriek of mortal agony plucked at their senses, but no one could turn to look. Darach stumbled against Danith, and righted himself, grunting in pain. Darkspawn were falling, but men and elves were falling, too. Out of the underbrush beyond the trees, more darkspawn were emerging, waving their weapons, rushing at the advance scouts.

Danith hissed as a hurlock caught her blades with his own,

forcing her back. While she struggled with him, a genlock came in low and slashed at her, slicing a shallow wound across her middle. Her armor spared her the worst, but she could feel the hot thread of torn flesh begin to sting. She had no idea how bad it was.

"Keep together and withdraw back down the road!" she yelled. More darkspawn were coming. If they tried to make a stand here, out in the open road, they would all die.

Another scream. Genlocks had grabbed a bloodied soldier and were having a grotesque tug-of-war over him. His comrades fought back, desperate to save him. One managed to hew the arm off one of the attackers, and the contested prize's legs were dropped abruptly. With a squawk of triumph, the rival genlock tugged the soldier away from his friends and brought down its crude iron mace, smashing the man's head to bloody splinters.

Bows still twanged. A quartet of Dalish had scrambled into the trees and were shooting down into the darkspawn. Danith's heart lifted in pride at their resourcefulness. The darkspawn attacked the trees with swords and axes, but were brought down before they could manage more than a blow or two. It was an excellent diversion.

The advance party moved back, drawing together in a rude circle, backs to each other. A thrown handaxe struck Darach in the knee. He went down, and another darkspawn chopped at his already injured leg. He screamed and stabbed up, gutting the creature. Danith tried to help him up, but it was

impossible for him to stand.

"Get inside the circle, then!" Danith ordered. Crawling painfully, Darach managed to make it to comparative safety, and then collapsed from shock and loss of blood.

Darkspawn gibbered and lunged, fainting and hacking. The circle shrank, contracting as more and more of them fell.

The earth trembled, the vibrations shivering up the warrior's boots. Thudding footsteps, gathering momentum. One of the Dalish in the trees gave a cry.

"Ogre! Mythal protect us!"

Danith glanced over her shoulder. Looming, massive, it was pounding down on them around the next turn of the Greenway. Once it hit them, it would scatter their little band, and that was death. There was only one thing to be done.

The runner passed the message to a horseman, who came flying back up the column.

"Darkspawn ahead! A lot of them! They've attacked the scouts!"

"Morrigan! I need a wyvern!" shouted Bronwyn, leaping down from her horse. She blew into her dragon horn, sounding an alarm. "Wardens! To me!"

The witch threw the gear she was carrying into a wagon, and

dashed off to the side of the road for enough space to make the transformation. Instantly a wyvern appeared. Horses reared and screamed; men shouted and clutched at their reins. Bronwyn vaulted onto the creature's back, and clung to the neck ridges, while they took off, the wyvern's roars clearing their way.

To do her justice, Velanna was at their heels, desperate to help her friends among the Dalish scouts. Anders, Tara, and Niall followed. Zevran laughed as he dashed away with wyvern Tara. Alistair and Brosca managed to get up on a wyvern apiece. Adaia ran after them shouting, until Alistair reached a hand back for her and pulled her on behind him. Siofranni ran after them, trying to catch up.

"Wait! Wait!"

Astrid shouted, "Let's get a move on! Yes, that means you, you mages there! Shale, bring the golems!"

Danith shouted, "Hold fast! Keep them out!" and then slipped between two frightened soldiers. She ran toward the ogre. It was crouching, head down, preparing to charge. She slashed past darkspawn, as they groped for her, and then she gave a wave to the archers in the trees.

"Shoot the ogre!" she screamed above the noise of battle. "Bring it down! Bring it down!" Then she sprinted away, daggers held tight.

Some of the archers heard her, and directed their arrows at the ogre, trying to distract it from its deadly rush. It shook its massive, horned head, dislodging some of the arrows, and then pawed irritably at one that had penetrated its ear. It gave Danith just a few extra seconds. Another archer had the sense to target the darkspawn in her path.

She ran; and time slowed to a crawl. Ahead of her was the ogre, and between them were yammering darkspawn. One went down before she reached it, and she hurdled it. It slashed out feebly, dying, and she felt the blade brush her boots. A hurlock challenged her and she parried his sword with her dagger and ran on.

Above her was the sky, an immense bowl of dull lead. Briefly she wished for a glimpse of the sun and the blue of the heavens above the Brecilian Forest, but they were far away; so far that they were now part of the dim, dead, inaccessible past. The only thing in the world was the ogre, growing larger as she ran.

It was fully crouched now, in a moment of perfect stillness before the terror of its charge. Danith ran up it; a boot finding purchase on a huge knee, another on the edge of a breastplate. She flung both hands high, and brought down her daggers into the corded vessels of its neck with all the strength in her, screaming aloud.

Foul ichor spurted out, splashing her arms and face. The ogre bellowed in surprise, rose half-way, and faltered. Danith screamed again, and gave the daggers a hard twist.

The right dagger's blow would have killed it eventually, but the left did the work far faster. Danith pulled the daggers out, and a jet of the ichor pulsed from the right of the ogre's throat. Bewildered, outraged, it slapped Danith away with its left hand, while with its right it tried to stanch the ichor squirting from the wound.

The elf landed on a dead genlock, breaking her fall, but still bruising her on bits of rusty armor. She scrambled up, and it was then that she realized that there had been not one ogre, but two. The other had been hidden by the bulk of the one in front.

Unwounded and ready for a fight, the second trampled its dying fellow underfoot, and was on Danith in a moment.

She winced as she bounded up from the ground. Lesser darkspawn milled about, getting in the ogre's way, but it carelessly knocked them aside, lumbering toward the Grey Warden nearby. She ran to meet it, slowed by her injuries. With a leap, she was on it, daggers extended at the chest just above the breastplate. At that moment, the ogre was distracted by an arrow, and shifted to the right.

One dagger struck true, buried deep, penetrating the top of the lung. The other only slashed the ogre's left bicep. Danith clung to the hilt of the dagger in the ogre's chest, hanging there precariously, trying to gain purchase with her feet. Mortally wounded and enraged, the ogre made a grab for her, and yanked her away. Her armor was no match for an ogre's grip, and her ribs cracked under the pressure. With a scream,

she threw her remaining dagger in one cruel, glaring eye.

The monster bellowed, and dropped her. It fumbled for the dagger, feebly, as its brain shut down. A great, wet cough, and it spewed out a mouthful of ichor. It took a step forward, and stumbled, already falling. Danith tried to roll out of the way. She did not entirely succeed.

She shrieked in brief agony, and darkness took her.

Just as Morrigan neared the darkspawn, Bronwyn jumped down to engage them on foot. It had been all she could do to cling on this far. There was no way she could fight mounted without the gear to hold her in place. She dropped off and rolled, coming up and unsheathing her sword in one motion.

The charge of the wyverns smashed the darkspawn. Morrigan lashed her tail, sending them flying. She spat poison, and rent them with her claws. The rest of the wyverns followed up, not giving the the darkspawn time for an effective counterattack. Bronwyn rallied the scouts and they spread out, killing the darkspawn laid low by the wyverns. Alistair had jumped off, as she had, and was hacking genlocks to bits. Brozca bounced away, with a gleeful yell, and pounced on the nearest genlock. Adaia, still sticking to Velanna's back like a burr, was chasing the last of them through the trees, tossing bombs in one direction, while Velanna spat venom in the other. Zevran had the knack of staying on a wyvern as well, He leaned to one side, sword extended, moving down darkspawn as they pursued them down the road.

Dalish archers rushed in behind them, their arrows finding their targets. Merrill's childlike voice rang out in bloodthirsty threats. The shallow burrows the darkspawn had used for the ambush were routed out and any creatures hiding was slaughtered.

"Bronwyn!" called one of the Dalish. "Darach needs a Healer!"

The elf was on the ground, not moving. Even at this distance, he looked bad.

"Stay with him! The mages are coming! Where's Danith!"

Another answered, "She fought the ogres, but she did not come back." He pointed, and Bronwyn took off at a run. One ogre was piled on the other. Huddled down within the bend of a massive knee was Danith.

"Over here!" Bronwyn shouted. "Anders! We need a Healer, not a wyvern!"

He had raged over the battlefield, and his blood was still up. Great golden eyes stared at Bronwyn, and she wondered for a moment if he was going to attack her. Then the wyvern shivered back into Anders, who staggered a little as he ran toward her.

"Danith's down here!"

They clambered over the stinking ogres, trying to think of a way to extricate the elf. Bronwyn felt queasy at the thought of moving her. Danith was covered in blood; worse, her hip was

oddly distorted.

"This is bad," Anders whispered to Bronwyn. "I don't know how much I can do. We mustn't try to lift her yet."

"Where's Tara? Where's Zevran?" Bronwyn asked, remembering their packets of Ashes.

"I don't know. Gone after the darkspawn." He met her eyes. If they were not back in the next few moments, it would be too late.

By this time the golems had arrived, and Bronwyn put them to work moving the ogres away instead. The corpses were hauled away, the limbs pushed aside to reveal Danith on the ground. Anders crouched down, working to stem the bleeding and heal the wounds. Anders pushed back a eyelid. Danith moaned softly and blinked at him.

"Hurts..."

"I'll take care of you. You're going to be all right." He hurriedly gathered his mana, spilling blue light, trying to repair countless ruptured blood vessels.

"No. I'm not. The Dread Wolf has me. Merrill..."

The little Keeper appeared, and knelt at her side. "I'm here, *lethallan*." She laid a hand on Danith's hair, stroking it back from her brow.

Wardens and Dalish crowded around, everyone wanting to

help. Danith tried to wave them away, but she was too weak, and her hand dropped to the ground.

"No," she murmured, "No. I want to feel the sun on my face..."

"—*What did she say, lethallin?*"

The clouds parted just a little: just enough for a rim of silver to line the edges. A fugitive patch of sun spilled down, casting light on the aftermath of the battle. Danith smiled, and died.

All things considered, it counted as a victory. They had slaughtered over four hundred darkspawn and cleared a wide swath of road. These were good things.

They had also lost a Warden to death, and another had been severely injured. Tara slipped Anders some of her Ashes for Darach, feeling sick with guilt over Danith's fate. The Ashes made all the difference. Without them, Anders might have been able to save Darach's leg from amputation, but the elf would have been lame for life.

Zevran did not know how to feel about Tara's decision. Yes, one did what one could for a comrade. He *liked* Darach. However, people died in war. All people died eventually. They could not save the whole army. Decisions would have to be made: hard decisions. That said, he knew that had he been on the spot, he would have given his Ashes to Danith.

There had been other casualties, of course. The humans

would be consigned to the pyre. As for the Dalish, they would be buried along with Danith in their traditional way. An area was cleansed with fire, and the Keepers' plan was to mark the graves with stones, and when the area could be further cleansed, to bring in saplings to plant on each one.

Bronwyn looked on, rather glad of Loghain's stalwart presence beside her. Such were the fortunes of war. Her relationship with Danith had not started well, but Danith had proved herself since as a courageous and principled Warden and a champion of her people. Alistair stood with a group of human Wardens and friends: Leliana, Silas, Emrys, Aveline, and others, looking on with sober curiosity. Astrid, of course, was there, serious and tactful, comforting Danith's friends. Those who had journeyed with her were grieved: Niall, Quinn, and Maeve, and Nuala and Steren. Danith had come into her own in their adventures together.

"I don't like this," Quinn whispered to Maeve. "I mean, it's like the Dalish have taken her back. Danith was a *Warden!* That's what we should recognize!"

"Shhh!" Maeve hushed him. "Funerals are for the living. Bronwyn's one to respect people's home customs. No doubt the Dalish find our customs strange, too."

Since it was a Senior Warden, the other leaders had shown the courtesy to attend as well. The Fereldan nobles could maintain a serious demeanor. For that matter, nobles like Wulffe and Corbus knew Danith and respected her. The Orlesians were less comfortable at the situation. All of these

pagan goings-on seemed improper and heretical; and the idea of putting the dead bodies in the earth to rot and be eaten by crawling things turned their stomachs. Far better a clean, decent pyre. The dwarves, of course, thought burial the appropriate way to dispose of the dead. The Dalish whispered among themselves, some not pleased that strangers were here to witness what was a Dalish ceremony, but tolerating it for the sake of the alliance.

Velanna had been weeping: hot, angry tears. Her face was swollen and red, and she glared resentfully at the humans. Nuala and Steren whispered gently to her, restraining her temper. Niall had slipped a calming potion into her wine, Bronwyn understood.

Keeper Merrill was quite distraught, too. Danith was from her own clan, and they had known each other from childhood. Lanaya supported her on one side, and old Maynriel on the other. A Dalish woman that Bronwyn did not know sang a dirge, accompanied by curious harps that were as much bow as musical instrument, and by a strange bone flute.

"Melava inan enansal

Ir su araval tu elvaral

U na emma ableas

In elgar sa vir mana

In tu seetheneran din'

Emma na..."

The words had a significance that was only known to the leadership among the elves. There were nods and significant glances. Beyond these dark days of Blight, there was a future for the elves that no darkspawn could sully and no human lord control. Merrill pulled herself together sufficiently to say the Dalish words of farewell to the dead. The language, incomprehensible to all but the Dalish, sounded sweet and musical, its very intonation soothing the heart. Bronwyn sighed as Danith's body was put in the grave by Thanovir and Cathair. The elf girl looked very small and frail there in the dark ground.

"If we were not in the Blighted lands, we would give her flowers in summer and fragrant evergreen in winter," murmured Lanaya to Bronwyn, "But there is nothing here but Taint. Therefore we give her presents instead, sweet cakes and small bowls of hallenensal. Cathair carved Danith a little halla to keep her company. Velanna gave her a silver brooch she found in the Deep Roads."

After the gifts were arranged around the dead, a little bronze trowel of dirt was presented to Merrill. She used it to sprinkle a little earth into the graves. She gave it next to Lanaya, who then, politely gave it to Bronwyn. There was a little stir among the Dalish, but the consensus was that it was permissible for Danith's commander to take part in the ritual. When she was done, Maynriel gave her a little nod and took it from her. The trowel was filled again and again, and friends participated in the

The graves were filled. Bronwyn tried not to flinch as the shovelful of earth covered Danith's still white face. If she could bear seeing her friends consumed by fire, she could bear this.

When the graves were filled, the stones were arranged on top, and Lanaya chanted a long invocation in Dalish, and the Dalish chimed in the responses. There was more restlessness among the Andrasteans at this. Bronwyn glanced around, willing people to have the decency to let the dead be buried in their own fashion. The last words spoken were luckily in Dalish, for they would have been inflammatory if declaimed in the Common Tongue:

"We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last elvhen. Never again shall we submit."

When it was over, they dispersed to their new camp, and Bronwyn called a meeting of the Wardens. Cathair was the new Dalish Senior Warden. No one talked much, until the human and dwarven Wardens had turned in for the night. Darach was still in a deep healing sleep. The rest of elves had plenty to say among each other.

"At least Danith saw the elven land. At least she had that," sighed Siofranni. Adafia held her close.

"She died a true hero," declared Cathair, "and would want us to finish what we have begun. The Blight must be conquered before we depart from Thedas."

"And *I'm* not going until I free as many people as I can from the Tevinters," Adaia said, black eyes fierce.

"There is that," Tara said, trying to think clearly. She laid her head on Zevran's shoulder, feeling more guilty than she could express. "I would love to see my family. Just once, I'd love to be able to see them and speak to them. That Fenris probably knows heaps about Tevinter and what they do with the slaves. Let's pick his brain when he gets back. Do we have anything to drink?"

All the elves stared at her. Wardens always had something to drink.

"My friend Oghren is snoring," said Zevran. "I shall steal something from him."

Bronwyn lay awake for a long time, listening to the sounds of the camp settling down, and to the insistent whispers of the elves, talking among themselves. They were too quiet to be intelligible. Bronwyn hoped they were not plotting mutiny. Loghain's breathing evened out, and soon he too added to the chorus of snores. His were certainly not the worst. She stared up at the dark red of the tent, backlit by a hundred campfires, and tried to make herself relax. She counted backwards, and only reached eight-three before she was asleep.

She found herself in the Fade, surprised at how noisy it was. She drew a Fade version of the Keening Blade to ward off the creatures lurking in ambush. It appeared that she was in the

ruins of a city, on an upper level of some great edifice. She peered over the edge of a broken floor, once glorious black marble. Far below her was a pit of nightmares.

Tentacles swayed like seaweed in the ocean shallows. A low, deep moaning rose up from it from a hundred ruined voices. Bronwyn thought they were cries of agony, until she realized that they were singing, heads raised to drink in the sight above them.

The Archdemon perched watchfully on a shattered tower, an immobile profile. Its fanged jaw was closed, and it physically uttered no sound, but from it rose a musical note, plangent, achingly sweet, and immensely powerful. It promised everything: balm for old wounds, surcease from sorrow. It promised, in fact, a perfect world.

Bronwyn looked past it, and far away saw a shadowy mass, hanging as if suspended in the heaven. She tried to make out details and thought she could recognize towers and gates, high walls and battlements. The Black City? it must be. Her mage friends had told that they could see the Black City when in the Fade.

She began climbing, up and up, wondering what would happen if she attacked the Archdemon here. Would it be easier to fight? If it killed her, would she be dead in the real world? Could she find her friends here in the Fade, and ask them to join with her? Mages could manipulate the Fade. Could she?

The Archdemon ignored her, more interested in what lay at a

distance beyond them. Bronwyn kept climbing, and found herself atop a section of damaged wall. She followed the dragon's gaze, and stared, unbelieving, at what was stretched out on the plain below.

Blue and silver banners heralded the presence of Wardens. Thousands of Wardens. The Taint in their blood called to her.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

"Bronwyn?"

Striding out of darkness, silver armor shining, was Warden-Commander Duncan.

"Bronwyn! My dear child!"

He looked much as he had when they had first met at Castle Highever. White teeth gleamed in his dark face. With his gold earring and black beard he looked like a gentleman-pirate. He seemed very happy to see her.

"Bronwyn! You brave, brave girl! I knew you could do it. I knew you were The One."

"I haven't done it yet."

"But you have!" He swept out his arm, gesturing at the army of Wardens encamped below. "You've brought us all together, the way it was meant to be. Here, in the Dragon Age, Urthemiel will be vanquished and the Fifth Blight will end!"

You've done your part, and more." He gave her the kindest smile. "Now let your brothers and sisters do theirs."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"You've been the leader that Thedas needed in her darkest hour. There's no need for you die! Among your faithful Wardens are heroes enough. Or let a worthy brother of Nevarra—or Antiva — or even, yes, even of Orlais— reap the honor of slaying the Archdemon. Don't be greedy for greater glory, dear child. Leave some for others."

"We'll all do our best against the Archdemon," Bronwyn answered. "When we face it, no one can hold back out of misguided *good manners*."

She had once, after the slaughter of her family, quite depended on Duncan. Now his words seemed patronizing... condescending. Had he always been like this? She had come to disagree with his leadership of the Wardens, but she had never been uncomfortable in his presence before. No, that wasn't quite true. There was her Joining, when Duncan had killed Daveth with the Joining potion and then skewered poor foolish Jory. Those had been significantly uncomfortable moments. Even so, she didn't remember him seeming so... insufferable.

"Of course," Duncan intoned soothingly. "Of course. A Cousland always does her duty. And you've done splendidly. You deserve to reap the rewards of such superhuman effort. You're a queen, and a wife of a man who loves you—

however unusually he manifests it— and you will someday be a mother. Think of the good you can do Ferelden— the good that I must say I think only you can do. If you were to fall, how long do think your scheme of mage clinics would last? What would become of your proteges, the elves? What would become of Loghain, unlooked-for love once again taken from him? And what of your unborn children?"

Three small phantoms flickered in the dreadful leaden sky, illuminated only by fire. A girl, a boy, a girl. The older girl had with long brown hair and pleading grey eyes. Bryce Cousland's eyes, starred with Loghain's dark lashes.

"Mother!" she called. "Mother! Save us! You've already lost our older brother! If you die, we won't even exist in the Fade!"

Bronwyn shuddered, and turned to Duncan's sympathetically smiling face. Duncan? She saw now that it was a bad imitation. "That was a low blow, Urthemiel, even for you."

The smile altered only minutely. "Does it hurt? Good. You should know how it feels when your children are slaughtered. Mine wish only to live... to exist. They wish to love me, serve me, hear my song, reproduce their kind. You would deprive them of all those things. It is only right that you should suffer some grief in your turn. But see!"

The phantoms were brighter now. With a pang, Bronwyn saw that the boy had Loghain's scowl. The smaller girl was clutching a puppy.

"All you have to do is live, Mother!" the older girl sobbed. *"Don't strike the final blow, and we can all be together with Father! Let someone else do it!"*

Bronwyn hardened her heart, though it broke in doing it. "If you were really my daughter, and the daughter of Loghain Mac Tir, you would never have said those words."

They vanished, their sweet faces tear-streaked, fading young voices crying *"Mother! Mother!"*

The imitation Duncan's smile remained, but turned malicious and smug, the face lengthening, the eyes pale and cold. The immobile dragon on the heights had only been an illusion. Bronwyn turned to the real Archdemon, who leaned with casual ease against the battlements.

Bronwyn said, "If I weren't going to kill you before, I would kill you for that. You are too hateful to live. You were a rotten God when the foolish ancients worshiped you, and the Taint has not improved you. Your days are numbered, and I will end you and the Blight together."

"Stupid girl!" the creature mocked. "I offer you love and a future, and you simper about the Blight. You are immune to the Taint! Use that advantage! Together, we can rule this world!"

Bronwyn hefted her sword, considering. It was not a great distance. *Could* she kill the Archdemon, right here and now, right here in the Fade?

"I'm not interested in ruling the world."

"Just some of it, eh?" gibed Urthemiel, the last vestiges of Duncan quite gone. "Just enough for your unfortunately limited abilities. But a crown, even of a wretched, barbarous, penurious land, is very sweet. Whatever happened to *'the kingdom within?'* Your father must be so disappointed, not to mention poor Andraste..."

Bronwyn charged without warning, sword raised, running quick and silent. Just a step farther...

A burst of echoing laughter, and the Archdemon was gone. Bronwyn tottered at the the edge of the battlement, and then she was falling, falling... the wind in her hair...

"Wake up, woman!" Loghain growled, giving Bronwyn a shake. "Stop arguing with the bloody Archdemon!"

Bronwyn jolted awake. The sensation of falling through space was so intense that she grabbed at Loghain's arm, gasping for breath.

"I tried to kill it!" she told him, her jaw stiff. "I tried to kill it in the Fade!"

"Good idea! See if you can pull it off the next time."

She sat up on the edge of the big camp bed, fumbling for a tunic. Her sword was propped up against the bed, which was

reassuring.

"Where do you think you're going?" Loghain asked.

"Out. Out for a walk. It's almost day, anyway."

"It is not." He rose up on his elbow, and wrapped an arm around her. "It's hours until daylight. Lie down and rest, even if you can't sleep. Maybe I can think of something to relax you."

Riordan made sure everyone was ready to leave Montsimnard very, very early the next day: even so instructing Prince Florestan himself. He had warned them that those not ready would be left behind.

"We leave at dawn," he said, his tone brooking no contradiction.

Carver was pleased, as was the rest of his party. Jowan regretted that he had had no time to explore more of the Tower of Shadows, nor to insinuate his way into the Montsimnard Circle. Someone else would have to do that, he supposed. Nevin was uncomfortable, surrounded by Orlesians, and wanted to get back to the army.

Fenris was eager to return as well. There was where the danger and hardship were most likely to be, and that was why he was here, after all. Once they stepped beyond Verchiel, the army was entering *terra incognita*; the place where the Orlesian army had been destroyed. No one knew what they

would find, other than lots of darkspawn. 'Where' was the big question.

Riordan had been glad to hear that Bronwyn had left a small garrison of Wardens at Jader, and decided to do the same here at Montsimnard. Out of his remaining Wardens, he left seven.

The Prince was ready in good time. So were his followers, and Berthold de Guesclin and his. The nobleman's wife and children were ensconced securely and quite comfortably in their townhouse. Altogether, a strong force of over a hundred would ride to the allied camp. Unsurprisingly, no one challenged them on their way. The only person they met on the roads was a daft merchant, Felix de Grosbois, who was hurrying south, bound for Val Firmin.

Other than the stops to rest and water the horses, they did not pause in their journey. They met elements of the allied army north on the Imperial Highway, at the crossroads with the Voie Verte. A rearguard was left at that point in the road, entrusted with patrolling the roads and keeping them clear.

"They've gone west on the Greenway already?" Carver asked, surprised. They were not giving the new Wardens much time to recover. On the other hand, perhaps there really wasn't much time to be wasted.

The officer of the patrol nodded. "Had a bit of a scuffle yesterday, too, I heard. Plenty of darkspawn over the river, I reckon."

A few hours on, and they began passing the main baggage train. Even Fenris had to respect the foresight of the ancient Tevinter engineers, who had built the Imperial Highway wide enough not to be easily clogged. One huge wagon had them all stopping to gape. They heard the roars before they saw the occupant.

"Is that..." Riordan gasped. "Is that a *wyvern*? Is that one of the wyverns that was in the battle?"

"It's a wyvern, but it wasn't in the battle with us," Carver said, grinning. "That's Duke Prosper's pet, Leopold. Pretty impressive, isn't he?"

"Very. The others," Riordan persisted, "they were equally large?"

"Or larger."

"That's... very good news."

Prince Florestan sighed. He had always been rather afraid of Prosper de Montfort, and did not look forward to meeting him again. That Duke Prosper was in with the new Empress did not bode well for Florestan himself. Florestan's people scowled, and Corot took to watching his prince narrowly, obviously wanting him to say something loud and denunciatory. Florestan refused to look at him. This was no time to fight among themselves. It was probably *never* a good time to fight with someone who kept a wyvern for a pet.

"It looks like reinforcements, my lord King," remarked Cauthrien. "From their colors, they are Wardens... and others. It's that de Guesclin fellow, come back, too."

Loghain recognized the Orlesian, and was briefly surprised that one of that lot would keep his word to return and fight. Probably wanted to be around to make trouble. And who were those others, with the painted shields and the chased armor? He glanced over to see Proper de Montfort's face turn an interesting shade. Hiding a grim smile, he waited to see what developed.

Ah... there was Carver Hawke, looking pleased and excited, as if he'd done something brilliant. At least he'd rounded up more Wardens for Bronwyn. That could only be a good thing. The girl was in low spirits about the death of the Dalish Warden.

"Your Majesty!" called Carver. "We found Wardens at Montsimnard! This is Riordan..."

Bronwyn stepped out of the royal tent and her face lit up.

"Riordan! How wonderful to see you!"

The Senior Warden of Jader jumped down from his horse and strode forward to greet Bronwyn, with a fierce smile and a graceful bow.

"Your Majesty. It has been a long time since we last met."

"Too long. Present your friends to us, Riordan."

Some of Florestan's retinue stiffened at the idea of an Imperial Prince of the line of Kordilius Drakon being presented to a Cousland of Ferelden—and even worse, to a peasant like Loghain Mac Tir. It was for their Prince to have his inferiors presented to *him*. There was no help for it. For that matter, Florestan himself was not helping. He dismounted and came forward, a pleasant smile on his lips.

Riordan said, "Your Majesties, this is Florestan, Imperial Prince of Orlais."

Rather startled to see someone they thought long dead, Bronwyn and Loghain stared at the bowing newcomer. Bronwyn managed a smile.

"Welcome, Your Imperial Highness."

Loghain added. "It appears that the rumors of your death were somewhat exaggerated."

"Very true, Your Majesty. *Madame la Reine*," Florestan said in a softer tone to Bronwyn. "I can see that exaggeration played no part in any report of *you*."

And then, to Loghain's great disgust, Florestan kissed Bronwyn's hand. Loghain was even more annoyed that Bronwyn gave the fellow a smile, especially since he was wearing a mask, which objects Loghain had made a point of banning from his presence.

"We're sorry not to get a better look at you," he commented.

"The mask? Alas, it is not an affectation, but to conceal what the darkspawn did to my face during my flight from Val Royeaux."

"Honorable scars are nothing to be ashamed of," Loghain growled. "Be damned to the world if they don't like them!"

Florestan hesitated, then sighed. "If it is your will, Majesty." He slipped off the mask, and braced himself for the reaction.

It was pretty bad, but everyone there had seen worse. The scars were still red. The Prince had clearly not had the advantage of magical healing when the wounds were fresh. The lid of one eye slanted down at the outside corner, and the nose was smashed like that of a drunken brawler. The flesh of the right cheek appeared to be largely carved away and the skin healed badly. The flesh of the left cheek down to the jaw appeared... *melted*... as if by dragonfire or acid.

Impulsively, Bronwyn took him by the hand. "Loghain is right. It's nothing for you to be ashamed of, but it must have hurt horribly," she said, and then gestured to her own scar. "The darkspawn marked me too, as you see. I was very lucky to have a brilliant mage Healer with me at that very moment."

Florestan gave her an odd, sad smile. "You are too kind, Majesty. Ah, well... Let me make my comrades known to you: This is Philidore de Corot, a man of ready wit. This is my faithful friend and foster-brother Ursus, whose strong arm

saved my life the night Val Royeaux fell..."

As the prince made the introductions, Prosper de Montfort arrived, a prodigiously false smile pasted on his lips.

"Your Imperial Highness."

"Duke Prosper. I was most impressed by your pet wyvern."

"Ah, yes. I think many have learned to be impressed by the creatures. We were all grieved at the false reports of your death. I shall inform the new empress of your survival, and naturally, also, of your acceptance of her as the rightful heir."

"*Mais oui*. I could not be happier for her. I haven't seen Celandine since we were children, but I remember how pretty she was."

Prosper sneered back, and let his eyes travel over the prince's maimed features in an unmistakable statement that Florestan's good looks were certainly a thing of the past. He said nothing of that aloud however, and only smugly remarked, "Her Imperial Majesty's beauty is greater than ever, were that possible. I act for her as her proxy and ambassador, especially as I am her affianced husband."

"You are fortunate." There was, perhaps, just the slightest emphasis on the "you." A careful listener might detect that Florestan thought the good fortune was entirely Prosper's.

Bronwyn took Riordan and the Wardens off for introductions

and briefings. After their blooding the day before, they would all be glad of the extra swords.

Prosper held a public ceremony of homage to the Empress in the Orlesian camp. Corot raged inwardly, but Florestan did not object to declaring his loyalty to Empress Celandine in the person of her representative. Ursus was less upset. It was in the Maker's hands; and just as the Maker had allowed them to escape alive from the grasp of the Archdemon, so they would survive Duke Prosper's scheming.

Morrigan wondered if it was time yet. Soon, certainly. At some point she must confide in Anders, since the ritual demanded some degree of informed consent to be effective. Perhaps now was not a bad time. He was depressed over his failure to save the elf. His heart, already soft, would be softened further. Not that it was in any way his fault. He was a superbly gifted mage and a brilliant healer. The elf had been simply too damaged to live. That happened, in war. Morrigan had never cared a pin for Danith one way or another, and when there had been that period of tension between Bronwyn and Danith, Morrigan had been completely on Bronwyn's side.

It was Anders' nature to be kind; to save those who could be saved; to relieve or prevent suffering. Very laudable, to be sure. That he was a Grey Warden, high in the Wardens' counsels and a favorite of the Queen's, was an excellent way for him to make the best possible use of his powers... with, of course, the greatest possible rewards. Rewards were agreeable things.

Morrigan had never thought of herself as poor in those days with Flemeth; never thought of herself as deprived. With the benefit of hindsight, she regarded her past life with disgust and indignation. She had lived in a dirty hut in a swamp, eating boiled lizard and entertaining stinking savages, while Flemeth told her what to think and do. She smirked, reflecting on the curious amulet in her special treasure chest: the amulet that would never, ever, in the course of her life be put to the use that she believed Flemeth intended. The world did not need a resurrected Flemeth. Now and then she considered having it thrown in the deepest part of the sea, but she dared not part with it, dared not let it out of her hands. If some fool were to throw it into the shallows, it could well wash to shore and into some other fool's hands. Perhaps, one day, she would take an ocean voyage herself. Or perhaps she would return to the Deep Roads, and throw the amulet into the lava, utterly destroying it, as the golem Caridin had destroyed himself. Perhaps that was the soundest scheme...

That was not the problem before her at the moment. The problem was the ritual, by which she would gain control over the soul of an Old God, and would prevent Bronwyn... well, any Warden—but chiefly Bronwyn, whom she actually liked and cared about—from death by Archdemon.

It was an elegant solution. The Tainted seed of the Warden would attract the soul of the Archdemon. It would take up residence in the new embryo and be born once more into the world: pure, unTainted, sublimely powerful. It could well usher in a Golden Age for this cruel and violent world; and Morrigan

would be mother to a god. As far as she could see, everyone — other than the vanquished darkspawn— would benefit. Bronwyn would survive, which Morrigan thought Ferelden's only hope for anything resembling enlightened government until Urthemiel was old enough to begin his reign. That would probably not be for many, many decades... very likely after Bronwyn herself was long gone and not inconvenienced by a supplanter. The little voice that might be her conscience — something she generally ignored and of which she denied the existence— pointed out that Bronwyn's children might not care to be swept aside. That was nonsense. Morrigan was not to be turned from her goals by any sense of duty to unborn children, even if they were Bronwyn's.

To be effective, the ritual demanded the child must be conceived "on the eve of battle," but the Archdemon could well attack at any time. They were clearly within the creature's attack radius, since they were approaching the site of its destruction of the Orlesian Imperial army. The embryo, to be effective, must be so young as to have no brain function of its own.

Looking back, she felt that Flemeth's instructions had been pitifully inadequate. Why must she be alone? Why must the child's father have no part in the child's rearing? That part she had rejected already. Flemeth wanted her alone and isolated in order to kill her and take the child. Flemeth was no longer a concern, since one part of her was at the bottom of Morrigan's jewel box, and Bronwyn was wearing bits of her as very handsome armor. There was no reason for Morrigan not

to please herself and remain with Anders as long as she liked, enjoying the hospitality of the Grey Wardens.

There were other concerns. The spirit of the Old God emitted a "song" profoundly attractive to darkspawn. Would the child also be a magnet for the creatures? How could she protect him if he was? Truth be told, the prospect of a safe haven built into the granite foundations of Soldier's Peak was looking more and more appealing. And the child, however great a genius, would need teachers. Anders' skills complemented her own so well... Tara was so clever and powerful and amusing... Niall was quite the expert in runes and glyphs: an estimable, ancient art... Petra was quiet, not a fool, and fond of children...

She sniffed, dismissing the idea of Velanna, whom she found obnoxious. Velanna could be assigned elsewhere, surely. Somewhere far away, perhaps.

Then Morrigan's thoughts turned to the most senior mage at Soldier's Peak, and even she briefly quailed at the sort of interest Avernus would take in the child. Would he discover Urthemiel's true origin? Would he want to do his part in mentoring a god? Yes and yes, unquestionably. Morrigan rearranged her future somewhat. Perhaps Bronwyn would want Anders at the Wardens' Compound in Denerim, serving as Court Mage. That might be more lively and equally secure.

Anders slipped into their tent quietly, looking tired and unhappy. Morrigan had left the lantern lit, and he saw that she was still awake.

"Darach will walk again, though not due to any healing of mine," he said, trying to smile. "That was all that bit of Ashes. Bronwyn came and sat with him for awhile, and they had a talk. He didn't know about Danith until he awakened, and he took it hard."

She arranged the bedding for him more invitingly, while he slipped out of his clothes.

"More will perish before the Blight is over," she said. "Without you, it would have been far, far worse."

He sighed as he lay down, and seemed pleased by her words. She supposed she should give him praise and compliments more often. They always worked very well.

"Yes," she continued, her voice thoughtful. "In this dark time, more will perish. That is why I want a child."

Thanks to my reviewers: sizuka2, Melysande, Chiara Crawford, Nemrut, Tirion I, Raxiselic, imperial queen, just in jest, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, forget the rest, Mike3207, Blinded in a bolthole, AD Lewis, KngihtOfHolyLight, DjinniGenie, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, New Zealand 5, Fenrir666, JackOfBladesX, Phygmalion, lemaru, Robbie the Phoenix, Lyssa Terald, Brediction, Garm88, jnybot, mille libri, Girl-chama, Herebedragons66, dragonmactir, Wedger, and Josie Lange.

My good friend JOdel, who has created spectacular versions

of many of my stories at her Red Hen site, has begun the heavy lifting on a version of Victory at Ostagar. The preliminary graphics are gorgeous. I, of course, will have to edit the story from page one on, since what is on ffdotnet is pretty much a first draft. She will break it down into five volumes, and I will let you know on my author's page when it's posted. I'm quite excited about it. Thanks, JOdel, for the immense undertaking!

119. No Man's Land

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 119: No Man's Land

"I want a child."

To say that Anders was surprised at Morrigan's words was an understatement: he was amazed, astounded, nearly stupefied. Morrigan wanted a *child*? He had never seen that she had any particular fondness for children. In fact, she seemed to avoid them whenever possible. There were plenty of women in the army — in the Wardens, for that matter— who were fond of children and looked forward to a chance to coddle them or play with them. Morrigan was not one of them.

Of course, they always said that it was different with your own child. Morrigan might well be one of those women who had no interest in other women's children, but would do everything in the world for her own. It even made a certain kind of sense. Morrigan did not create relationships easily, but she could be quite loyal once she had. Witness their own happy... well... whatever it was.

But this was good, wasn't it? If she wanted to bear his child, it implied that she was not considering giving him the boot

anytime soon. A child? Anders rather liked the little buggers himself, though it was something he had never imagined in his own life. The Chantry frowned on mages marrying. It frowned on mages reproducing. For that matter, it frowned on people being *mages*.

And there were other issues.

He finally managed to squeak, "Maybe we should wait until after the Blight is over."

She remained perfectly in command, perfectly incisive. "And when will that be? Three years...ten years... a hundred? We might be long dead before the Archdemon is slain. Besides, there is another reason. I learned of this some years ago, but it seemed of academic interest. 'Tis not. We move closer to the Archdemon every day. I know of the sacrifice that must be made in order to kill it—"

"How?" he demanded, eyes wide. "Did Tara tell you? Morrigan," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, feeling very put out. "Morrigan, that's a Grey Warden secret!"

"I know many secrets," she murmured seductively. "I grew up with a woman who knew many more. Flemeth told me her all she knew about the Grey Wardens— and somehow she knew *everything*. She also told me of a loophole in the threat that hangs over all of you —Bronwyn especially."

He glanced about the dark little tent in panic. You never knew who might be listening on the other side of the canvas.

"We can't talk about this here. Tomorrow. When we're outside, we can make sure nobody's eavesdropping. What I want to talk about now is you getting it into your head that you want to be a mother."

"The two things are related," Morrigan said softly, trying to be patient. "'Tis the begetting of the child that will weave a mighty protection over the Grey Warden who strikes the killing blow on the Archdemon."

Ander rolled to his side, trying to make out Morrigan's expression in the darkness. "I've never heard of any protection spell like that," he said.

"Few have. Flemeth was old and wise and knew many a thing unknown to other masters of lore. I used to dismiss some of her sayings," she said, by way of excuse for not telling him before. "but after further consideration, I think she might well have been right in this."

She turned toward him too, and laid a fair smooth hand on his side, stroking gently. "She told me that the unborn child of a Grey Warden could attract the spirit of the Archdemon away from the one who slew it. The Archdemon would perish, and the Grey Warden survive, and the child would carry the spirit of the Old God, now purified of the Taint."

He caught her wrist in his strong grasp. "Are you out of your mind?" he managed, trying to muffled the shout that rose up in response to this wild idea. "Since when do you trust Flemeth? Remember? Flemeth? The old witch who was planning to

wear your body like a new gown? The child could well turn out to be a darkspawn!"

She should have given him a calming draught beforehand, but it was too late now. She made her soft tones calm and reasonable.

"The child could not possibly be a darkspawn. When has any child of a Grey Warden become a darkspawn? 'Tis irrational to suggest a thing. How could that be of advantage to Flemeth? And let me remind you, everything Flemeth desired would be something to her advantage."

"You admit she put this idea in your head. Why would it be to *your* advantage?"

"Because it would be a very great thing. An Old God would be born again into the world, free of the chains that bind the others; untouched by the Taint itself. It could well bring about a Golden Age. We would be its parents: we would cherish it and teach it. There is so much wrong in this world. Would it not take the power of a God to put it right?"

"Morrigan," Anders sighed, unable to believe what he was hearing. It was the craziest idea he had ever heard. And he had thought Morrigan was *clever*. "If I remember correctly, the Old Gods didn't do so well last time."

"So say the Chantry fools. In old Tevinter, mages ruled, under the wise and watchful eyes of their Old Gods. Magic was a part of life, like bread and wine. No one was burnt at the

stake for causing a few sparks, or locked up for life because they could heal the sick. "

That was certainly true. Anything that would help mages was a good thing. But — "Bronwyn wouldn't like being displaced by an Old God child."

She laughed softly. "And why would our child do that, when we have trained him from birth to respect the Queen? I daresay more than that, for that matter, since Bronwyn is likely to take a personal interest in our child. She would be a model and a teacher to the child, who would thus learn all about using power for noble ends. No, the child would be brought up to *help* Bronwyn. He might even rise to become a chief adviser."

"That's... true enough," Anders admitted, still uncomfortable with the concept. On the other hand, the idea of a child, fathered by him, born by Morrigan, was a very enticing one. Morrigan sensed his hesitation.

"You know how self-sacrificing Bronwyn is. It is an unfortunate trait, but so she is. She would never let someone strike the blow and perish, were she there to do it herself. If she does this without such protection, she will surely die, as all the rest of the Warden Champions have perished in the deed. What then will become of her new freedoms for mages, of her generosity to the elves? They will be dust on the wind, and you know it!"

Anders did know it. Loghain seemed inclined to let Bronwyn

have her way, but Loghain was over fifty. He would not live forever. Another king or queen might be well-intentioned, but not have Bronwyn's fearless adherence to her beliefs, or... it had to be said... a certain degree of validation by the Prophet Andraste herself. Bronwyn could get away with things that no one else could.

And of course, on a human level, he did not *want* her to die. He didn't want anyone to die. Morrigan must have been reading his thoughts.

"'Twas sad enough, the fate of that poor elf. If not Bronwyn, then someone else will perish. Will it be Tara, or that cheerful Brosca, or perhaps the noble Aeducan princess? Will it be you? Who is expendable?"

"Of course I don't think anybody's expendable!" He sighed. "I'm tired. I don't want to argue. Can we talk about this tomorrow? I've got to think it over."

"Very well. Think clearly, but not for long. The Archdemon is closer every day."

He had more questions the next morning. They took their bowls of porridge and withdrew to a fallen tree where they could sit and see who was close enough to hear them. Anders asked questions that Morrigan could answer, and some she had not even asked herself.

"What if someone else is up the duff?" he asked. "There are a

lot of women in this man's army. What if Bronwyn gets pregnant again? Or Tara?"

"I am seeing to it that they do not," she said stiffly. "I distribute the women's tea every evening without fail."

"It's not that I doubt Flemeth's information... though I do," he went on. "There must have been other pregnant Wardens... or pregnant wives or mistresses. How does the Archdemon's spirit choose which one to take?"

"I presume it would be a matter of proximity," said Morrigan, rather nonplussed. This was troubling. She had not thought about it, but surely there must be some parameters regarding distance from the dead Archdemon. "Clearly in the past, none of them were close enough to attract the Archdemon's spirit at the critical moment. But I assure you that it will not happen this time. I shall stand with you all. Furthermore, the ritual requires that you know and consent to it. Otherwise, it is simply another night of pleasure."

"Can't have too many of those," Anders agreed cheerfully. "There's another thing. You say the child would have the Archdemon's spirit. What does that mean, exactly. Will it have its memories? Its powers?"

"I assume so."

"Hmmm... Assumptions could get us into all sorts of trouble. Is spirit the same thing as intelligence? Is it the same thing as magical talent, or is that something physical? If the child

simply has the spirit of Urthemiel, God of Beauty, maybe he'll have an overwhelming desire to be a royal dressmaker. Or an artist."

"You are being absurd. No god would engage in such trivialities."

"A lot of people don't find art trivial, sweetheart."

She huffed, dropping her spoon in the empty bowl with a clang, obviously dismissing his remark. Anders still thought this was a very dodgy business. All very nice to have a child: not so nice to have a demon child out to rule the world. Why did Morrigan imagine she could control an Old God? Anders knew it would be entirely beyond him.

He liked the idea of an Old God's spirit living on — without its memories and power. That was fairly amusing, and tolerable in a God of Beauty. A God of Chaos like Zazikel or — he shuddered — of *Fire* like Toth would be utterly terrifying reincarnated as a toddler.

This child was clearly something Morrigan wanted fiercely, and denying it might well cause her to go elsewhere. That was an unacceptable outcome. He loved Morrigan — yes, he loved her— and he wanted a future with her.

"All right," he smiled. "You've convinced me. We're going to be parents."

Her smile made it all worthwhile.

"I must make some preparations. Tomorrow night, then."

Meanwhile, Anders' mind ticked over various scenarios and possible ways out. A baby was a wonderful thing. An Archdemon baby, not so wonderful. He would simply have to keep Morrigan far enough away from the Archdemon that the ritual failed.

Either that, or very early on he would have to turn his child's attention to the fine arts.

They were in the middle of a war, marching through Blight-infested lands. There was little time for training.

Nonetheless, most of the senior mages did what they could. Huddled in covered supply wagons, Anders made sure that every newly-Joined mage could perform a basic healing spell. Tara taught them the basics of elemental magic. Niall taught them a glyph that would lock an attacker in place. Jowan went over the theory of entropy spells. Morrigan, reluctantly, and only with great persuasion, presented the basics of shape-shifting.

Velanna was not so generous with her time or free with her expertise, and would only teach other elves. Had she not been such a powerful and effective fighter, Bronwyn would have made something of it, but Bronwyn was too busy to deal with Velanna. At least she was teaching somebody *something*.

They reached the fork in the road, and decisions needed to be

made. Even setting up camp had its hazards. Warden mages had to burn off a great deal of ground cover to clean a campsite. Water had to be boiled to purify it. The entire army was warned about touching obvious Taint and about the need to wash frequently. The Taint had affected the wildlife in the area, and they were attacked by Blight-mad wolves and grotesquely swollen spiders. It was not likely to be any better in the near future.

Riordan still wanted to punch through to Val Foret. A strong mounted party should be able to get there in less than a day. His last attempt had failed, but with the slaughter of hundreds of darkspawn, he now had a far better chance of success. Bronwyn was willing to detail some of her new mages to him. A few— especially the former apostates— actually knew how to ride.

Loghain liked the idea of scouting Val Foret.

"If the darkspawn already hold it," he said, "we'd be fools to march all the way to Val Royeaux with our left flank exposed. We'll send a party. If they meet significant resistance, they should withdraw quickly. If they can reach the city, all the better."

Bronwyn liked the idea, too, since the wounded needed a little more rest, and the new mages all the training they could get. Alistair surprised her by asking to go along with Riordan.

"It's my mother, you see," he told her, his voice lowered to a whisper. "Riordan sent her around the long way to see what

was happening in Val Foret. She might be there now! If she is, I want to see her."

The party left the following morning, galloping fast along the Val Forest Road. Bronwyn wished them well, wondering what they would find.

Among other things, quite a few cases of Blight disease.

Pitiful remnants of the company that had called themselves the Imperial Guard were hiding out in the woods, survivors of the march of the Montsimmard Wardens on Val Royeaux. Riordan learned about what a disaster that had been. None of the soldiers could tell them anything about the Wardens. They were all either dead or still running, as far as the men knew.

"It was like the darkspawn always knew where they were," one grey-skinned archer told them. "The Wardens had... like a *target* on them. Wherever we went with them, the darkspawn followed. In the end, the last two went off on their own. We've been getting by as best we could since."

Riordan kept his face expressionless, not wanting to insult the men with his pity, and seeing no point in commenting on the foolishness of eating Blighted creatures.

"If you want to live, you can become Grey Wardens," he told them. "Otherwise the Taint will kill you."

A handful survived. The sleeping men —and one woman—

were slung over horses and carried. The rest were burned, and the Wardens moved on. By the afternoon, they reached the limits of the Blight: a land where some green broke up the monotony of Blight grey, brown, and black. Beyond that, in another hour, lay the walls of Val Foret.

For a moment of horror, they thought it was under siege by the darkspawn. Then they realized that the small figures digging outside the walls were human, elves, and dwarves, attempting to divert the nearby river into a huge moat, encircling the city.

A great many people had already left Val Foret. The ones remaining rattled around the city as if it had suddenly grown too large for its population. To the great joy and relief of Alistair and Riordan, Fiona was there, with her largely intact party of a dozen Wardens. She had much to tell them.

"The lord of Val Foret, Count Alain Ghys-Demourne, is most cooperative. He was the uncle of the previous holder of the title, who is believed dead in Val Royeaux. He may be old and fat, but he is no fool."

The man was attempting to keep up some sort of normalcy, by encouraging those remaining in the city to keep trying to raise crops. The Wardens had already seen that the farms and villages to the north and east had been evacuated. They were not entirely deserted, however.

"The farmers go out and work the fields, while the guards on the towers keep a good watch. Some of us go out, too. If we

sense darkspawn, the civilians will be sent back to the city at once. We are also patrolling the city very carefully."

Riordan and Alistair learned a great deal. In the city were refugees from Val Royeaux, but unlike all the ones they had met and interviewed previously. These were not from the the dock area. These were survivors from the western faubourgs and the neighboring villages, who had managed to flee upriver to the Imperial Highway. From them, the Wardens found out about how the capital had been undermined. The darkspawn had not breached the walls, but had simply tunneled underneath them, found their way into the sewer system, and emerged inside the city.

"Thus the patrol," Fiona said grimly. "There is a survivor of the Val Royeaux Warden garrison here. The darkspawn did their digging just far enough from the Warden barracks that no one sensed them. By the time they did, it was too late."

That was certainly alarming. Still, the darkspawn had not marched on Val Foret itself. Some scouts had tried to explore the Imperial Highway to the north. Most had not returned, and the ones who did had not got very far.

Many of the inhabitants of Val Foret had fled west, into the Nahashin Marshes. Ghys-Demourne thought they were fools. When the Wardens were presented to him, he told them his opinion of the refugees very frankly.

"Far better to go south to Val Firmin. Warden Fiona here says that city is holding fast," remarked the old nobleman. "There is

nothing in the marshes but fever and starvation. I suppose they think to get to Andoral's Reach or hide up in the Hunterhorns, but who's to say that's any better? Best of all to stay and defend one's home."

There was a certain consternation when the leaders of Val Foret heard about the leadership of the army that had come to fight the Blight. Nonetheless, Alistair, as a Fereldan Warden and a noble, was treated very civilly. He gave Fiona a little smile, and her heart swelled with pride at the sight of him. Yes, she and Maric had hoped for a simple life for him, but he was truly his father's son, and had risen in life. Besides, if Bronwyn Cousland could be both Warden and Queen, then Maric's son could be both a Warden and a noble of Ferelden. Alistair had asked Riordan to introduce him as the Bann of Stonehaven. "Arl of Jader" had not yet been approved by the Landsmeet, and Alistair thought putting himself forward as such would hardly be tactful in this situation. He was absolutely right. The Orlesians were thunderstruck that Fereldan soldiers were marching through the Heartlands of Orlais.

"Well... yes..." managed the old count. "Very noble of the young queen to bring her Wardens to help. Very proper. The rest of the Fereldans, though... are they taking over? Is that their scheme? I once fought against Loghain Mac Tir myself, and I don't mind telling you that I would prefer not to repeat that. He is... formidable."

"On my honor," Riordan assured them. "They are not here for conquest. Or," he said, honestly. "Not much. They have

claimed Jader, it's true."

There was a burst of indignant talk. Fiona was surprised, but not angry. She had never felt the least personal loyalty to Orlais. Jader might well be better off under Fereldan rule. What would it mean for the Jader Wardens?

"However," said Riordan, holding up his hand for silence, "they have upheld the rights of the Empress' young heiress, Princess Celandine. Duke Prosper de Monfort is her general, and treated with perfect courtesy by the Fereldans. Prince Florestan survived the tragedy at Val Royeaux, and is also with them. And there is more to the army than merely Orlesians and Fereldans. Queen Bronwyn used the Grey Warden treaties to obtain a considerable army from the dwarven king. The Dalish, too, have come, and have fought bravely."

"Elves!" snorted a chevalier, dismissing them.

"They are superb scouts," Riordan rebuked him. "And many have died in the struggle. Some have Joined the Wardens. All have served honorably, as have the mages brought from the Fereldan Circle, also according to the ancient treaties. They have made a great difference," he added, giving Fiona a slight smile.

"Well, *mages*, yes," agreed Ghys-Demourne. "No one questions the value of *mages* in times like these. They whipped the Qunaris in the Exalted Marches after all. The truth's the truth."

He liked to think of himself as a fair-minded man; and he was, for an Orlesian nobleman. He had mages in his household; their indentures bought at great expense from the Chantry. He had seen that they were always decently treated, and had been richly rewarded by their loyalty. He would have been dead the year before last from an infected jaw without the skills of his devoted Lyonelle. While what had happened to the Divine was a great tragedy, he was quite complacent about the destruction of the Circle's indenture records. Lyonelle and her children were safe now, which was a blessing in itself. He had not the least scruple about acknowledging the service of mages, even the elven mages who had the worth to become Grey Wardens. Warden Fiona was a credit to her race. Really, in his opinion, she was not like an *elf* at all.

Riordan considered, and then decided that they ought to know. "It is interesting that you have brought up the Qunari. The Queen came across a party of Qunari in the Orne Valley. They are curious about the Blight."

"How many?" was the next question.

"Perhaps a little over a dozen. Their ship was sunk by the Archdemon when they attempted to sail into the harbor of Val Royeaux."

There was spiteful laughter at that, but the old count remained serious.

"Are they going to cause trouble?"

"Queen Bronwyn thinks they are here to retrieve a Qunari artifact — an ancient work of philosophy— from the ruins of the Cathedral. The Queen had a Qunari traveling with her previously who had served her well, but as he was a Qunari officer, he has chosen to rejoin his people. He, at least, understands the danger posed by the darkspawn, and the Queen believes he will restrain his people from outright obstructionism." He shrugged. "Loghain, on the other hand, is far more suspicious of their motives. He thinks it not unlikely that the Qunari are probing for weaknesses in the south of Thedas. As we have more important enemies to fight at the moment, however, they were permitted to live or die as they like."

Fiona said harshly. "Blight disease is likely to take them anyway."

"Very true."

Some of the Orlesians nodded at that, but no one was particularly smug. Everyone was too afraid of the Blight sickness gaining a hold in Val Foret itself.

They went down to the fortification works around the city. Riordan was impressed in spite of himself. Yes, darkspawn could tunnel under any moat, but the sides were built up that the darkspawn would not see the moat until they were already falling into it. They would be slowed, even stopped for some time. Later they would attempt mining under the city, but with the Wardens in residence, the Count could have his engineers countermine them and set fire to the works.

"I will not give up my city without a fight," the old man said. "I never thought I would rule here, but now that it has come to me, I'll will do my best for the people."

"That is all any of us can do," said Riordan.

They would stay the night, in the quarters assigned to the Wardens. Clearly, Fiona and Alistair wanted to speak to each other. Riordan smiled faintly, glad for his Wardens to have such a happiness, even in the teeth of Blight and darkspawn.

While Riordan was involved in the venture to Val Foret, the army was not idle. Numerous patrols probed the country ahead. For the longest-range mission, Loghain ordered a company to scout east to the mouth of the Orne, and see if they could make contact with the ships he had ordered to follow the army there.

"We can't lose them," Loghain told Bronwyn, in a moment alone. "We need to keep up communications with Jader and the rest of Ferelden. We can evacuate any wounded, of course, but we need the fleet whether we fail or succeed. Mostly especially if we succeed," he added rather sourly.

"I don't understand."

A bitter smile. "My dear girl, what do you think is going to happen once the Archdemon is gone and the Blight is over? Yes, yes, I know," he said impatiently. "There will still be darkspawn to put down, but that will be a largely internal

matter, surely. There will be no more Horde, no more attacks on cities. And with that, Bronwyn, your lovingly crafted Alliance will collapse."

She thought about it. Right now the Orlesians tolerated them because they had to. What if they did not? Her people were far from home, in enemy country. She sighed. Loghain was almost certainly right.

"You think we'll be in danger."

"I know we will. Oh, I think the dwarves will march back to Orzammar with us, but they may not want to get involved in a dispute between surfacers. I think we can more or less rely on the Dalish and the mages, because they will have no choice but to be on our side. They'll want to get out of this country as fast as they can, too."

"We have the Empress-elect in Jader."

"And that's all very well," he said, shrugging. "Though I think such a hostage will be of limited value. Prosper's claim to speak for her has been accepted. They know you would never countenance harm to the girl. She might spend years in Jader, a tragic prisoner, while Prosper rules in her name. Our value as hostages, on the other hand, would be incalculable."

Bronwyn shook her head. "They're not taking me prisoner."

"Nor will they take me," Loghain said. "Mind you, I won't leave the army to its fate. If it comes to it, I will be the last man in

the rear guard, but I'm marching out of here with them. It may get fairly grim. We'll want to put the wounded and the noncombatants on ships and get them away to safety. We must not lose contact with those ships. I'm sending Cauthrien. Put together a squad of Wardens to go with her to smell out the darkspawn."

Bronwyn considered sending Leliana, but then decided against it. Loghain did not entirely trust Leliana. Instead, she put Brosca in charge—a Warden whom Loghain did trust and even liked—and had her take Niall, Bustrum, Ostap, Nuala, Steren, and Sigrun. Any supplies they needed would be taken downriver by boat.

It would be easy enough to find the Waking Sea. All one had to do was walk along the northern bank of the Orne. Undoubtedly they would encounter darkspawn on the way.

First, they encountered the Qunari. Brosca had always got on perfectly well with Sten, and when she saw him, looming amidst some leafless trees, she gave him a wave.

"How are you?" she called. "We're going to have a look at the Sea!"

"I am well," he replied. "Perhaps I will be permitted to accompany you."

He was not.

Karasten and Tallis wished to give him orders, and the plan was to follow and observe only. Sten watched the Wardens pass, somewhat wistfully. It would not do, however, to give his superior officers less than his complete attention, however little he thought of them.

After a day with his own people, Sten's observations had somewhat alarmed him. This Karasten was accustomed to command at sea. He had great experience there, and was no doubt well skilled in all the maritime arts. On land he seemed uncertain, but was attempting to conceal it under a facade of severity.

Tallis was not uncertain by nature, but it had not taken Sten long to determine that she was unwell. Nor did it take him long to divine the nature of her ailment.

"You are ill," he remarked. "Too ill to follow the Wardens."

"It's nothing."

Karasten frowned, watching her keenly. He narrowed his eyes at Sten, tacitly ordering him to continue.

"It is the Blight sickness," Sten informed them frankly. He told Tallis, "You have been exposed to darkspawn and have contracted Taint from them. I believe that the Warden-Commander warned you of this possibility."

Tallis tried not to show how alarmed she was.

"You've been exposed to the darkspawn for months. Did you get this sickness?"

"I did not," said Sten. "However, I have traveled with Healers who saw that every injury was cleaned and closed quickly, and was also warned by the Warden-Commander to take great care in washing. Darkspawn blood is particularly infectious. As you have seen in this land, both vegetation and wildlife are vulnerable to the Taint. The Wardens deal with it by fire."

"Is it contagious?" Karasten demanded.

"It is *infectious*," Sten corrected carefully. "I do not believe that this sickness is easily transmitted by casual contact. However it will be necessary to exercise caution to keep the disease from spreading."

Tallis squared her thin shoulders, and asked, "What can I expect?"

Sten did not spare her the truth. "The disease varies in the individual. You will sicken, and either transform into a ghoul or die outright. No one recovers."

The Ben-Hassrath was visibly shaken at that. "*She*," said Tallis, referring to Bronwyn, "said that Grey Wardens could help me."

"I believe you would be required to join the Grey Wardens. I am not privy to their secrets, but there is a ceremony of some

sort and oaths are sworn. At that point, you would be expected to pledge your loyalty to the Grey Warden order. Deserters are not tolerated. I did not join the Grey Wardens myself, seeing the conflict between serving them and serving the Qun."

Karasten frowned over that, thinking hard.

Tallis did not like the prospect at all. "My loyalty is to the Qun."

"Well said," Karasten approved, and drove his dagger through her back. The point emerged from her chest. Tallis looked at him with horrified astonishment. Karasten withdrew the dagger and a gout of blood spurted out. The Ben-Hassrath collapsed, coughed, and died.

The other Qunari, who had been too far away to overhear the conversation, leaped to their feet in astonishment.

"The Ben-Hassrath had contracted a deadly contagion. She chose the Qun, and to die rather than to defect to the Grey Wardens, or to further infect us," Karasten declared solemnly. He turned to Sten. "I believe you were instructed to wash all Tainted blood from weapons and exposed skin?"

After a beat, Sten replied, "That is correct. Her body also should be burned, along with her personal possessions. Objects of metal can be cleansed by fire."

"See to it, and instruct the men in the appropriate hygiene."

ordered Karasten. He retrieved his canteen, and began washing his hands with great care. Later, while the Ben-Hassrath burned, he would see to his dagger, and then wash his hands once more. Only then did the Qunari move on, following the Wardens and the rest of the *bas*, in order to discover their plans.

Val Chevin seemed safe enough for the moment. Hector Pentaghost left the city walls and went down to the mess hall, wiping his sweaty face.

For some reason, the Archdemon had not made another appearance. Plenty of darkspawn had attacked, but the Wardens were holding the city firmly against them. Attempts to tunnel under the city had been thwarted. In one case, the part of the tunnel outside the walls had been flooded with oil and then set alight. Then it had been booby-trapped and filled with rubble. The darkspawn would have to try harder.

And supplies and reinforcements were still getting through. The harbor was untouched, and the ships came in and out.

Most of the civilians, aside from the brothelkeepers and their whores, were gone. Most had gone north to Montfort and Arlesans. Some had kept traveling. Val Chevin was now a city of Wardens, with a few chevaliers rounding out the complement, and some priests and Templars still in the Chantry. The Revered Mother herself had sailed to Cumberland, to wait out the war.

As in any city, it was a struggle to keep the peace. The First Warden ruled Val Chevin now, and had divided the city into districts: a Nevarran district, a Tevinter district, an Anderfels district, and now a Rivainni district. The Antivans and Marchers had decided to go south to Jader, apparently. Word had come that the Fereldans had pulled together a decent force, including dwarves and elves, and had marched west. The Antivans and Marchers would be throwing in their lot with them. That they were fighting the darkspawn on two fronts was wonderful news, and Pentaghast had sent one of his ships south, hoping to locate Queen Bronwyn and give her a message of support.

Did the Archdemon know about Bronwyn? Pentaghast hoped not. The Archdemon deserved the nastiest surprise the Maker could craft for it.

Across the mess hall, one of his Senior Wardens caught his eye. Athis loaded a plate with hunter's stew, and headed his way. She looked grim: burning with suppressed anger. He had hoped her joint operation with the Tevinters had gone well. Apparently not. Pentaghast groaned. He had *told* the First Warden that nobody could work with the Tevinters. Nevarrans could get on with Marchers; they could get on with Andermen; they could even get on to some degree with the Orlesians—but the Tevinters, no. They were difficult to cope with even in the privacy of the Wardens' Council, when there were only dozen in the room and everyone was trying very hard. On the operational level, the Tevinters inevitably offended everyone. The handful of Templars left in Val Chevin did not help things,

nor did the inevitable clashes between the priests of the rival Chantries.

Athis set down her plate with exaggerated care, and then slumped onto the bench beside him.

"Before you say anything," she began, "we did get all the way out to the Crossways. We didn't lose anybody, so I guess you can call it a success. I was feeling pretty good about it all, until we got back to town and the Tevinter staff came out to welcome their Wardens back." She stabbed angrily at her food with her spoon. "You know they brought slaves."

"Yes, I know." The Tevinters had been reasonably discreet about it, but they had come with quite a large train of campfollowers.

"And they're not just slaves. I think some of them are bloodthralls. They looked as blank as the Tranquil—but they were smiling. It was... horrible. Pretty girls and pretty young men, with terrible, imbecilic smiles pasted on their pretty faces."

Pentaghast was absolutely certain she was right. Tevinter Wardens demanded all the luxuries they enjoyed at home. He had heard that Tevinter Warden facilities boasted every pleasure: even brothels set aside entirely for the Wardens' use, staffed by mind-controlled slaves, who now and then became Tainted themselves. The Tevinter Warden-Commander refused to discuss the matter, and if they wanted him and his incredibly powerful and useful Warden mages to

remain with them, there was nothing to do but hold their noses. Once the Blight was over, however, there was going to be real trouble.

"All the more reason to finish this. Don't spread this around, but the First Warden is considering marching on Val Royeaux in the next few days. We've got to locate any nests they've established before they start spawning."

The sentries alerted the camp to a large armed force approaching from the east. To Bronwyn's surprise and delight, they proved to be yet more Wardens.

"Enzo Visconti, Warden-Commander of Antiva, and at your service," said the tall man with the distinguished air and the lusciously seductive accent. Bronwyn noted some admiring looks among her Wardens, both male and female. Zevran was smirking, proud of his countryman for upholding the Antivan tradition of being irresistible.

Bronwyn wondered if she was reading too much into Visconti's behavior. He sounded just like Zevran, only older and more bass instead of tenor, and Zevran made a point of flamboyantly pretending to seduce everyone. Perhaps this was the way all male Antivans behaved. And he kissed her hand, of course. She was ridiculously pleased that her hair was in order and her face not speckled with darkspawn blood.

"You are most welcome, Warden-Commander," she replied warmly. "How many are with you?"

"I have two hundred thirty Wardens and a force of mages totaling forty-one." He laughed. "They are quite recovered from their voyage and glad to be on solid ground once more."

"You've come in good time," Loghain remarked. "We're moving into darkspawn territory."

"Ah, excellent! One wishes to arrive late enough to make an entrance, but not so late as to miss the party entirely."

Instead of fighting, of course, they had to have a meeting instead: Bronwyn and Loghain, Prosper and Florestan, Astrid and Merrill. First Enchanter Irving and Knight Commander Greagoir were included as well. Visconti tactfully inserted himself into their councils, trying to sense the unstated tensions and the strength of the alliances. They spent some time going over the map and pointing out what they knew and did not know. Their battles so far had been successful. Riordan of Orlais had gone scouting to Val Foret, and other Wardens had been sent down the mouth of the Orne to gather intelligence. Other scouts were out as well. Before their next big push, they would hear what the various parties had to say about the country ahead.

Visconti, in his turn, could tell them something about what he had seen marching up the Imperial Highway. Jader was calm, Halarmshiral holding, Lydes under control by its garrison. As to the Lord of Verchiel, Visconti smiled thinly. This was no place to bring up the fact that Visconti would like to beat the man bloody someday. Then they talked about the war itself. The Antivan was grim about the fate of the Wardens who had

been in Val Royeaux and those from Montsimnard.

"So it appears unlikely that Warden-Commander Caron survived. That would make Riordan Acting-Commander. You think well of him?"

Loghain did not permit himself to snort. Bronwyn smiled. "I have worked with Riordan in the past, and yes, I think very well of him. He came to my assistance when I had the greatest need of it."

And while they met, a message arrived by fast courier. A Nevarran ship had arrived at the port of Lydes, and the Warden-Commander of Nevarra's letter was put in Bronwyn's hands. She excused herself while she read it on the spot. It was long, and a meal was served in the big tent while the rest waited for her to finish.

"Well, this is actually good news," she exclaimed, slapping the parchment down on the table. "Oh, is that mine?" she asked, seeing the serving before her.

In between bites, she told everyone the contents of the letter. She had not understood before now that the Wardens—all the Wardens—really had rallied against the Blight.

"The Nevarrans were first, but the Wardens from the Anderfels soon arrived. The First Warden himself! They're based in Val Chevin, the closest big city north of Val Royeaux. Pentaghast says it's pretty much a no-man's-land between the two cities now. He's holding Val Chevin fairly securely at the

moment and they're being supplied by sea. And the Tevinters arrived next —"

She saw the expression on old Greagoir's face at the mention of the Tevinters, but chose to ignore it, and went on.

"— and now the Rivainnis, too. They were slowed down by a pirate attack, and their Commander has sworn revenge against the Felicisima Armada."

"Filthy pirates!" muttered Prosper. Pirates were a nuisance. Pirates cost you money.

"As to their tactical situation: the Archdemon took part in two attacks on the city, but was driven off by massed volleys. They haven't seen the creature since the eighteenth, which has them puzzled." Bronwyn laughed lightly. "I think I can shed some light on that. Some of you know that there is a small band of shipwrecked Qunari in the marshes not far from here. A Qunari dreadnought tried to sail into the harbor of Val Royeaux, bold as you please, to retrieve some artifact of theirs. They roused the Archdemon and a mob of darkspawn, which chased the landing party to the docks. The Archdemon then attacked the ship and set it afire."

A few chuckles. No one felt the least sympathy for the Qunari. Bronwyn smiled slightly and told them the best part.

"However, the Archdemon had a surprise of its own. You know the Qunari explosive powder? Their gaatlok? Apparently the fire ignited the place they stored it inside the ship. There

was a huge explosion, and the Archdemon was injured in some way. At any rate, it flew away squealing, and did not linger to pick off the survivors in the water."

"Injured!" Visconti smiled, a fierce blaze of white teeth. "Good news!"

"Yes, it is good news," agreed Loghain, "since it has rendered it unwilling to pay us a visit... or harass our allies the Nevarrans in Val Chevin."

This was the first the Antivan had heard about an alliance between Ferelden and Nevarra, and he paid close attention. This would be of importance long after the Blight was over.

"Unfortunately," said Bronwyn, "it did not render the creature unable to fly. In my own experience fighting dragons, and in the lore we gleaned from the Nevarrans, the most essential part of killing any dragon is to *bring it down*." In brief, she summarized things that had worked, and the role she wished mages to play. "Damaging the wings is what everyone who is not a Warden should concentrate on, first and foremost. Since we cannot surround it in the sky, we must fight it on solid ground."

She told them the rest of the message.

"They want to move on Val Royeaux as soon as possible, of course, before any newly-made Broodmothers can begin spawning. The nests will be tough, no doubt, but they are just as much a strategic objective as the Archdemon itself."

Visconti had considered the matter himself during his voyage. He had only a theoretical knowledge of Broodmothers himself, but his readings painted a dark picture. "Very tough. Have you had any ideas about how to destroy them?"

Astrid smirked. She had taken the lead with this. "A Broodmother nest is no problem for a well-prepared dwarven engineer. We've been using lyrium bombs in mining and construction for ages. They can be assembled out of a large number of lyrium grenades. We have people working on the problem. We can either use remote detonation, magical detonation, or, if we can get some distance above them, we can simply use contact detonation. It'll be a mess, and destroy the place they're hiding in, but lyrium bombs will do the job."

Greagoir opened his mouth, ready to bring up the Chantry's monopoly contract with the dwarves for all surface rights to lyrium. Then he shut it. Actually, dropping a large explosive device on the darkspawn sounded like a very good idea.

Loghain was deeply pleased with the message from the Nevarran Warden. Their diplomatic efforts had actually paid off. They appeared to have one reliable friend, at least, in the Nevarran Warden-Commander. If a mob of Wardens were attacking the horde from the north, the danger to his own people and above all to Bronwyn was substantially lessened. It was late and insultingly Orlesian-centered, but at least the order was mobilized. To paraphrase the Antivan fellow, better late than never.

"We'll send a message back to Warden-Commander Pentaghast," Bronwyn decided. "We have messages anyway, and I wanted to send Pepin to Jader. We'll send a ship to Val Chevin as well, and tell him what we're up to."

There was a road of a sort running parallel to the River Orne on the north bank. "Of a sort" meant that it was narrow, overgrown, and underwater in places. Darkspawn stragglers were everywhere. The Fereldans moved along the path, and darkspawn jumped out at them from time to time. The Wardens sensed them well before their appearance, and most of them fell to Niall's spells and the archers in the party before they could engage them blade to blade.

Brosca liked action, but she could not say she liked this place. It was soft underfoot: as far from good honest Stone as possible, unless they actually tried to walk on water.

There were other hazards, too. Huge webs warned them of giant, blighted spiders. These were as big as the ones in the Deep Roads, and like them, were a by-product of the Taint. Many of Cauthrien's soldiers had not seen them before, so there was something of a stir at their appearance.

At length, they came upon a large area that had been cleared by fire. Cauthrien raised her hand for a halt, and looked about her.

"This must have been the Orlesian camp. Come on."

She pulled out a pencil and parchment and began making notes and a map. Brosca led the Warden around the perimeter of the site, senses alert for darkspawn, but also looking for the odd bit of loot.

Not much remained. The survivors had remained on the site for some days, and had picked it clean. Large, burned-out places had evidently once been mass burial pyres. There was also evidence of a more recent campfire.

"The Qunari," Bustrum said. Steren agreed.

Brosca nodded. A smell of rot drew them to a body left a little way into the forest. It, too, was Qunari, from the size and the horns, though much of it had been scavenged.

"They just left him here?" Niall asked, disgusted. "They didn't burn him, or at least, bury him?"

"I don't think Qunari do that," Brosca said, trying to remember anything Sten had said about burial customs. From what she could gather, lifeless bodies were useless and no objects for sentiment. Still, surely the Qunari must dispose of them in some way.

"Sten told me," put in Sigrun, "that they believe in doing the simplest thing with the dead. If they live near the sea, they throw them in; if they live on a farm, they put them in the field as fertilizer. They thought they would never come back here for their noses to be offended, so they just left this guy. Hey," she said, seeing Nuala's scandalized expression. "I didn't

make up Qunari burial customs. It's not much different at home in Dust Town. Nobody does much with the Dusters until we stink too much, and then we're dumped in the lava pits."

"Lava pits are good," Brosca said, feeling sentimental. "Dignified and tidy. Really hard to loot the bodies afterward, though."

Meanwhile, Cauthrien and her subordinates studied all the burn marks, finding the long, raking scars of intense heat, discovering a deliberate pattern to them.

"Looks like the dragon burned a cross into the land," she remarked. "It came in one way, and then came in from the other side to maximize the damage."

People kept telling her that dragons were smart; that they had some degree of intelligence; that they were not simply dumb brutes. Cauthrien had fought against the concept as long as possible. Intelligent enemies were far more dangerous than the other kind. Still, this was proof positive that the Archdemon was capable of formulating a plan.

Bits of bone and scraps of tents remained, remainders of the fire. The survey of the site took quite a bit of time. The darkspawn had been through here later, leaving their typical trophies: rotting, flayed human heads on sticks to mark their passage. The ground had been trampled at various times, but Cauthrien felt she was getting a good idea of what had happened here. The road led away north, and there, somewhere or other, the Montsimnard Wardens had met

their doom.

"It won't happen to us," she declared. "All sentries are instructed to watch the skies as well. In fact, we've doubled our lookouts. If the Archdemon comes, we'll throw everything we have at it."

Eventually the river mouth opened out into many little streams, dividing the soft marsh into a maze of scrubby bushes and treacherous quicksand. Cauthrien kept her people strictly to the narrow road. The Waking Sea finally glittered amid the trees, and they came upon the Qunari lifeboat.

It was in fairly good condition. The Qunari had pulled it up above high tide level, and covered it with fallen branches. The wind had blown some aside. The oars were inside the boat. Whatever supplies had gone into the boat were now with the Qunaris themselves, but the boat itself was quite usable.

"What are they planning to do?" Brosca snorted. "Row back to Qunari land?"

Sigrun dropped her voice to Sten's bass. "If necessary."

Surprised laughter greeted her imitation.

"Not bad," said Bustrum.

The village nearby was deserted. While the buildings showed some signs of Taint, the darkspawn had come and gone. They found no bodies, which suggested that the people living

here had had the sense to run when they had the chance. The lack of maintenance was obvious, but there were still docks and one very long pier extending into the Waking Sea. Beyond, in the untainted sunlight, five ships were anchored. They flew the Ferelden standard.

Yes, they were there, but out of earshot. Cauthrien ordered the company's standard bearer to walk out on the pier, waving the banner, hoping to attract attention. At length, there was some activity among the ships, and one of them launched a boat shoreward. At the helm was a handsome, dark-skinned woman with a great deal of gold on her. She gave them a wide grin and a wave as the boat drew near.

"Ahoy, Fereldans! I'm Captain Isabela, of the ship *Siren's Call!*"

It did not take long to find out that they had mutual friends. Isabela's ship had carried Carver and Jowan on their trip to Nevarra. She knew Fenris, too.

"You can chat with the Captain after I'm done," Cauthrien said to Brosca, impatient with her gossiping.

They talked business then. Isabela told Cauthrien that they had received Loghain's message to come to the mouth of the river. The ships at the port of Lydes were now the merchant men who were ferrying refugees out of Orlais for whatever they could get.

"There's a lot of traffic in this part of the Waking Sea," Isabela said. "I saw some Rivainni ships put in at Cumberland not too long ago. Oh! And I saw what I'm sure was a Qunari dreadnought, but I have no idea what they were up to."

Brosca was so excited to hear this, that she fidgeted, wanting to answer instead of Cauthrien. The tall bann gave her an amused look, and said, "The Qunari were looking for a relic of theirs in Val Royeaux. They roused the Archdemon, who destroyed their ship. The survivors are not far from here."

Isabela was wryly amused. "Remind me never to piss off the Archdemon."

Brosca's words bubbled out of her irresistibly. "You should watch out. The Qunari have a boat. I bet they wouldn't mind borrowing somebody's else's ship so they could go home."

"Thanks for the warning," said Isabela. "Now tell me more about this relic. Is it valuable?"

Cauthrien did not like this turn in the conversation. "To the Qunari, undoubtedly, but they're not likely to pay for it. It would seem to me that looting Val Royeaux will be a lot safer after the Archdemon is dead. Remain where you are, Captain, but do keep watch for darkspawn on shore, the Archdemon overhead... or Qunari in a rowboat."

Isabela smirked. "Problems do seem to come in threes."

At a safe distance, the Qunari watched the encounter. Karasten eyed the ships hungrily, longing for the sea, and whispered the scheme forming in his mind. The *bas* had found their rowboat, and thus it would be moved elsewhere, and hidden carefully. There were a number of useful ships standing off the coast. Any one of them could be put to use when the time came to return to Par Vollen.

Sten listened to his superior's plans, forcing himself to hide his contempt. It was not necessary to murder a crew and steal a ship. All he had to do was *ask* Bronwyn, and she would arrange passage for him — and yes, his men. There was no need to sneak and spy. His opinion of Karasten sank lower. True, it was not entirely his commander's fault: he had never had dealings with anyone but Qunari, Sten had learned, and thus the commander did not understand that even those called *bas* were capable of courage and honor.

How long would Karasten survive against the darkspawn? It was a matter of some interest to Sten, for he was now convinced that the men under them would likely suffer the same fate as Tallis, if this Karasten remained in command. Sten had devised his own plan for finding a way to the Tome of Koslun: a plan not relying on foolish isolation, but which instead would unite Qunari with the great alliance against the darkspawn. Karasten, as far as Sten could see, was the only obstacle. The Qun was quite clear about how to deal with inadequate leaders.

Thanks to my reviewers: FloridaMagpie, Spirally, Chiara Crawford, Massgamer45, Tirion I, Melysande, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Girlchama, imperial queen, Nemrut, Blinded in a bolthole, KnightOfHolyLight, JackOfBladesX, AD Lewis, darksky01, Fenrir666, le-maru, LadyMary, DjinniGenie, KrystylSky, Brendiction, Suna Chunin, Mike3207, Robbie the Phoenix, Raxiselic, Phygmalion, Jenna53, devo342, jnybot, dragonmactir, Dennis Creevy Lyssa Terald, butterflygrll, animeman12, and mille libri.

LadyMary left me a long review, but did not sign in. Here's an answer: I think the Archdemon is insane from the Taint, but still somewhat intelligent. There is evidence that the developers originally planned to make the Archdemon's mind control a plot point—it might well be the dangling end that explains Loghain's bizarre behavior in canon. Gaider has made noises to that effect. However, they ended up not making that explicit (thus making the Archdemon not much more than a big, noisy beast). And yes, there will be a dangerous mess in Orlais after the Blight. You were quite right about Tallis. I always thought Morrigan's participation in Flemeth's plan completely irrational, and the result of years of conditioning and who else knows what. The plan itself was weak from the beginning, and depended on too many circumstances outside of Morrigan's control.

120. Fires on the Plain

Victory At Ostagar

Chapter 120: Fires on the Plain

Cauthrien and Brosca returned to camp with the good news that a squadron of ships was anchored at the mouth of the Orne. Captain Isabela had got the message and was there for when they needed her. Cauthrien described the number and kind of darkspawn they had fought and her speculations on how many were in that part of the river delta. Then she described finding the old campsite and displayed her little map, annotated with her diagrams of how the Archdemon must have attacked.

"It was night," Bronwyn said, visualizing it. "It was dark, and no one was looking up. Of course, it would be hard to see the Archdemon if it weren't actually flaming."

"Dwarves and elves have better night vision," said Loghain. "The Dalish especially will be the best choice to watch the skies at night. They'll want to poison their arrows, too." He snorted a laugh. "And we'll tell them not to shoot until they actually have a chance at hitting the creature."

Bronwyn hoped they would not be treated to poisoned arrows

raining back down on their camp. "I wish I knew how badly hurt the Archdemon really is," she said. "We shouldn't waste the opportunity, if it's really damaged."

Loghain pretended to be philosophical about it. "The army can only move as fast as it can move." Actually, he was anxious to hurry, too. It had been a month since the attack on Val Royeaux. The Wardens all seemed to think it would take almost two months for the wretched Broodmothers to start bearing. They needed to strike hard before those unwelcome reinforcements came into play.

Brosca added, "I saw Sten, too. He wanted to come with us, but the bigshots said no."

"He was all right?" Bronwyn asked.

"He *looked* all right. I don't think he's pleased with how things are going."

"I would think not."

Cauthrien told them that the Wardens had done some work on cleansing the old camp, and that it should be usable if they traveled in that direction. She also reported finding the remnants of the Qunari: the dead body and the boat.

"And they moved the boat. It wasn't where we saw it on the way in. It crossed my mind to destroy it, but that seemed not only petty, but a perfect way to start a needless fight. The ships were warned to watch out for them, in case they

decided to steal one."

"It's completely ridiculous," said Bronwyn. "If they had the least intelligence they would join with us for the duration, instead of standing on their dignity."

Loghain shrugged. "That's their decision. If they attack us or offer any hindrance, they'll have to be killed."

Bronwyn was not happy about it, but saw no way to object. Anyone who made it difficult to pursue the war against the darkspawn was by definition their enemy.

Riordan and Alistair were back later in the day, with the news that Val Foret was still holding, and that Riordan's wandering Wardens had reached the city alive.

"I told Fiona to stay there," Riordan reported. "We need an outpost there, watching for darkspawn. The refugees there were sure that the darkspawn tunneled under Val Royeaux's city walls. Fiona is making certain that they don't do that in Val Foret."

Loghain granted the value of Val Foret. It was directly on the Imperial Highway. As long as the city held, the darkspawn could not easily turn south. To the northwest were the vast Nahashin Marshes, and the horde would be as bogged down there as any human army. The Nevarrans and other Wardens were keeping the darkspawn occupied to the north. It was really not a bad tactical situation. If it had been any other

army, he would think they had an excellent chance of hemming them in and destroying them piecemeal.

But they were not an ordinary human army. Darkspawn could survive without food and without clean water. They were hard to kill and they spread disease. And above all, there was the Archdemon, which could rain down death from above. Their options against the creature were limited. Ballistae and magic were all very well, but their range was limited. Of course, when he thought about it, it was true that the dragon's effective range was limited, too.

"How long is a dragon's flame?" he asked Bronwyn.

She could only give him a general estimate. Obviously, a High Dragon had a much longer range than the lesser kind, who could only flame the length of two men.

"Do dragons do anything else?" he wondered. "If they carried rocks into the sky, for example, and dropped them, they could do great harm."

"Yes, but I've never heard of that, or seen it, for that matter." Bronwyn thought about it. "I suppose there are all sorts of things an intelligent dragon could do, but they don't. They flame, and they use their claws, teeth, and tails to rend. They can fly in low and smash into you. I think they might well do that to an advancing army. But dropping things? It would be very effective, but they don't."

"Interesting." Loghain considered his options briefly. "We

move out tomorrow."

Their next objective was the Charente River.

Val Charente lay on both sides the river, according to the map: a small town south of Val Royeaux. Nobody had heard a word from it, or from anyone claiming to be a refugee. A bridge spanned the river, and rather than going all the way up to Val Foret and traveling on the Imperial Highway, which crossed the Charente at the town of Arc, Loghain preferred to try the smaller bridge along the Greenway that would shorten their journey to Val Royeaux.

"The Count in Val Foret knows nothing of the fate of Arc," Riordan told them. "None of his scouts got that far. The darkspawn very likely hold the bridge there."

"Presumably they hold the bridge at Val Charente as well," Bronwyn pointed out.

"True," said Loghain, "but I like the idea of using the bridge at Val Charente better, anyway. We'll have naval support that way, and we can withdraw into the Orne Marshes and back up the Greenway if we get into trouble."

Bronwyn liked the idea better too. Ever since Loghain had confided his concerns about being trapped deep in Orlais, it had preyed on her mind. It caused her to look at Duke Prosper in a different light. He was a sound ally at the moment. He even seemed to personally like and respect her, but she could imagine, all too easily, that he would turn on

them the moment he could do so with impunity.

They finished their meeting and Riordan and Alistair went off to be introduced to the Antivan Wardens. The noise from from the Wardens' camp was loud and cheerful, and their presence reassured Bronwyn somewhat. Without the Wardens, their position would be infinitely more perilous.

No sane person would cross the Wardens, and a large portion of them were under her command. In fact, they were all under her general command, by common consent. The mages and Dalish, as she and Loghain had agreed, were loyal because it was in their best interests to be loyal. Astrid and her dwarves—for they were now unmistakably Astrid's dwarves— would likely stand with them, as long as their escape did not take too long or cost too many lives.

What about the Antivan Wardens in particular? They were curious about her, having heard some sort of nonsensical stories about her and the Ashes and Andraste. They were very curious about the dogs, and were quick too see their value in combat. Visconti himself seemed friendly enough, but she could not imagine him wanting to get between the Fereldan army and the growing Orlesian forces.

For they were certainly growing. Prosper de Montfort had done very well, luring in nobles and chevaliers at loose ends since the fall of Val Royeaux. They, in turn, brought their retinues, and they were beginning to add up very nicely. Loghain always gave orders when they made camp, and organized things so there would be the least amount of

tension, but it was difficult to field an army with such contradictory elements without the occasional conflict. The Fereldans were fairly well trained by now —unless they were drunk — and would not automatically assume any elven woman was theirs for the taking. Nor did they utter high, girly screams, at the sight of a mage using magic. Newcomers to the army, however, were not so collaborative. All that could be done was to keep the Dalish as far from the Orlesians as possible, and to make sure that no Orlesian patrol incorporated Dalish scouts who were not also Grey Wardens. The Orlesians did respect Grey Wardens, and understood that Grey Wardens came in all races and both genders— and included mages as well.

"Perhaps we should send Corbus home," Bronwyn said, her voice low. "Perhaps we should send him downriver to that Captain Isabela, and get him out of here."

Loghain had been thinking exactly the same thing. "He won't thank us for it."

"No, but I'd rather he survived all this. We've had it easy so far, It's going to get so much worse. The farther we go, the more Taint everyone will be exposed to. It's inevitable that soldiers will contract Blight disease. We can try the Joining, but it won't work for everyone, and I certainly don't want to risk Corbus."

He nodded. "The Wardens will have to be in the vanguard as we march. Try to clear the way as much as possible. Try to burn off potential campsites. Have the mages test the water.

We'll do what we can, but you're right: people will fall sick. It's too bad Duncan wasn't so honest about dealing with the Blight sickness.

Bronwyn gave him a tight smile. The dream of the Archdemon still haunted her, and she found it too disturbing to describe even to Loghain. No doubt he would find the idea of the Archdemon disguising itself as Duncan amusing. Bronwyn, however, was not amused. She still toyed with the idea of trying to kill the Archdemon in the Fade. If demons could be killed there, why not the Archdemon itself? The problem was that demons could also manipulate the Fade, and change things to suit themselves— just as the Archdemon had.

Arl Wulffe's hearty voice was heard outside the tent.

"Are they in? I'd like a word."

"Yes, we're here. Come on in, Wulffe," Loghain called.

Wulffe looked remarkably cheerful. "We have a new recruit. Who'd have thought the girl to have this much spirit?"

Bronwyn stared at him blankly. "Who—?"

"Charade! Rothgar's Charade! The girl rode all the way here from Denerim, looking for him." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Tired of waiting, I daresay, and wanting her wedding night. You should have seen the look on his face. Happy about it, after the surprise, of course. Be honored if you'd come to the wedding, which is going to be—" he burst out laughing "—"

before supper, I suppose. The girl brought a promissory note for her dowry!"

"I suppose we can find a priest—"

Wulffe was still laughing. "Oh, that's taken care of, too! She found a young Mother in Verchiel willing to ride out with her. Mother... I forget... Mother Something-Orlesian-Sounding. At least she can sit a horse."

"Lady Charade came alone?" Loghain asked, rather impressed.

"With the couriers. Got an order from Anora for horses. Resourceful of her. At this point, I'd let Rothgar marry her, even if she weren't good for the five hundred sovereigns!"

The wedding was rather sweet. Everyone enjoyed it, and many waxed sentimental. Even the Orlesians, who barely knew Rothgar, and the Antivans, who did not know him at all, were moved to attend and support the couple. A chance for a celebration was always welcome, especially in such dark times. Prince Florestan was particularly gallant to the bride, who had the decency to smile at him without flinching at his ruined face.

Charade had brought a pretty yellow silk dress in a saddlebag. Rothgar found a ring among the quartermaster's supplies: a fine ruby sold by one of the new Wardens for a fraction of its worth in order to buy drink instead. The

quartermasters were cautious about loot sold by Wardens, and always had a mage on hand to clean the items properly. The ring even fit, and was much admired on Charade's strong and shapely hand.

The Revered Mother Donatienne looked rather dazed, or perhaps she was simply tired. The ride had been a hard one. The young noblewoman had offered a huge sum for a priest to accompany her, and though Donatienne grew frightened as they went west, she did not dare turn back alone. Strange as this rough camp of warriors was, it was better than the lonely road. She had been very frightened at first by the big Fereldan dogs, but was assured that they would never harm her.

And most people were very kind to her. A Templar, Sir Silas, approached her, and made her welcome. There were other Templars, too, led by a Knight-Commander, and a former lay sister, now a Warden.

"Yes, there are mages here," Leliana told her, in a sweet and soothing voice. "They are nothing to be afraid of. They are being very brave, and trying to do their duty by fighting the horrible darkspawn. The Dalish elves, too, are our allies. It is sad that they do not know the Maker, but all we can do is lead by example."

Donatienne was no fool, and understood the implicit message: *"Don't cause trouble."*

That seemed like good advice. Naturally, things were always

chaotic in war —or at least that was what she had always heard. Fortunately, the Chantry would be there to help return things to normal once this dreadful Blight was over. Somewhere, perhaps the Divine was still alive; or a new Divine would be elected. A new Cathedral would rise, and the mages would be returned to the safety of their Circles.

And the wedding was a proper opportunity to convey the Maker's message. Donatienne set about making it as pleasant and memorable an experience as she could. Leliana and Aeron had their instruments, and played softly, while the priest recited the Chant of Light, and the couple exchanged vows. They were declared husband and wife, and crowd cheered.

"You're not angry?" Charade whispered to Rothgar, under all the noise.

"Angry? No! I can't believe you're here!" He laughed. "And I can't believe all the presents we're getting!"

There was something to be said for having a wedding in front of an army that had a great deal of loot. Anders and Tara stood guard by a huge cauldron, which was rapidly filling up with coin and jewels and oddments, making sure nothing was Tainted.

Bronwyn actually wore a gown for the occasion, and made an effort to look her best. As the chief guests, she and Loghain looked on benignly, while their thoughts remained on the campaign ahead.

"We need to send her back as soon as possible," Bronwyn murmured, her smile fixed, feeling rather sorry for the brave young woman who seemed so very, very happy.

"Obviously." Loghain did not smile, but no one expected him to anyway. "We can't delay the advance for anyone's honeymoon. On the other hand, Rothgar can see her to that pirate woman's ship."

"Privateer."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"We'll order Corbus to go too, and tell him to look after her on the way home."

The following celebration was restrained. They were marching out in the morning, and no one — or almost no one — wanted a heavy head. They had the dispatches, but Charade could give them the gossip from Denerim in her own words. They learned that Bethany Hawke had established a free clinic in the Market District, under the protection of the Chantry. They also heard about the return of the Tevinters, and the death of Arl Kane. Bronwyn groaned, feeling like pounding her head on the table. Would Denerim ever be sorted out?

Loghain leaned over, and told her his private opinion. "Maybe we should dispense with the Arls of Denerim altogether. Charter the city and have the guilds elect a mayor. Keep everything under the general authority of the Crown."

It was a shockingly radical idea, and Bronwyn could not quite see how a city could be governed without a proper lord. However, it was quite impossible that lords like Urien, Vaughan, or Kane could be considered competent. Perhaps Denerim really would be better off without them.

"It would be hard on Faline," she whispered back, "to be done out of her rights."

"Why should a twelve-year-old girl who grew up on a farm have any right to rule Denerim?" Loghain growled back. Bronwyn was nonplussed by his attitude. The sturdy, independent freeholder appeared in him at the oddest times. Wulffe was speaking to her, and she turned to him with a smile, dismissing Loghain's revolutionary ideas from her mind.

There were toasts, of course, but soon the happy couple vanished into Rothgar's tent, and the rest had the decency not to hover nearby. The camp settled down for the evening, falling back into the usual routine.

While the celebration gave everyone a veneer of good spirits, Anders could tell that Morrigan, unlike everyone else in camp, was extremely unhappy about the appearance of the Antivan Wardens. While the male Antivans greatly outnumbered their female counterparts, there were now too many female Wardens in camp for Morrigan to control, or even to keep track of. She could not force every one of them to drink her awful tea.

Mind you, she had it available, and some of the newcomers

had thanked her very politely. That said, she had no real connection with them, and could not bully them into drinking it down, the way she did with Tara or Brosca, or any other female Warden who was... er... *active*. She did not know who among them *was* active, for that matter.

Tara noticed that Morrigan was disgruntled about something. Knowing that approaching Morrigan directly was always useless, she instead decided to have it out with Anders. She slid over beside him, leaning against a tree, while Morrigan doled out cups of bitter brew.

"What's up with her? She acts as if we're all a lot of careless sluts who'll let the side down by getting knocked up. Does she think if that happens we'll run away and knit booties? Play house?"

"She's worried..."

"Come on, Anders, she's fixated on it. It's getting creepy. Even Maeve is complaining, and Maeve puts up with *everything*. She drinks that horrible stuff, and she's not even *getting* any."

"I though maybe she and Niall..."

"Hasn't happened yet. You know him. He's incredibly repressed. He can't do it in a tent, because he afraid somebody will hear. Once we get back to civilization, though, I think she'll nail him." She burst out laughing. "Nail Niall."

"You wicked girl. Zevran's a bad influence."

"We're not talking about me. We're talking about Morrigan and her obsession with everybody else's fertility."

"Look..." He was torn between keeping Morrigan's secrets and confiding in an old friend who was notably intelligent and sensible. "Look... you can never tell her I told you. You have to swear you'll never tell anyone."

"Tell anyone what?"

"You can't even tell Zevran. Swear."

She sighed heavily. "All Right. Grey Warden Honor. Pinkie swear. I won't even tell Zevran." She didn't like the idea, but it must be something big, and Anders was dying to tell her. If she had to tell Zevran, she could swear *him* to secrecy, and Anders and Morrigan didn't need to know about it.

So he told her every detail, and then winced at the look on her face.

"You're an idiot," she snapped. "You're completely out of your mind!" For a moment he thought she would hit him, and so did she.

Instead she clenched her fists and thumped the tree. Hard.

"Ow..."

Anders hardly knew what else to say. "Morrigan's obsessed

with this. I think Flemeth must have done something to her..."

"*Obviously!*" Tara's burning sarcasm made him deeply regret confiding in her at all. She was not done with him.

"All right," she muttered, trying to think it through. "It's some form of geas. Probably a blood magic-based spell. It's not like making her a thrall, but just fixing her mind on the necessity of doing one thing."

"Morrigan told me that Flemeth despised blood magic."

"Ha! Of course she told her that! Blood magic is *powerful*. Why would she hand Morrigan a tool like that? She could have done anything to her, since she's had her all her life, and Morrigan *would not know!*" She blew out a breath. "It's useless to try to talk her out of it if it's a geas. I doubt there's anything we could do to exorcise it at this point. There's no chance of slipping her the tea without her knowing, I suppose. No, of course not. We'll need to sabotage the ritual somehow. What's involved?"

"Don't know."

"Well, you'd *better* know. Get it out of her. If it involves glyphs we can alter them. If it's a hex, we can nullify it."

"I do think a potion's involved. Something to make us... er... fruitful."

"That makes sense, but I don't think I can work with that."

Morrigan's sure to notice if she doesn't quicken. I'm hoping there's something else that we can modify. We need to think about keeping her far from the Archdemon."

"Bronwyn likes to have her with her..."

"If Bronwyn thought she was pregnant, she wouldn't let her anywhere near the battle. Maybe that can work, too."

"Maybe not. She might just shape-shift and fly in to join her."

"True. Let me think about it. And get every single detail out of her. See if she's got any kind of talisman relating to Flemeth. That might have some effect on her. Does she have a ring? An amulet? Something that she always wears?"

"There's a necklet of willow beads that she slips under her gown. She always wears that."

"Take another look at it. I wish we could bring Jowan in on this—"

"Not Jowan."

"I know you don't like him, but he knows a lot about this sort of thing."

"Right. Blood Magic."

"Don't you get high and mighty with me, Prospective Father of the Old God Urthemiel. How do you and Morrigan think that's going to work out, anyway, when the baby smites you for

singing the wrong lullaby or not changing his nappies fast enough?"

"It's not going to happen! That's why I came to you. If you don't want to help—"

"Don't be stupid. Of course I'm going to help. Morrigan's going to be busy for awhile. After she's done here, keep her talking. I'll search everything she's got, while you lull her into complacency, doing your... lulling-into-complacency-thing. Pick her brain for every detail of the ritual. Be honest. Tell her you're really worried about it and you need to understand it. How do you know Flemeth's ritual won't do other things to you? I see nothing wrong with analyzing the whole process. Now go. Do it."

Tara shoved him away, fuming at all people made fools for love. Anders was supposed to be *clever*. Morrigan seemed to think she knew everything. Both of them were behaving like complete idiots. They were the pathetic pawns of that vile old monster Flemeth, who was supposed to be dead, but probably wasn't quite dead *enough*.

Any sane person could see that Flemeth must have some sort of back-up plan, and would be scheming to swoop in, kill Morrigan and everyone with her, steal the child for whatever nefarious purpose she had, and flap away in triumph. Eventually, they would probably have to kill the rotten old bitch again.

What *was* Flemeth? More than a witch, more than a thorn in

Morrigan's side. The dragon form, Tara surmised, was the big giveaway. Maybe Flemeth wasn't a witch who could assume dragon form. It was just as likely that Flemeth was a dragon who could assume *human* form. Maybe she was an old God herself. Tara had given Flemeth quite a bit of thought over the past few months.

Records of Flemeth only went back to the end of the Towers Age, when she had suddenly appeared in Highever, married Bann Conobar Elstan, and then killed him. Not as old as an Old God, some would say, but who was to say where Flemeth had been before? Was she an Old God, trying to rescue another of her kind? How did she know about the ritual? Why would she think it would work?

Tara shivered. The ritual worried her. Was it possible that it had been tried before? Was Flemeth the product of such a ritual? Maybe from the Archdemon Toth? The dates were very close. Maybe Flemeth *knew* the ritual would work, because it already *had*.

All this was supposition, and Flemeth was unlikely to give anyone a straight answer. She was supposed to be dead, but Tara found it difficult to believe that she had gone down so easily— unless that was her plan, for some reason. Maybe she was lulling Morrigan into complacency, letting her imagine she was safe. It was all fairly frightening.

She slipped into the tent that Anders and Morrigan shared, feeling like a traitor, but also like someone who had found a friend drunk in a gutter once too often and was trying to save

her. She dug through Morrigan's possessions, found her trinket box, and sorted through her collection of jewelry with admiration. She remembered Zevran's tutelage and looked for hidden compartments. After a moment, there was a click, and a space under a false bottom was revealed.

It was a nasty looking object: a fetish more than an amulet, made of hair, hide, bone, and something that looked like fingernails, but might be horn. The remains were very old. It was intensely magical. Tara felt uncomfortable holding it, and dropped it into a pocket. She replaced everything in the box as it was, and then looked for Morrigan's grimoires. She could not read much of them, since quite a bit was in Old Alemarri, and Tara had no idea who could still read that, other than Flemeth and perhaps Morrigan. However, it used the Arcanum alphabet, and some of the roots seemed similar. She sat down to puzzle out what she could, knowing there was not enough time.

After awhile she gave up the struggle, and put the books back. Sneaking out the tent was easy enough. Simply taking that talisman away from Morrigan might do wonders for her mental health.

Zevran had been more amused than horrified at Tara's tale of the Old God baby. He stared at the unlovely object in Tara's hands. "I hope that is magic. Otherwise, I must say that it is a most unattractive souvenir of our visit to Orlais."

"It's magic," Tara admitted. "And it's still ugly. I don't know

what it is, exactly, but I think it's something very, very bad. I think it's affecting Morrigan, but it's not something that's safe to just throw away."

"Does our good friend Morrigan know you have this?" Zevran asked, brows raised. "She does not seem to me to be one to share."

"I stole it from her jewelry box."

Zevran burst out laughing. "*Brava, cara mia! Brava, brava, bravissima!* Your education has not been wasted." He gave her a serious look. "Be very careful."

Tara was a little shamefaced, but pleased at the praise. "She'd probably kill me if she knew. She keeps it hidden away in a secret compartment, so she may not miss it for a long time. Anders and I are going to figure out what it is. Maybe it has something to do with Morrigan's obsession with reincarnating Urthemiel using weird Sex Magic."

"Weird Sex Magic sounds like an otherwise worthy field of study. As to the object, let us rid ourselves of it, and the sooner the better." Zevran grimaced in disgust. "Are those *fingernails?*"

"Maybe."

When the darkspawn burst through the Blighted trees the next day, Sten saw no reason not to take advantage of it.

Karasten charged them bravely enough, but did not know enough about them to target the emissary. Sten had tried to make the others understand that the darkspawn had *saarebas* of their own: powerful magic users who posed a real threat. One should always take them out first.

Karasten, however, chose to engage the biggest hurlock, an axe-wielding creature that was formidable indeed, but not the chief danger. A bolt from the emissary struck Karasten, weakening him, making him stumble. The axe came down with a wet thud. A genlock followed up, and stabbed Karasten in the back. It was over in moments.

Sten was already leaping forward, and Asala came down on the emissary's shoulder, biting through the rotten robes. Another blow and the creature was dead. After that, it was a matter of mopping up. The ten survivors looked at each other, and then, questioningly, at Sten, who was currently the ranking officer.

He was pleased that he had not had to kill Karasten himself, but had let the man's own ignorance kill him. Some people could not be saved. However, perhaps these Qunari warriors could be. It was time to take command.

"I do not know you," said Sten. "And you do not know me. What you should know, however, is that I have been fighting darkspawn for some months, and I know their ways. We have a duty to perform. I have been ordered to collect information about the Blight, you have been ordered to retrieve the Tome of Koslun, if possible. To complete either or both of these

missions, we must survive and be in a position to return to Par Vollen. Obey my commands and we will do that."

"Karasten wished to seize one of the *bas* vessels," said a sullen Arshaad.

"An unnecessary hazard. I know the *bas* commanders well. All we have to do to reach Val Royeaux with a good chance of completing our mission is to attach ourselves to the force marching against the darkspawn. The Grey Wardens will accept temporary —" he emphasized the word. "—*temporary* allies of all sorts. What is more important: Showing our disapproval of those who do not know the Qun, or completing our mission and return to report?"

Some muttering followed, but it was clear that Sten had the right of it. The Tome was more important than their pride; more important than converting these *bas*. With the brusque nods that were Qunari usage in such cases, the rest of the Qunari expedition pledged themselves to obey Sten, their new commander. The next thing he did was go into further detail about how to fight darkspawn effectively.

Afterwards, he had the men fill their canteens from a spring running clean from a nearby outcropping, and then follow him, using the path taken by Brosca and the woman commander named Cauthrien, back to the Wardens, and to Bronwyn, whom he trusted like no other in this strange country.

Loghain was not particularly pleased to see the band of

Qunari, but Bronwyn greeted Sten in friendly fashion, and provided his people with adequate supplies to make themselves comfortable on the march. Scout wagged his tail. He had always liked Sten.

Bronwyn refrained from smiling too much at the fate of Tallis and Karasten. "So, are you going to try for the Tome of Koslun?"

"That was the mission given to the expedition. If you truly will not prevent me, I hope to complete it."

"The Tome is yours, if you can find it," Bronwyn assured him. "You have earned it, and more."

"The Tome will suffice. That, and perhaps passage in a ship to convey me and my men home."

"Done."

Sten established an area next to the Wardens, gathered his men, and told them— in discreet Qunari — how things were arranged.

"The woman Bronwyn is Warden-Commander. She is also Queen of her country. She can be regarded as commander-in-chief. Yes, she is a woman," he said, seeing the confused looks about him. "However odd it seems, certain of the Fereldans hold with an antique custom of training their women in the art of war. In her case, it is understandable, as she was born into the ruling caste, and learned to fight for much the

same reasons as a female Ben-Hassrath. Among the Wardens, it has been tradition from their beginning over a thousand years ago to admit women. Some of the women fight; other serve as artisans and Healers. The *bas* have only a limited understanding of the dangers posed by the *saarebas*, and you will see many walking about the camp unleashed. Do not interfere with them: my experience is that these are trained not to attack you as long as you do not attack them. They are useful in combat against the darkspawn, whom, you will have noticed, have powerful magic of their own."

They were listening, at least: at this point aware that not to listen was to court a useless death. Sten went on. "You will report to me. I will report to Bronwyn. The men about her are also leaders. Treat them — and her — with cautious respect. My advice is to stay away from them, but if Bronwyn gives you an order — or the black-haired warrior with her named Loghain — you are to obey them. However, stay out of their way, and that is not likely to happen."

It was a dark day, heavy with clouds, when First Warden Wildauer finally ordered the general advance. His troops spread out on a wide, meticulously organized front. A few skirmishers darted out ahead, checking for ambushes, but behind them stretched companies of archers and arrow-bearers. They hoped to draw the horde out. Their orders were to fire as many volleys as possible until the darkspawn were within magical range. Then, the archers were to

withdraw behind the Tevinter battlemages, and the games would begin.

The Tevinters themselves had been pushing for this. It would show the world of the White Chantry how very powerful they were, and what they could inflict on their foes if the Templars kept pushing too hard.

There was always trouble on the border. Desperate apostates would make a run north, and now and then were caught just short of their goal. Even more provocatively, there had been instances in which the mage was actually within Tevinter lands, but the Templars had ignored the fact and followed in hot pursuit, killing or capturing the fugitives. This could not stand. The Archons at home had told the Tevinter Warden-Commander to show the heretics what mages could do. Not everything they could do: that would be giving too much away. But yes, they were to show them that there was a reason, if they had forgotten, why the Imperium had never fallen to the Exalted Marches.

And they never had fallen: not even in Andraste's day. They had taken the Prophet's lessons, and revered her as she deserved, but she had not conquered them, so much as *persuaded* them. The dreary succession of hags calling themselves Divines had never persuaded Tevinter of anything, except that they had been right all along. Besides, it was a deeply-held tenet of faith in Tevinter that Andraste had herself been a powerful mage. Anyone who believed differently was not only a heretic, but a fool.

So they would light up the sky and shake the earth. They would rain down fire and poison on the darkspawn; they would fry them with thunderbolts and smash them with arcane energy. If the Archdemon was tempted out of hiding, they would be ready. A school of thought held that freezing the Archdemon in flight would cause it to crash. Five hundred mages should have no trouble destroying even an Archdemon, once it was on the ground.

Further back were the swordsmen and axemen, Nevarrans and Andermen alike, with their own mages. These mages were held in reserve, and would act primarily as Healers. The nevarrans especially were not particularly happy about their current position, though most were willing to let the Tevinters lead the vanguard and put themselves at risk.

"Smug bastards," Athis growled to Hector Pentaghast. "I think their robes are stupid, too."

Pentaghast chuckled. He agreed. The black feathered capes smacked of people who were trying too hard to be impressive. On the other hand, Tevinter mages really *were* impressive.

A strong garrison remained in Val Chevin, defending the walls, patrolling the perimeter, and guarding the all-important harbor. The rest were marching out into the Blighted wilderness: a dead zone dotted with the corpses of men and animals.

Pentaghast understood the reason for the broad front. The mages were spread out into two ranks, one just behind the

other. There was considerable space between each mage, giving them plenty of space to wield their staves. What was comfortable for mages was in Pentaghast's opinion a little too thin for archers, and would reduce the power of their volleys. He was not in charge, however, and it was not his decision.

From the noise ahead, a pack of bandy-legged genlocks had been started up out of cover by the scouts, who danced away at the sight of them, leaving them for the archers. It was frustrating, to be able to see so little. Some of the scouts were acting as runners, carrying news back and forth from the First Warden and to all the other commanders. It felt a bit precarious to Pentaghast, but he could think of no better plan himself.

The mages just ahead of him were moving aside, skirting a shattered wagon and a pair of rotting oxen. Pentaghast caught a glimpse through the mages to the archers in front of them, and a bit of the empty rolling fields beyond. There was a fine manor on the map that they should reach by noon, even at this slow pace, unless something happened to distract them. His own position was nowhere near the coast road, where there were a number of villages. Scouting had indicated that they were all gone, and burned to ashes for the most part.

After more trudging, he was relieved to find himself at the top of a shallow hill, which gave him a decent view. According to his map, those crumbling ruins were all that was left of the manor of Sancerre. The family and their servants had not been seen in Val Chevin, so Pentaghast had no idea what had

happened to them.

There! To the southwest, there was dust stirred up by hundreds of feet. Gradually, the dust resolved into a disorganized mob of darkspawn. Runners sped fast, and the left flank, following order, wheeled, backs to the sea, to provide crossfire to the rest of the Wardens. Already, down the line, there were little bursts of colored light: distant fireballs casts by mages. It was too far away to see the archers' arrows.

The slow maneuver continued, and more of the line formation turned to envelop the charging darkspawn. The fireballs were bigger and closer, as the darkspawn ran at them, not exactly head-on, but at a slight angle.

There were ogres among them. That was never a good thing. Ogres could smash through men and beasts and through a carefully-planned defense into chaos. There was no cover left, either, to use for defense. Much of the woods had been burned, and farms and manors leveled.

One of the distant ogres halted, captured in mid-stride by a spell. The sullen light reflected oddly on him. Probably a freezing spell. Other spells were been thrown at the creature, and in short order, it toppled to the ground. One down, but there were others.

"I'm sick of this," muttered Borthus. A good man, but impatient. Pentaghost did not turn to stare him down, but flicked a glance at Athis, and she did. The grumbling was

briefly silenced. Out of the dust, more figures appeared. The first charge had only been a taste of things to come. More darkspawn were on their way.

"We'll have our turn, soon enough," said Pentaghast. "But maybe not today."

The ground shook under the weight of the creatures. All along the line, archer captains shouted orders, and volleys of arrows took to the skies, creating yet more dark clouds. Squeals and squawks answered, but the darkspawn were still moving. More shouts, and the archers fell behind the mages, continuing to shoot over their heads. Then the full fury of the Tevinters was unleashed. A cry rose up from the Tevinter senior Mages. It was in old Arcanum, and thus incomprehensible to Pentaghast, but he could not complain of the results.

With uniform precision, the Tevinters all cast the same spell. The landscape was rocked by an earthquake, bizarrely localized, but insanely powerful. Even on the edges, as he was, it was disorienting. The earth before him, down the hill, trembled and split. Ogres stumbled and fell, crushing their fellow darkspawn beneath them. Weapons were dropped, creatures scrambled and crawled, wounding each other in their confusion. Another blast of magic from the Tevinters, and the sprawling darkspawn were caught in a storm of ice and lightning, slipping and crackling in an isolated band of springtime snow. Archers backed away from the onslaught.

it was hard to see what was happening in the midst of the

storm, but it raged with great violence for some time. More darkspawn appeared on the horizon. Some were stupidly sucked into the the trap. Others tried to avoid it, and were targeted by the archers and mages on either flank. The troops behind them, like Pentaghast and the other Nevarrans, decided to have a snack while they enjoyed the show.

When the storm began to die down, new orders were shouted. The second rank of mages stepped forward, and then a nightmare of fire exploded over the helpless darkspawn.

Well, almost helpless. A big hurlock burst out of the firestorm, flames streaming from him, and charged the Tevinters. He bellowed, and for a moment Pentaghast thought he was speaking in actual words. The mages burst out laughing, and struck him with a paralyzing hex.

"Try to capture that one!" commanded one of the Tevinter Senior Wardens. "I want to find out what makes him that tough!"

After the flames died down, only a few bodies twitched when the spells had struck. The archers took aim and finished them off. Not even ogres had withstood the power of earth and lightning, ice and fire. The bodies were piled up in unrecognizable heaps. The Wardens edged past them, and when the army was on the other side, the mages all hit the piles of dead with more fire, burning the flesh and bone away with the Taint.

They marched on, hoping to cover more ground that day. A trickle of darkspawn contested their way, but feebly. No doubt the Archdemon had plenty more and to spare, but for now, they were fairly safe. They made camp early, using the rolling landscape as best they could. They lit very few fires.

But some Wardens made their own entertainment. One of the campfires was at the Tevinter camp, where the senior Wardens amused themselves by restraining and vivisecting the captured hurlock. He was an alpha of some sort, but more powerful than any they had ever seen. Some were convinced that he showed signs of rudimentary intelligence.

"I wonder..." one said, musing over the creature. "Is this really a darkspawn?"

"It's certainly Tainted," replied another. "I can feel it if you can't."

"No, I know it's Tainted, but so are we, after all..." He leaned over, peering into the filmy eyes. The hideous face was constricted in what appeared to be an expression of agony. That was interesting. Darkspawn responded to the stimulus of physical damage, but they did not appear to experience pain in the way that humans did.

"Look at this," he said. He pressed a red-hot iron to the creature's scabby jaw, and it groaned. "See! I think it actually feels pain. I'm beginning to wonder if this is not a very powerful ghoul, rather than a darkspawn. A high functioning ghoul."

The mages laughed uproariously, since it was a old joke of the blackest humor for Tevinter Wardens to refer themselves that way: as "high-functioning ghouls."

Their Commander, who had been watching for some time without either commenting or cracking a smile, finally spoke up.

"You could be right. That could be what's left of a Warden."

That spoiled the fun. The creature was dosed with Quiet Death, and a complete postmortem conducted. The results were disturbing.

"Well, he wasn't one of ours," declared the Senior Warden. "We haven't sent our people off for the Calling in ages."

"Not a mage, either," pointed out a young woman, a former apostate from Starkhaven, who had eagerly Joined the Tevinter Wardens: for the power, the prestige... For the coin.

"Well, my dear," said the Senior Warden, "not *all* of us are mages."

"Only the best," snickered a joker.

The Senior Warden smiled, and gestured at the remains. "A very powerful warrior in his day. Some latent magical abilities, like all the best warriors. About fifty when he went for his Calling, which is normal. Impossible to recognize him now, of course. A pity we can't share the improved potion with the

rest of the Order, but the White Chantry would squawk louder than ever about Blood Magic. Poor wretch. You," he called to a thrall. "Toss him on the fire with the rest."

Later the next day, across the low-lying plains, the First Warden's forces glimpsed the walls of Val Royeaux in the distance, gaping and shattered as broken teeth.

Another swarm of darkspawn descended: a larger one this time. The Tevinter tactics worked well, but a band of the monsters surprised them and flanked them on the right, and then charged perpendicular to the ranks.

The Nevarrans, glad to see some action at last, laid into them with disciplined blood lust. Even the ogre, sent to wreak havoc, could not long survive. Thick ichor splattered them all. After it lay dead, something sparkling rolled out from under its breastplate. A large amethyst of the finest water glittered in Athis' bloody gauntlet.

"Finder's Keepers!" she chirped, quite chuffed about the treasure. She shoved it into a pouch on her belt, and returned to the fight.

It went on for quite a long time. The darkspawn were reinforced, again and again. The Gate of the Moon, the north gate of Val Royeaux, stood open, and from time to time, swarms of darkspawn issued from it, like blood from a wound.

Arrows darkened the skies, warriors hacked at darkspawn

flesh, and mages laid down fire, endless fire. Flames licked at the Blighted grass, and only ashes marked their passing.

Bronwyn and Loghain, with the allied army, reached Charente on that same day. As expected, darkspawn squatted on the old stone bridge. It was decorated with heads: the heads of men, women, and little children; of humans and elves. The town of Val Charente, as far as they could tell, was not much more than a smoking ruin, with a few stone chimneys and crumbling walls marking the house sites. A few buildings remained: the little Chantry, the harbormaster's office, part of what was once a tavern.

The march up the Greenway had been contested frequently by bands of darkspawn. As they went farther, those bands became larger and more formidable. There was a barricade on the far side of the river.

The allies had an advantage, however. Standing just off shore was the *Siren's Call*. Isabela had sent Charade and Corbus back to Jader on her prize ship, *Red Queen*, under the command of her second mate, who was just enough enamored to be trusted. The priest who had performed Charade's marriage was traveling with them too, glad for an excuse to travel far from the Blight. Isabela had decided that the *Siren's Call*, with its shallower draft, could get her closer to the action, and better able to render help when needed. She had sent Bronwyn a parchment explaining common naval code between ships, and could send signals using either flags by day or lanterns by night. Loghain's opinion of the woman

rose accordingly.

Isabela, watching the town with her spyglass, could calculate the numbers of the darkspawn far more easily than any of the landbound scouts could from their vantage point. There were a few hundred darkspawn in Val Charente, but no more; and their fortifications were crude. In fact, Loghain was quite pleased with the situation. His greatest fear had been that the darkspawn would destroy the bridge and slow them down. They had not done that, perhaps because the Archdemon had no concept of defense. Rather, the Archdemon wanted to maintain all possible routes in readiness, while it decided which way the horde would next march. If the allies could get across that narrow bridge, they could take the town. Loghain made his plans quickly.

Morrigan and Anders flew high and came down behind the darkspawn, perched in the bare branches of a dead tree. Tara, Niall, Jowan, and Velanna moved out of sight of the darkspawn, and prepared for battle. None of the newer recruits had yet managed shape-shifting, but they watched carefully, trying to absorb the lesson before them. The Antivan Wardens, who had not seen this particular trick before, were thrilled, and the mages among them studied every movement, every spell. This was the tactical edge they had lost with the extinction of the griffons. Now the edge was back, but in a new guise. Bronwyn would lead the charge, the happy few along with her. The rest would charge the bridge on foot, along with the dogs, once the barricades were smashed.

Meanwhile, archers spread out on the riverbank, just out of

darkspawn bow shot. They moved carefully through the brush, and ducked out of sight. The ballistae were camouflaged with brush, and slowly rolled into position. The rest waited impatiently for their turn.

A few arrows came their way, but were dodged or knocked aside. Florestan shook Riordan's hand and wished the Warden luck, as Riordan went to take his place among his comrades. The young prince nodded at the sight of Bronwyn astride the wyvern.

"There is the hero of our time. Who will believe the stories we tell of this?"

"No one who was not here, I'm afraid. But it was always thus. Be safe, my prince."

"And you, my friend."

While the darkspawn at the other end of the bridge clucked and scolded. Bronwyn and Tara moved into position, protected by a wall of shields. When everything was ready, Loghain drew his sword and gave her a nod. Bronwyn unslung her horn, and lifted it to her lips.

At the horn's call, the hidden archers stood up and poured arrows on every visible darkspawn, killing a number and forcing the rest to take cover. Ballistae launched explosive bolts at the handful of ogres. At the same moment, the shields were pulled aside, and Tara in wyvern form, with Bronwyn, Zevran, and Leliana on her back, charged across the bridge,

battering logs and caltrops out of her way. Behind her, the other wyverns charged. The bridge shook, but it was built for the ages, and held under the weight. Behind the wyverns, Riordan led the Warden on foot, and they ran like madmen. Their cheers echoed across the water, and Isabela smiled, watching the spectacle.

While the darkspawn rushed to meet the attackers, they left themselves open to the assault by two wyverns behind them. Anders and Morrigan rushed at the creatures, tails smashing darkspawn; sleek, heavy bodies crushing them. The one thing they must not do is let themselves be surrounded and trapped.

So they kept moving: pouncing, twisting, and darting from darkspawn to darkspawn. The creatures were bewildered by the wyverns, and though their instinct was to fight and kill anything not darkspawn, they hesitated enough to make them easy prey.

The mass of darkspawn at the end of the bridge was still very dangerous. Many were knocked aside by the wyvern's charge, but they soon rallied against the Wardens on foot. It was a welter of slaughter. Behind the Wardens came a unit of the Legion of the Dead, and then Loghain brought up a company of Maric's Shield in support, along with the Circle mages as Healers. The wyverns had prevented a dangerous bottleneck at the end of the bridge, but it was still heavy going. The archers on the opposite river bank were forced to slow their rate of fire, anxious not to inflict casualties on their own people.

Bronwyn yelled to Tara to keep breaking up any rallying darkspawn. They needed to open up the battle, to prevent the darkspawn from offering any united defense. Velanna leaped past them at an ogre, her passengers in full war cry. They tumbled from their saddles as Velanna reared back, spitting venom directly into the ogre's face. A second later, her front talons slashed out, disemboweling the monster. Not much hurt by their abrupt dismount, Nuala, Steren, and Alistair were quickly on their feet, and bringing down a swarm of genlocks.

Niall veered left, and began a perimeter run around the darkspawn, while Adaia and Siofranni bombarded the creatures with grenades. Jowan turned right, thundering along the town dockyards. Half-way in, Brosca, Oghren, and Sigrun tumbled from his back, and waded into the fight, attacking the darkspawn from the flank.

The force of the attack pushed the darkspawn back, back, past the few standing houses. Here and there, darkspawn made a stand, hiding in the shadows or lurking behind rubble, and then leaped out to kill. Thus died five new Wardens, not yet able to sense the creatures. Others died, too, for darkspawn never surrendered. Even after anyone else would have considered themselves victors, they still had to comb through every building and brave every cellar to kill the last of them. Carver's dog Magister smelled some huddled under the piers, and flushed them out. Securing the area took quite a long time. The worst horror was the Chantry, where most of the women and children had sought refuge. Florestan went in there with the Orlesian Wardens. After a time, he stumbled

out and sat wordlessly on the steps, wiping the vomit from his mouth.

They had to recognize that Val Charente was filthy with Taint. The darkspawn had not just moved through here: they had taken up residence. It was impossible for the army to stay here, and so a camp was established a good distance beyond in a field by the sea just above high tide. Mages burned it off, leaving a blackened but fairly safe area for the tents. The army was moved quickly through the town, and told not to touch, not to loot. A hard order to enforce when the soldiers could see the Wardens picking through the rubble and searching the darkspawn bodies.

"Some of them will sneak back through the sentries," said Loghain.

"You can't save everyone," Bronwyn shrugged. "If they sicken, then I'll have new recruits."

She was sorry to lose any Wardens, but had hardly known the casualties. She would note them down in her recruitment rolls, recording their brief service. Nearby, Visconti was celebrating with his Antivan Wardens. They had enjoyed their first pitched battle against the darkspawn. They treated the shape-shifters as heroes, and at the moment were crowding around Niall and Jowan; offering them drinks, slapping them on the back, giving Lily treats and praise.

Visconti grinned at Bronwyn. "Next time you let us go in first, eh?"

"I want to ride a wyvern," shouted an Antivan.

"I want to *be* a wyvern!" countered one of their mages.

Loghain raised a brow at her, clearly thinking that a splendid idea.

Bronwyn smiled wryly. "Absolutely."

Smoke still rose in lazy white threads: from the town, and the plains beyond. It poured blackly from the pyres for the dead. A thick haze muddied the horizon to the northeast, where Val Royeaux lay waiting.

Thanks to my reviewers: Spirally, Melysande, Tirion I, Guest, imperial queen, Aeonir, AD Lewis, Nemrut, le-maru, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, KnightOfHolyLight, Blinded in a bolthole, darksky01, Ninjababe, Mike3207, Floridamagpie, Robbie the Phoenix, BandGeekNinja, Phygmalion, JackOfBladesX, reality deviant, Lyssa Terald, Jenna53, mille libri, New Zealand 5, jnybot, amanda weber, Zereogame, dragonmactir, Costin, Guile, Suna Chunin, Wehaswallhacks.

Such a lot of fascinating insights and suggestions! Really, you've given me a lot to think about, and I'll see what I can shoehorn into the story.

Yes, the Dark Ritual: such a controversial subject. I really cannot explain Morrigan's fixation on it, and now believe she must be under something like a post-hypnotic suggestion or

a magical equivalent. The idea that she could control an Old God baby is simply absurd. I don't care what Witch Hunt says. At some point the Old God would assert itself and that would be the end of her. My own view is that Flemeth is simply once again planning on using her as a vessel—this time not for Flemeth herself, but for the Old God. Once she gives birth, she's superfluous.

However, I must thank Tirion I for the fascinating idea about Flemeth and why she appears shortly after the slaying of the Old God Toth. It's really a neat idea, and Tirion explained it to me in some detail. It could explain why Flemeth is so certain that the Dark Ritual will work. I have no idea if it's the developers' idea, but it's quite exciting. I urged Tirion to post the essay. However, Tirion tells me that the theory belongs to Archon Gaius Lucius Vindicus Caesar III. Then, hail Caesar!

As I told some of you, I feel that Sten has a precedent for fomenting a coup. In canon, he attempts to take over the party during the Ashes quest, when he feels they are not sticking to the mission (in some ways I think he's right). Therefore, I think there must be a pragmatic attitude about dealing with incompetence among the Qunari. As it happened, he did not have to issue a challenge or pick a fight.

To my knowledge, the term "high-functioning ghoul" was coined by Sarah1281.

I see no reason why Tevinter Wardens, with a large number

of mages and sophisticated facilities (plus an unending number of slave test-subjects) could not independently come up with an improved Joining potion similar to that devised by Avernus. And they would never, never tell anyone else about it.

121. South of the Sun and North of the Moon

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 121: South of the Sun and North of the Moon

The very air tasted of Taint.

Reluctantly, Bronwyn opened her eyes, not knowing if sleeping or waking was worse. Her dreams had been ghastly: a pit of despair filled with grotesque, swollen bodies; with agonized cries as forms changed into things that should never have existed. It was deliberate, no doubt. The Archdemon wanted to demoralize them.

Yes, she was rather demoralized. She was no less determined to end that monster, and give a merciful death to the darkspawns' victims. Loghain eyed her with some concern, but did not subject her to an interrogation. Bronwyn had no desire to put what she had seen into words. She had not slept well last night, and she had not slept well the night before. Making love was simply not possible in her current state.

Instead she washed. She brushed, braided, and pinned up her hair securely. She put on clean undergarments and her underpadding, and she and Loghain buckled each other into

their armor, with as few words said as possible. Bronwyn supposed she should eat something. Grey Wardens were always hungry, but she knew everything would taste like Taint. She would force herself to eat anyway. It might be her last meal if things went badly. Or even if things went very well.

She opened the case where her Airbow lay stored. A small number of the weapons had been distributed. A squad of Astrid's dwarves had them now—regular army, not Legion of the Dead. Adaia had done fairly well with this weapon. Bronwyn considered lending her this weapon for the duration. She could not give it away, since it was a gift from the Paragon herself, but Bronwyn was already heavily armed. Yes. She would slip the Airbow over to Adaia later, and tell Astrid that the elf was giving it a field testing for her.

The dogs nosed about. Scout's warm brown eyes were on her, wanting to know that she was all right. She took a moment to sit down and rub his ears and make much of him. When all this was over, he deserved green fields and sunshine and plenty of rabbits to chase.

Amber had found someone's sock and had chewed it to bits. Loghain would ordinarily have reproved her, but the sock was clearly not his, and not Bronwyn's, and so was fair game if the owner hadn't better sense than to protect his belongings. Amber brought it to Loghain with a hopeful air, and he indulged her by tugging on it. Amber clearly thought it all great fun, pretending to growl ferociously.

"They've laid out breakfast, Your Majesties," the tent guard

told them, speaking through the canvas.

"Very well." Loghain tilted his head to the tent flap. "Shall we?"

Bronwyn managed a smile. "I suppose we must."

Porridge was the last thing she wanted, but she needed to choke it down. It would be a long, hard slog today, and very likely Val Royeaux at the end of it.

Astrid was up and doing very early, unlike Bronwyn. She washed, dressed, armored, while thinking ahead, beyond today's battle.

I just want this over and done.

Once the Blight was over, she had plans for her life. She had her thaigs to improve, her army to rally, and a crown to win. The longer this Blight lasted, the harder it was on the dwarven people. There was much she could do for them, and she was ready to settle down to doing it. With patience and tact, she might be able to create regular communication between Orzammar and faraway Kal'Sharok, embittered over many ages by what it regarded as Orzammar's desertion.

She was eager to face the Horde. She thought they were in a very good tactical position, now that she knew about the other Warden army, pressing Val Royeaux from the north. Their own force was not alone. They had excellent, advanced

weapons, they had mages who could take the form of monsters, they had hundreds of Wardens, they had support troops, and their supplies were holding out. They would face the Archdemon, and they would kill it. And then they could go home. Some Warden would perish in killing the Archdemon, but Astrid knew that it was not likely to be the Paragon of Orzammar. She would kill any other darkspawn — as many as she could — but not that one. She could not be spared.

Strapping on the hand she used for fighting, Astrid went through a mental list of potential allies and adversaries. She had won Piotin Aeducan to her. There was nothing like fighting side by side for strengthening a bond. Bhelen had never risked himself, and so had lost that advantage. Once the Blight was over, the battle for Orzammar would begin... on the floor of the Assembly.

"Once the Archdemon is dead, the Blight is over. It can't happen too soon for me!"

Brosca sat up and grinned at Torvald. This was hard on him, poor kid. He was smith caste, and not a warrior at all.

"You stick with the wagons today," she said, giving him a playful slap. He groaned and looked ready to hide under the blanket.

"Come on. Get up!" she insisted. "Get something to eat. I'm going to be busy today. You stick back there with the luggage. We'll need you if one of the gadgets breaks down,

but there's no use risking yourself until then."

"But the Blight will be over once the Archdemon's dead, won't it?"

He sounded like a plaintive little boy. Brosca ruffled his bright hair. It was like gold... and gold was a very good thing.

"We—ll... not *all* over," she told him, sorry to give him bad news. "There'll still be darkspawn on the surface that we'll need to wipe out. It's called the Thaw. It won't be nearly as bad, though. Just some pockets here and there. We'll hunt 'em down, one by one. It won't be like this."

"Good. I hate this. Everything stinks."

"Yeah, yeah, it does. Smells worse than Dust Town. You be careful, *sal roka*, you hear? Keep your hands washed and your gloves on, and don't handle anything that might be Tainted. Which is everything, at this point. Come on, get some clothes on. I'm starving!"

Adaia bounced up from her blanket, eliciting complaints from Siofranni.

"Come on! Rise and shine!"

Siofranni tossed a pillow at her. "*You rise! You shine!*"

Adaia laughed, and dug through her pack for her last clean shirt. She might as well wear it today. She tossed on her light

leathers, fastening them with extra care. She had cleaned everything last night, so it was all looking pretty good. Glancing in her little handmirror, she thought *she* looked pretty good, considering.

Most of her loot was in her chest in the baggage train, but she had a special box that she kept with her. While Siofranni snored daintily, catching the last fragments of sleep before the dawn, Adaia entertained herself picking through her favorite treasures.

"I'm rich!" she whispered. "Rich as a noble!"

She was, too. She was richer than the whole Alienage. Richer by far. She had a sapphire that would buy everything in Alarith's little store ten times over. She had gold. She had fine armor and weapons and beautiful silk clothes for the day when they would celebrate the end of the Blight.

Never would she be married off to a stranger. She was a Grey Warden, and needed no arranged marriage to validate her. Siofranni had been a surprise to her, but maybe because she had simply never met another elf she genuinely found attractive, male or female. She and Siofranni were a couple. They were a team. Wherever they went, they'd go together.

And once the Blight was over, the real war could begin: her own personal war. Merrill and Lanaya could lead the people to the Dalish homeland, and some could start going through, one by one, to the secret land of the elvhen. That was fine for them, but Adaia had work to do.

She and Siofranni would round up some of their friends: Tara and Zevran, of course, and Cathair and Darach, Nuala and Steren, and maybe Velanna too, if she could behave herself. They might see if Fenris would go with them. He was haughty and standoffish, but she thought he'd like the adventure she planned. They were rich enough to hire a ship. Maker, they were rich enough to *buy* a ship. They would sail for Tevinter, and give the slavers a taste of what it was like to be hunted and harried. They would steal people from them... not be made slaves, but to be made free.

She had talked to Fenris about what it was like to travel by ship. He did not seem to like it much, and told her that it was complicated. Sailors had lots of special knowledge about how to make ships work and how to get places. Adaia knew that was true, from the times she had found work at the Denerim docks. Sailors had a language of their own. Maybe she should learn some of that. If you didn't know things, shems could cheat you. There was that woman pirate Brosca had met: Captain Isabela. Maybe she'd teach them about sailing, for a price. Adaia grinned, imagining swaggering on the deck of her very own ship. Captain Adaia, Terror of the Tevinters!

Duke Prosper awoke, irritated, to the sound of Prince Florestan's voice outside his tent, speaking earnestly to his servant, that brute Ursus.

"Take care of yourself, too! I don't want you sacrificing yourself for me! You've done enough."

"I know my duty, my prince."

"Well... don't get yourself killed. I'd miss you."

There was a warm chuckle from both of them, and Prosper rolled his eyes at such sappy sentiment. Really, he must have a word with some of his people about Florestan. If they ran into heavy opposition, it was very likely that the young prince would meet with a misadventure. He was an untidy loose end, and Prosper intended that nothing should impede his grasp on power.

Once the Blight was over, he would have to move quickly. Florestan was only the first obstacle. They must deal with the Fereldans, and get them out of the country with the greatest possible dispatch. It was too much to hope that Loghain Mac Tir would die in battle. It would take more than darkspawn to put an end to that jumped-up peasant. It was a scandal that the Queen had been forced to sully herself with such a creature.

He meant no harm to Bronwyn, indeed. It was clear that she was favored by the Blessed Prophet. Moving against her personally would be... impious. If it were only she who was here with her army, Prosper would have assisted her departure with every comfort and assurance of good will. The presence of Loghain, however, rankled. He was not the only one who felt that way. Old grudges had surfaced, and had been poured into his ear. He had replied that they needed the man — for now — but once the Archdemon was slain, he would not stand in the way of rightful revenge. A pity that

Boniface Clery was now a Warden, and apparently totally devoted to Bronwyn. Prosper would have to find another tool.

First things first. Today he would ride Leopold into battle. Safer for him, a good way to deal maximum damage to the darkspawn, and the best way to solidify his image as the leader that Orlais must have in the future.

And Leopold would enjoy it.

Anders woke up, both incredibly relaxed and incredibly guilty. He had meant to question Morrigan about the ritual. Really. He had meant to *question* her, and point out the problems, the dangers. He hadn't meant to *perform* the ritual.

But there she was, stretching languorously, pleased with herself... and him. She gave him one of her smiles, and he smiled back, knowing he must look a complete fool. Tara was going to kill him.

He tried to be casual, but his voice came out as a squeak. "So, do you think..." he coughed, and went on in his normal register. "Do you think it worked?"

"I know it did."

"You mean... you're sure..."

"Absolutely. Can you not tell?"

He usually could, but after only a few hours? He sat up,

summoned his scattered mana, and laid glowing hands on Morrigan's taut, silken belly. Maybe that little sparkle... no... he couldn't be sure.

"Maybe. Early days."

"Of course." She stretched, slipping out from the blanket, and reaching for her smallclothes. Then she paused, and kissed him lightly. "My thanks. You performed well."

He grinned. "We've had plenty of practice."

"Indeed we have."

"It's just so... precarious." He groped for his own garments. "Look what happened to Bronwyn. Maybe you could... I don't know... be more careful?"

Her throaty laugh made it clear that the hope was futile. "After our battle yesterday? *Now* you want me to be careful? It seemed to me that you thoroughly enjoyed smashing darkspawn as much as I."

"I just don't want them to smash *you*."

She paused, quite touched. She liked Anders. She had liked him from the first. He was good to look upon. He was magically powerful. He had been considerate and amenable to her wishes. Nor was he a fool, other than when she wished him to be. That he cared so much for her was quite... well... it was foolish and sentimental, but gratifying, all the same. He

would no doubt be quite devoted to the child.

"Nothing will stand in our way," she soothed him. "The Archdemon will be slain and the darkspawn defeated. Bronwyn and all our friends will survive to celebrate their feats for years to come in the halls of Soldier's Peak. Our child will be educated as a mage child should be: with rigorous standards and fearless honesty; not like some hedge mage, trembling with fear."

Briefly, she sensed a curious change in her surroundings; as if she were missing something. The sensation was fleeting. Anders kissed her distractingly, and they returned to their pleasant practice.

"Ow."

"Too much wine, *cara mia*."

"Too much wine and too much worrying about Morrigan and too much bloody Archdemon," Tara grouched, rubbing her head. "I had awful dreams."

"I wish I could share your burden."

Tara laughed, and then winced. "I wish you could, too. We could join up and fight the Archdemon in the Fade." She blinked. "I wonder if that's possible..."

"It sounds like you do plenty of fighting already. Come, there

is hot water."

"Amazing. I'll give the servitors a big tip."

Tara's thoughts strayed to the perilous amulet hidden away in her little locked box. Could dragon fire destroy it? Maybe not. She had promised not to tell Jowan about Morrigan's secret, but maybe she could phrase it as a hypothetical question and pick his brain. Jowan was always ready to help.

Maybe not today. She dressed, forcing a smile for Zevran. Today was going to be rough.

Clever as he was, he saw past the pretense. He took her face gently in his hands.

"We shall not die today, my Warden. Not today and not tomorrow. Today is a good day to *live*."

Sten sharpened Asala in the early grey light. One by one, his soldiers awakened, most of them satisfactorily alert and efficient. When all were awake and armored, they stood together, and Sten spoke words of the Qun.

" Existence is a choice.

There is no chaos in the world, only complexity.

Knowledge of the complex is wisdom.

From wisdom of the world comes wisdom of the self.

Mastery of the self is mastery of the world. Loss of the self is the source of suffering.

Suffering is a choice, and we can refuse it."

Then he said, "Let us go forth to battle, but first we shall eat, and strengthen ourselves. I have been informed by Bronwyn that cookies will be provided for us."

A scout asked, "What are 'cookies?'"

Sten did not smile outwardly, but inside he glowed with the pleasure of bringing a new, good thing to his people.

"You shall soon see, Ashaad. You shall see, and learn."

The dogs were awake before Carver and Jowan. Others shared the big tent: Oghren, Ser Silas, Niall, Quinn, and Fenris. Fenris was up even before the dogs, awakened by the restless, demon-haunted sleep of the Wardens. Another reason never to join the order.

Carver looked like a boy, curled up under his blanket. Quinn was a boy, for all his height and muscle. Life could be merciless. Would they survive today? For today they might well find themselves before the walls of Val Royeaux, besieging monsters from the days of the ancient magisters.

Another evil by-product of magic. Magic was evil, however useful this army found it. Fenris liked Jowan personally — and liked his dog even better — but it was clear that Jowan would be a menace without the discipline and control imposed on him by the Grey Wardens. Niall, too, appeared a decent

fellow, but who knew what he would have become had he been born in Tevinter? Their conscription into the Wardens was making the best of a bad situation. Personally — though he knew better than to say this aloud — Fenris thought the Qunari handled mages more sensibly than any other culture in Thedas.

But for better or worse, they were all in this together. Carver had taken him aside, and reminded him that he, Fenris, must not be the one to strike the final blow against the Archdemon. Some unspecified horror would fall upon them if any but a Warden slew the creature. That said, anything that could be done to disable, to weaken, to damage the creature would be more than welcome.

What would the world be like, after the Blight? Fenris suspected it would be different in ways that no one had foreseen. As long as there was a small corner for him, perhaps he should not complain.

Riordan grew weary of nightmares, and lay looking up into darkness until light began seeping through the canvas of the tent. Early, still, but not too early to face the day. He smiled, wondering if it would be his last. If it were, he would also make it his best.

Savaged and decimated as they were, the morale of his Wardens was fairly high. The presence of the allies had done much to raise their hopes. They knew that Fiona and her party were alive in Val Foret.

Clovis and Fabrice were particularly happy to back under Riordan's command and among their friends once more. Minjonet had enjoyed her adventure, and had nothing but good things to say about Queen Bronwyn and her Fereldans. They were here, after all, without even having to be asked.

Bronwyn. Riordan smiled again. A fine lass, indeed, just as he had thought when they first met. The very finest. She had been wiser than them all, in the end. Becoming Queen of Fereldan was not a foolish entanglement, as he had feared, but the only way to bring the full power of her country to bear against the darkspawn. A Grey Warden did whatever was necessary, after all. Duncan might well have saved Thedas when he recruited her.

That said, it was *not* necessary for her to die. Riordan heart rebelled at the image. She was too young, and had too much of her life before her. She had already done so much.

Besides, the horde was in Orlais. The Archdemon had usurped Val Royeaux. Riordan thought it very important that an Orlesian put an end to the Blight. He was the oldest Warden in camp — even older than Visconti, based on Joining date. He was nearing his Calling. It was only fit and proper that he should be the sacrifice.

The greatest difficulty, he mused, would be getting between Bronwyn Cousland and what she perceived as her duty.

"Blessed Andraste," whispered Leliana, not wanting to wake

Aveline and Maeve. "Make me fast and accurate today. Maker, let my aim be true and my hand quicker than those who would seek to destroy me. Grant me victory over my foes, and those that wish to do harm to me and mine..."

Aveline blinked awake. "Were you talking to me, Leliana?"

"I was just praying. It should be an exciting day."

This might be the end, and that was all right. Alistair stepped out of the tent with Scrapper, and looked at the dark and turbulent sky. It would be a red dawn, but he felt curiously lighthearted.

Bronwyn must live through this. Ferelden needed its queen. She had heaped honors and titles on Alistair, because she was a true friend and wanted to do things for him. Bronwyn's presents were always the best. The problem was that she now gave him things she thought he *ought* to want. Just as he thought he might be able to cope with being Bann of Stonehaven, she made him Arl of Jader. He couldn't see it, though his friends pretended they could. She had better not make him a teyrn, though, or he'd run away to Weisshaupt. Or he would have, if he didn't have something much more important to do at the moment...

He had never had so much to live for. He had been given a beautiful city and a princess to marry. Eglantine was really pretty and really nice. Sometimes he could almost imagine how good his life might be. Emrys would help him, he knew.

Ser Blayne and Ser Norrel, too. He wasn't cut out to be a nobleman, but he would have to do his best.

What about the Jader Wardens? They were Orlesians. Riordan, of course, was now the Orlesian Warden-Commander, though he never used the title. After the Blight, the survivors would go back to Montsimmard to rebuild.

Forget the Jader Wardens. What about Fiona? Why couldn't she stay in Jader? They could use an experienced Warden. Or would Bronwyn keep the Jader post operational? It made sense, since it was so close to Orzammar. Would he still act as a Warden? Or would he be a prisoner of the Emerald Palace? Could he be both Senior Warden of Jader and Arl? There was a precedent, after all.

It was pointless to worry about any of this. He had a mission, and that took priority over everything else.

Fiona insisted that he could never reveal that she was his mother. It was unfair, but that was life. The one thing he would insist on was that Fiona be given the improved potion. No mother of his would face a Calling in the darkness of the Deep Roads. In his opinion, all their fellow Wardens should share in the discovery. They were his brothers and sisters, after all, though he had some reservations about the Tevinters.

He had written that request about the potion down in what might well be his last will and testament. Nobles were supposed to have wills. Alistair would never forget how furious

Bronwyn had been with Cailan for not having one ready. Since Alistair was a nobleman now, with coin and lands, he had taken the trouble to give his opinion about what should happen, if he were the one to kill the Archdemon.

Or if he were simply one of the many to fall in battle. Eglantine might even be sad. They'd have to find a new Arl for her. Too bad he hadn't stolen a kiss; it would have been nice to have kissed a girl... ever. He had left instructions to give her a keepsake: an emerald pendant from the Deep Roads around Ostagar.

Someone had to kill the Archdemon.

Why not me?

The Dalish Wardens joined their fellow elvhen, facing east to the Sun, while Lanaya offered prayers to Mythal the Great Protector. Though the rest of the sky was overcast with the darkness of the Blight, a patch of light shown clear in the east over the Waking Sea, far beyond the power of the Archdemon. The sweet elven words washed the bitterness from their hearts, and before they dispersed to breakfast, Merrill told them the Tale of Mythal's Touch:

"Elgar'nán, God of Vengeance, had defeated his father, the sun, and all was covered in darkness. Pleased with himself, Elgar'nán sought to console his mother, the earth, by replacing all that the sun had destroyed. But the earth knew that without the sun, nothing could grow."

She whispered to Elgar'nan this truth, and pleaded with him to release his father, but Elgar'nan's pride was great, and his vengeance was terrible, and he refused.

"It was at this moment that Mythal walked out of the sea of the Earth's tears and onto the land. She placed her hand on Elgar'nan's brow, and at her touch he grew calm and knew that his anger had led him astray. Humbled, Elgar'nan went to the place where the sun was buried and spoke to him. Elgar'nan said he would release the sun if the sun promised to be gentle and to return to the earth each night. The sun, feeling remorse at what he had done, agreed.

"And so the sun rose again in the sky, and shone his golden light upon the earth. Elgar'nan and Mythal, with the help of the earth and the sun, brought back to life all the wondrous things that the sun had destroyed, and they grew and thrived. And that night, when the sun had gone to sleep, Mythal gathered the glowing earth around his bed, and formed it into a sphere to be placed in the sky, a pale reflection of the sun's true glory."

Breakfast was quiet, but not particularly gloomy. They were all particularly kind to one another, gentled by the prospect before them. The enemy they faced was so terrible that the differences among themselves seemed petty by comparison. Ostap and Bustrum had established themselves as leaders among the newest Wardens. Their calm attitude toward the

coming battle did a great deal to hearten their peers.

The mages and Templars were having a calm and pleasant breakfast together. Some of the army mages had joined their old friends from the Circle, and there was a hum of gossip. Greagoir and Irving presided like a pair of grandfathers: one gruff and no-nonsense, the other kindly and comforting. Keili sat at the far end of the trestle table, as she always did, hoping that today would be the day that her curse—the terrible curse of magic—was lifted.

Wulffe was trying hard to lift his son's spirits. Rothgar's brief wedding night must seem a dream to him now, as he woke to the horrible reality of the coming battle. Bronwyn wished she had sent him home, too. Wulffe had another son, now ruling West Hills in his father's stead, but the Wulffes were loyal, and in some ways doing far more than their share.

Loghain ordered the war machines brought forward, since he thought it would best if they were available, just behind the vanguard. The preparations were held up by a temperamental wyvern. Duke Prosper's Leopold did not want to go back into his caged wagon, once he was fed and exercised. Prosper then announced that he would be riding the creature. Clearly, he wanted to make a statement of some sort.

There was time for talk during the delay. A number of Circle mages clung to the Wardens they knew from their days together: Anders, Niall, Jowan, and Tara, wanting to pick their brains about shape-shifting. Tara tried to turn the conversation to another brilliant magical application, but the concept of the

Arcane Warrior eluded many of the mages. It was at once too alien and not obviously magical *enough*. Tara sighed. A handful of Dalish mages had learned the discipline, and she would have to be satisfied with that. Maybe it really was something only for elves.

As they were preparing to strike camp, a cry rose from the lookouts. The ships offshore were signaling to them. The Marcher Wardens had arrived: almost too late, but not quite. Excitement rose while the five ships approached, their sails bright with blue and silver. When they dropped anchor in the little harbor of Val Charente, the ships' boats were launched, and the Wardens of Ansborg began arriving, a dozen at a time.

Their Warden Commander clambered out of the boat and strode eagerly down the pier. He spotted Bronwyn—a tall young woman in red armor, and made directly for her.

"Errol Sainsby," he said, extending his hand for a warrior's wristclasp. His glance searched over her, and settled on her poison-green eyes. "You must be Bronwyn Cousland!"

Bronwyn smiled, and returned the gesture heartily. "I am." She introduced Loghain, Astrid, Prosper, Visconti (whom he had met before), Riordan, Merrill, Prince Florestan, Knight-Commander Greagoir, First Enchanter Irving, and Alistair. Sainsby introduced his command team, and was inexpressibly relieved not to have missed the war.

He commanded one hundred ten Wardens, thirty-five non-

Warden mages, and five ships. His ships, they were glad to hear, were loaded with supplies. They would have to delay their departure somewhat, but it was quickly agreed that the supplies would mostly remain on the ships, which would join with Isabela's little flotilla, shadowing them as they went north. Loghain ordered a signal to the Siren's Call, requesting Captain Isabela join them for a council of war.

She arrived quickly, jumping up to the pier, swaggering ashore in her thigh-high boots. She had always wanted a look at Bronwyn and Loghain. Maybe she'd even have a chance to catch up with the gorgeous Fenris. She gave the dignitaries her most polished bow, graceful to the point of impudence. She gave the famous Red Queen a once-over, and decided that she wouldn't turn her down if the chance ever offered. Unlikely, but you never knew. For that matter, she wouldn't turn down the King either. Maybe a threesome... She indulged in the most depraved speculations as they all retired to a clearing, where soldiers had placed a table and a number of chairs and benches.

Sainsby gave them a brief accounting of his recruitment efforts and his journey, not failing to mention the antipathy shown by Kirkwall and its Knight-Commander, Meredith Stannard.

"Refused! Outright refused! She wouldn't allow us to have any mages from Kirkwall, nor Templars either! Said that the Grey Warden Order is a refuge for criminals and apostates!"

"Well..." Visconti whispered to Riordan, trying not to laugh. *"It*

is."

Riordan coughed, wiping the sudden grin from his face. Bronwyn looked their way, with a carefully innocent expression. They all smiled pleasantly. She looked at Sainsby, too, who then shrugged.

"And we conscripted quite a few runaways before we sailed. But that's not the point. The *de facto* ruler of Kirkwall refused assistance in a time of acknowledged Blight. That cannot stand."

"I entirely agree," said Bronwyn. "The Blight is our first priority. Afterwards, however, I think that the Wardens should meet and take counsel about people, who, like this Knight-Commander Meredith, in effect allied themselves with the darkspawn."

"Deal with her as you like," Loghain said harshly. Kirkwall was a maritime rival of Ferelden. "But later. She's not the only one who let others bear the burden while remaining safely at home."

Greagoir fidgeted on his bench, but found it impossible to protest. He was not sure he wanted to, since he was here, and Meredith obviously was not.

They buckled down to practical matters. There was no time to waste on fine speeches.

The horses had already been sent back to the camp at the

Orne, guarded by a small force. There was no pasturage for horses here in the Blighted Lands. There was no pasturage for the oxen, either, but the army needed them. Isabela was instructed to keep two of her ships rotating on runs to the seaports to buy up what fodder they could.

Personal possessions, too, would have to be left behind. Food and arms were the priorities. The army might resent a separation from its loot, but there was nothing else to be done.

Bronwyn began to understand more clearly now why it was so terribly hard to fight the Blight. The logistical problems were huge. Finding untainted water required skilled mages, and there was no food at all to be requisitioned or scavenged. As it was, the Rivainni ships were a godsend, and they were likely to eat up all those supplies within days.

Besieging the darkspawn in Val Royeaux for an extended period would be impossible. The non-Warden components, at least, would have to leave soon, especially if large numbers of soldiers became Tainted. Supplying the troops would get harder and harder. They were going to be reduced to being supplied completely by sea. What if the Archdemon took notice of their ships, and destroyed them? They would have to retreat in that case, and many would die on the march.

Loghain glanced again at his map, now a little grubby from much handling. It was stretched out on the table, pinned flat. Val Royeaux was less than half a day away. They needed to march, but sensibly.

"Captain Isabela, I want you and your remaining ships to keep following us along the coast. The Rivainni ships, too, Take the lead, since you know the waters around here the best. Let us know what you see."

"No problem, Your Majesty," Isabela said, with just a hint of a saucy look. "I'll stick to the shoreline like a wet silk nightgown."

Loghain gave her a brief look that suggested that if they were alone, he'd have said something about her attitude. She wondered what it would be like to get past the stony facade. Stony? More like rock-hard, and probably in a good way. She wondered if his Red Queen knew how to stoke the hidden fires... and Isabela was now absolutely certain that there were some pretty hot fires hidden there. Hard to tell. Bronwyn had that upper-class manner that sometimes put Isabela off—just listen to those plummy vowel sounds—and she was obviously terribly earnest and sincere and all that was goody-good. She should let her hair down and live a little, but Isabela granted that she probably hadn't had much time for that. Out of the schoolroom and into the Blight, more or less, poor girl.

For his part, Loghain found it hard to believe that the bloody pirate woman had just flirted with him in front of his wife and the entire allied command. Should he be offended or flattered? Bronwyn was diligently studying the map, the faintest smile on her lips.

What nonsense. It was just the way the woman talked to everyone. She was doing her job, and that was what

mattered. And there was more reconnaissance to be arranged. He turned to an aide, and ordered him to summon Warden Anders. He and that witch of his should be able to tell him what they were walking into. While the mages were scouting as birds, the army would move on to Val Royeaux.

The soldiers were restless; ready to march. A few struck up that song of theirs.

*"When evil stalks upon the land
I'll neither hold nor stay my hand,
But fight to win a better day
Over the hills and far away.*

*O'er the hills and o'er the bourne
Through Jader, Lydes, Verchiel, and Orne.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away."*

First Warden Reinhard Wildauer had always believed he had a good idea of what a Blight was really like. It was distressing — perhaps even humbling— to realize that he had been wrong all along. Nothing he imagined was anything as bad as this.

The darkspawn had not ceased to attack. The creatures trickled out of the Gate of the Moon, or sometimes charged in force. Forays flared up randomly. It was impossible to make a normal camp. Instead, he was forced to improvise. Various units were brought up to hold the line, while exhausted Wardens moved back to the baggage train to swallow a hasty

meal and sleep wherever they could find a patch of bare ground to collapse on.

Even the Tevinters, as powerful as they were, could not hold their ground indefinitely. They too, needed rest, and mages from the Anderfels took their place on the center and left flank, and the Nevarrans and Rivainnis on the right.

Those latter did not work particularly well together, since their magical styles were very different. The Rivainnis had a Circle, yes; and learned magic there. The Rivainnis, however, were not very orthodox Andrasteans —when they were Andrastean at all— and much of their magic seemed primitive, even shamanistic, to the Nevarrans.

That being said, it was powerful. The fetishes the Rivainnis used to hex the darkspawn caused the skin of the creatures to slough off, made them turn on each other, made them claw at themselves. Swarms of stinging insects rose up from the fetid marshes and settled on the darkspawn, bewildering them. Tainted creatures raced across the ashy plains, snarling and tearing at the darkspawn, and ignoring the Wardens altogether.

And the attacks intensified at sunset. Wildauer had always understood that darkspawn avoided the sun when they could, and preferred darkness. He had wondered if that were true, seeing how bold they were in the day. With night, he learned that he had not been wrong. Darkspawn really did prefer the night.

They were forced to supply their mages with lyrium now, as the assaults grew in frequency and in numbers. They were exposed out here in the plains north of Val Royeaux. They were not close enough to storm the walls, which would have been suicide, anyway. Neither were they close enough to be in danger from archers on the walls and towers. Archers who emerged from the city and tried to shoot them were picked off fairly quickly by their own archers and by the mages. Even emissaries could be killed at a distance, and that was certainly the best way all around. The greatest danger was the raw, Tainted vigor of ogres, and their accompanying genlocks and hurlocks, armed with swords, axes, and maces. Time after time they surged through the lines, and brought Wardens down before being mobbed and slain themselves.

Some remarkably stupid Rivainni archers thought it would be a good idea to use fire arrows, thinking they could set the grass on fire and more easily see darkspawn creeping forward through the dead grass. They set the grass on fire, all right.

"Fire!" Athis shouted, pointing. "Fire!"

It was spreading quickly, snapping and snarling, fanned by a south wind. The wildfire was coming their way.

Pentaghost roared for mages, but their spells could only freeze the earth ahead of the fire and slow it. Frantically, the Nevarrans, and then the Rivainnis and the Andermen, all began frantically digging a firebreak.

Dozens of Tevinter mages, heavy-eyed and sleepy, stumbled

forward from the baggage train and set a series of backfires across the firebreak to change the direction of the burn. The blaze licked at them, tall as an ogre, blackening silver griffons with soot, scorching at faces. The backfires crackled up to meet it, and it roared away, forced to the west and south, surging toward the road and the walls of Val Royeaux. Everywhere, the Blighted grass and brush caught fire, burning, burning a path that only stopped briefly at the Imperial Highway. Sparks and tufts of wind-born grass blew over the ancient stones, and the grass on the other side was instantly alight.

A large band of darkspawn was caught in the fire and every one of them roasted, their shrill squeals carrying in the wind. And ogre waded through it, too imbecilic to understand its danger. Horns wreathed in flame, it actually made it halfway to the Wardens' lines before it stumbled and went down. It crawled and twitched for some time before it was still.

The fire stopped the attacks for some hours.

"A breathing space," Pentaghast said gratefully.

"By *accident*," Athis replied. "It's a wonder it didn't kill us all."

"Any rest has to help us," said Pentaghast. "This is going to take time. The darkspawn might well outnumber us ten to one."

Borthos overheard them, and grinned. "May I should go home then," he joked. "I already killed my ten."

A haze of smoke clung to the ground; another layer obscuring the sky. The fire died down over most of the plain, but persisted in places. Corpses of darkspawn and animals burned. So did stunted trees and shattered, abandoned wagons. Some scaffolding at the north wall caught fire. Repair work had been going on there until the fall of the city. All the Wardens, from Wildauer to the rawest recruit, were sorry to see it go, since it had looked like another route into the city. The heavy beams and supports burned for a long time. When some of the smoke from the grass fire cleared, the light from the fire at the wall illuminated the darkspawn nearby.

A few bands of scouts crept closer, behind mobile shields called mantlets that could be wheeled out by a team of sappers. Behind the mantlets were archers and mages, who tried picking off the shambling figures at the top of the wall. Wildauer and the other commanders watched through their fine spyglasses. Every time a darkspawn fell, Pentaghost gave a wave to his Wardens, and a cheer rose up. The darkspawn tried to retaliate, but the good silverite of the mantlets thwarted their efforts. Not even a ballista at a guard tower succeeded in penetrating the armor.

It was good sport until well after midnight. Another mantlet was rolled out, and the first teams was told to get some rest. The Wardens who slept, slept very badly, moaning and thrashing. When they relaxed somewhat, most of those on watch breathed a sigh of relief.

Pentaghost made the effort to sleep, laying uncomfortably on the damp and Tainted ground, his neck and jaw prickled by

dead grass. The Archdemon taunted them, showing them horrors. Suddenly, the Archdemon vanished.

The Tevinter Warden-Commander, Ennius Elagabalus, struggled out of the Fade. If the Archdemon was not in the Fade at the moment, it meant it was awake...

The shouts of alarm were not particularly composed. Some of the shouts were closer to screams, when a horned head of nightmare and lunacy rose up over the wall and glared down at them.

Wildauer was looking through his spyglass at the moment, and the head, thus magnified, was frightening large. He yelped and dropped the instrument. Seen without the lens, the Archdemon still looked big. And angry.

"Archers!" he cried out. "Mages!"

In a quick, dazed moment, every Warden was standing, weapon out and ready. A few groped for their canteens. Others found flasks of something stronger to drink. A defiant Rivainni behind a mantlet loosed an arrow. It soared up, past the burning scaffolding, and hit the Archdemon's armored neck. It penetrated only a little, and looked like no more than a dangling splinter compared to that vast, scaly body. The Archdemon did not appear to notice the challenge.

Pentaghast pulled himself to together with an effort. "So that's the Archdemon," he said, trying to sound casual. "Ugly bastard."

Elagabalus, pushing his way to the front, came to halt next to him, and shot him a cool look. Pentaghost wondered if the Tevinters disapproved of mocking Old Gods. Pentaghost had never heard anything about them that was worthy of respect. Fear... yes. Not respect.

Wings unfurled and beat the air like thunder. The Archdemon launched itself into flight, the dark purple of its hide blending into the smoky haze and the thickly clouded sky. Everyone braced for what was to come.

But instead of attacking, the Archdemon continued to climb. Higher and higher it rose, and the First Warden hastily snatched up his fallen spyglass to follow its trajectory. The dragon grew smaller and smaller in the distance, and finally was lost to sight. There was a long silence, and then excited whispering, and then loud talking. The wait stretch out endlessly.

"Could it have risen above the clouds?" Pentaghost muttered. He glanced at Elagabalus.

"Why not?" the Tevinter replied, clearly concerned. "We know that griffons could fly that high. In fact —"

A massive body burst out of the clouds directly over their heads, and dropped like a firebomb among the Wardens.

Ten Wardens were dead before they understood they were in danger. Everyone was formed up in ranks for battle, closely

packed. The Archdemon pounced again and again, wings beating like bellying sails, crushing a dozen at a time. It flapped up, and there was a sucking, wheezing intake while the Archdemon filled its lungs. Then hot blue flames roared out, turning men and women into torches.

The flames just missed the First Warden. He was still looking through his golden spyglass, still looking in the wrong direction, and the Second Warden and the men around him were clumps of cinders between one breath and another. He stood, frozen in shock, gaping at the monster smashing his army.

Some kept their heads better. Elagabalus got off a freezing curse that actually slowed the Archdemon. The wings faltered, and the dragon landed hard on the bloody field, crushing the life from already wounded Wardens.

On the other hand, it briefly made it vulnerable to edged weapons.

"To me!" Pentaghost shouted, charging. "To me! Keep it down!"

Where were the net teams? If they could launch a weighted net now, they could entangle the Archdemon. If they could just disable the wings...

He plunged his sword into the huge thorax, trying to remember everything he had ever learned about dragon anatomy. The fire glands were above the stomach and within the lungs. If

you could nick the fire glands, the corrosive chemicals would seep into the lungs, and...

A shock, and he and the others were knocked aside by the sweep of the tail. More Tevinters ran up, trying to coordinate their spells, so that one did not cancel another. The dragon screamed and grabbed a mage in fanged jaws, shaking her like a terrier shakes a rat, then throwing the bloody remnants aside.

Pentaghost rolled aside, narrowly avoiding a front talon, and scrambled to his feet. There was something wrong with the creature. It turned its head from side to side, trying to focus on its attackers. One great eye was white with Taint. The Archdemon turned its head toward him, and Pentaghost saw that the other eyesocket was empty, surrounded by half-healed scars.

"It's blind on the left!" Pentaghost roared, heartened by the discovery. "Attack on the left side! It can't see you!"

Who had done that? Someone had hurt the Archdemon, and made a good job of it. That wound had never been inflicted tonight. It was at least some days old. Had Bronwyn Cousland and her people done it? Had they already come to Val Royeaux and been wiped out? Were they nearby... perhaps on the other side of the city?

No way to tell at the moment. Hearing his words, mages and warriors alike grinned fiercely, dancing out of the dragon's way, trying to stay on its blind side.

All but the brave souls who deliberately put themselves in harm's way.

Athis and Borthos were running, shouting insults, banging swords on shields. Another blast of blue fire, and they ducked down behind the mantlets, temporarily safe from the flames.

The Tevinters gave a great shout in Arcanum, and a glowing band constricted around the dragon, squeezing it like an Iron Maiden. The Archdemon shrieked and backwinged, knocking Wardens aside like leaves in the wind. The spell faded and instantly the dragon was aloft, sucking in air.

"Scatter!" shouted Pentaghast. He saw the First Warden, not a dragon's length away, gaping stupidly. Running with the speed of a guilty boy caught stealing apples, Pentaghast rushed at him, and pushed him down. The flames raged over their heads. Pentaghast felt the hairs on the back of his neck crisp with heat.

A shriek of agony, cut off abruptly, as the Archdemon's jaws snapped shut on another victim.

Three ballistae traveled with them, each with missiles that would carry weighted nets. The teams manning them pushed them hard over the uneven ground, trying to find a way to get a good shot at the Archdemon.

The Wardens were making an impact, here on the ground. The Tevinter mages still had enough power for another crushing prison curse, and while the Archdemon was caught in

it, enterprising Wardens leaped up on their enemy, hacking, hacking. Athis tried to slash through the sail of one furled wing. The curse faded, and the Archdemon shook them off with an ear-splitting shriek. Its wing was hurt, but not disabled, and it rose up, gaining altitude, squealing as arrows and spells struck home. It veered and flamed down at them.

Some caught in the blast hid behind shields, some dove behind the mantlets, some rolled away. A few were caught and roasted in their armor, like turtles in their shells. Away from the fire, archers and mages kept pouring arrows and spells at the Archdemon. Outraged, it squawked and flew higher, out of range of the Wardens, but also out of range to flame them. Instead, a mob of darkspawn burst from the city and came charging across the plain. The Wardens hardly had time to form ranks, when the first wave was on them.

This was brutal. Overhead, the Archdemon seemed to be directing its forces, observing everything from its aerial advantage. The tired mages downed more lyrium. The penetrating odor began to have an effect even on the most non-magical of the warriors. Those who had learned the secret arts of the Templars used them more easily: Emissaries were struck down and destroyed. Another great storm was raised in the path of the charging darkspawn, killing and crippling them. Some of the Tevinters decided the time had come for mightier magics, and drew the small, sharp lancets they kept on their belts. If they were to live through this, it was time to perform Blood Magic. Darkspawn staggered and fell, their blood boiling in their veins.

Behind them, the Archdemon tried to flame them again, dropping down and coming in low. Garamis, a tall Nevarran, hit the ballistae release, and a net shot up, its weights swinging in deadly circles, its furious momentum making one weight slam hard against the Archdemon's right front leg. For a moment, the dragon faltered, both front legs tangled in the net. Trying to free itself was a distraction from flight, and dragons were not built to hover. Elagabalus and the Wardens nearest him united in a Blood Magic spell that was powerful enough to disorient the Archdemon. Deciding that it would be better to put some distance between itself and the Wardens, the dragon flapped frantically and headed back to the city wall, ripping at the net with its teeth. It had been wounded, and was displeased with the battle. Its creatures could fight it instead. It gave a mental command to one of its generals, and the huge hurlock pounded away, running to direct the fight against the Archdemon's enemies.

Once the net was torn away — and it was no easy task — the Archdemon took flight once more, and settled back on its preferred perch on top of the south tower of the Grand Cathedral. The north tower had been utterly destroyed, but much of the other remained. It even still contained its bells, now silent since the slaughter of the holy brothers who had rung their changes. The delicate spiral staircase of silverite and bronze that led from the base of the tower to the very top was damaged, but usable, had there been anyone to use it. The Divine and her Court had once enjoyed the view from this tower. Other than the Archdemon, no darkspawn cared for such things.

Most of the Cathedral's roof had collapsed, but this one tower was still a comfortable eyrie. The Archdemon could peer over the edge of the tower, long neck craned forward, and gaze down through the gaping hole, down, down, to the despoiled sanctuary, and think complacently about the great nest established in the vaults and dungeons below, gestating the great horde that would overwhelm Thedas.

It watched the battle going on outside the Gate of the Moon to the north, fearing nothing. The flares of magic and the screams of the dying were a spectacle, something to be enjoyed at a safe distance. It was pointless and unnecessary to risk itself. Saturated, steeped in Taint as it was, it paid no attention to the hawk and the raven perched on a nearby battlement. After a time, the birds flew away to the southwest.

"A battle outside the walls of Val Royeaux?"

"A very great battle," Morrigan told Loghain. "And the Wardens were holding their own, though they were hard-pressed. The Archdemon briefly took part, but withdrew in a fit of temper. Some clever Warden had tangled the creature's talons in a net, and the Archdemon was forced to pick it apart with its teeth. 'Twas most diverting."

"It may still be going on," Anders said, more concerned for the Wardens than Morrigan was. "A lot of Wardens, but a lot more darkspawn. We flew over the battlefield. There's a huge force of mages — probably Tevinter— there. They were in

ranks, taking turns with mass area-of effect spells. It was impressive."

"Where is the Archdemon now?" Bronwyn asked. "And did you see an evidence of the injury that the Qunaris mentioned?"

"Up on the remaining tower of the Grand Cathedral," Anders told her. "It likes the view, I guess, and the cathedral tower is the best place to keep an eye on what's going on. From what I could see, its left eye is damaged. I think," he added, "that there's a big nest below the Cathedral. I got a really strong sensation there, and when I looked through the hole in the roof, I saw those long tendrils. I flew closer, and smelled..." he paused, making a face.

Morrigan was not so squeamish. "... Broodmother."

"Then that's where we need to be," said Bronwyn. "We've got to go now, while the horde's attention is fixed on the north."

"What about the city's defenses?" Loghain frowned, taking out his map of Val Royeaux. "The Gate of the Sun? Is it guarded?"

Anders shook his head. "It's wide open, just as it's likely been since the day the refugees fled."

Loghain idly scratched at the stubble on his jaw. It might be some time before he shaved again. "Good," he said. "Then our army will march right through it."

Thanks to my reviewers: DjinniGenie, Nemrut, imperial queen, Spirally, KnightOfHolyLight, Chiara Crawford, Incognergro74, Wedger, watermostcharmed, MisterSP, Blinded in a bolthold, AD Lewis, Highlord, le-maru, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Guest, darksky01, Doom-N-GloomGal, Vaanarash, Robbie the Phoenix, Mike3207, JackOfBladesX, Jenna53, Phygmalion, Suna Chunin, Juliafied, mille libri, Lyssa Terald, undeadyeti, dragonmactir, Mystricka, jnybot, Lucy's Echos, Fenrir666, animeman 12, LeanoraPascault, The Warrior of the Light, Isala Uthenera, karinfan123.

Once again, thanks to Sizuka2 for "Over the Hills and Far Away."

As I told some of you, I am considering writing two endings for this story. You might eventually be able to choose the one you like, and ignore the other.

122. In the Archdemon's City

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 122: In the Archdemon's City

They were preparing to set out, carrying only the essentials. Bronwyn noticed that Riordan was carrying more than his weapons and rations.

"Riordan, what have you got there?" she asked. "Is that *rope*?"

"A trick used by dragon hunters that I read of in the library at Monsimmard," the Orlesian told her. "Sometimes the Nevarrans would use ropes with weights at the end to tangle the dragon's wings and feet. Sometimes they used nets or grappling hooks. I have neither nets nor weights, but grappling hooks are always to be had in an army."

Bronwyn felt her face redden. Yes, Jowan and Carver had mentioned ropes, but she had focused on their talk of spears, thinking it impossible for any number of Wardens to hold down a High Dragon. A drake or young female, yes; but not even the golems could hold a High Dragon.

No, they could not hold it down, but they might damage or

disable it. Bronwyn had only pictured dropping a net over a smaller dragon. Tangling up the *feet* of *any* dragon was a workable plan.

"What a good idea! Thanks!"

She sent some soldiers to fetch some coils of rope and others to rout out the grappling hooks in the baggage wagons. They might need them anyhow, if the gates of Val Royeaux were shut. They had not been closed when Anders and Morrigan had flown to Val Royeaux, but the situation could have changed.

A hurried conference with her Wardens was probably superfluous, because everyone by now should know who was senior to whom. Still, while the Marchers got themselves in order, there was a moment for a private talk. Bronwyn mentioned the rope and hooks, and assigned people to carry them. She then gathered her most trusted people and told them what they needed to know in case of her death.

"The roster is with the rest of the Warden papers, back in our supply wagon. It's in the rosewood chest. Quite a bit of gold is there, too. Don't forget that everyone gets paid on Summerday. There's a copy of the roster in Jader, and I sent the newest names to Catriona. We need to send some mages to Avernus. Some others, too, to build up Soldier's Peak. After the Blight, we'll want to present the improved potion to the rest of the Wardens. I've been thinking about that. We owe it to Riordan and the others who've come to help us. *Don't* forget that the Archdemon's blood has to be preserved

and distributed. I also think we should keep the Jader post going, since it's close to Orzammar. Consider one in the south in the old place near Ostagar. Not now, of course, but some day, perhaps."

"Bronwyn," Leliana said sternly. "You're going to take care of all of this yourself."

"I certainly intend to," Bronwyn agreed, "but no one can predict the future. I can't even predict what's going to happen today, or in the next hour. I trust all of you to do your best for the Wardens."

Tara touched her arm. "Bronwyn, I know I speak for everyone when I tell you it's been an honor to fight by your side."

That, of course, triggered a round of hugs and kisses and the shedding of a few tears. Morrigan watched from a distance, grimacing, but also uncomfortably moved. She had never thought to have friends, but she actually liked some of these people. Yes, Bronwyn was her friend — even something like a sister — and she was pleased with herself that she had done her part to keep her safe, even though Bronwyn must never know. With a determined sniff, she walked away, busying herself with the last details of preparation. She and Anders had been told to scout ahead as the army marched, and all their belongings must be in order for Bustrum and Ostap, who had agreed to carry them.

After the farewells, Anders found a moment to whisper a word in Tara's ear. At the moment, she seemed his only hope

of retrieving something from last night's fiasco.

"What is it, Anders?" she asked. "You're supposed to be scouting."

"I know. It's just..." He made a face, feeling inexpressibly foolish. "You know what we talked about? You know that thing...?"

She stared at him, and then understood.

"You idiot. What did she do— show you her boobies and you went simple-minded?"

"Something like that."

She hit him in the stomach with her staff. Hard.

"You are such a tool!"

"Ow! Don't! Morrigan's coming back! She'll see us talking!"

"I'd like to give her a piece of my mind—"

"You promised not to tell!"

"You're a dithering imbecile. Is she already up the spout?"

"She thinks she is. Sorry."

He did not look nearly sorry enough, in Tara's opinion. He was trying to hide how pleased with himself he really was... how

happy he and Morrigan were going to have a baby — even if the baby was an ancient malignant deity that would probably be worse than the Blight itself. Tara gave up all hope of getting him to do anything sensible. At least he had had the decency to warn her... no doubt hoping that someone else would take care of his problem for him.

She gave him a hard shove and stalked away, fuming. Right. That was Anders. She'd have to think of something herself. And she was going to discuss it with Jowan. So there.

First, of course, she passed on the story to Zevran, who laughed at Anders' utter inability to resist temptation, but then grew very serious.

"I agree with you, my Warden. It would be a supremely dangerous thing for Morrigan to create another little Morrigan, but far more powerful. Perhaps she, like our dear and unfortunate Bronwyn, will lose this child. A sad thing, but safer for the world."

"We'd have to be very careful. Morrigan would kill anyone she thought had done it, and I'm not exaggerating for a minute."

"I know you are not, *mia bella*. A quiet dose, perhaps when Anders is away. It shall be done."

"I'll pick Jowan's brain for this, too. He might have some good ideas."

Zevran was quite convinced that the birth of an Old God into

the world would be a catastrophe. Personally, he would let Tara busy herself with potions and hexes. There was a simpler, more final solution to Morrigan's plots, and Zevran was quite prepared to put it into action, if all else failed. Morrigan was Tara's friend — in her casual, superior fashion — but she was not *his* friend, and he would not shed a tear if she perished. The Old God would not survive if its host perished.

"My friends, my brothers and sisters, my comrades from the cold lands of the Korcari Wilds to the flower-scented cities of the Amaranthine coast! *This* is what Thedas can achieve, when we see our goal clearly! *This* is the best of what we are! You and I have seen the world as it really is, and we know our true enemy. The darkspawn know no borders. The darkspawn know no race or title. In coming together, we have struck a blow for a better world, for mutual respect and greatness of spirit. Those who come after will envy us, they will remember our names, and they will fall silent when any speaks who stood with us today!"

Bronwyn knew how to pitch her voice to carry, and more than one mage in the crowd helped her discreetly with magic. Even those too far away to distinguish her words saw the tall figure in red armor: the hands stretched out as if in blessing, the bright eyes uplifted. The image remained with many, and the memory grew in the telling.

Her brief words over, Bronwyn sounded her horn, and the allies moved out once more, their numbers now increased by

the Marchers. Loghain quickly revised his plans to include them, and was glad of the reinforcements. The more Wardens between Bronwyn and the Archdemon, the happier he would be.

There were darkspawn to be met on the way, but they were scattered, and dealt with summarily. Only Niall and Velanna were in wyvern form, and they carried the rest of the harness for the others. Also in the vanguard were the golems, tirelessly clearing the road, invulnerable to missile weapons. Out on the left flank, behind a band of Orlesian Wardens, Prosper de Montfort was mounted on Leopold. The wyvern was restive and fidgety, curious about the smell of the darkspawn, but also curious about the other wyverns. The scent of the male was infuriating, and Leopold longed to destroy it as an insupportable rival. The female, however...

The new mages chattered excitedly about the rumor that the Fereldans knew the lost art of shape-shifting. Speculation was rife about what the Chantry at home would do if it learned that mages could hide in the form of animals.

"I don't know what would be better," one girl said. "To be a cat so I could hide, or a giant bear — or a wyvern — so I could fight anyone who hunted me."

Another said, "I'd rather be a bird and fly away. I heard that they can turn into birds. Imagine the Templars trying to deal with that!"

In fact, at that very moment Anders and Morrigan had flown

on ahead, watching for traps and ambushes. They called out in harsh bird voices, signaling their finds.

The Greenway had become a coastal road here, and they could almost always see the Waking Sea, with Isabela's little fleet within view. Unfortunately, the refugees had fled that way, and many had not escaped the darkspawn. Heads on stakes were seen far more frequently than milestones.

They passed the ruins of a little wayside inn, where sadly decayed landlords and guests alike were strung up on the beams outside. A coastal manor at some distance from the main road looked untouched, until the Marchers went to investigate and found the horrors within. Luckily, the women had been killed, and not captured.

"Unless the survivors were taken elsewhere," Sainsby grunted. He had gone on many missions to the Deep Roads, but he had never seen surface dwellings —human homes — despoiled by the darkspawn. It was hideous and disturbing. The manor was set alight, as the inn had been, to give a kind of funeral to the poor victims.

They had had a late start, but they were moving fast, unencumbered by the wagons, which were far behind and protected by the rear guard. Human soldiers hauled the light ballistae along, and dwarves hauled a wagon carrying the components for lyrium bombs. No one had more than he or she could carry comfortably. Aside from their usual weapons, Bronwyn and each of her Wardens carried one of Master Wade's dragonhunting spears, along with a spring-loaded

anchor and its straps. If they managed to climb up on the Archdemon, it would not easily shake them loose. Luckily, there were enough of the spears and the anchors to distribute them to some of the others: Riordan, Visconti, and Sainsby, of course, and as many of their people as possible.

Astrid, walking beside Riordan, fell into conversation with him. They talked about the new weapons, and Astrid introduced him to Shale. He had seen the golem, of course, but had not quite grasped that Shale was fully sentient, and not subordinate to any control rod. He was also interested to learn about how golems had been created, and was told Astrid's speculations on Shale's origins.

"So you remember nothing of your former life?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," Shale rumbled. "Of course, when one has lived for many ages — far beyond the span of mere squishy creatures such as yourself — it all gets rather fuzzy. I do not remember all of my existence as a golem, for that matter, though that is due to much of it being so boring. Why bother to remember ages of standing immobile in the Deep Roads? I cannot complain of boredom recently, however. The darkspawn are an evil that must be eradicated."

Riordan was pleased at the golem's very proper sentiments. Astrid took the opportunity to raise a proposal she had not mentioned to Bronwyn.

"What would you say to a Warden post being established within Orzammar itself?"

Riordan instantly saw the advantage of that. "It would be a matter for the First Warden to approve, but I cannot see him refusing. I've often thought that Wardens should do more to take the battle to the enemy." He bit his lip, and tried to explain things he had not liked to say aloud in the past, not meaning to seem disloyal. "The lore indicates that there are millions and millions of darkspawn in the Deep Roads — so many that it would be futile to fight them there in strength — but I am beginning to wonder if that is mistaken. Supposedly the Archdemon brings the darkspawn onto the surface *en masse*, and we have not seen millions of them here —thank the Maker! Perhaps the past estimates have been exaggerated. Perhaps we could undertake a long-term plan to seek out nests and destroy them."

"We can move from reclaimed thaig to thaig," Astrid agreed, eyes gleaming. "We've already cleared the Amgarrak Road and installed new barrier doors. We've explored widely — or at least Bronwyn has — below Orlais. I think we could change the nature of the struggle with more emphasis on hunting the darkspawn down. Of course," she said carelessly, "once the Archdemon is dead, the surface will suffer through the Thaw, and that will take some resources, but it's foolish and short-sighted to let the darkspawn build up below. As Paragon, I'll have the power to establish the Wardens in the dwarven kingdom. I think it's time."

"You will have my complete support," Riordan assured her.

Meanwhile, Tara discussed pregnancy issues with a blushing Jowan, who was under the mistaken impression that she was

talking about herself.

"Don't give up hope, Tara," he urged her, earnestly concerned. "I know fighting darkspawn is important, but you should have a life, too."

"It's just..." she sighed, and then twisted the knife a little more. "You heard how the Wardens made Fiona give up Alistair when he was a baby. He ended up living in a stable, raised as a servant. It's marked him: anyone can see. I couldn't bear for a child of mine to be treated like that! And it would be worse, because he'd be an elf!"

"Bronwyn would never do that to you! How can you imagine that?"

She whispered, "And what if Bronwyn doesn't survive?"

"Don't talk like that!"

"Well, what if she doesn't? The First Warden might appoint some hardass stranger who toes the Weisshaupt line. He'd make me give up the baby or be sent back to the Circle." She declared, with absolutely sincerity, "I really would rather die than ever set foot in a Circle again. So listen, there's something, isn't there? Something that nobody would notice? I don't want to hurt Zevran, but it's my decision."

"Of course it is," Jowan said, rather upset. "But it's apples and oranges. You've *got* Zevran. I can't imagine him leaving you in the lurch with a baby. If he had to, *he'd* stay home and

take care of it."

She raised a brow, and he understood her. What if Zevran didn't make it?

"All right," he said, not wanting her to worry about it. "I could make something for you, but you'd need to take it early on. It would look like a completely natural miscarriage and doesn't leave traces. Just get through this battle today, and *think* about it, for Maker's sake! You have friends, Tara. You've got me, for that matter. I know I let you down before, but I swear I'll never forsake you again as long as I live!"

She grinned, remembering the story, and punched his arm.

They saw the towers of Val Royeaux before mid-afternoon.

They were obviously not as Bronwyn had imagined them, nor as she had seen them pictured in her history books. The distinctive twin towers of the Grand Cathedral had been reduced to one, and that one a shadow of its former glory.

On another hill, a little closer, was the Palace Compound, smoke rising from shattered domes. High above all should be the White Spire, the home of the Circle of Mages, In its place was a broken stump. It looked as if the tower had imploded, collapsing in on itself.

Loghain did not allow anyone else to know what he was feeling. The sight was unreal, fantastic. The last thing in life he

had ever expected as to look upon the Grand Cathedral with his own eyes. It was hard not to be distracted by the ruby flame of spiteful triumph, seeing the capital of the enemies of his blood laid low. Bronwyn had grieved for the loss of innocent life. Yes, no doubt many of the dead had been innocent. Others, however, had been bitter, cunning foes, and some of them had been the very people he had fought at River Dane thirty years before. Had they not died, they would still be plotting the ruin and enslavement of Ferelden, and yet more assassination attempts on Bronwyn and himself.

Bastards. Let them rot.

The sky, already overcast, grew darker. A distant thunder rumbled from the grey clouds.

"Wonderful," Bronwyn muttered. "All we need now is rain." She turned to the other Wardens. "The city isn't looking its best, is it?"

The older Wardens exchanged glances, almost smiling. Here their long exposure to Taint was going to be of genuine use. Once they got closer, they should not only be able to sense darkspawn, but how many and what kind. They should be able to give the locations of the leaders and above all, of the Archdemon.

Or perhaps that would not be necessary. The remaining tower of the Grand Cathedral looked... odd. Loghain scowled at it, and peered through his spyglass.

A small, angular bit at the top broke off, and resolved into a dragon. The creature flew north and veered lazily, neck extended down as if to watch what was going on below.

Loghain, carefully expressionless, handed the spyglass to Bronwyn. She studied the distant Archdemon. Here they were at last, and she tried to analyze what she felt. Relief? Fear? Anticipation? All of those, she suppose, and many other things as well.

"If it's interested in what's going on there," she said, "I would guess that at least some of the other Wardens are still alive and keeping it busy."

"Good of them," Loghain remarked, not caring a copper about any of them. It was convenient for his own army, and might indeed save many lives. "Let's get moving and enter the city before it notices us."

They marched on, guided by the tiny black dragon-shaped shadow in the sky, as it lazily circled over the ruined city.

Loghain's final orders were written during the last halt. An aide held a flat board before him by way of a desk, while Loghain scribbled quickly. The map of Val Royeaux was vivid in his head: a brightly colored map marked with strategic objectives, possible ambush sites, and the quickest routes. Duke Prosper, ready to offer condescending, expert advice, was absolutely stunned by the man's grasp of a place he had never visited, and once again granted that the Fereldan had

extraordinary ability.

Targeting defensible districts and then securing them with a house-to-house search was the safest, most reliable way to take a city, but those tactics were unsuited to this unique situation. The Wardens were right: the Archdemon was what mattered. Like the king in chess, its destruction would win the war. They could slaughter darkspawn until they themselves rotted from Taint: it would avail them nothing unless the Archdemon were slain.

They had to get in and get to the Archdemon as quickly as possible. Or more properly, the Wardens had to get to the Archdemon as quickly as possible. The role of the rest of the army, as Loghain saw it, was to protect the Wardens and keep them from being overwhelmed by the horde before they could accomplish their mission.

Sten presented himself before Bronwyn and Loghain as these arrangements were being made.

"The Tome of Koslun is said to be in the Grand Cathedral. I wish to go there with my men."

Bronwyn saw no problem with that. "That's where I'm going, most likely. I'll have to follow the Archdemon, but it seems to like the Grand Cathedral as well as anywhere else. It's possible that the darkspawn have made a nest there."

He nodded. "Broodmothers. We have fought such a creature together, you and I. It would be a worthy deed to remove

them from the world. Yes, I think a nest is likely, based on what Tallis told Karasten. Coming from the docks, she said she saw almost no darkspawn. However, there were a great number in the walled compound of the Cathedral. She described tendrils and spongy matter that sounds exactly like what we saw in the Dead Trenches. There may be other nests as well, of course, but the Grand Cathedral is certainly the site of one."

"Then I think you and your men should attach yourselves to my party of Wardens," said Bronwyn. "While they must not attempt to kill the Archdemon, we could be of significant help to each other. Astrid is leading the team that will try to destroy the Broodmothers, largely with lyrium bombs. We can't expect they will be completely successful, so a party will have to go in and mop in afterwards. Do you have any idea where in the Cathedral the book is being kept?"

"I do not. *'Somewhere in the vaults,'* was our only intelligence on the matter."

Bronwyn shrugged. "No doubts the vaults are extensive, but they're not the Deep Roads. And you won't have to worry about being discreet or nondestructive. Once you get to the Grand Cathedral, I would appreciate any help you can give Astrid and her people, but of course you'll want to find your relic. Good luck to you."

"I accept the sentiment in the spirit in which it is offered," Sten said gravely. "Though it is not luck that will save us, but courage and skill at arms."

Certain other objectives would have to be determined at the very last moment: The Wardens could detect darkspawn concentrations, but not until they were much closer. Once at the city gates, they would have a far clearer picture of the horde's distribution within the city. Speed was of the essence now. They must get to the city before the Archdemon could fortify the Gate of the Sun against them.

The troops were ordered to march at the double with a minimum of noise and no cheering. The point was not to rally opposition. They moved quickly, across the plain, and then down into the valley of the River Royeaux. Armor and weapons clattered and banged; the golems shook the ground. Thousands of troops simply moving made noise enough. They could only hope that whatever was happening on the other side of the city was noisier yet.

Spanning the River Royeaux was another stone bridge, occupied by darkspawn. The creatures squawked at the appearance of the army spilling over the hill, but had neither the sense to flee or to send for reinforcements. Archers shot into them on the run, while mages cursed them motionless. A darkspawn emissary hurled a sickly green spell their way and was frozen and shattered. At that sight, it was not possible for the troops to be quite mute: a grim chuckle greeted the sight, and some muttered approval.

The road curved, following the area's natural geography.. The Greenway fed into the Imperial Highway, which stretched out, straight and majestic, before the shining Gate of the Sun, not

yet defaced by the darkspawn, not totally sullied by the Taint. Overhead, a hawk and a raven wheeled and fluttered. Thunder rolled out again, and a few drops began coming down.

Bronwyn could not help but admire the imposing entry. Cast in bronze and thickly gilded, the relief of Drakon Kordilius, first Emperor of Orlais proudly declared his heroic deeds. A great golden sun, the symbol of Andraste rose high above all. It was simply glorious. No wonder Orlesians were so overbearing. Loghain snorted at the opulence. and waved Riordan and Visconti over to join them. Sainsby arrived a few moments later.

"Do you sense anything yet?"

Bronwyn huffed a grim laugh. "Lots of darkspawn!"

The three older men could be far more precise, and could tell him where the darkspawn were concentrated, and give him some secondary targets that needed to be dealt with. There were powerful darkspawn Generals in the Market District and at the Palace. Probably another at the Alienage, though that was closer to the docks, and it was hard to distinguish it clearly, considering the intense sensation coming from the Cathedral. Loghain nodded, and instantly refined his strategy. Anders and Morrigan flew back to report, and Loghain refined it some more. The army caught its breath, and prepared for battle. Wyverns took shape, and were harnessed. Bronwyn smiled at Morrigan, and went to mount up. Scout trotted beside her, looking back at Loghain and Amber.

"Bronwyn!" Loghain called. She turned, and was surprised at the look on his face.

Ah. So he feels something, after all.

Perhaps she did, too, even after all that had passed. Certainly not that breathless, blushing adoration that had shadowed the past few years and relegated her to Highever like a foolish girl too immature to be out in society. But something. He was her first and only love, and he not ceased to be a great man in her eyes. A difficult, irascible, and unaffectionate man, but still a very great one.

She smiled at him. "Luck in battle."

He did not smile back, but strode toward her. She was startled when he grasped her arm and pulled her firmly to him.

"You're a brave and clever girl... and I love you." He took a deep breath. "Now don't do anything *stupid*."

The rough kiss was brief but hungry. It kept Bronwyn from laughing out loud at Loghain's concept of tender words. They were just so utterly... Loghain.

For his part, Loghain bitterly regretted not taking the time to make love to her properly that morning. Here they were, facing the Archdemon, and anything might happen to either of them. So many times he had failed to make a proper goodbye, and those he had loved had slipped away forever, not knowing what was in his heart: his mother, his father,

Rowan, Celia, Maric... yes, even Cailan. Bronwyn must understand that he did not take her for granted.

The Fereldans looked on with delight and approval; the dwarves and elves with amusement; the Antivans and Marchers with interest; the Orlesians with faint horror and disgust. There were not many of them who did not think Queen Bronwyn far too good for Loghain Mac Tir. Not only was she a high-born lady, and he a bloody-handed peasant, she was Andraste's Champion, and specially favored by the Maker. A number of them, like Prosper de Montfort, Prince Florestan, and Boniface Clery, were not sure that it was appropriate for her to have relations with any *man*. Riordan and his Wardens, however, were far more tolerant.

"It's going to be all right," Bronwyn whispered to Loghain, looking up at him with a faint, arch smile. "I promise not to be stupid. We'll see each other again."

"I'll hold you to that."

Morrigan was ready and impatiently waiting. Loghain gave Bronwyn a boost onto the wyvern's back, and she and the rest of the chosen few were soon mounted and buckled in securely.

The army would punch through to the Cathedral, using the Avenue of the Sun. Units of the Fereldan and Orlesian forces, along with the Antivan Wardens, would travel down the streets running parallel to the main thoroughfare, since trying to travel on a single street, however wide, would create a bottleneck,

and leave them only a narrow front rank with which to attack the enemy. Then too, they would better be able to protect the Wardens from flank attacks that way.

As to the secondary targets: the Marchers, supported by a unit of Legion of the Dead, would deal with the General in the Imperial Market. The Antivans and the Dalish would eventually deal with the Alienage. Duke Prosper was eager to go to the Palace.

"I know it better than anyone," he declared.

Loghain shrugged. The Orlesian's motives were perfectly clear to him, but if the fellow wanted to go there, Loghain did not much care. That wyvern of his was restless and likely to cause trouble, and it was best to get it away from the others.

"If you like," he said. "You are entirely welcome to the Palace. The Archdemon is what matters."

The Gate of the Sun was not simply a door into Val Royeaux: it represented a large and complex triple gate defense system. Denerim's Great Gate was a smaller, less sophisticated version, but knowing it gave them some idea of what to expect. There was no organized defense of the place, but it was still full of darkspawn.

It was decorated with darkspawn victims, hanging here and there like spoiled fruit. Some lucky survivors had escaped through the Gate of the Sun and fled to Vercheil or Val Foret.

The slower, the older, the infirm, the hesitant— they had not fared so well, and had been slaughtered in great numbers. None of the Wardens missed that fact that there were not many women of childbearing age among the victims here.

But darkspawn had died too. The Orlesian gate guards had put up quite a fight, and there were heaps of hurlocks and genlocks scattered about, each centering around one or two brave souls who had died hard. For that matter, they found some dead ogres, surrounded by human soldiers who had given their lives to cover the flight of the escaping civilians.

After a month, it was all putrescence and rot. The stink was vile, penetrating the very stones underfoot. Carrion birds had attempted to feed off the dead, and had perished from Taint. It explained why the skies even before Val Charente had been so silent and empty. Not even rats could live long, though a few burst out from the rubble; Tainted and crazed and rabid. Dalish scouts watched for them with bows at the ready and arrows nocked.

It took time to clear out the Gate, for there were gatehouses and guard towers where darkspawn lurked. The Wardens and the rest of the army spread out quickly, however, and were able to put overwhelming force to bear on this enclosed, discrete area. A hard fight, but a worthwhile one. The golems shook the earth under the darkspawn's feet, sending them sprawling. The wyverns dashed about with terrible speed, knocking barricades asunder, crushing darkspawn, carrying their riders faster than a man could run. Bombs and grenades rained down, and the darkspawn were destroyed before they

clearly understood their danger.

Loghain, careful to wipe his face and hands clear of blood using a clean cloth that he then discarded, gave the various units there orders. It was time to make their way into the city proper. The army marched through the inner gate and divided into Loghain's planned parallel columns, moving quickly toward their objectives.

First Enchanter Irving was tasked with standing with the Wardens and directing the mages. Most of their most experienced mages would be fighting as wyverns, and many of their newest recruits were apostates: half-trained at best. The mages from the Ferelden Circle were used to following Irving's direction, and his presence would hearten them. Knight-Commander Greagoir and his Templars, however, was ordered to help support the left flank, with dwarves, Fereldan soldiers, and the Antivan Wardens. The two old men shook hands gravely, and parted ways.

The Marchers broke off and headed to the Imperial Market. A little later, a large force of Orlesian chevaliers under Duke Prosper, and supported by a dozen Orlesian Wardens led by Clovis, turned at the Imperial Way, toward the Palace. In the parallel columns, the Antivans were spread out on the fringes, on the watch for darkspawn attack. The main body continued up the Avenue of the Sun and the streets alongside it, keeping the remaining tower of the Grand Cathedral before them as their lodestone.

Ahead, the broad avenue opened out into a spacious, elegant

square.

"Place Reville," Loghain muttered, remembering his map. The square was old, but had been renamed after Mad Emperor Reville, the bastard who had ordered the invasion of Ferelden. It must have been quite the place before the darkspawn redecorated. The flowers in the long marble planters were dead, and the statues looking down on the square had been vandalized and reinvented as darkspawn idols. Strange arcs of metal were strapped each to famous Orlesian's back, reminiscent of grotesque wings.

Overhead, they heard a outraged bellow. The Archdemon had noticed them at last.

Off and on, the northern Wardens had been fighting for an entire day.

That did not mean that individual men and women had fought that long. That was impossible, even for Wardens with their Taint-fueled strength and stamina. The warriors and mages took turns, the healers repaired the damage, food was brought up from the baggage train— hidden in a ravine— and gobbled. Wardens collapsed behind the lines and slept fitfully for an hour or two, and then struggled up to face the enemy again.

The First Warden had somewhat pulled himself together, and now busied himself with logistics. He was good at numbers, at administration, at making things work. That had always been

his strength... well, that and his ability to play Weisshaupt politics. The latter ability meant nothing at the moment; the former ability was vital. He was not a coward, but he was not a great tactician or strategist. He must leave that to others—mostly to his Second Warden and to Pentaghast and Elagabalus.

"We're bleeding the darkspawn, Commander," Athis murmured to Pentaghast, shaking him awake. "We're bleeding them good. Look what the robes have done!"

Pentaghast grimaced, but did not rebuke her for using that derogatory term for mages. The Nevarran mages called themselves that, after all. Besides, he was too startled at the sight before him to pay much attention to anything else.

Powered by Blood Magic, the Tevinters had changed the very shape of the battlefield. Instead of the flat, grey-brown plain, stretching to the walls of Val Royeaux, Pentaghast saw a defensive maze of swells and hollows.

This was terrifying, overwhelming magic, and it frightened the other Wardens as much as it encouraged and shielded them.

Mages swayed from lyrium, and some turned aside and vomited where they stood from the effort, but when they united their magic, the very earth cracked wide; the Wardens were lifted onto rising ground, and ditches and pits appeared to trap and confound the darkspawn.

Breastworks swelled up to defend the ballistae and the

Wardens who operated them. The shields were tilted up to provide protection, since the Archdemon now and then attempted an attack from above. It was wary of them now, and did not wish to risk further injury to itself. It also was sending out fewer darkspawn to challenge them, for the creatures were unable to close with the Wardens, or even inflict serious damage on them.

"It's a delaying tactic," Pentaghast muttered. "It wants to keep us out of Val Royeaux and wait for its reinforcements to spawn."

"And it has the walls of Val Royeaux to keep us out," agreed Athis. "If we try to storm the city, we'll be massacred."

"Possibly. Possibly not. I think that given time, our Tevinter friends could collapse the walls. We'll have to attack sooner or later. If we can just get some rest, we'll have a better chance." He stared at the distant figure of the Archdemon, gliding through the sullen skies, wishing he could strike it dead with the hatred he felt.

As he watched, the Archdemon veered sharply, bellowing a challenge. It flew away toward the south, and the horde before them was suddenly leaderless and bereft of will.

There was not a moment to lose.

"To the Gate!" roared Pentaghast. "Follow me!"

"There it is!" Bronwyn shouted, pointed straight ahead. "Ballistae! Mages! Archers! Make ready!" Like the rest of the Wardens mounted on the wyverns, she jumped to the ground. Riding the wyverns had been a good vantage as they slaughtered darkspawn on the way, but the wyverns could fight the Archdemon best if they were unhindered by Wardens and saddle harness. Teams dashed forward, previously assigned to each wyvern, quickly unbuckling the straps.

The Archdemon visibly started, its head swerving about to see the unsuspected threat in the city it had claimed. Then it seemed to hover in the air for moment, before changing direction. It was heading their way, screaming, preparing to flame and rend.

Bronwyn had seen this before. It was just like the false Andraste in the Frostbacks, who had killed Cullen and nearly killed the rest of them, too. She briefly felt a shiver of the same terror she had experienced then.

But then here she was, facing this creature not with a mere handful of brave souls, but with an entire host of heroes; with advanced weapons and bombs and clever tactics. They had killed Flemeth, the mighty shapechanger and Witch of the Wilds, with a far smaller force. She was absolutely certain they could kill this creature, who was clearly relying on its size and strength.

But it would not be easy. At the same moment, the right flank was set upon by a sudden rush of darkspawn, led by a pair of ogres. Loghain and his soldiers would have to deal with that,

while the Wardens in the center dealt with the Archdemon.

"Sten! Support Loghain!" Bronwyn ordered. The Qunari, like a battering ram, dashed to the Fereldan lines, and immediately engaged the darkspawn minions.

The Wardens withdrew to what shelter the building lining the street afforded, looking like terrified people running for their lives. It was not entirely a sham. Bronwyn hoped that it was a temptation the Archdemon was unable to resist. She sheathed her sword and dagger, and like the rest of her people, unslung her spear: razor-sharp, well-balanced, light but strong. Only the mages kept their staves, holding them on high, ready to cast. The wyverns hugged the walls, ready to leap on the Archdemon if it touched the ground. Had the Archdemon even seen them? Did it smell them? Did it know what they were?

The creature was nearly on them, neck stretched out at full length, wings folded in a graceful dive. Bronwyn shouted, "Loose!"

Curses, spells, arrows, and explosive bolts rose in a lethal fury. The Archdemon had never imagined that these puny creatures could actually resist it. The mages had been briefed to hit with united spells, thus not canceling each other out. The paralysis spell, combined with a misdirection hex, crippled and confused the Archdemon. Arrows glanced off its scales, but penetrated its nostrils and flew through its open maw. One struck it in its ruined eye, which did not blind it, of course, but pained it. Two of the ballistae bolts missed altogether, but one, envenomed, struck the creature full in the belly.

Still stiff from the fading paralysis, it hit the ground hard, driving the bolt in further. The Archdemon shrieked its outrage to heaven. In a moment, the wyverns bounded at it, coordinating their assault like a wolf pack around a bear.

A few arrows were loosed. "Wait!" Bronwyn shouted. "You'll hit our own people!"

For the moment they must wait and see what damage six wyverns could do. Bronwyn called to her newest mages. "Do what you can, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else!"

Some hexes and curses, carefully targeted, got through. Area spells were out of the question. One paralysis glyph caught both the Archdemon, Jowan, and Niall in its grasp. The cleverer mages aimed at the Archdemon's head and wings, and slowed the creature somewhat. The rest was up to the wyverns.

Even in wyvern form, Tara was furious with Morrigan. She spat poison in the Archdemon's face, and then turned to snarl at Morrigan. Morrigan, taken aback at Tara's hostility, but assuming that it was a warning to be careful not to strike a killing blow, twisted away and clawed at a huge wing.

Ten times the size of any of the wyverns, the Archdemon lashed out with a massive tail. Anders was thrown through the air, and did not quite land on his feet. The injured wyvern lay winded for a moment, and then hesitantly rolled onto his belly, testing whether it dared move or not. Something was damaged, but Anders could not heal himself in this shape.

Reluctantly, he shifted back into human form, and began repairing his broken leg and cracked ribs.

Jowan squealed, caught in a blast of arcane fire. Tara took advantage of the Archdemon's distraction to leap in from the left, blind side and bite the dragon's neck close to the head. The stream of fire broke off as the Archdemon shook its attacker off violently. Tara bounded away, over the Archdemon's back, raking her talons in long streaks, ripping off scales. Jowan screamed again, dashing away, changing back to his human shape, trying to heal himself. The burn was excruciating. He had never felt pain like this.

Velanna leaped in to spit poison, and the dragon's front talon lashed at her with alarming speed, slashing open her side. The wyvern doubled back on herself, shocked at the wound, dashing away to Anders. The mage groaned with the effort of healing the long wound, and was only partly successful.

"You'll need to shift for it to work!" Anders called. Furious, impatient, the Dalish elf changed, and Anders made a better job of it. Instantly, she changed back, and charged the Archdemon, roaring. Anders swallowed a lyrium potion, and shot another healing spell at Jowan's burn.

Niall tried to scramble up the Archdemon's back, wanting to get at the wings. His fangs tore at the base of the right wing. Tainted blooded bubbled up, and the Archdemon writhed with pain, trying to beat its attacker away. Niall bit at a tendon, feeling he was really doing damage, forgetting how long a dragon's neck was. The head snaked back, and huge jaws

seized the wyvern, shaking Niall like a rat and then tossing him aside. Back in the ranks, Maeve uttered a wild shriek. She rushed out, Quinn at her heels, to drag Niall to safety, in the projecting corner between two building.

The wounded man had lost all control over his shape, and with bizarre contortions returned to human form. His injuries were ghastly. Anders hobbled over to help him. They were down to three active wyverns, and the Archdemon was damaged, but might well kill them all. Bronwyn could not throw them away. Anders, Jowan, and Niall were all hurt. It was time to step in.

"That's enough!" she cried. "Back off, wyverns! Archers! Mages! Keep aiming at the head and wings! Come on, the rest of you! We're going in!"

She charged, spear at the ready, followed by the Warden melee fighters. They had all been organized roughly in groups of three: Alistair, Emrys, and Oghren worked together; another group united Broasca, Bustrum, and Ostap, and Bronwyn expected great things of them. There were a dozen groups altogether, and they almost immediately began doing serious damage. The dogs worked with the fighters: even Jowan's Lily, who had watched the wyvern fight, whimpering. Now she was loosed, with Scout and Magister, and they challenged the dragon, barking and dodging. Bronwyn had tried to make them understand that they must not get too close, but she was not sure she had succeeded.

Adaia and Siofranni dashed out, Siofranni throwing noise-making bombs in front of the Archdemon to keep it confused,

Adaia shooting it in the face with the Airbow: jumping, skipping, calling insults. The girls were not doing much damage, but they were preventing the Archdemon from choosing a victim.

Zevran, Fenris, and Silas insisted on coming with them, but they were armed with swords: their mission to protect Bronwyn and the other Wardens from darkspawn that broke past the army. The Wardens were too focused on dragon-killing to protect themselves.

Against the walls, Leliana commanded the archers and First Enchanter Irving the mages. It was a day of horror, but Irving was secretly pleased that all his years of study in an isolated tower on an island had at last actually proved good for something: he had a real talent for battlemagic.

With Bronwyn's charge, most of the wyverns, now decimated by the Archdemon, fell back into human shape. Tara raced over to help Jowan, who could barely walk; she supported him as they hurried to find Anders and Niall. Lily broke away and made a dash for her master, tail wagging anxiously. Velanna's blood was up, and she had become so invested in her wyvern form that she did not change, but hissed at the humans and then darted away, further down the avenue, looking for darkspawn to slay.

Morrigan, the most experienced of shape-shifters, changed directly from wyvern to hawk, and fluttered up to a balcony above the fight. There she took human shape again. She was nearly invisible, safe from attack herself, and in a prime

position to cast spells down on the Archdemon without hitting anyone else. It was quite the spectacle. She was almost mesmerized by it, watching the struggling little figures in armor, thrusting their spears into the massive, red-purple body.

Down below, Anders was trying to save Niall, despairing of accomplishing anything but easing his pain. Maeve clung to his hand, crying.

"I want you to have all my things, Maeve," Niall gasped out. "My trunk's in the baggage train. And take my belt pouch. There's a nice necklace in it I wanted to give you after all this was over. There's gold, too. Somebody's going to get it, and I'd rather it was you..."

"Oh, don't!" she sobbed.

"No... take it. Quinn..."

Quinn slipped it off and gave it to the distraught Maeve, while Anders worked feverishly.

Niall tried to smile, but it was a raw grimace of pain. "My mother always said... She said I was a mage for a reason. I hope I haven't disappointed her..."

Maeve could not speak. Anders said roughly, "I know she's very proud of you."

Tara and Jowan joined them a moment later, moving along the

walls. Jowan's face was grey and drawn with agony. Tara cast the only weak healing spell she knew at him again and again. Jowan lowered himself to the pavement by Niall's twitching body, trying to rally his own mana.

There was nothing to be done. Niall's eyes were open, but life was already leaving them. He moaned, and called out "Mother?" very distinctly. And then he was dead.

Thunder pealed again. Lightning flashed dimly through the clouds. The storm drew closer. Maeve made a strange, pained noise through her teeth, and ran back to the battle, clutching her spear. Quinn paused, uncertain, and muttered, "Sorry." Then he followed her.

The three Circle mages, who had known each longer than they had known anyone else in the world, huddled together, mourning. Soon, Lily came, unable to stay away from Jowan. She licked his face, pressing close, mourning with his friends.

Even without the undivided attention of the Archdemon, the Marcher Wardens and the Legion faced a very nasty fight in the Market. A half-dozen ogres charged them —fortunately not all together —and then they were confronted by a huge hurlock General, commanding a very large force. The value of the mages they had summoned from the Circles of the Free Marches was incalculable. All the same, twenty Wardens, eight mages, and fifteen dwarves died there, amidst the vandalized remains of the most exclusive shopping district in all Orlais. Everyone was distracted by the splendor of the

goods left behind by the murdered artisans, and indulged in an orgy of looting, almost before the the last of the darkspawn there was slain. Wardens broke into a wine merchant's shop, and smashed the tops off the bottles, guzzling rare vintages until the wine ran like blood. Sainsby furiously called his people to order, occasionally using the flat of his sword.

"We'll have time for that later!" he snarled. "Clear out the rest of the darkspawn so we can join the others at the Cathedral."

All the same, quite a few packs were stuffed with silk gowns and silver spoons, gold was thrust into belt pouches, and diamond necklaces were slipped under breastplates and mages' robes. Following Loghain's instructions, they fought their way through a curving street that led through a residential area, and ultimately back to the Avenue of the Sun.

It was starting to rain. Barely more than a drizzle, it was still enough to make the stones beneath their boots slick and treacherous. Worse yet, the damp stirred up the stink of darkspawn, steaming from the cobblestones.

Darkspawn were everywhere: pouncing on them from derelict houses; shooting at them from upper windows. Every street intersection was a skirmish, and an open square was an invitation to a pitched battle. These interruptions slowed them and cost them lives, but did not stop their advance.

They paused, though, when they emerged from a narrow passage and saw what the Archdemon was doing in the *Place Reville*.

Glad he had escaped the confrontation with the Archdemon — he could hear the beast's screams and bellows all too clearly — Prosper led the way to the Palace. He had reasons of his own for focusing his attention there. Thank the Maker, Loghain had seen the logic of sending Prosper and his forces in that direction. Wardens had sensed a powerful darkspawn General in that direction and a significant darkspawn force. No one wanted that force to support the darkspawn near the Grand Cathedral. They needed to be destroyed where they were. Prosper knew the area extremely well, perhaps better than anyone else in the army.

Mostly importantly, in Prosper's view, the Palace had vital symbolism in the war. The man who seized the Palace — however ravaged it was — was the man who would be viewed as the de facto Emperor. And then, it was full of riches beyond imagining, and secret archives that must not be scrutinized by foreigners. Prosper was fairly certain that the darkspawn had not broken into the treasure vaults: the doors were thick silverite, and the locks subtle. He happened to have the secret of them due to the clever work of an agent of his — who shortly met his end after reporting to Prosper, alas, thus making him unable to sell his information to anyone else.

The archive was in a secret room, *La Chambre des Rumeurs*. Prosper had been there many a time in his days of favor. Even finding the room would be beyond the capabilities of the darkspawn, nor would the contents of the room have any

meaning for them or for the Archdemon. Here was decrypted diplomatic correspondence, here were the minutes of secret tribunals, here were the records of deeds done in darkness. Reports on the actual parentage of claimants to noble titles were kept here, along with the ponderings of the great spymasters of Orlais. Here one could discover how exactly the parents of the Imperial Princesses had met their end; here Prosper had learned that the death of Queen Rowan of Ferelden was not due to natural causes.

It would never do for Loghain Mac Tir to read about *that*. It would be best if that the man never entered the Palace; or, if he must, it was essential that someone else have the Palace in proper order, with all its buttons buttoned, as it were, before he set foot in it.

He shouted at Leopold to slow down. They were making sufficient speed, and the streets were becoming slick under the light rain. Leopold, overjoyed to be out and running, wanted to race away and leave the foot soldiers behind. That would be imprudent. Prosper knew the creature might grow over-excited and indulge in acrobatics that might unseat his rider. For that reason. Prosper was strapped in place very securely, and his back and neck protected from whiplash by the high back of the saddle. The buckles could be released at need quite easily, but they would not slip without active triggering.

The wyvern, however, was making a splendid portable battering ram. Any barricades in the streets fell before his might. His chevalie, running beside and behind him, mopped

up the darkspawn that were left. Resistance had been light, with most of the darkspawn concentrated on the north side of the city.

A shout to his left revealed the presence of Prince Florestan, running along easily, hacking and slashing with great good will. He would not be a pebble in Prosper's boot for much longer. Further back in the ranks was a man who would deal with him once they were a little more dispersed and distracted.

From the Avenue of the Sun to the Imperial Way, they swept along to the gates of the Palace Compound, now sadly Tainted and tarnished. No matter: anything worth the keeping could be cleansed by magic and transported to the new capital of the Empire.

Where would that be? Prosper knew he might have to temporarily relocate to Montsimmard, or to untouched Val Firmin, but surely not forever. Perhaps an entirely new capital would be required: a monument to his power and taste.

The gates were open. The darkspawn were imbeciles. Leopold burst into the Palace Courtyard, and Prosper discharged his magnificent one-handed crossbow in the faces of the enemy.

A fairly nasty fight ensued. A big hurlock burst out of the palace doors, and ran, slowly and ponderously, at the attackers. A storm of arrows feathered him, but did not stop his charge. The creature trampled resistance underfoot, swinging a huge axe in a frenzy. The Orlesian advance broke

apart into small discreet bands. Leopold loosed a gout of green venom that poisoned the monster— and struck some chevaliers, too.

Ah, well... the fortunes of war, my friends.

Leopold bit the hurlock and gave him a shake. That seemed to make an impression. Still, the hurlock got off a blow that made the wyvern squeal and double back on itself. Prosper swayed in the saddle, and the men about him shouted and leaped and swerved. For a moment, it seemed like someone else was on the wyvern's back, but that was brief. In the confusion, he felt a brief sting, and then realized that he had received a slight cut on his neck from a stray arrow or a flying bit of metal. It was nothing. The Hurlock General was stumbling, overcome with poison and fangs and many wounds.

Prince Florestan shouted again, and gave the creature the *coup de grace* with his glittering sword. A cheer rose up, much to Prosper's disgust.

But there were the Palace steps! All they had to do was destroy the last of the darkspawn and the Palace would be his! Prosper popped another bolt into his crossbow and pulled the trigger. A genlock fell... one of the last. He shouted at Leopold to make for the steps. He would ride up them and make a speech.

His feet were cold. That was odd. His feet, his ankles, his legs. Why was he so cold? The golden doors of the Palace

hung ajar, but they shivered into rainbows as his vision faded.

"Wha... What's happening to me?" he gasped out, his tongue thick and reluctant. "Poison..."

The rainbows dissipated, and there was only darkness.

Leopold, sensing a sudden lack of control from his master, bounded back down the stairs and dashed away in search of the other wyverns in the city, the dead man still strapped to his back. Soldiers stared after the retreating Duke.

Corot, Prince Florestan's advisor, said solemnly. "The noble Duke has perished in the defense of our country. May his sacrifice not be in vain."

Ursus finished off the last hurlock, and made his way back to his Prince's side. The little dagger with its carefully envenomed blade was carefully replaced in its invisible sheath behind his big dagger. The big man smiled quietly. He was tired of having to fight off Duke Prosper's assassins. On the way up the Avenue of the Sun there had been another one, and he had almost got Florestan with an arrow. Best to tear up treason by the roots. He gave Corot a discreet gesture. The other man nodded almost imperceptibly. Prosper had thought the Prince a fool, because he was a decent man. He had not considered that those who loved Florestan might not be as decent.

"Come, my prince," Ursus rumbled. "The Palace is ours. You should go up to the top of the steps and say something to

encourage the others."

Florestan blew out a breath, and ascended the bloody steps willingly enough. Too bad he could not do this in full sunlight, but the day was what it was. He wiped the rain from his face. "All right. A word. And then we've got to get back to the battle. Queen Bronwyn is counting on us."

He hoped he would survive today. Orlais would need a leader, now that Duke Prosper was gone. He had died bravely, at least, but Florestan was deeply relieved that the young and lovely Celandine would no longer be forced to marry him.

"My friends and comrades!" he shouted. "A victory! The first of many, I trust, and the beginning of the end of the Blight! *Vive la Reine Rouge! Vive l'Impératrice!*"

They could not get the Archdemon to stay on the ground, and the rain was making its scales slippery. Whenever Bronwyn tried to scramble onto its back, it would beat its injured wings, she would slide off, and the dragon would come down in another part of the square. She could not even get a secure enough footing to try sinking one of the spring-loaded anchors into its back, risky as that would be.

They had tried the golems against the Archdemon, but it was simply too tall for them, and they could not do any significant damage. They were knocked down and knocked back: not hurt, but ineffectual. Astrid sent them off to support the Antivans on the left flank.

The ballistae were at the ready, but could only shoot when the Archdemon was in the air, and even then it moved too quickly for a solid hit. One bolt had gone completely through the widest part of the sail of the right wing, but it was a clean hole, and dragon could still fly — at least well enough to gain altitude and come down again, instinct driving it to attack the Wardens again and again. Leliana swore with frustration at her wet bowstring that played havoc with her aim. Only magic was reliable in this weather. Tara was the least injured of the senior mages, and cast curses on the Archdemon with terrible, single-minded anger.

Darkspawn skittered through the alleys; they jumped from upper windows down into the square. Some got past Loghain's lines, and Fenris found himself fighting two genlocks at once. Another crept up behind him and then fell to Zevran's thrown dagger. Silas fought on doggedly, already exhausted.

A bolt of lightning flashed above them, and thunder rolled out almost simultaneously. The rain came down harder, and diluted the blood on the stones in the square.

It was a madhouse around the Archdemon, as Wardens thrust and slashed at it with their spears and tried not to kill each other. Spears became lodged, and Wardens clung to them, trying to get them out and dodge the Archdemon at the same time.

Oghren was behind the dragon, ripping though massive tendons, stabbing again and again.

"D'you like that? D'you like that?" he jeered. "How 'bout a little more?"

The Archdemon shrieked, as Brosca stabbed it in the mouth. It reared back, carrying her with it, while she tried to yank the spear free.

"Brosca! Let go!" Bronwyn yelled. At the same moment, Alistair shouted. "Oghren, look out!"

Brosca let go, and landed hard on the pavement. Oghren was too rapt in bloodlust to heed Alistair.

The Archdemon stumbled, slipping in the standing water, and took a step backward. There was a shocked bellow, and Oghren's armor held for a split-second, before the full weight of the Archdemon came down, crushing the dwarf flat. Aveline, inches away, staggered back, wild-eyed, her spear trembling in her hands.

"Maker!" Alistair croaked, turning his eyes from the horror on the ground. They had no time to grieve; no time for anything but fighting.

Bustrum, practiced climber that he was, got a leg up from Ostap and managed to deploy his anchor into the Archdemon's back. There was a meaty thud as the prongs dug deep into Tainted flesh. The Archdemon shrieked again, and before Bustrum could buckle the strap around himself, the dragon was airborne. Bustrum and Alistair both tried to grab the dangling strap and were carried along with the creature,

until the wet leather slipped through their grasp and they fell to the ground. Bustrum landed lightly, but Alistair twisted his ankle on impact.

"Maker's breath!" he groaned. He looked up wildly, expecting the Archdemon to come down on top of him. He rolled away, and looked around desperately for a Healer.

The dragon came down some distance away. Bronwyn reached for the anchor strap, missed, and slipped off the dragon's side again. She danced away from the talons and snapping jaws, swearing.

"I'll try this!" Riordan shouted to her.

He sheathed his spear and uncoiled the rope on his back, swinging the grappling hook in ever-widening circles. The Archdemon paused just long enough, and he threw the hook, catching the right wing at the second joint and ripping through tough hide.

Another shriek. The Archdemon went mad, beating its wings with a powerful stroke that sent Riordan clanging along the ground, stunned. Its tail lashed out, knocking its enemies flying, smashing through the front of the nearest building, showering the Wardens with shattered stone. Morrigan's balcony creaked dangerously, and she shifted to a hawk and fluttered away, panicked.

The Wardens below were not so lucky. Maeve died instantly of a broken neck. Among the archers and mages, Nevin,

Cathair, and five more were brained by falling masonry. Others were down, some injured badly.

At that moment, the Marcher Wardens arrived, shouting a hurrah. The darkspawn that Loghain's forces had been holding back on the left found themselves attacked from the rear, and crushed between the hammer and the anvil.

Seeing the destruction of its minions, the Archdemon took off, trailing the rope and the anchor strap, headed for the safety of the south tower of the Cathedral. The ballistae loosed as soon as the dragon was high enough, but the engines were soggy with rain, and the aim was off. Two bolts missed, and one hit a glancing blow. The Archdemon's bellow blended with a peal of thunder.

"Stop it! It's getting away!" Bronwyn shouted, her voice cracking. Rain poured down her face like tears. "It's getting away!"

She would have run down the Avenue of the Sun after it, but Riordan caught her, a strong hand on her shoulder.

"We shall have to hunt it now," he said, grave but calm. "But I think this round should be awarded to us. We have paid enough for it."

Thanks to my reviewers: Zairazruari, Chandagnac, Kyren, lemaru, KnightOfHolyLight, Nemrut, Tirion I, Melysande, Chiara Crawford, Raxiselic, AD Lewis, Brediction, mille

libri, JackOfBladesX, Wedger, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Mike3207, Robbie the Phoenix, darksky01, DjinniGenie, Fenrir666, Lucy's Echos, butterflygrrl, Blinded in a bolthole, PhantomX0990, Jenna53, imperial queen, dragonmactir, Mystricka, jnybot, Trilobiter, Fastforwarmotion, Suna Chunin, Zute, Death Night's Crowbar, Candle in the Night. Forty-five hundred reviews! I'm really honored.

We know that in canon, Riordan went into battle with some ideas about how to fight dragons. I would guess that he, unlike everybody else, had been doing some research. The technique he tries unsuccessfully in canon works quite well (implausibly well, imo) for Cassandra Pentaghast in Dawn of the Seeker.

I really can't see long, individual goodbyes being practical. Unlike the game, Bronwyn can't pause the action.

Thanks to Nemrut, for a very useful tactical suggestion. Why couldn't the Tevinters, with their power and their grasp of elemental magic, not use Earth magic to reshape the battlefield to their needs?

123. The Lightning-Struck Tower, Redux

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 123: The Lightning-Struck Tower, Redux

They needed time to rest and lick their wounds, but there was little time to spare. The dead were carried out of the rain and placed in the buildings remaining around Place Reville. One elegant townhouse was chosen for the Warden dead and wounded. The latter were laid out in the ravaged rear parlor off the entry hall; the former in the library. Anders gave Niall and Maeve's valuables to a distraught Quinn.

"I don't want their coin!" the boy cried.

"Take it," Anders advised. "It's what you've got for keepsakes."

They had lost over a score of Wardens so far, which included three Antivans killed in an unlucky encounter with some shrieks, and a pair of Orlesians killed by the Archdemon. The door was closed on the dead and Tara wrote a warning on it.

"Sacred to the Grey Wardens. Trespassers will be hunted down and fed to the darkspawn."

And of course they were starving. Aeron and Emrys found the kitchen, the buttery, the pantry, and the wine cellar, and shared out what was fit to eat. The pantry stank unspeakably, for the fish and fowl that had been fresh on the day Val Royeaux fell was now anything but. The milk and butter had long since turned, too, of course. The rotting bodies of the dead residents who had fled upstairs did not much help the smell. The reek had permeated much of the other foodstuffs: sausages and hams that were cured and would be otherwise edible. Not even a Duster could stomach them.

Not all was ruined. Bread and pies had moldered in the pantry, but preserved in barrels were dried fruit and pickled herrings that could still be consumed. Wheels of cheese covered in wax were untouched. Also covered in wax were crocks of honey and jars of sweet preserves. There were crates of root vegetables that the rats had not lived long enough to investigate. There were boxes of chocolate and of sugar plums, kept for the delight of the wealthy. Some barrels contained fine white flour, and some held oats and barley, which could be boiled up in hastily wiped cauldrons. There was an oven, which would take time to fire up, but could be used to make flat bread. Gilded furniture in the ballroom was broken up to fuel the cookfires.

There was wine in plenty, including Orlesian honey wine. The cistern on the roof was found and the water in it discovered to be safe enough. This place, guarded by a few Wardens, could serve as a refuge and a supply center. All around the Place Reville, various units were claiming their own headquarters.

People were exhausted. In turns, they could eat and rest and prepare for the next move.

Leliana told off some of the newer Wardens to this duty: a few who were too injured to chase the Archdemon, but fit to stand guard and make their way around a kitchen. There were those who had never been warriors before the Blight, but who knew how to cook.

"Make a nourishing stew, " she said. "It will not take long for potatoes, onions and barley to cook. Make it in small pots, so the water will boil faster. Add the herring to it. It will not be fine, but it will be hot and put strength in us. A few at a time will come back here."

Sigrun and Brosca, practiced pilferers that they were, discovered a wealth of silver spoons for eating the stew, a hodgepodge of elegant bowls and plates to serve it in, and a parade of crystal goblets and jeweled cups for their drink.

During the halt, the army remained on guard. Sporadic waves of darkspawn burst out into the square and were promptly destroyed. The golems were invaluable, for they needed neither rest, nor food, nor water.

Cauthrien suggested building barricades to Loghain, but he only approved them for some of the side streets.

"We can't settle down here. We've got to move on after the Archdemon, and we've got to leave the Avenue open."

Bronwyn had not taken part in clearing out the Warden's headquarters, but remained outside, sheltered from the rain by a pillared loggia, looking through a spyglass, watching the Archdemon on the distant tower watching her.

Alistair, came outside, Scrapper trailing behind him, and brought her some food.

"You need to eat," he told her. On a painted fish plate with a gilded rim lay a bizarre assortment of food: herrings, olives, chocolate almonds, dried apricots from Antiva, and a big wedge of Haute-Cantal cheese. "And drink," he added, passing her a silver goblet of what tasted like a earthy Mourvèdre red. "That's good with the cheese. I tried it."

"You and cheese," she said, smiling in spite of herself. She gave some of the herring to Scout, who snapped it up, licking his chops, and then angled for a bit of cheese. "We had some good cheese after the Tower of Ishal. Remember?"

"Do I!" he scoffed. "Like I could ever forget! Especially the smoked Amaranthine. That was fabulous. I would have brought you bread, but there isn't any. Leliana put Rabille and Lucy to work cooking. Some others, too. They'll stay and make some stew out the odds and ends and try to bake some quick bread. Guard the place a bit. Anders is working on the wounded in there. You should come in and sit for awhile."

She shook her head. "Not now."

It had not been long, really, but they needed to advance.

Bronwyn wolfed her food down hungrily and finished her wine in a long swallow. Riordan, Sainsby, and Visconti were coming — Sainsby was stuffing his face with a fistful of soft cheese — and it was time to pull their people together.

"You should have seen the Imperial Market!" Sainsby was saying to Visconti. "Prime stuff there, I can tell you..."

Riordan, predictably, did not look pleased to hear about the plundering of his homeland. Sainsby desisted, and began talking eagerly about the rope and grappling hooks.

Jowan came out of the Warden's house, walking normally. Bronwyn wondered how he could be fit to fight after such a serious burn, but he seemed determined. Lily bounded at his side, looking up at him every few steps.

"How are you?" Bronwyn asked.

"Fine, fine, no problem in the world," Jowan said hastily, which Bronwyn did not find particularly reassuring.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. I'm bandaged up and I'll be fine. Anders is coming in a minute," he added. "He left a couple of the new mages with the wounded. Between him and the First Enchanter, his leg seems fine. Amazing talent, really." He looked about, and saw Morrigan, sitting apart, daintily consuming a jar of strawberry preserves. "Have you seen Velanna? Has she come back?"

Bronwyn grimaced. "No. I have no idea what happened to her. She was last seen running off in wyvern form up the Avenue of the Sun. Morrigan warned me that mages can get too involved in their shape-shifting. Maybe she's forgotten she's an elf."

Alistair burst out in an involuntary laugh. "Impossible! Or at least, she'll remember it pretty soon."

Bronwyn smiled too, a little, but was annoyed at the potential loss of a powerful mage. Velanna had always been wayward.

The dwarves were coming out to join them, Astrid at their head. Orzammar dwarves hated rain, but there was nothing to be done about it. Loghain was talking to his old friends among the Dalish Elves. It was time to push on to the Cathedral.

Reveling in her power and freedom, Velanna bounded through the streets, spitting, smashing, ripping darkspawn as she went. Rain poured off her sides unheeded. An ogre started up, puzzled at her appearance, and she knocked him down and disemboweled him with a single swat. It was glorious to be so strong, to have nothing to fear. Her thoughts seemed different, more straightforward, more responsive to her senses as a wyvern. No darkspawn was her equal, and any shemlen in her way was no more than an ant to be crushed underfoot. In fact, she felt eager; ready for anything. Let the shemlen try to stop her.

Let the Wardens swarm over the Archdemon and die. She had done her part. Why should she give her life for those who

had destroyed the Dales? She was sick of Bronwyn, that shemlen hypocrite, with her ever-so-noble-and-generous attitude; and even sicker of Astrid, that squat little one-armed durgen'len, who imagined she had the right to tell any of the elvhen what to do. The noise of battle faded as she left it behind, enjoying the sensation of running fast along curving streets, sometimes using her little wings to get a bit of lift so she could bound up to the rooftops. She killed the darkspawn where she found them, and needed no orders. It was a joy to escape them all at last, even Merrill with her earnest advice and Lanaya with her disapproving looks. She did not need them. She did not need anybody.

Her side was still tender, but it would heal in time. Wyverns were tough. Being a wyvern was very agreeable.

Stones rattled to her right. Something big was coming up the street in her direction, and coming fast. She lifted her snout, and smelled wyvern.

Was it that fool Jowan, or that simpering flat-ears Tara? Morrigan would not be following her — the shemlen witch had no use for Velanna, and the feeling was mutual. Anders would be busy healing Niall, so it would be neither of them. Danith had liked Niall... But he was a shemlen, and no concern of hers. In fact, what did any of them matter to her? Velanna the Dalish elf was fading, and Velanna the wyvern seemed far superior.

She sniffed again, and with her wyvern-keen senses, identified the smell.

Leopold, the shemlen Duke's pet! The beast must have escaped and was running loose. Velanna chuffed a harsh wyvern laugh at the thought of the chaos that would cause: the pompous shemlen demanding that they all cease their fighting and return his prize to him.

The wyvern burst through a blocked alley and scrambled to a halt within spitting distance. Velanna was surprised to see that the Duke was riding on Leopold, but he was not shouting orders or complaints. He looked... Velanna padded closer, while Leopold's great golden eyes stared at her.

The shemlen was dead! That was amusing. The dead man was propped up by the straps and buckles, his eyes open, a look of comical surprise on his face.

The ridiculously opulent harness was hampering the other wyvern's movements. Velanna came closer yet, and let the male smell her. Then, very carefully, she extended a single talon, and tore delicately through the saddle girth. Leopold did not move. With a noise like a sigh and then a thump, the saddle, Duke and all, spilled sideways onto the cobblestones, and Leopold was free. He trumpeted a glad cry, and she answered in kind. Sensing more darkspawn, Velanna squealed and went to hunt them down. Happy enough to please the female, Leopold followed, not much liking the darkspawn's smell either. The master was dead and his hold on Leopold gone forever. They should leave this strange, stony place, and find his old mountains...

The Gate of the Moon was shut. A deep voice was raised in command, shouting almost-words behind the defenses of Val Royeaux. The darkspawn had swung the bronze portal closed with maddening slowness, as Pentaghast and his Wardens dashed across the battlefield. Here the defensive topography of the Tevinters worked against them, for instead of a flat plain, they faced hills and valleys and abrupt drop-offs. By the time they were within bowshot, the gate was barred and the Wardens exposed to a withering volley of arrows and magic.

"Take cover!"

There was no choice but to withdraw behind the tall buttresses of the Imperial Highway. It would be a siege, after all.

"Something's going on in the city!" Athis shouted in her commander's ear. "Where's the Archdemon?"

"Up to no good, I daresay." He laughed. "Our Tevinter brethren will just have to make the rough places plain again, so we can bring up what siege engines we've got."

The Tevinters were in a huddle with Elagabalus, their commander, and were apparently about to do just that... or something of the sort. However, they were also waving their blood-spattered hands and discussing a project that very soon began to take shape: a growing hillock with a stone foundation, growing higher, and higher, as the Tevinters tried to create a place that would allow them to see over the city walls. It was amazing. It was rather horrifying. And because

they were on a coastal plain, the earth was not really stable enough to support a pile of dirt very easily. The observation platform would suffice for the moment. The First Warden made them concentrate on the the battlefield next.

A rearguard was posted around the Place Reville, and the army resumed its march, sending out scouts and skirmishers to lure the darkspawn out. As far as possible, Loghain maintained his multiple column tactics, but some streets came to dead ends, or curved off in inconvenient directions. Every unit had its map, even if only in the leader's head, and they had points at which they would make contact.

He decided to drop the attack on the Alienage, since Visconti told him that though a powerful darkspawn had been there, it had since moved on to the north, and was probably engaged in defending that wall.

"Good," Loghain briefly replied. "If it's pinned down there, it's not fighting us."

A golem was assigned to each of the flanks, and they walked through fire, poison, and arrows unimpeded. Shale and the other three were at the head of the main column, just behind the skirmishers. The ballistae were rolled along, and with some watchful mages, formed a protection for the bomb wagon. A chance fireball would not easily set off the lyrium explosives, but they wanted no accidents.

The Qunari, their number down by two, moved with the main

column as well. Sten had a better idea now of what each man could do. They were not bad soldiers, by any means, though inexperienced in fighting any enemies other than Tevinters and Rivainnis.

Now that their presence was known to the Archdemon, the numbers sent against them were far greater. The mages were doing better and better against the darkspawn, now able to cast area-of-effect spells in advance and together, something most of them had never tried before. The results were astonishing: in one case, the shaking earth had brought down an entire building being used by darkspawn snipers.

"They just... brought it down!" Bronwyn said to Alistair, absolutely astonished. "That's amazing!"

"That's why the Templars learn how to bring *mages* down," Alistair pointed out, though not very loudly. "You know you might well be giving them ideas."

"True," Bronwyn said softly. It was a moral quandary. She was giving mages ideas about using their powers... even letting them recognize that they *were* powerful when they had a common purpose.

But why *shouldn't* mages achieve their potential? Why should mages be imprisoned and emasculated, just so the non-magical could enslave them and imagine themselves morally superior *because* they lacked magical powers? It was awkward for anyone who truly believed—as Bronwyn believed she did — in the pursuit of excellence. She herself was

superior to some others — in birth, in ability — and believed herself to have the right to rule them. That did not mean, however, that she had the right to tyrannize over them, to kill or torment them at will, or to permit others to do so. The Tevinter mages, as far as she could see, had taken their magical gifts to mean they had the right to do all those things. And Bronwyn had certainly seen the variation of intelligence, character, and talent among her own mages. Having magic no more made a mage a superior being than having high birth had made Vaughan Kendalls fit to rule a pigpen. Niall had been a kindly man, wanting to work for the common good; Velanna was a bitter, hostile harridan who cared little for anyone she did not personally love.

Bronwyn still felt their new Fereldan way was the best way: it gave mages an outlet for their gifts and ambitions, like letting steam vent from a pot. Let Bethany Hawke heal the sick in her clinic; let Enchanter Uldred and his mages serve in the army. It did not have to be an all-or-nothing situation. No one was putting the mages in charge: they were instead being allowed to make something of their lives. What would come of this experiment, she could not guess.

"King Loghain!" shouted a messenger, one of a patrol of four who ran at double time into the Avenue. "News from the Palace! The Orlesians have taken it, and the darkspawn leader is slain!"

A hearty cheer rose up, especially from the other Orlesians. The messenger reached Loghain, bowed, and said, far more gravely. "But there is sorrow, too. Duke Prosper was slain in

the battle. Prince Florestan has assumed command."

"Unfortunate," Loghain responded, wondering what the Orlesians would do if he decided to dance the Remigold. In a way it really was unfortunate. Prosper was a capable fellow, and no doubt the Palace district had been taken due to his good sense. However, he was manifestly going to be a thorn in Ferelden's flesh later on. Loghain did not know much about Prince Florestan, other than the very silly moon-calf looks he directed at Bronwyn, but he was far less likely to give them trouble once they tried to get out of this awful country.

Bronwyn's reaction was somewhat different. She had been rather nervous about Prosper and his ambitions herself, but could see that it was a pity for Orlais to lose a strong leader at this juncture. Florestan would no doubt do his best, but she suspected that Nevarra would get more territory from him than it would have from the Duke de Montfort.

Very soon the main body, led by Florestan himself, appeared, joining up at an intersection.

"Your Majesties," he said, bowing to Bronwyn, and nodding more casually to Loghain. "You have heard the news."

"Yes," said Bronwyn. "We commiserate with you on the loss of the noble Duke. He was our esteemed ally."

"Then we shall avenge him," said Florestan. "You have not seen him, have you? He was still in the saddle—quite dead—when his wyvern ran away."

Loghain took a deep breath. It would never do to laugh.

"Have you ever been inside the Cathedral?' Bronwyn asked Riordan.

"Of course. Not in the more private areas. Perhaps Ser Silas would be of more help there."

"He described it in detail to me, but it's not the same as seeing it for myself. I've promised our Qunari allies a look at the vaults, since they want a book back that the Chantry borrowed some time ago." Briefly, she described the arrangement she had made about the Tome of Koslun. Riordan was pragmatic about it.

"I have been only in the sanctuary and the chapel of the Disciple Havard. Twice I have been received in the Divine's audience chamber. That is all."

"What about the bell tower? Silas says there's a spiral staircase going all the way to the top."

"Yes, I have been there, long ago. One must obtain leave, but it gives one a superb view of the city. Not as splendid as the one no doubt afforded by the White Spire, but that, alas, is no more, and it was nearly impossible of access. But I remember enjoying the privilege of climbing to the top of the south tower. It was a long climb, on a narrow, decorative spiral staircase. One saw the bells, of course, which were very interesting, and then one emerged into an elaborate room that opened out

onto the roof garden. Both towers have flat roofs, and they were used for outings and picnics by the nobles and priests. Sometimes the Divine met with high clergy on the north roof, especially if they wished to make it impossible for anyone to eavesdrop, I am told."

"So we could send a force up the staircase to attack the Archdemon on the roof."

"We could, if the Archdemon did not inconveniently fly away. It would hear us coming, and would no doubt have darkspawn stationed on the staircase the entire way. There is only room for one at a time to pass. The ascent would be slow... and deadly."

She nodded, a plan forming in her mind.

"Horde," indeed.

Innumerable darkspawn crowded within the Cathedral Compound, even after the golems had smashed the gates. The Archdemon swooped down, flaming, but the press was so thick that the flames incinerated its own minions, as well as soldiers and Wardens.

The engineers were dealing more effectively with the rain. The ballistae, brought up near the walls, were tilted up, and scored two hits. The Archdemon flapped away unsteadily, up to the refuge of the Cathedral tower, another hole in its right wing and a deep wound in its neck. Lightning flashed

overhead, briefly dazzling them all. Darkspawn, Bronwyn discovered, really disliked lightning. That had not registered on her before, but it made sense.

Despite being bloodied so badly, Tara, Anders, Jowan, and Morrigan changed into wyvern form, and helped the golems drive into the Cathedral square. There was no question of riding them, this time, for in this press, the wyverns would need maximum agility and the freedom to perform feats that would snap any rider's neck. Once in, they were followed by a mass of Grey Wardens and a solid phalanx of the Legion of the Dead. The rest of the army opened up the wedge, spreading out through the compound, maintaining a guard over the chokepoints at the gates.

Bronwyn fought her way through, with Alistair at her right and Zevran at her left. It made her feel ill.. uneasy... to be here, remembering that the Divine had named her anathema in this very place. While it was easy to scoff to other people, the sentence had preyed on her mind and caused her a certain degree of pain. The place was crawling with darkspawn, and the holy statues surrounding the square were defiled, but this had once been the heart of the Chantry, and it had cast her out. There might even be those among the Orlesians who had seen it. Prosper had.

But Prosper is dead, and cannot speak of it ever again.

Oddly, that gave her some relief, unworthy as it was. For her part, she would like that episode to be utterly forgotten. She had enemies, she knew, and she could imagine with what

spiteful pleasure they would gnaw the bone of her humiliation. Her cousin Habren's face sprang to mind, and Bronwyn almost laughed at herself for caring what that vicious little fool might think, comfortable and cosseted in her estate in Denerim.

Darkspawn blood splashed in Zevran's face, and Bronwyn glanced at him in alarm. How many after today would be Tainted? It might not be the secretive Grey Wardens' policy, but she would offer the Joining to any it might save. If she could catch her breath, she must tell someone that.

More darkspawn poured through the far northern portal. They must get there and get it barricaded. Triumphant wyvern screams resounded, and golems shook the earth. Irving led some of the mages up to a clear space on a walkway along the low walls, where they could cast directly into the heart of the squirming mass of darkspawn. A raging storm rose up in a perfect circle, buffeting and freezing the creatures. A firestorm was tried, but the rain was too heavy for it to be entirely effective. No, lightning and ice was the order of the day.

Or night. It could hardly be more than a little past sundown, but it was dark now, the heavy stormclouds blotting out the light. The battle was lit with flashes of lightning, with darkspawn bonfires smouldering luridly in the shelter of the Cathedral, and with magefire blazing from hundreds of staffs.

Light blazed from the Cathedral, too, through the shattered windows and sagging doors, from the top of the belltower, and most eerily, from the purple, arcane fire streaming from the maw of the Archdemon.

Distantly, she heard Loghain's voice bellowing a command, as Greagoir and his Templars fought their way up to the wall to defend the mages.

Then she tripped on a root, and nearly went down. Someone behind her steadied her with a hand — she thought it was Emrys— and then she realized the thick tendril stretching across the square was no treeroot.

"Broodmother shit!" shouted Brosca to Astrid. "Guess this must be the place, Princess Paragon!"

Now that they were closer, they could see more of the tendrils. Nor were they all. Pulsing sacs clustered around the ornate doorway, and much of the inside of the Cathedral sanctuary appeared to be a repulsive shade of flesh-pink.

There were archers up in the tower, and up on the huge peaked roof of the Cathedral, and they were nearly in range of their arrows.

How to attack?

Loghain managed to get close enough to Irving to shout a question.

"Could you bring that tower down?"

"Too big. Maybe in a few days, but the Archdemon would have flown by then."

So, no. Bronwyn and her Wardens wanted to kill the

Archdemon, not shoo it away to another place where it could lie low and build a horde all over again. In fact, it was likely that she wanted the Archdemon to stay exactly where it was. The snipers, however, had to go.

"Target the archers in the tower and on the roof," he ordered. "Get rid of them."

As the square was somewhat cleared, bands of soldiers with shields made a moving shelter for some picked archers and mages. They locked their shields, and crept forward, a little at a time, while others gave them cover. Those under the shields would peer out between the cracks, choosing a target, and then at a quiet word would pop up, and send a lethal message to the darkspawn.

Meanwhile, Bronwyn needed to get a message to Loghain. Her plan was now clear in her mind, and he had a critical role to play. She turned to pass the information to Emrys, trusting him to get every word right. He looked rather shocked, but was too disciplined to give her an argument. He slipped away, running toward Loghain and his men.

"Keep the Archdemon's attention. Make it clear that you're trying for the tower staircase, but can't get there?" Loghain growled. "Just what does the Queen have in mind?"

"I think," Emrys said, trying to be tactful with majesty, "That she means to do here what she did at the Rock." He nodded over to the Wardens, still surging against the darkspawn.

"They've got ropes, Lord King. They've got grappling hooks. While the Archdemon laughs at us, thinking we'll never get up that narrow staircase, the Queen will be up and over the top with the Wardens, and be on the Archdemon before it knows what's happening."

Loghain felt rather sick, not liking the idea of Bronwyn risking herself like that; but also rather excited, wondering if it could possibly work. She had done it at Ostagar; she had done it at the Rock. Here, the greatest danger was from her own people.

"Pass the word," he ordered a lieutenant. "No matter what anyone sees, they are to point and shout only at the Archdemon itself and at the base of the tower. If they see climbers, they're not to betray them to the darkspawn!"

He swung his troops around, sheltering the Wardens from the darkspawn mob as well as possible. The Qunari and his men were in earshot. Loghain got Sten's attention, and pointed at the north gate of the compound.

"Help that golem hold the gate. If the Wardens are to take the Archdemon, we don't need any more darkspawn in here!"

Sten nodded curtly, and led his men in a flying wedge through the seething mass.

Riordan had cut his way to Bronwyn and they were able to step back just enough, behind a broken statue, to confer.

She told him, "I've asked Loghain to make a lot of noise and confusion down here. The Archdemon knows we can never get up that staircase, but it doesn't realize that there's another way."

He grinned fiercely. "Just like Ostagar."

"Exactly. The army and most of the Wardens must hold off the darkspawn, while I and my climbers go up the side of the tower." She gestured at it. "Look at it! It's ideal for a climber: plenty of ledges, plenty of carving, plenty of buttresses. I can start with my rope there —" she pointed. "And get up there and swing it up to that—"

"By the Maker!" he exclaimed. "I shall go with you!"

"It's going to be dangerous in the rain," she warned him. "The stones will be slick."

He gave a very Orlesian shrug. "It's not like I was going to live forever."

"If you've got any hill folk among your people, bring them. I've got a pair of Avvars who are splendid, and some others who have climbed with me in the past. And I've got Morrigan and Anders who don't need ropes to get up there. Speaking of which..."

She sounded a signal on her horn to recall the wyverns, who had done about all they could do in the compound without harming their own people. Instantly, they raced back to

Bronwyn, slaying darkspawn as they bounded along. Pools of wyvern poison spread out on the stones. Trampled underfoot, Bronwyn noticed a straw-stuffed effigy dressed in rotting rags, and shivered.

Alistair was coming with her. Bronwyn had not the heart to order him away, though she felt she should. This was something he needed, if only for his self-respect. Nor were the climbers all Fereldan.

Riordan was coming, with a band of chosen Wardens. It was his country, after all, and no one had a better right than he. Bronwyn wondered how many would actually make it up the tower. The rain showed no signs of letting up, and the lightning flashes were startling and ominous.

Astrid could not follow Bronwyn up to the roof. It was galling, but she was no climber. She would have not the first idea how to shimmy up a rope, or whatever it was Bronwyn intended to do. Not that she wanted to risk striking the final blow, for she had every intention of surviving the Blight. Still, it would have looked better for a Paragon of Orzammar to be in the thick of things, helping. Now she was relegated to the ranks of the bystanders: to the press of soldiers and Wardens who would simply be making a *diversion* for the real heroes.

The party that had helped Bronwyn take the Rock would be going with her: Anders, Morrigan, Zevran and Tara, the Avvars, Darach, Quinn, Sigrun, even Brosca, who was gallingly more devoted to Bronwyn than to her own Paragon.

Carver Hawke was going as well. Leliana was over there, gabbling furiously that she could make the climb, too, not wanting to be left behind.

What Astrid needed was a deed of as equal stature as possible, something that would not cause Bronwyn difficulty, but would be worthy and noble in itself, and...

Of course. The Broodmothers. The nest.

Besides, it was the most plausible distraction. It would be safer to do it now, too, than later, when the darkspawn would no longer have the Archdemon to protect. Most of all, Astrid *wanted* to do it now.

She pushed her way through the crowd to tell Bronwyn her idea.

"It would be safer after the Archdemon's gone," Bronwyn pointed out, looking a bit puzzled. "We could all go together."

"I have a sufficiently large party," Astrid disagreed stiffly. "I shall take Falkor, Hakan, and Soren. I'll have a large number of Legion of the Dead and I'll also take Shale with me. Better to destroy the nest now."

Bronwyn's voice sharpened a little. "I'd rather you didn't. It could startle the Archdemon away."

She looked very determined, and so Astrid, knowing she would not win in a contest of force, resorted to cunning. "Just

as you say, then."

Bronwyn gave her a nod and darted off to join the climbing party. Astrid waited until she was absorbed in preparations, and then began quietly giving her own orders to bring up the wagon loaded with lyrium bombs.

A strong party of shield-bearers pressed toward the darkspawn guarding the staircase to the tower. "Guarding?" "Occupying" was a better word. There was a genlock or hurlock on every step. Visconti and Sainsby had gathered all those who could protect themselves from arrows, and who also could shout and make trouble. They had to strike a nice balance. They must attract the Archdemon's attention without actually frightening the dragon away.

It was dangerous, too. Many of the darkspawn used poisoned arrows, and an otherwise innocuous hit to ankle or calf could prove fatal.

The two commanders agreed, though, that as soon as there was the least hint that the Archdemon was failing, they would loose everything they had on the staircase.

Bronwyn last farewell was particularly painful.

"Scout! See Loghain? Go to Loghain and Amber. I'll be back soon. No, I can't take you with me. You're too big. Go to Loghain."

The mabari whimpered, backing away reluctantly. Bronwyn felt like crying herself.

"Go to Loghain!"

Meanwhile, Astrid had Falkor find Ser Silas. The Templar was distracted, just having bid Leliana farewell and given her a blessing.

"Is there a way into the Cathedral other than the big front door?" Astrid asked, not wasting time in games.

He knew several. When asked, he was quite willing to help Astrid fight her way to the best one for their purposes: the service entry.

"It is there that tradesmen made deliveries: food, silks, candles, firewood. It lets one into the lower reaches of the Grand Cathedral."

"Then that's where we're going."

Loghain noticed a large force of dwarves move around to the far side of the Cathedral, but believed them to be part of the holding action at the north gate of the compound. That seemed to be effective, and he concentrated on directing the slaughter of darkspawn in the south-east corner. Once they had rid themselves of the nearest dangers, they could hold off the darkspawn outside the compound walls, while the tiny figures he determinedly tried not to look at crawled up the

south side of the Cathedral tower like so many ants.

Lightning struck the tower just as Bronwyn was high enough in her climb for a fall to be inescapably fatal. The Archdemon echoed the thunderclap with a wild scream. It was frightening.

Bronwyn suspected that she was not the only one who thought so. Tara had begged and pleaded and cried to go along, and soft-hearted Ostap had once again agreed to carry her on his back. Bronwyn was higher than anyone else at the moment, and knew better than look down or even look around her for her comrades, but this was a bad climb, and they would be lucky to make it. She did not see how all of them could. She had told her friends to take their time, and do their best, and that it was not a race. Once they were at the top, they would try to wait for at least a few others, and Anders and Morrigan would certainly be there. Bronwyn reckoned that even with a half-dozen and the element of surprise, they very likely could carry the day. The Archdemon was looking either down into the Cathedral courtyard, or north over the walls. It was blind in its left eye, and with any kind of luck would not see them coming over the south side of the tower's edge.

In some ways it was easier than Ishal. There were many more ledges for grappling hooks to sink into, and a generally rougher surface. Her boots had no trouble gaining purchase on the wall. But no one had watched her climb Ishal. Destiny had rested in her hands that night, but no one had known that. Now, thousands of eyes below could see her, trusting her not to fail; trusting her to see them through this.

The bowels of the Cathedral were filled with a loathsome mass of Broodmother matter. Stinking and spongy, it clung to one's boots with every footstep, and let go with a wet little hiss each time. Astrid was uncomfortably aware that she had never fought a Broodmother, and had no one in her party who had. Perhaps she should have summoned Sten.

But no: he was at the north gate and had plenty to do. The danger and glory of this venture were hers alone. She had heard the stories and asked the proper questions. She knew what to expect. And she had Shale, which was immensely reassuring.

So the tentacles rising from the floor did not complete unman her party. Shale stunned them with blows. The axemen came forward and chopped at them lustily. When darkspawn lunged at them from the shadows, Astrid's people were prepared. Distant moans rose further on.

Silas said, "The only place I can think of that would be large enough for what you describe is the Cathedral laundry. It's a vast chamber, with high vaulted ceilings. It had to be big for the boilers and the wide tubs."

"I don't want to go *into* the laundry," Astrid told him. "I want to find the floor above and drop these bombs down into it. Can you lead us there?"

"I believe so."

He led them through a maze of storage rooms and still rooms, along corridors with heavy, broken doors, lined with more of the foul tendrils. Dark blood stained the stone floors.

"Do you know where the vault is?" Astrid thought briefly of Sten and his book.

"Yes, but it's much further west, under the statue of Andraste herself."

"Forget it, then."

Rain fell on them in places. Part of the building's roof had collapsed, leaving a sizable hole to admit weather. Much of the main sanctuary floor had collapsed as well, piling rubble below. Picking their way through to their destination was no easy task. They had to change direction when one tunnel proved too narrow and low for Shale to pass at all.

Astrid's senses were on fire. There was a massive darkspawn presence ahead and below: exactly what she would expect of a Broodmother nest. As they moved deeper into the Cathedral, they found that tendrils had insinuated themselves everywhere: trailing down corridors, bursting open doors. They draped from floor to ceiling, everywhere laden with swelling sacs. Thousands of darkspawn were gestating here.

No one said anything. There was nothing to say. The stink was indescribable.

Behind her came her Wardens and her loyal Legion of the

Dead. Many were heavily burdened with lyrium bombs that could be linked into compound explosives. Hakan carried the detonators: small devices that could be set off by a hard blow. In places they had to hack through sacs to squeeze through the corridors, spilling out half-formed embryos. Some were mature enough to shriek as Shale stamped the life out of them.

"Disgusting," the golem muttered. "I shall have to stand in the rain for a long time after this."

Silas looked about him, trying to get his bearings.

"I'm not sure..." he whispered. "Everything looks different."

"We're still going west," Astrid told him. "I've got enough stone sense left to know that."

So they moved on, hacking, hacking; wincing as unspeakable fluids splashed and dripped on them. Astrid saw no way that the Templar would get through this without being Blighted. He would of course be recruited; the Wardens could do far worse.

The moaning was louder now: a chorus of dull despair, ebbing and flowing like an evil tide, eerie music from a myriad of throats.

"I think... here..." Silas said, gesturing at a doorway before them. "It was an airing cupboard for the linen."

Through the door was a wide, circular room, built over some vaulting, which made the floor strange and uneven. The shelves that had once lined the walls had mostly collapsed, and piles of stained linen were scattered around the room, absorbing the spongy damp of the Broodmother matter until the linen was nearly indistinguishable from it.

"Paragon, look!" exclaimed Falkor. Using his axe, he scraped away some of the spongy matter from the floor, exposing a tendril. It had come up through the floor itself, penetrating the stone vaulting. Part of the floor was crumbling away from the support beams. They all felt an unsettling shift beneath their feet.

"Shale, you'll have to go back," Astrid ordered. "We don't want to put anyone more weight on this floor than necessary. Thanks for your help."

"Nothing, really," snarked the golem. "A mere bagatelle. I was looking forward to my showerbath anyway..." the muttering faded with the sound of heavy footsteps retreating.

Astrid had most of her Legion wait in the corridor, as the explosives team worked swiftly. Brushing stone chips away, they could see down into the chamber below them, but the light was dim. Astrid flinched back from the glimpse of monstrous bodies packed together, tentacles waving gently in an arcane breeze. The rest of the party were looking, too, through the other cracks in the floor. Ser Silas' face was drawn with the horror of it. Astrid shrugged off the emotions of surfacers, not quite grasping that the core of Silas' horror

was the likelihood that some the monsters below had been women he knew.

Astrid steeled herself and took another look. She could see no sign of active darkspawn down there. They could widen some of these cracks, assemble the bombs, lower them down, and then detonate them from outside the Cathedral. It was risky, but doable.

Candles were found and lit, giving a little more light to work in. The bombs were taken from packs, and the work of assembly began. Falkor brought out the reels of wire that were be used to to lower them; the kind that would carry the detonating spark. Some of the Legion set to work carefully widening a few of the cracks in the floor. The men with the detonators handled them gingerly. A premature detonation would kill them all.

"Hurry!" Astrid growled. Silas looked on in wonder. He had heard vague rumors of dwarven explosives. They were apparently quite the equal of Qunari gaatlok.

Grit from the cracks whispered as it sifted away to the floor below them. Falkor fixed the first of the bombs to a wire, pushed it through the floor, and played out the wire from the reel in his hand. Astrid watched, heart pounding in suspense, as the device descended. She twitched the wire slightly to make it settle between two of the horrible, moaning creatures...

Stone exploded up at them in a storm of tentacles. The

dwarves screamed as the floor disintegrated, and they slid, inexorably, into the ghastly pit below them. Broodmothers shrilled in rage. The air turned green with poison. More screams, as claws tore at dwarven flesh, and tentacles ripped limbs from bodies. A few had not fallen, but clung to the support beams. Soren shrieked as a tentacle reached out and dragged him down. Hakan was next to him, clutching the detonators to his chest with one hand, clinging to a beam with the other.

From somewhere below, Astrid heard Silas shout, "Maker! Accept your servant into your—*aaahhh!*" A horrible gurgling noise cut his voice off.

Astrid had sunk the hook of her metal arm into a remaining support beam and hung there, struggling to grab it with her right hand and pull herself up. It was not impossible, as long as —

An explosion below, the first of many, as Hakan lost his grip and fell, setting off the detonator charges. The minor explosion sparked a bundle of bombs nearby, and the resulting chain reaction was so swift that it sounded like one huge thunderclap to those outside the Cathedral.

Broodmothers were reduced to fragments in a burst of glorious blue-white light. As the light rushed up to meet her, Astrid's last thoughts were furious and despairing: an image of Bhelen, smug and smiling, surrounded by his happy family, dedicating a fine memorial statue of their late, great Paragon Astrid, once Gytha Aeducan.

No! no! I was going to be Queen!

The explosion that killed Astrid killed some of Bronwyn's climbers, too.

The entire edifice quaked. No one knew at first what had happened, and they thought it a close, powerful lightning strike. Much of the remaining roof of the Cathedral collapsed, sending up a cloud of dust, and sending the darkspawn snipers down to meet the cobblestones in gruesome splatters. The bell tower shook: so hard that two of the bells tolled faintly, and some of the darkspawn fell from the staircase. The Archdemon squawked in alarm, and then screamed in fury as it realized what had happened to the greatest of the nests. It sent out messages to its remaining lieutenants, summoning them from whatever else they were doing; demanding that they kill its enemies and avenge the nest.

The tremendous noise of the explosion covered the screams of those falling from the tower; those caught in mid-swing on their ropes, or those who were clinging to the stones in the act of tossing their grappling hooks. Thus died Sigrun and Clovis. Thus died Bustrum, who was too good a climber to have fallen for any other reason than someone else's fatal ambition.

Others, like Riordan, Leliana, and Quinn were hurt as their rhythm was thrown off by the shock. Alistair, too, had his nose bloodied by a wall that came up to meet him rather faster than he had planned. He held tight to the rope, and lived.

Bronwyn was perhaps the first one to realize what had happened, and it took her some time to pull herself together.

I will kill her. I am not joking. I am not exaggerating. I will kill Astrid, if I live through this.

Then the terrible unlikelihood of her survival struck her, and she choked back a sob, dangling between heaven and earth. There was so much she wanted to do, and be, and have, and her future seemed no longer than a rope's length.

I should have written Fergus a letter! Why didn't I write to him?

If she allowed herself to think like this, she might as well let go of the rope right now. Hissing a breath through her teeth, she pulled hard and walked up the wall to the next ledge. Another throw of the grappling hook, and she would be on the last stage of the climb.

Anders, fluttering back and forth desperately, was in a pitiable state. Morrigan might complacently perch on the edge, hidden by the wall at the top of the staircase. He found it impossible to be so calm. At the top of the tower, they had found the little ornate structure that housed the access to the staircase, and had discreetly barricaded the door, so that no darkspawn could burst out to defend the Archdemon. It was not much of a barricade: mostly ornamental urns full of dead flowers, but it was enough.

He longed to encourage his friends, but knew that swooping

past them was more like to startle them. Ostap must have heard Bustrum's death cry. He was struggling on the slick wall, burdened by Tara, and anguished over the loss of his friend. Riordan was gritting his teeth, his elbow no doubt hurting him. Brosca was having trouble getting a secure grip on her rope now, and had slid down several feet. Then there was Alistair, his face bloody. Anders considered taking human form on a ledge and healing some injuries, but the storm and the situation frightened him. Then, too, suddenly being healed might also startle people. Zevran saw him go past, and flashed a fierce grin his way. He, at least, looked unhurt, and not in the least disheartened, even if very, very wet.

When they reach the top. When they reach the top, I'll be waiting. I'll cast a general healing on each one as they reach the top.

Loghain had no idea what had happened in the Cathedral, until a dwarven officer came to pass on the reports of some survivors from the Legion of the Dead. He had flinched away from the shock wave, like everyone else, and then, in dull horror, had seen the little figures tumbling from the tower. Bronwyn had not fallen, but what was she going through?

The dwarf, with pride and grief, told him that Paragon Astrid had led her people into the Cathedral and blown up the nest. Apparently, something had gone wrong and most of her party had been killed by the blast.

"My condolences," Loghain said. His face was stone. He hadn't told the bloody dwarf princess to go in there. The nest

could have waited. *Should* have waited.

His head was turned in the direction of the bloody Archdemon, but his gaze was directed to the left, watching the little figure in dark red armor as it neared the top of the tower. What was the matter with the other bloody Wardens? Why did Bronwyn have to do everything herself?

You there, Carver Hawke! Look lively! And you, Brosca! Get yourselves up there and make sure Bronwyn doesn't have to die to save you all!

The darkspawn, at the Archdemon's command, deserted the city wall entirely, rushing south to the Cathedral compound. Their first obstacle came in the form of two angry, vicious wyverns that pounced on the first wave, scattering them, poisoning them, and ripping them apart.

Velanna, by now totally absorbed in her wyvern guise, could not have shifted back to elven form had she tried. It never occurred to her to do so. Instead, she charged into the darkspawn ranks and reduced them to chaos. Leopold, not to be outdone by the female, bounded along, crushing darkspawn a half-dozen at a blow.

Perhaps they ultimately made a very great difference, for the darkspawn were numerous. Had the full number of these reinforcements hit the north gate of the compound, they might well have overrun the defenses. As it was, the darkspawn were decimated, and they were forced to defend themselves,

the archers taking up positions behind the melee fighters.

The last of the hurlock Generals rushed the wyverns, whirling his axe. With a half-intelligible shout, he buried the blade deep in Leopold's spine. The wyvern's ear-piercing shriek temporarily halted Velanna's rampage, but seeing her fellow creature's mortal wound, she renewed her attack with even greater savagery. She charged, knocking the General down. Then she caught his head in her jaws and bit down hard. The indigestible head, with its heavy helmet, was spat out at the darkspawn surrounding her.

More and more darkspawn poured into the street, trying to get past the wyvern and do the Archdemon's will. Velanna fought with all the power of a magical beast. Dozens went down to her poison, her fangs, her claws. They tried to swarm over her, but she leaped up to a statue, shaking them off, and then pounced, again and again, heedless of wounds, a stranger to fear.

All the northern Wardens outside the walls saw the bright flash of the explosion at the Cathedral reflected against the clouds: it shone with the eerie pale blue of lyrium. The roar came a few seconds later.

Athis wiped the rain from her face and looked at Pentaghast. He shook his head.

"That was no lightning strike."

"In the lore... when the Archdemon dies... they say there's a brilliant light... You don't think..."

The Tevinter lookout on the mound shrieked out the news.

"The darkspawn are withdrawing! They've left the walls! They're not at the gate towers!"

As one, the Wardens started running, running for the Gate of the Moon. A blow like a thousand fists struck the gate. They squealed horribly in response, massive hinges straining, bars made brittle.

"Wait!" shouted Elabagalus, his voice magically magnified. "Stand back!"

The terrible fist of arcane energy struck the gate again, fueled by blood and lyrium. The gates sagged, and then there was a tremendous *snap!* and they slammed back. The Wardens began pouring through, bellowing in triumph.

Fenris was here to fight, and so he fought. He had known Qunari in his days of wandering: knew and respected them. With Carver off trying to climb the tower, and Jowan wringing his hands as he waited below, Fenris decided it was time for action. Thus it was that he was in the bloodbath at the north gate of the Cathedral compound, holding off the darkspawn reinforcements. He stood, shoulder to shoulder with the defenders, and hacked away at the darkspawn. The golems and Qunari were big enough to resist attempts to push them

back.

The army was in a perilous position. By this single-minded pursuit of the Archdemon, they had knowingly cut themselves off from support or retreat. Fenris presumed that was Loghain's strategy, at least. The Archdemon could always create another horde, sack another city, build another nest. Without the Archdemon, the darkspawn would be dangerous monsters, but no more than that: unable to unite in massed attacks, unable to plan. Those on the surface did not have the wits to flee to the Deep Roads, and would have to be hunted down and annihilated. So much Fenris had learned from his Grey Warden friends.

So it was the Archdemon or nothing. The allies were staking everything on killing the dragon early and ending this Blight more quickly than any before. In exchange, they were in great danger now. No doubt more darkspawn had swept around and were poised to attack the south entry to the compound.

The Qunari leader, Sten, was an admirable fellow. Fenris did not claim to know him well, but the Qunari was a traveled and intelligent man, and had a far greater breath of vision than most of his race. And he was a tremendous warrior. He stood tall, lopping off a genlock's head and sweeping a hurlock's feet out from under him, while issuing commands in a calm, resonant voice that carried over the noise of battle.

Fenris hacked down a shriek that lunged at him. Blood splashed out, staining his armor. Fenris knew to keep his mouth closed when fighting darkspawn. He wiped sweat from

his eyes with the back of his arm and kept on fighting.

The Archdemon screamed from its command post atop the tower, and a band of genlock archers gathered behind the melee. When the Archdemon screamed again, they loosed their arrows in a volley at Sten.

The golem fighting at the north gate, Rune, saw the volley coming, and instantly put itself in front of Sten. The arrows harmlessly rattled off the dense metal. Sten was rather startled at the golem's action, but the creature was there to protect them, after all.

"Come," he ordered Rune. "You...and you four," he gestured at Fenris and three of his Qunari, "will advance with me and deal with the archers."

She was a rope's length from the top. Bronwyn clung to the ledge, ornamented with scenes of Andraste's battles, and swung the grappling hook. To make sure she was not going to hit anyone else, she was forced to look down and about her.

Zevran was just a little below and to the the right of her. He saw her and edged away to give her room to swing her rope. He mouthed some words at her, but she was too far away to make them out clearly. She thought he was saying, "*Wait for me!*"

Brosca was also to her left, beyond Zevran and a little higher, hauling herself up sturdily with her dwarven upper body

strength. She was totally focused on climbing, and Bronwyn did not try to catch her attention.

Riordan was not far below her. He had evidently been taking the climb in shorter increments, and something was wrong with his left arm. Ostop, to her left, was carrying on doggedly. Tara's face was white and scared. Bronwyn wished that Tara had learned a bird form, but the elf had a fear of heights, and birds were apparently alien to her magic. Bronwyn felt a wave of affection for Tara's loyalty in following her up here, not knowing how she was to get down.

For that matter, how are any of us getting down, with the darkspawn on the staircase? One by one, I suppose. Or... there's always the quicker way, right over the edge.

Her stomach knotted at the thought.

Stop it. You're here to do your duty, not to whine. A Cousland always does her duty.

With the noise of the rain, the thunder, and the Archdemon's furious screams, she could not hear her grappling hook land. She tugged at the rope, and it seemed to hold firmly. She tugged harder, and hoped that the Archdemon had not seen it. For the sound of it, it was still at the front of the tower, looking down on the battle below. Loghain was no doubt doing his damndest to rivet the Archdemon's attention there.

She looked up, and a flutter of black wings settled by the hook. The raven peered down at her, not daring even to

squawk an encouragement. Surely if the hook were laid wrong, Anders would indicate it in some way. There was nothing else for it, so she swung out again, arms aching, and began slowing walking up the carved stones. A sculptured Andraste held her sword high, pointing the way to the victory.

The last bit was the hardest, and Bronwyn struggled to get a hand up over the wet stones at the top, A hand, and then the other, and then a leg, and she slid over the crenelation, nearly onto her face. Lightning struck the White Spire, a short distance away, and stone fell from the ruin. It made a tremendous distraction, which helped Bronwyn as she slunk away to the overdecorated structure that sheltered the top of the staircase. There was enough of a wall to hide in the shadows. She left her grappling hook in place. Riordan and others could use her rope to climb instead of having to swing their own up.

Bronwyn was more worried about Tara and Ostap. She crept further over, looking for them. Beside her, the shadows stirred, and Morrigan's yellow eyes gleamed at her from the darkness. The witch gave her an amused smile, which Bronwyn returned. Good. Someone's nerves were still all they should be. It kindled a spark of hope that this crazy plan would work.

The Archdemon was getting restless. Something had drawn its attention further to the north. It was flapping its wings. Any moment it might take off and all the climbing would be in vain.

Brosca slid over the wall, and Bronwyn beckoned her over.

The little dwarf's eye's lit up, and she slipped silently back to the wall where Bronwyn and Morrigan were waiting. Anders settled by them and transformed. Energy instantly shot through Bronwyn's veins. Anders shot a spell at Brosca, and got a grin and a whispered, "Thanks!"

Bronwyn leaned over the wall again. Not everyone was there. Perhaps Sigrun had given up and gone down, but where was Bustrum? She mouthed the name at Anders, who shook his head grimly, and raised his hand to show the number of the lost. Bronwyn ground her jaw, feeling vengeful.

Zevran was next, and then, in short order, Riordan. Anders pulled him completely behind the stairwell wall, so the light from the healing spell would not show. Ostap was getting close to the top.

She huddled close with her comrades, and whispered on a thread of breath. "As soon as Tara is up here, we've got to attack. When I give the signal—" She raised her hand and lowered it quickly, to show them "—I want you to hit the Archdemon with the most powerful freezing spells you can. Hold it in place, and we'll jump on it and get our anchors in. We can't wait for anyone else."

Riordan whispered back, equally softly, "We must shred the creature's wings. It cannot be allowed to escape."

"All right. You go for the wings. Zevran, help him. There's no way a wing wound could be considered lethal."

Riordan raised his brows, not pleased at Bronwyn's lack of discretion. She whispered, "Everyone knows that only a Warden can kill an Archdemon! It's no secret! Anyway, I'll go for the brain. Here's Ostap. Let's get Tara off his back."

Tara was trembling with stress as they pulled her over the wall. Zevran took her in his arms and gave her a kiss and a whispered endearment. Anders gave her a restorative potion to guzzle down. Ostap sighed with relief, and managed to climb over on his own. Quickly, Bronwyn whispered the plan to them. The Archdemon was restless and alarmed. Bronwyn might have panicked had she known that it was preparing to launch itself off the wall and attack the Grey Warden who were pouring through the bottleneck at the Gate of the Moon.

Instead, Bronwyn took a deep breath, dismissing all thoughts from her mind other than those that concerned fighting and killing the Archdemon. It was too late for regrets. Nor could she wait for Alistair and Leliana and the others, laboring up the tower. She slipped the spear-anchor from its sheath on her back, crept forward a few paces, crouched, and raised her arm. Beside her, Riordan, Zevran, Broasca, and Ostap waited, tense as leashed hounds.

She dropped her arm and sprang forward. Behind her, three powerful mages cast a freezing spell on the Archdemon, just as its wings were lifting for the first mighty downstroke that would carry it far away.

The frost on the rain-slickened scales turned the dragon's surface to ice. Bronwyn tried to vault onto the huge back, and

slipped away. Riordan jammed his anchor directly into the Archdemon's side and triggered the spring. The prongs shot out and plunged deep into muscle.

"Thanks!" chirped Brosca, darting in between the two humans. She bounded onto the anchor and swung herself up, catching at the dangling strap of the anchor that Bustrum had left in the creature during the battle at the Place Reville. She hauled herself onto the Archdemon's back. Slipping and sliding, she moved along the creature's spine, choosing a good spot to plunge in her own anchor. Bronwyn burst out laughing. Riordan swore vividly.

Zevran was amused himself. "Ha!" He plunged in his own anchor, higher than Riordan's, giving a safer way up to the dragon's back. "*Con permesso*, my Queen," he said, giving Bronwyn a boost. Bronwyn threw a smile back at him, and was surprised at how sad he looked. Riordan was up immediately after, diving for the wing joint that Niall had damaged earlier. Zevran thrust up at the same target from below, his dagger slimy with the Wardens' most lethal poisons.

Being a bigger man, Ostap was a little slower than Riordan, but was still able to make it to the dragon's back and deploy his anchor before the spell faded, and the dragon, not quite sure what had just happened, was suddenly conscious of a knifing pain in its left wing. It screamed out in surprise, and turned its head completely around, trying to see what was happening on its blind side.

It screamed again, horrified, when it suddenly realized how it had been tricked.

With a violent shudder, it tried to shake off the puny mortals that were crawling over its divine flesh. It lashed out with the huge tail, smashing the tower wall, sending stones tumbling that crushed darkspawn and soldiers alike. Zevran's dagger was stuck in its joint, and as the assassin attempted to pull it free, he was struck by a front leg, and nearly sent over the side of the tower. Tara shrieked, running to him, casting a life-draining curse at the Archdemon's hideous head. She caught Zevran by an ankle, and pulled him back from the brink.

Anders tried a freezing spell that caught Ostap along with the dragon. Morrigan, more cool-headed, lay down a paralysis glyph, which while elegant, delayed the dragon only briefly. It was enough time for Riordan to buckle his strap and brace himself against the left wing. Bronwyn vaulted past Brosca, despite the dwarf's protests, and clambered higher on the bony neck ridge, gripping it with her thighs as she would a horse. Ostap had gone for the right wing and wrapped the strap around his left arm. Brosca clung to two of the anchors, tying the straps together as the wings came down, and the Archdemon leaped from the top of the Cathedral tower.

Tara and Zevran held each other fast, both glad to be alive, but anguished at this latest development. Tara whirled, and shouted at Anders and Morrigan.

"What's the matter with you? Go after them! Go after them!"

She rushed at them, waving her arms, and shoed them away like chickens. Indignant, Morrigan took to the skies, screeing at Tara, who gestured back at her in the rudest possible way. Anders was aloft a second later, with an uneasy look back at Tara. Both birds took off after the Archdemon, which was flying slowly and unsteadily, both its wings injured.

At that moment, Alistair was over the top, his face covered with blood, looking about him in bewilderment. He was followed a moment later by Darach, by Quinn, and then by Carver. Minjonet and Leliana had some way to go. Others were still only two-thirds to the top.

"Where's the Archdemon?" Alistair demanded, as if it would suddenly reveal itself behind an ornamental vase.

"Gone," Zevran told him. "And our lady with it. Riordan, Brosca and Ostap are with her, and Morrigan and Anders are flying behind."

Alistair took a threatening step forward, fist cocked to punch the assassin.

"Alistair! Don't!" Tara cried. "It's not our fault! They've gone and left us!"

A furious, frustrated tremor, and then Alistair exploded.

"Right! I've just about had enough of this!"

Tara jumped back, wide-eyed. She had never seen Alistair

lose his temper before.

He wasn't done.

"I'm going to kill some darkspawn. Lots of darkspawn. You can stay here if you want. I don't care."

With that, he turned smartly on his heel, and headed to the door, shoving the urns and Blighted flowers of the barricade aside. He drew his sword, and headed for the top of the spiral staircase.

It seemed the only thing left to do. Without a word, the rest followed him.

Bronwyn watched the teeming courtyard below drift away like a passing vision. The noise of battle was muffled by the tremendous downstrokes of the Archdemon's wings. It dipped its head, and Bronwyn's stomach lurched. She clung to the neck ridge, almost panicking. The swarms of warriors and archers, the flashes of the mages' spells were tiny and far away. In the midst of them was a little figure in shining silverite armor that had paused, looking up at her. Loghain was watching her fly away.

That's right. I promised him we'd see one another again. I didn't think it would be like this. Not like this. I imagine he'll think I've been terribly stupid, after all. And poor Scout!

Look! There was Sten at the compound gate with a golem.

His men were putting up a good fight. Bronwyn hoped he'd find his precious Tome. And farther away, she could see over the very city walls. Warriors were pouring in through the north gate, and they were not darkspawn! They must be Hector Pentaghast and the rest. What a pity she would never have the chance to give the First Warden a piece of her mind. Useless twit.

The Archdemon shrieked, faltering. Bronwyn saw that Riordan had torn a great hole in its wing with his spear. The Archdemon swooped and struggled, trying to shake them off. It swerved, bellowing, and headed east, toward the harbor and out to sea.

The rain had almost stopped. A light drizzle misted the sky around the dragon. Dark waves glittered below, where the lights of Isabela's little fleet shone faintly. The dragon dropped down, almost skimming the surface of the water.

The flight smoothed a little and Bronwyn buckled the strap of her anchor to her belt, and then used the loop to safely slip up higher on the neck. The Archdemon hated that, and twisted its neck, trying to snap at her. She was too close to the head. Instead, it saw Ostap, who was trying to gain enough purchase to take another swing at the right wing joint. With a roar, the Archdemon bit at him, and a fang tore through his anchor strap. The big Avar tumbled into the water with a wild shout.

Triumphant, the Archdemon lifted its head and soared up at a sliver of moon visible through the breaking clouds. It flapped

its injured wings, trying to gain altitude, its flight nearly vertical. Brosca's grip on her straps began to slip.

"Boss!" Brosca called. "Boss!"

Brosca's round little face was white in the dim moonlight, and it suddenly grew smaller and smaller, as she fell away toward the waiting sea.

"Brosca!" Bronwyn's cry was lost in the rushing wind. Now only Riordan and she were left.

No... not so. She saw a flutter of wings to her left, and the pale feathers on the underside of a hawk's wing caught the moonlight. To her right was a raven, farther away, wary of the Archdemon's good eye. At least there would be witnesses.

She slipped further up the long neck, nearly tipping over, and found close to the head. She could grab at the horns to steady herself, and slipped over another bony spine. The Archdemon shook its head, enraged, and then screamed, as Riordan managed to stab at the base of its wing, striking a nerve.

Its flight was unsteady now, and it banked sharply, heading back to land, not risking itself to the sea. Bronwyn's stomach lurched again, violently, and she turned her head and was sick, losing her poor last meal from the Place Reville. It was unspeakably vile. She had no idea if Riordan was still with her or not, but it must be all he could do not to fall. She wiped her mouth with the back of her gauntlet, and tasted Archdemon

ichor. It was even worse than the vomit.

They straightened out once more, and passed over the plain to the north of the city. Bronwyn glanced at it, impressed. Someone had done a great deal of siege-work here. It was quite the sight. She remembered the vision in which the kingdoms of the earth had been spread out before her. Now she seemed to see that same vision with her living eyes, but truly the only kingdom that mattered was the kingdom within: the strength she could wield to master her fear and do her duty. She slipped forward over the last ridge and pulled her spear, her dragon-killer, from its sheath on her back.

A sob broke from her, thinking of all she must leave. She pressed the tip of the spear to the exact spot at the back of the brain, and sobbed again, her throat burning.

"Goodbye!" she cried. "Goodbye!"

And then she thrust the spear home with all her strength.

Thanks to my reviewers: Nemrut, le-maru, Candle in the Night, Chiara Crawford, Mike3207, AD Lewis, KnightOfHolyLight, Phygmalion, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, imperial queen, Melysande, Lucy's Echos, Tirion I, sizuka2, BandGeekNinja, JackOfBladesX, Guest, darksky01, Death Knight's Crowbar, karinfan123, reality deviant, jenna53, Guile, jnybot, amanda weber, Cheshire, Jodel, MsBarrows, dragonmactir, Zute, mille libri, IneedAHaircut, animeman12, and Robbie the Phoenix.

124. A Hero of Our Time

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 124: A Hero of Our Time

Thousands witnessed the last flight of the Archdemon over the ruins of Val Royeaux. Most could make out the tiny figures on the dragon's back. Those with spyglasses, like First Warden Wildauer and Hector Pentaghast, could see the red armor worn by the Warden on the dragon's neck, riding the creature like an ancient hero. They could see the glitter of the spears in the Wardens' hands. It was the most astonishing sight they had ever seen or ever would see.

A few Tevinter mages had remained posted on their lookout mound, disgruntled at being left behind. Now they were glad to be in a prime position to observe the Archdemon's demise. They even saw two of the Wardens tumble into the sea.

"Bad luck!" cried one of them, younger and more empathetic than the rest.

His friend shrugged. "Maybe they can swim, Julian."

"I hope so! Imagine riding a dragon, Vyraco!" babbled the young mage. "I hope they live to tell about it."

Those remaining at the top of the tower now had to find a way to get down again. Between them and their friends on the ground was a spiral staircase of iron and bronze held by darkspawn.

Tara had a sudden inspiration. She rushed after Alistair, yelling "Stand back!" and released a blue-white bolt of lightning.

It sizzled down the staircase, curving, curving in an elegant helix; electrocuting nearly all of the darkspawn there. Tainted bodies jerked and shuddered away. Some remained in place, dead bodies rigid, eyes bulging, smoke rising from the top of their heads.

"Good job!" Alistair shouted, impressed. He and Carver knocked dead darkspawn aside as they raced to the bottom. Not all were dead, though, and they fought back savagely. The smoke of the burnt darkspawn obscured the way. Blades slashed out of nowhere; arrows whistled past.

Zevran laughed fiercely as he drove a dagger into a hurlock. His laugh was cut off by an arrow in his throat. It went all the way through, the bloody barb coming out the back.

Tara shrieked at the sight. Zevran's eyes were wide and astonished, as he groped at the bright blood trickling from the wound. Abruptly, he sat down on a step, and managed to give Tara a shocked, ironic smile. Minjonet was just behind him and caught him as he toppled back.

"*Créateur!*" cried the Orlesian. "In the throat! That means death!"

"No, it doesn't!" Tara shouted back. She fumbled in her breastband for a small packet. and then shouted at Minjonet. "Break off the barb! I'll pull it out! Do it!"

Minjonet shook her head, but snapped off the barb. Tara yanked out the rest of the arrow, ignoring Zevran's horrible gurgle and the jet of blood that followed. Instead, she grabbed him by the jaw and forced all she had left of the Ashes of Andraste into his mouth.

"Swallow!" she yelled. Then she rifled ruthlessly through his clothes, until she found his own pouch. Only a little remained. "This, too!" she insisted.

The result was startling. All the fighters paused on the steps, disbelieving. At one moment, Zevran was choking to death on his own blood. In the next, the wound was closed, and Zevran was covered in blood, but quite healed.

"My Warden!" he gasped, awed and grateful. He seized her bloody, filthy hand, and pressed a fervent kiss to it.

"All right!" Tara shouted at her staring comrades. "It was all we had left of the Ashes of Andraste! Only the Grand Cleric has any, so nobody get hurt. Don't ask me any questions! Let's go!"

Oddly, the loss of the Ashes made her happy. She felt as as if

a great burden had been lifted from her. She yodeled out a war cry, firing off spells at the last of the darkspawn.

They were almost to the ground when a shock wave shook the tower, making them stumble. Alistair got out the door first. They were just in time to see the huge churning fireball to the north. Under the stars, a dragon fell from the sky, spewing the last of its fire, and the fireball dissipated slowly into dark smoke, hiding the stars.

"Bronwyn!" Alistair shouted, echoed by Tara, almost simultaneously.

By this time all the darkspawn in the cathedral courtyard were dead. More lurked in the compound itself: in the Cathedral itself, in the sullied gardens, in the scriptorium, in the dormitories. They would be hunted down eventually. Nor were all the Broodmothers dead. There were more nests: in deep chambers under great mansions, in the dungeons of the Palace, and further down, down, in the Deep Roads, where many of the captives had been dragged.

But at that moment, no one had anything on their minds but rushing out to see what had happened.

A shaft of unearthly light speared up into the heavens. It expanded into a gigantic white blossom that lit up the night sky like daylight. The boom that followed shook the walls of Val Royeaux.

"Oh," Athis murmured, gazing in awe. "That's what they meant by a 'bright light.'"

"It's... pretty bright," Pentaghast croaked. "Forget the darkspawn for now. We've got to see this."

Loghain did not wait for the end. He was already pushing ahead like a one-man battering ram, the route to the Gate of the Moon vivid in his mind's-eye.

"Out the way! Out of the bloody way! You! Sten! Get the golems, and let's get out there!"

The dogs, not quite understanding what was happening, but comprehending fully that he was upset, ran at his side.

Sten grasped the urgency of the moment. "Golems! Form a wedge and force your way through."

The darkspawn melted before the golem's charge like butter, and fled to the north and south of the city, pressed on the other side by the Northern Wardens.

Further down the Avenue they came across a wyvern saddle, and in it, spilled onto his side, was Duke Prosper. Loghain could not be bothered with him, except to feel a spark of fierce relief that he was gone. Some Orlesians carried him to the side of the street and left him to be recovered later. The charge went on. They met the Nevarran Wardens, and a brief cheer rose, as they pushed through the gate and out onto the

plain.

Morrigan thought she had planned for every possible contingency; yet at this moment — a moment that should have been one of triumph — she felt her schemes unraveling. She had believed that her ritual would benefit all her friends, and had prided herself on her cleverness. She had never expected Bronwyn to end up on the back of a dragon, flying high above the earth. Her friend would survive the death of the Archdemon: there was no way she could survive the subsequent fall. The Avvar fell off into the sea. A little later, Brosca slid away. Morrigan shrieked in frustration, flying ever faster to keep up.

If only she had confided in Bronwyn! If only she had told her that she could both kill the Archdemon and survive. With a little prudence, Bronwyn would understand that she should disable the dragon; force it to land. She could have then slay it and reap all the rewards. She might not like it, but surely, given time, she would see reason...

But Bronwyn did not *know* that she should force the dragon to land. Bronwyn expected to die either in the air or on the ground, and there was no way for Morrigan to inform her otherwise now. Anders would be angry: he would feel betrayed. Even though she trusted in her power over her lover, Morrigan did not relish the thought of the coming confrontation. For that matter, she was genuinely distressed that all these worthless Wardens had proved so ineffectual that Bronwyn must die to save the day.

That burst of emotion forced out a shrill "cree!" and she veered a little closer to the failing Archdemon, trying to think of some way to distract Bronwyn. That Riordan was still stabbing at the dragon, bracing himself against the wing joint as he tried to pierce the hide. Let him perish!

Thus, she was dangerously near when Bronwyn's spear found the Archdemon's brain. Flemeth had not prepared her for what followed.

Light burst from the Archdemon's wound, as if a curtain had been drawn aside in a dark room. The light was dazzling; overwhelming. The birds were blinded by it.

It was the last thing Bronwyn saw. The Archdemon convulsed, thrashing violently. In the resulting shockwave, Bronwyn was jolted forward, and the impact of the butt of her spear against her breastplate stopped her heart. The spear could not penetrate the dragon armor, and it bent away to the side, but the damage was done. Bronwyn was already dead and beyond pain by the time the Archdemon slammed into the earth. The creature's mass somewhat cushioned its riders' final impact. but more bones were broken. Bronwyn lay draped over the Archdemon's head, one arm extended, face turned a little to the side.

By a bizarre happenstance, Riordan survived, though badly injured, sprawled out unconscious on the vast wing. Anders ordinarily would have gone to him at once, but instead rushed to help Morrigan, who was critically injured.

The Archdemon's lashing tail had struck her a glancing blow, breaking a wing. The shockwave stunned her. Morrigan became groggily aware that she was plummeting to earth, and she fluttered desperately, crying out in pain. Her first impulse was to go to human form, and she had just enough sense left not to do it. Morrigan struck the earth at some distance from the Archdemon a few moments later. Anders was instantly at her side.

He had been shaken by the shockwave, too, but was farther away, and had managed to keep his head. Flying swiftly to her, he shifted back to human form and fell on his knees by the injured bird.

"Morrigan!"

He thought now that he had made a mistake with Niall, and would try another way with Morrigan. "I know it hurts, but let me set the wing first before you change. If you change with broken bones, you could do even more damage."

He busied himself, mending the bird's fragile bones, sick with guilt and unable to look at the awful calamity behind him. He cast a sleep spell on Morrigan, and when she seemed stable, he got hold of himself and turned to the wreck of the dragon. No one could have survived that. All of Morrigan's plots had been in vain.

He slipped off his tabard and set Morrigan carefully inside it, using it to carry her along with him. Closer to the dragon, he was startled to see faint movement. He walked a little faster,

still careful with Morrigan's injuries. Already he could hear distant shouts, as the Wardens on the north side of the city came rushing from their fortifications and through the city gates to triumph over the defeated Archdemon.

He set Morrigan in the curve of a wing, and clambered up to see if anything could be done for Bronwyn, already guessing the truth. Feeling like a fool and a coward and a dupe, he gently felt for a pulse. He ground his teeth, and then tried again. Nothing. It was over. He turned away, and slipped down to see to Riordan.

What he discovered was the one good thing that happened that night.

The young Tevinter lookouts on the mound stared in disbelief at the white light blooming from the dragon. The shock wave knocked them down. They staggered up, still not daring to believe their eyes as the creature hurtled to earth. It hit the ground behind the Warden lines.

The younger, Julian, managed to speak first, grabbing up a torch. "Come on! Maybe we can help them!"

"Nobody could have survived that!"

"I'm going. Bring a torch, Vyraco. We'll need some light."

"But we were supposed to stay here... Oh, all right, but I'm telling the Commander that it was your idea."

Some nearby grass had briefly caught fire from the dragon's last breath, but it was so wet that the fire could not spread. It cast a little light on the scene for the young mages. They pelted toward the Archdemon's body, and then halted at the sight of Anders, working hard on Riordan. They held up their torches, trying to see into the shadows.

"It's a Warden!" Vyraco shouted. "He's alive!"

"Someone survived?" Julian burst out. "That's amazing!" Seeing that Anders was a mage made him much more comfortable addressing an obvious foreigner. "I am Julian Merulus, and this is my friend Vyraco. How can we help?"

"You're Healers?"

Vyraco shrugged. "He is. I can do a little."

"All right." He pointed at the comatose Riordan. "We've got broken ribs here, and a punctured lung. A broken leg, a dislocated shoulder, some serious contusions. I'm hoping his brain isn't scrambled. Take your pick. I'm Anders, by the way."

Julian looked up to the still figure draped over the dragon's head.

"What about...?"

"She killed the Archdemon. She's dead."

Vyracus stood in nervous, respectful silence, and then hastily

held up the torch for his friend.

"I'm sorry," Julian said softly, going to work on Riordan's injuries. "I mean... someone had to kill the Archdemon, but I'm sorry anyway. She looks young. Was she your friend?"

"My Commander. Bronwyn, Queen of Ferelden."

That got a reaction. Julian's concentration slipped for a second, causing Anders to hiss in anger.

"Sorry. That's *her*?"

It struck Anders then that Bronwyn really was dead. Gone. Grief nearly strangled him, and his eyes burned. Morrigan had *promised* she'd live. She'd *promised* that all their friends would be safe. He blinked, and cleared his throat.

"Yes. That's her. Watch how you talk about her."

"I don't mean any disrespect," Julian assured him. "It's just...we heard some amazing things. Some Orlesian noble left a copy of a White Chantry document in Cumberland." He whispered to his friend, "That's Andraste's Champion."

Vyracus craned his neck for a better look. "I heard she found Andraste's Ashes. Why didn't she use them?"

Anders was ready to explode.

"Because the bloody Chantry made her *use* her Ashes to prove they really were the Ashes." He subsided, exhausted.

"She healed a little girl. She didn't have any left for herself."

Vyracus whispered to Julian, "White Chantry idiocy." Then, embarrassed, he muttered, "Sorry," to Anders.

"You don't have to apologize to me. I hate the Chantry more than you can imagine. Bronwyn always stood up for mages. It's only because of her that mages have the freedom to serve in the army or run public clinics in Ferelden."

Julian focused on healing Riordan's fractured skull. Blue healing light glowed brilliantly in the darkness. Vyraco held the torches to help them work and noticed the bundle in the curve of the wing.

"Is that your hawk?" He asked Anders.

"Yes. Don't touch her. She was hurt in the blast."

The young Tevinter studied the hawk, politely not touching her, but clearly very puzzled and interested.

Julian gave his friend a look, which was not understood. He finally said to Anders, "When you're done here, you should get her—" he pointed at Bronwyn "— down from there before she gets stiff. I mean..." he hesitated at the burning look from the strange mage. "I mean, her people will want to see her... looking better. I can do it if you don't want to."

"Don't touch her, either. The King... her husband... isn't feeling very friendly toward Tevinters since he cleared out some

slaver gangs in Denerim."

"We're not slavers!" Julian said, a little indignant.

Anders looked at him, bone-tired. "I think the Fereldan Wardens who recently had family abducted into slavery would not see much difference between the merchants who sell their goods and the customers who buy them. I don't want to talk about it. Concentrate on fixing Riordan."

He had to argue again when the First Warden and the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra, Rivain, and Tevinter arrived. Anders had unbuckled Bronwyn from the dragon by then and laid her out more or less decently on the dragon's wing to keep her from the wet ground. She was already nothing like the Bronwyn Cousland he had known. In the moonlight she looked smaller and younger, and her broken bones made her bend in odd ways. He shut her eyes and folded her hands over her waist, but no one would mistake her state for sleep. It was harder than with a living body, but Anders cast a few spells to make her look more like herself, if only to spare everyone else's feelings. Quietly, he cast a preservation spell too. It would be a hundred times worse if the flies started buzzing around her.

Pentaghast had the good sense to send a runner to find King Loghain and break the news. The First Warden was very curious about Bronwyn, and touched her armor.

"It really is dragonbone," he murmured to an aide. When it appeared he might attempt to open her eyes to see how

green they really were, Anders interposed himself.

"Sorry, First Warden. The preservation spells are in a delicate state."

It was an outright lie. The Tevinter Commander raised his brows and looked faintly amused. Anders sensed that he had no particular respect for the First Warden, either. Pentaghast ordered some of his men to strap some spears together for makeshift litters. The wounded and the dead must be carried away with dignity.

Morrigan was looking a lot better, and had awakened. Anders talked to her like any man would talk to a favorite pet, warning her that they were not alone.

"There you are, girl. You're going to be all right. Just lie still and don't make any sudden moves. You might startle my new Tevinter assistants."

Morrigan creed softly, to show she understood. Under his terrible grief and anger, Anders still loved her, and was not about to betray her to the curiosity of these strangers.

Vyraco, who might regard elves and slaves as furniture, but was very tender-hearted toward animals of all kinds, took another look at her.

"So Fereldans like hawking too! I have a hawk at home, but I didn't bring her. I'm surprised your Commander let you."

Anders wondered how anyone could be this completely oblivious to the situation and to the feelings of others. His friend look a little embarrassed, or perhaps he thought Vyraco was being too forthcoming with a Fereldan barbarian. At least Julian was doing good work on Riordan.

"My hawk is really useful. She can deliver messages... and she understands anything you say to her."

"You must have trained her up a treat. Who's that coming?"

Anders sighed. "That's Loghain Mac Tir. This is his wife. I've got to go talk to him. You may want to stand back."

But Loghain had an iron grip on himself. He supposed he had always known how this would end. The world was peopled by fools and incompetents. Those few who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the common good were cheerfully allowed to do just that by the feckless, the lazy, the cowardly.

Loghain saw Anders working over a fallen warrior, and for a moment, against all reason, he felt a thrill of hope. That hope was crushed as he came closer and saw it was that bloody Orlesian, Riordan. Bronwyn was next to him, looking quite nice for a dead girl. He stopped, quite unable to say or do anything. There were groans and sobs around him, but they meant nothing to him. Then Scout dashed at Bronwyn, sniffed at her, and lifted his head in a howl so terrible, so utterly forlorn that Loghain lost control.

"Stop him! Stop him! Shut him up, you mages, or I swear I'll

kill him here and now!"

Instantly, Jowan cast a sleep spell on the dog.

"It's done!"

The unbearable howling was cut off, and Scout slumped onto the dead, blighted grass.

Sten turned to a golem. "Carry him back to their headquarters. Carefully. He is a true warrior, and worthy of respect."

Loghain remained rooted to the earth, trembling a little. Tara dared to approach him.

"Let's take Bronwyn back, too," she urged. "We'll see to her there."

Loghain nodded, as if thinking of other things. Then he frowned as too many strangers crowded close, wanting the honor of carrying the litter of the Slayer of the Archdemon.

"Let me carry her!" Jowan offered. He stumbled forward, and knelt before Loghain. "I'll change... and you can strap the litter to me. Everybody can see her, but nobody will be able to touch her. Please, Lord King. Let me do this."

Loghain looked at him a long moment, and then gestured to the side. The Fereldan Wardens backed away. Tara gave Jowan a nod and a strained smile. The transition from man to wyvern made the entire crowd draw back in awe.

And so Bronwyn was lifted to the wyvern's back, and the litter made fast. And Loghain stalked back to the city, Bronwyn on her strange and magical bier behind him.

"Stay!" the First Warden said to Anders, who had taken Morrigan up again in his tabard. "We have much to discuss! Ferelden will need a new Warden-Commander."

Adaia stepped forward, her little elven face battle-hard. "Tomorrow. We'll talk *tomorrow*. You'll want to finish looting the Archdemon, I expect. We need time to sleep... and grieve."

"And so do we," said Pentaghast, his voice gentle. "I shall see that our Fereldan brothers and sisters are given their due."

Adaia hoped he would, but was more interested in being with her friends at the moment.

While the Wardens of Tevinter and Weisshaupt swarmed over the Archdemon, draining the precious blood from the corpse, Riordan was carefully carried from the field by his Orlesian comrades, under the watchful care of the young Tevinter mages. Julian proved to be an expert Healer, and clearly thought nothing too good for a Warden who had ridden on the back of an Archdemon. Riordan was still unconscious, but Anders had made a good start on him. Julian was hopeful for a complete recovery, and told Anders so, when he sought him out later.

"He'll need a lot of sleep. When he wakes," the boy sighed, "he'll learn that's it's all over. Was he a good friend of your Bronwyn?"

Anders paused, about to tell the Tevinter sharply that she had hardly been "his" Bronwyn; but then he thought he understood. National heroine. Andraste's Champion.

I suppose she's now officially "our" Bronwyn.

"Yes. He was. Sort of a mentor, I suppose. She always thought well of him. Anyway, he was up there, fighting beside her, and that counts for something."

The boy drew closer. "But *you* weren't on the dragon, were you? I didn't see you there. How did you get to them so quickly?"

Anders shook his head. "I really can't say..."

The boy lowered his voice. "Was it *teleportation*?" he whispered. "Have you mastered teleportation in the far south? We have heard that the ancient elves had devices that allowed them to travel over great distances, but the lore is lost."

"I don't know anything about teleportation," Anders said sharply. He was about to say more about Tevinters in general, when there were heavy footsteps coming nearer, and Shale appeared, carrying Astrid's body.

A crowd gathered, with more and more dwarves, and the events in the Cathedral became known. The nest under the Cathedral was destroyed, but Paragon Astrid and her party had perished. Others had been caught in the collapse. Shale had not been hurt, of course, and was able to clear some of the rubble and retrieve the Paragon, whom Shale had greatly respected.

The dwarves were quite devastated by the fate of Astrid. Much of the interest in the Archdemon and the dead Queen were diverted to other, more specifically dwarven interests. The Paragon must obviously be given to the Stone in Orzammar. The Archdemon had been slain. and thus the Blight was over and with it any obligations the dwarves had to the Grey Wardens. They must return to Orzammar as soon as the condition of their wounded permitted. Piotin Aeducan was about to seek out Loghain and tell him so, and then hesitated. Perhaps the next morning would be more... tactful.

Early the next morning, the Fereldan Wardens received a message that their senior leadership was to report to the First Warden as soon as possible.

Everyone was exhausted, of course. While there were still darkspawn in the city, they had been driven from the Place Reville, the Palace, the market, the Cathedral Compound, and the two major gate areas. The Avenue of the Sun was fairly secure, as long as one traveled with armed companions. Minimal guards kept occasional forays at bay. The darkspawn were leaderless and nearly imbecilic: that did not mean they

were not dangerous.

And some of the Rivainni Wardens claimed to have seen another wyvern—a live one — in addition to the mangled corpse near the Gate of the Moon. This was attributed to darkness and strong drink, but it was entirely possible that there were still ogres lurking in the shadows.

The summons resulted in a brief, unhappy meeting at the house at the Place Reville. Those already up sent one of the new Wardens around the house to wake up the late sleepers. Alistair knew he must meet with the First Warden, and had unpleasant expectations.

"I won't let them make me Warden-Commander. It's just not on. Bronwyn made me an Arl, and I'll always be a Warden. Just not Warden-Commander."

"If not you, then who?" Leliana asked, feeling very tired. Silas, she had learned, had perished with Astrid. The Archdemon was gone from their dreams, which was a gift of the Maker, but her heart was broken with so much loss. "Astrid is gone, Brosca is gone, Danith is gone. Cullen is gone. And Bronwyn..." She took a deep breath, and swallowed hard. "So few of us are left from that Joining in the little hunting lodge in the mountains. And you *are* senior."

"I won't do it," Alistair insisted, pale but stubborn. "I've got Jader to take care of. I'd even stay on as Senior Warden in Jader, but I can't be Warden-Commander. Emrys, either, for that matter. He's got to be a bann. Look here: who's senior?"

"And who gets on with the King?" Aveline put in, very reasonably. "Whoever is Warden-Commander needs to be able to work with him."

"King Loghain likes Tara," said Adaia softly, holding hands with Siofranni. "He listened to her yesterday. I think Tara would be best."

Tara and Zevran walked in at that moment. Zevran was a shadow of his usual debonair self. He was doing his best to put up a brave front, but the effort was showing. Tara was tense and miserable. If Morrigan was going to lure Anders into a crazy, evil, blood magic ritual, she could have had the decency to see that it actually *worked*. For all her promises. Bronwyn was dead, along with all too many of their friends.

"I'd be best for what?" she asked.

"We're summoned to talk to the First Warden," said Alistair. "We've been discussing who we should put forward for Warden-Commander. I won't accept the job. You'd be great."

Zevran managed a wry grin and an elaborate bow. He filled bowls of a rather horrible-looking porridge for Tara and himself and brought them to the table.

Tara rolled her eyes. "I can just see that nomination going over well. Especially with the Tevinters."

Carver Hawke stopped eating long enough to put his chin on his fist, thinking. "Who cares what the Tevinters think? We'll

probably never see any of these people again."

Tara shook her head. "People at home wouldn't like a mage in charge... 'ruling' over anything, you know. And Fereldans will like giving an elf a hard time. If Alistair won't do it, what about you, Leliana? You've been a Warden as long as I have."

Leliana did not even see that as a possibility. "Loghain does not like me. He never has. That will not change, now that his wife is dead in the land of his enemies, saving their lives."

That was all perfectly true, but the fact was that Leliana was considering staying in Orlais. She liked Riordan. Even more, she liked the Empress and her sisters and Prince Florestan. The happy time she had spent refurbishing Soldier's Peak seemed to have happened to someone else in another life. Now that Bronwyn was gone, she could never love Ferelden again. It was time to start over.

"Well," Tara said, "there's Anders..."

Carver snorted, and then muttered a good morning to Jowan as the mage slipped into the room. "Tara, only *you* would nominate Anders to be in charge of anything. Besides, *Morrigan* might not approve."

Alistair agreed. "Morrigan doesn't approve of much. She liked Bronwyn, though. At least she was able to be with Bronwyn at the end."

They were silent for a some time, eating, and finally Tara

said, "Well, what about you, Carver? You're more senior than the Ostagar Wardens."

Aveline objected. "I think the Warden-Commander of Ferelden should be at least twenty years old!"

Carver shot back, "It just so happens, milady Aveline, that I *am* twenty. Just," he added in a low voice. He was tempted. Being Warden-Commander of Ferelden was *something*. It was greater than being a mere 'Bann Adam' any day. "But I still think Tara would be better. She even has experience as a Senior Warden leading a unit."

"I think Tara would be best, too," Jowan murmured.

"All right," Tara said, thinking hard. "How about this? We'll go, and we'll give my name and Carver's name, and see who'll they'll go for."

"And if they try to give us a foreigner," Quinn spoke up from a corner, "We'll tell 'em that the King won't have it!" He had been very quiet since the deaths of Niall and Maeve.

There were some murmurs from the others in the room. Most were too tired and sad from the losses to trouble themselves. Darach had not spoken they had returned last night, and Nuala and Steren were doing their best to look after him. The surviving dwarves had become very withdrawn since hearing of Astrid's death. And the loss of Bronwyn had the whole party feeling weaker.

"Who's going to go, then?" Tara demanded. "Alistair, you've got to go, so don't hide behind your bowl. Everybody who was a Warden before the big Ostagar Joining should go. That means somebody needs to get Anders... and so it's you, Leliana, and Anders. Then Adaia, Carver, Jowan, and me."

Quinn said, "Anders is whipped..."

Alistair added, "...in more ways than one!"

Everyone chuckled, but Quinn was not done. "...he was up until all hours taking care of Morrigan and the rest of the wounded."

"I know," Tara said kindly, "but this is really important, and he wouldn't like not to be consulted. Siofranni, go up there and roust him. While we're gone, I've got work for the rest of you."

There were groans, but people already seemed in better spirits, having a purpose again.

"Steren, take a patrol out and scout the perimeter of the Place Reville. Look for hidden darkspawn. Aveline: take a patrol to the Gate of the Sun, and make sure the way out of here is clear. I need a mage... you, Peder. I remember you from the Circle. After what we've been through, some of the soldiers must have got themselves Blight sickness. Look for signs. Try to enforce some cleanliness and safety standards. It's likely we'll be welcoming a lot of new Wardens pretty soon. We need to be ready. Don't alarm people, but talk to the other healers."

Alistair said quietly. "And we'll be having the funerals today."

"Right. They'll have the pyres for the soldiers and the Wardens here in the Place Reville. Bronwyn's pyre will be at sunset on the north side of the walls near the Archdemon. Here's a thought for today: nobody gets killed but darkspawn."

Loghain managed a few hours of sick, restless sleep, and awakened to the first full day that Bronwyn was dead. He would have to get up and see her laid out on her bier, knowing that she would never fight or talk or laugh again. She would never lose her temper or toss a goblet of wine his way. She would never kiss him again. Everything that was Bronwyn was gone, only the Maker knew where.

He had lost women he loved before, but this loss had its own special poignancy. She was, he was certain, the last woman who would even be in love with him. For the first time in his life, he felt...old. Barren years of duty stretched out before him, lonely and uninviting.

Then he was informed that Piotin Aeducan wished to speak to him. No matter what the heartbreak, it seemed that there was always work to be done.

"I'll be there directly," said Loghain.

The Wardens' Council declared that Riordan, as soon as he

recovered, would be the new Warden-Commander of Orlais. No one questioned it; no rival claimant was proposed. His deeds spoke for themselves.

In contrast, Tara's nomination for Fereldan commander was received by First Warden Wildauer with a signal lack of enthusiasm. With the exception of Tevinter, where a mage always ruled the Wardens, it was considered more tactful for the position to be filled by a notable warrior who would be better able to mix with the nation's elite. Being an elf did not much help the situation either: the Tevinters would not support an elf, and wondered why Anders, handsome and capable, and whom many of them had met, was not putting himself forward.

"I'm a Healer, not a leader," he said. "I like being a Warden, but I don't want to deal with nobles and try to think of strategy. Tara's a lot better at that. That's why Bronwyn made her a Senior Warden and gave her an independent command."

For that matter, nearly everyone had been immensely impressed by Jowan's transformation, and thought that such a powerful — *human* — mage would not be a better choice.

"I've made serious errors of judgement in the past," Jowan said. "Tara has saved me from them more times than I can count. She has my complete support. And she can shape-shift into a wyvern, too, for that matter."

Alistair was clearly senior, but he absolutely refused. Perhaps

if someone he personally admired, like Riordan, had been there to urge him; or if Loghain had commanded him, it would have been different. but these strangers meant nothing to him, and he did not care about their good opinion. Leliana told them frankly that she was not Fereldan enough to be acceptable. No one even considered Adaia for a moment. The little elf smirked coldly. She wondered if any of the Tevinters here had bought friends of hers on the slave market.

Pentaghost had met both Jowan and Carver. He thought Carver a very nice young man, with a great deal of potential, but considered him far too young. Visconti and Sainsby had seen them all fight, and had good things to say about Carver's prowess, but they agreed that he needed some experience in command, and perhaps another ten years, before he was ready to undertake such a demanding position.

"Your King may disapprove," the First Warden warned Tara.

Alistair disagreed. "Loghain likes Tara. He always has. He's not prejudiced against mages or elves. He thinks she's competent, and he doesn't think that about most people. And she was Bronwyn's friend. He'll be fine with it."

They returned to their headquarters to find the pyres nearly ready, and with one thing to be glad about.

"Ostap's back!" Quinn shouted. "He's alive!"

The Avvar was in good shape, but in borrowed clothes, since his leathers were being carefully dried.

"I did not have far to fall, and I swim well. I found the woman captain's ship and they took me aboard." Gravely, he added. "I have heard that Bronwyn chose glory before length of days, as in the tales of old."

"She did," said Alistair, remembering Bustrum's story with a shiver.

Tara asked, "Did you see Brosca? Did she make it, too?"

The Avar shook his head, his face drawn with grief. "She was a great warrior, but she could not swim."

Dead trees and ruined houses had contributed to the pyres in Place Reville. Duke Prosper was laid on one, his identity unknown, wearing only his smallclothes, for looters had divested him of his magnificent armor, his plumed helmet, his wyvern-hide boots, his jewels, and even his silk handkerchiefs.

The Wardens had their own pyre, and Fereldans and Orlesians alike were laid on it. Quinn wept openly, as he laid Niall and Maeve side by side. More tears were shed for other comrades: for Cathair and Sigrun, for Bustrum and Clovis, for Nevin and Oghren and all the rest. They would all be burned here, all alike, whether human, elf, or dwarf, for there was no way to carry them either to a green wood or return them to the Stone in proper fashion.

Astrid, indeed, was going home to Orzammar. Her body had been preserved by spells, and was now in the half-empty explosives wagon, wrapped first in looted silk and then in

canvas. She would have a great state funeral, no doubt. The dwarves and the Legion of the dead were ready to go, but agreed among themselves to attend Queen Bronwyn's funeral out of respect. After that, nothing would persuade them to remain on the surface.

Some had slept through the past several hours, and were awakening to a new world.

"Riordan!" said Jowan. "How do you feel?"

The Orlesian blinked and realized that he was still alive. It was somewhat... disappointing.

"Better than I have any reason to expect. The Archdemon?"

"Dead."

Reluctantly, Riordan forced himself to ask, "Bronwyn?"

"Dead. You only survived because Anders was there and could tend to you immediately. You were pretty banged up. You should be fine, but you need a lot of rest—"

Minjonet appeared at his side. "We thought we'd lost you!"

"It would seem not. What's happening?"

"The darkspawn are scattering. Everyone was too exhausted to pursue them last night. The pyres will be lit for the Orlesian and Fereldan dead here in Place Reville. The Queen's funeral

is at sundown."

"I must be there!"

Minjonet looked at Jowan to forbid it, but Jowan sympathized with Riordan.

"We'll see that you're up to it. I'll have someone get you something to eat, while Minjonet gives you the news."

Jowan stepped out of the room, and Riordan was aware of bottomless, raging hunger. It seemed base and inappropriate. He, so close to his Calling, had survived, and Bronwyn, so young and with so much to live for, was gone. It was not something he ever said aloud, but Riordan had suspected for many years that the Maker had a cruel sense of humor.

"What else has happened?"

Minjonet pulled up a nearby stool and sat down at his bedside. "Well, it appears that Tara Surana will be the new Fereldan Commander, and *you* are the new Warden-Commander of Orlais. It's official. The First Warden said..."

Another awakening took place after the Warden' Council. Once Anders had managed to get Morrigan back to the comparative safety of the Wardens' headquarters, he had found a small room — hardly more than a closet with a window — for his private use, and there Morrigan managed to transform and spend many hours in a healing sleep. Anders

locked her in and left her during the meeting, but as soon as he returned, it was time to face her.

On awakening that morning, he had checked her signs, of course, and was relieved to see that the bones were knitting well. Between his magic and her own, she should heal rapidly and be on her feet by the following day. He left her and returned to find her awake and nearly hysterical. Her magic had told her at once that something had gone disastrously wrong.

"I have *miscarried!*" she shrieked, her face twisted in an ugly rictus of fury and disappointment.

"How can you know?" he asked. "It's too early—"

"I *know!*"

Something to do with the ritual, then. Anders looked at her anxiously. At this stage, at least it would not have harmed her physically.

"Morrigan, sweetheart," he said, stroking her face. "You were hurt really badly. I got to you first thing, but there was nothing I could do. We can always have another child—"

She clutched her temples in world-crushing despair. "You *fool!*"

Words were said for the dead in Place Reville, and by noon

the pyres were aflame. Bronwyn was laid out in her armor in a make-shift bier in front of Loghain's headquarters. Her helmet, her weapons, and her dragon horn were displayed on a stand. Leliana had spent some time on her face and hair. Aeron played his lute quietly nearby. Loghain stood at the head of the bier, his eyes fixed on Bronwyn's still face, committing every feature to memory.

The army, the Wardens, the dwarves, the Dalish, the mages, even the Orlesian chevaliers lined up to pass by in farewell. For some, this was the first opportunity they had ever had to see her close to.

Merrill whispered to Lanaya, "Doesn't Bronwyn look pretty? It's such a shame. I always liked her..."

Scout crouched next to Bronwyn's bier, whimpering and shivering. There was no comforting him: he snapped at those who approached him, and even growled at Loghain. Only his fellow mabari were welcome.

The First Warden ordered one of his staff, a gifted artist, to draw Bronwyn. After taking some sketches now, he would paint a portrait of her as she appeared in life, to be hung in a place of honor at Weisshaupt Fortress. Discreetly, the artist consulted Leliana about the exact shade of green to use for her eyes. Loghain was irritated, but others courteously approached him with the request to represent the scene.

"Why not?" he growled. "You might as well get it right."

There was a stir in the crowd, and a group of Orlesians approached, led by Prince Florestan. He carried a long object wrapped in cloth-of-gold. With some trepidation, the Prince bowed to Loghain.

"Your Majesty," he said, his scarred face grave. "Nothing can express the gratitude of Thedas for this sacrifice. And yet, I wish to offer a token of my own regard. I pray you accept it. It was never ours, anyway."

He opened the wrappings, and revealed something remarkable.

Loghain, not much interested, frowned. "A sword!"

"It is Nemetos, the Sword of Calenhad, taken from King Venedin of Ferelden in Blessed 8:24. I knew where it was kept in the Palace, and thought it a great dishonor to hoard it away from its rightful owner. Let it be a symbol of peace between us." With another bow, he offered the sword, hilt first.

Loghain considered punching the silly fellow's face. What did he care for the ancient sword of the Theirins, when Bronwyn lay dead? Cauthrien did not dare touch him, but he felt her steadying presence beside him, and mastered his first impulse. He took the sword and held it high, judging its balance. Maric had had a fine sword, too, but Loghain had never considered using it.

"The Sword of Calenhad," he murmured. "Too heavy for

Loghain. Let the blood of Calenhad watch over it, until she is given to the fire."

The pommel was laid under Bronwyn's folded hands. It was a handsome sword, Loghain thought. The Orlesians had taken good care of their prize. It meant absolutely nothing to him personally, but all the same, he would take it home and have it displayed in a place of honor at the Landsmeet. If Fergus Cousland wished to bear it someday, that would be his own doing. No one else would hold that sword hilt but Bronwyn while Loghain lived.

To the north of the vast, already stinking corpse of the Archdemon was a broad, flat area that was deemed adequate for the Queen's funeral. The Wardens worked with a will. There was plenty of dead and Blighted wood to use for the purpose: at sundown, Bronwyn Cousland of Ferelden would be sent off in style. The pyre would burn, and in the early hours of the morning, her ashes would be collected and all who were not Wardens would depart.

Some sympathetic Orlesian Wardens had searched the remains of the Grand Cathedral and had found jars of sacred incense. It was added to the pyre to overcome the usual depressing smells. Many Orlesians believed that Bronwyn should be regarded as something of an Orlesian heroine. She certainly had not been bound by the small-minded prejudices of many of her countrymen. Boniface Clery was one of them. He had spoken to both Tara and Riordan, and it was agreed that he would be reassigned to the Orlesian Wardens. It was

for the best. Tara did not like the idea of punishing people by forcing them to be a Warden in a foreign land, and she did not think Boniface would ever be happy in Ferelden. She did the same with some of the Wardens they had picked up along their march. Others wished to remain with the Fereldans, especially the mages and the elves.

At sundown they gathered, thousands in their ranks, and watched the solemn procession to the pyre. Many admired the soldierly fortitude of King Loghain; others thought him incredibly hard-hearted. With him were Arls Alistair and Wulffe, Bann Cauthrien and Emrys, his captains, the commanders of the dwarven forces, the Keepers of the Dalish, and, of course, the Wardens. Amber was with Loghain, and Magister and Lily with their own humans. Scout had become so difficult that Loghain knew better than to try to take him to the funeral. He was chained up, bewildered, furious, and barking, back at their headquarters.

The Qunari were there, however. Sten's stern demeanour was to be expected; but there was sadness, there, too. It was not the Qunari custom to treat the dead with ceremony. Once life was gone, the shell was something to be disposed of with due regard to public health and hygiene. Nonetheless, Sten thought this a remarkable occasion, worthy of consideration and meditation. If these *bas* needed elaborate trappings to focus their minds, so be it. He would have much to say about Bronwyn Cousland when he returned to Par Vollen. First, of course, he must find the Tome of Koslun.

With great care, Bronwyn had been prepared for the pyre.

Leliana and Tara wanted to spare him, but Loghain insisted on helping. They had removed her armor, washed her carefully, and since any linen would have to be filched from some dead Orlesian's bedchamber, Loghain had dressed her in the rumpled red gown in her pack. She would be a Red Queen to the end. Jowan, in wyvern form, once again carried her on his back. Alistair and Wulffe lifted the litter away and bore it up to the pyre between them.

The army had no priest. Those few with Loghain's army had been left behind beyond the Orne. The northern Wardens did not wish to quarrel with the Chantry on campaign. and none had come with them. Truth to tell, there were two priests among the Tevinter Wardens, but Elagabalus did not mention the men, quite correctly understanding that the offer would be neither appropriate nor appreciated. Nonetheless, the two priests stood back in the crowd and whispered their own prayers for one whom more and more were coming to believe had indeed been Andraste's Champion.

That was the word among the Wardens, anyway, and they would all take it with them to their homelands.

"—wasn't Andraste from Ferelden, like Bronwyn? Didn't Bronwyn have a voice that persuaded all to join her? Didn't she perish to bring hope to the world? Didn't she have the power of healing?"

Old Knight-Commander Greagoir was the closest thing they had to a proper cleric. He had fought hard in the battle, and was feeling all his years and more today. He recited a bit of

the Chant of Light that Loghain wanted, since this had been the text at the funeral of the Wardens after Ostagar.

"Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter.

Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just."

The listeners were riveted. The mention of champions resonated with a growing legend. Greagoir went on:

***"Though all before me is shadow,
Yet shall the Maker be my guide.***

I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.

***For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."***

He stepped back, making way for Loghain.

Cauthrien and Wulffe had tried to make Loghain see reason, but he was determined to give this speech himself. He was in armor, and sheathed on his back was Bronwyn's personal sword, The Keening Blade. It suited him somehow, as if it were whispering secrets. It was a way of being close to Bronwyn, even now. Tara had talked him into a cup of wine and some bread sopped in it before coming, and he felt the better for it. He had plenty to say to these people.

"This pyre is for Bronwyn Cousland, Queen of Ferelden, who was worth the lot of you put together!"

Loghain stared out at the crowd, daring them to disagree, daring them to challenge him.

"Almost a year ago, Bronwyn Cousland gave a stirring speech for the Wardens slain in the first great battle of the Blight, fought at the ancient fortress of Ostagar. Some of you were there with me. You won't have forgotten it. No one who heard her ever will."

His eyes sought out fellow Fereldans: Arl Wulffe, the red-eyed Alistair, the faithful Cauthrien.

"She knew then what the world was facing, and she never flinched, she never shirked, and she never stopped until she ended it. She did it without much help from the Grey Wardens outside of Ferelden or from the rest of Thedas, for that matter."

An uneasy murmur. Loghain's face set in a mabari-like snarl.

"Do you think she failed to notice the assassination attempts? The insults? The dismissals of her as a 'barbarian?' The leadership of the Chantry calling her a 'heretic' and doing everything they bloody well could to try to make her *fail*? Well, I'm here to tell you she didn't miss a thing. She knew how little you thought of her. She knew how much people wanted her dead. Anyone else would have done just enough to drive the darkspawn out of Ferelden — which she had largely achieved by the end of last year — and let the rest of Thedas rot. I would have: I admit it freely. I don't see that Ferelden owed anybody anything."

He was angry. He was angry, and contemptuous, and utterly bereft.

"I suppose I should play your games and be *diplomatic* and tell you how wonderful you've all been, but I'm a barbarian too, and not a bloody *liar*. Not one of you could be troubled to lift a finger when Ferelden was fighting for its life. No, that's not fair — there was one: Riordan of Jader over there. Bronwyn thought a lot of him. He came to her in secret and gave her counsel when everyone else had their heads up their arses. In fact, Bronwyn got a letter from a *very* important Warden telling her to leave Ferelden to its fate and go to Orlais! You can imagine what she said about that. No, come to think of it, you probably can't, since she was a well-spoken noble, whatever you lot choose to think about Fereldans."

He frowned, and then paused for a moment.

"Bronwyn was a Cousland. I don't know how much that means to most of you. Maybe the Marchers understand. Maybe even the Orlesians. The Couslands were teyrns — that means 'prince' in the Common tongue — they were teyrns in the north of Ferelden long before we had a king. They have a saying: '*A Cousland Always Does His Duty.*' That's why she wouldn't stop as long as the Archdemon lived. She knew... she *knew*... that killing it was what mattered. She knew it was so important that she united all the peoples of Thedas together to fight it: humans, elves, dwarves, mages and Templars... yes, even you Qunari. She became Queen of Ferelden so she could direct the kingdom's full force toward her quest to end

the Blight. In the end, that quest took her life.

"I'm taking her home tomorrow. It's time she had a rest. You Wardens will have your work cut out for you here, cleaning up the Broodmother nests and the darkspawn bands. You call it the Thaw, she told me. It's all yours, though I'll tell you that Bronwyn thought you should be doing more to strike at the heart of the darkspawn down there in the Deep Roads. I'm told by Warden-Commander Tara that the Fereldan Wardens plan to do just that. We owe it our dwarven allies, after all, who lost their own Paragon fighting the Blight."

It was a token of respect to them, and was appreciated. Loghain was actually still very angry at Astrid for the heedlessness that had killed so many others. Perhaps she had killed a Warden who otherwise might have killed the Archdemon instead of Bronwyn. He would never know.

"I'm not one for quoting the Chant of Light, but there was a verse that Bronwyn used when she gave her funeral speech after the Battle of Ostagar:

"Let the blade pass through the flesh,

Let my blood touch the ground,

Let my cries touch their hearts.

Let mine be the last sacrifice."

The devout found this moving. Leliana's tears flowed freely.

Loghain huffed a bitter laugh.

"But she won't be the *last* sacrifice, will she? Two more Old Gods sleep deep down under the surface, awaiting the day the darkspawn find them. There's always another Blight, another dragon to be slain, a plague of werewolves, or an invasion over the border. Every generation faces its own challenges. Bronwyn was the hero of our time, the hero we needed at the moment, and once again the world —unworthy as it is — has been saved. So it's time to bid her goodbye, and try to deserve her. I think there are some Highever lads among us today, and perhaps they'll help me see her off in the old style."

He took the torch from Arl Wulffe, and lifted it high.

"Highever Hail to Queen Bronwyn! Hail!"

"*Hail!*" the soldiers roared. Alistair joined in, remembering that day at Ostagar, which now seemed long ago.

"Hail!"

"*Hail!*" Tara and the Fereldan Wardens took up the response.

"Hail!"

"*Hail!*" Thousands of voice roared it out, and left an echoing silence.

Loghain touched the torch to the pyre, which blazed up

quickly, illuminating the onlookers with a lurid glow. He stood away from it, watching, not inviting anyone to speak to him. Amber sat close to him, concerned for her human.

It was a fine, big pyre, and with the help of the mages' spells, Bronwyn burned bright and hot before she crumbled into the blazing logs. The wind quickened, and the sparks danced up to Heaven. What drink they had was shared out, and so ended the Fifth Blight.

True to his word, Pentaghast saw that the Fereldans received their fair share of the spoils of the Archdemon. Kegs of preserved blood and bundles of hide and bone were loaded onto Isabela's ships. A small amount was kept by Tara, for use on the march to Ferelden.

She, Riordan, and Pentaghast talked quietly together, while the pyre burned. Sainsby Visconti, and the Rivainnis were having their own passionate discussion about what they intended to do about Kirkwall and the Felicisima Armada. Under the cover of that conversation, the other three made plans.

Pentaghast was remaining here for the foreseeable future, as was Riordan. Both Orlais and Nevarra had the greatest stake in clearing the remains of the horde from the Blight Lands. There were obviously other nests here in the city, and the Wardens would use poison and bombs to prudently destroy them.

"The operative word," Riordan remarked, "being 'prudently.'"

Then too, though no one spoke of it aloud, there was the magnificent loot of Val Royeaux. The city would be Tainted probably until the next age, and only Wardens would be able to sift through the rubble in safety.

"We will be expected to pay some percentage to the Empress," said Riordan, "but the Wardens will keep a great deal."

"Bronwyn promised Sten he could have the Tome of Koslun, if he could find it," Tara reminded them.

"He is welcome to it," said Pentaghast, with a shrug. "It seems fair. The Qunari fight well."

"And eventually," Riordan said, "We will probably learn that first hand. For now, however, let them go in peace."

"Loghain's leaving tomorrow as early as possible," Tara said. "I'm going with him. We'll clear out the darkspawn to the Orne. The Dalish will be with us. They all need Wardens for the ones who turn out Blighted. Besides, we've got to get back home eventually. There are still darkspawn in the south and west of Ferelden. There's something you need to know, though, before we leave, and you can pass it on to the First Warden and the others: one of our Wardens came up with an improved Joining potion. I know that Bronwyn wanted to share it as soon as our more *pressing* problems were resolved."

"An improved potion?" Riordan asked. "What does it do?"

"More people survive the Joining, for one thing. We've tried it, and we've had a *lot* fewer deaths. Now's the time to use it, with all the soldiers exposed to the Taint."

The two men glanced at each other, intrigued and hopeful.

"And it may..." Tara hesitated, not sure how much was the potion, and how much Avernus' powerful Blood magic. "It may prevent the Calling, or delay it. It works on people who have already Joined too, because we all took it with no ill effects. I'll write down the formula for your mages."

"That sounds..." Pentaghast gestured his wonder. "like a brilliant idea."

The Antivans, Orlesians, Nevarrans, Rivainnis, and Marchers were quite elated at the news. The Wardens of Weisshaupt and Tevinters did not seem all that impressed. Instantly, Pentaghast suspected that they had already had some such improvement, and had not troubled to inform the rest of the order. First Wardens typically stepped down on their thirtieth year of service, but no one had ever heard of a First Warden going to Orzammar for his Calling. He had assumed that they had another entrance to the Deep Roads further north, but perhaps there was another, more infuriating explanation.

He came back from those brief conversations very unsettled, and then asked Tara more about the invention of this potion. The pretty elf mage took a deep breath, and then began to

recount the adventures of a very old and terrible Warden by the name of Avernus.

The farewells were made that night. Some were quiet and tender; some were violent and raucous. In the Place Reville, at the Palace, and in the Imperial Market desperate, ferocious looting raged from cellars to garrets. Soldiers begged Wardens to go with them while they pillaged, promising them an extra share to make sure the riches they took were safe. Had it been any place other than Val Royeaux, Loghain would have given strict orders to respect property and keep discipline. But Loghain stayed with Bronwyn's pyre until the last fiery glow was extinguished, and did not care what his men did here. In his opinion, they deserved all the plunder their packs could hold. More coin circulating meant greater prosperity at home. For that matter, Cauthrien's men had found some remarkable treasures in the devastated Grand Cathedral. Loghain wasn't giving a copper to the bloody Orlesians. His own share would go to build the cathedral Bronwyn wanted for Denerim. *Our Lady of the Sacred Ashes* sounded like a good name to him.

Tara approached Loghain carefully. The man was swaying on his feet, and she was concerned for him.

"The fire's nearly out, Your Majesty," she told him. "Instead of letting it cool tomorrow, why don't I use a freezing spell right now, so you can collect the ashes? Then you could get some sleep."

Wulffe was worn out himself, and grateful for the suggestion. "That's kindly thought of, Warden. Loghain, listen to the girl. It's a sound plan."

"Do it," Loghain croaked out.

They had no proper urn, but a tin arrow chest would serve. Tara led the mages in casting the spells, and very quickly, the white ashes were cool enough to sort through. Loghain wanted to do it all himself, but knew he was being ridiculous, and let his friends help him. It was painful, as this duty was always painful, but it was an important part of accepting the death of a loved one.

Before dawn, the dwarves had packed up and gone, taking their wagon and their Paragon with them.

Merrill told Tara that the Dalish would travel with the Fereldan Wardens and the army. It was a sensible decision. Though the Keepers had urged their people to be careful, there were those who had contracted the Blight sickness, and no doubt others would show signs, given time. If they did, they would simply Join the Wardens, and continue the journey back to Ferelden.

For there was no use in going anywhere else. The elves were safest with their Fereldan friends. While they had been met with condescending politeness by the First Warden, there was no indication that a new friendship had been forged between men and elves in general. Some of the Orlesian Wardens had

been grateful, but it was unlikely that would be the general consensus in the Empire. It was wisest and safest to remain with the army until they reached the Fereldan border, which was now west of Jader. Then the Dalish would go their way: to their new lands in the kingdom. Some, at least, would go farther.

Irving and Greagoir, baffled by their own survival, gathered their people. Going home seemed utterly anticlimactic, but they could think of nothing else to do.

Thus the Fereldans and their allies broke camp, stuffing their packs with Orlesian plunder and putting the Blight Lands behind them.

The First Warden watched these preparations from a distance, quite relieved.

"A difficult man, that Loghain," he remarked to Elagabalus. "Quite capable, though."

"Impressive. The Fereldans were impressive throughout the Blight," Elagabalus remarked. "Perhaps our understanding of the country was outdated."

"I would be the first to admit that I underestimated the Girl Warden. A pity I never met her," he said, with palpable insincerity.

Elagabalus was not afraid of Wildauer, and replied with a skeptical smirk

"Oh, very well. It's true," the First Warden admitted. "She was a very inconvenient young woman, but she did the job in the end. I'll grant her that. Loghain has insisted on taking her ashes back to Ferelden, instead of surrendering them to us. We shall have to be satisfied with a suitable monument to her."

He was actually quite annoyed about the ashes. As soon as Loghain was gone, the relic-hunters had come out in force, wanting to collect a pinch of Andraste's Champion for themselves. The First Warden had spoiled their fun by posting a guard and having his people collect a reasonable amount of the wood ash that remained. Some of the girl might be mixed in. Who could tell? Ashes were ashes. No doubt, other Ashes of the Champion would trickle into the markets of northern Thedas eventually, In due course, Wildauer would see that his own siftings were interred in the splendid tomb for the Slayer of the Archdemon that he had commissioned as soon as the Blight began.

Three soldiers had already come to the Warden headquarters, admitting even to themselves that they were Tainted. One of them was a Sergeant named Tanna, who was considered the finest camp baker in the Fereldan army. She was actually not at all unhappy at the prospect of being a Warden. The others were at least resigned.

Tara found being in charge helpful. She had something to focus on; something that helped her ignore the great gaping holes in her heart. Loghain seemed fine with her being the

Warden-Commander. No one seemed put out. That would probably change, she acknowledged, once they were back in the Ferelden. For now, there was no problem.

That did not mean that she was happy with all her people. She knew that Morrigan had been injured, but Riordan had been hurt as badly, and still had come to Bronwyn's funeral. Morrigan had not. Tara thought that fairly outrageous. And now Morrigan was late mustering for the departure.

"Anders, where's Morrigan?" she asked. "Is she coming or not?"

"Go easy on her, Tara," Anders pleaded. "She's suffered a loss."

"Does that make her *special*?"

Tara instantly remembered Bronwyn speaking those words, and the immediacy and finality of death made her choke. Yes, Bronwyn had spoken those words, but she could not remember where or when.

Anders was angry in his turn. "She lost the baby, if you must know. I can't tell, but she can. Something to do with the ritual. She's heartbroken."

Tara left the harsh words on the tip of her tongue unsaid. She even kept the smile from her lips. This was wonderful news. The Old God Urthemiel was well and truly gone from the world. She must tell Zevran right away.

"I'm sorry you've lost your child. It's very sad," she forced herself to say.

Your child, she thought, whose true soul you were willing to drive out to make room for a monstrous being that might have well have proved worse than the Blight. Morrigan did not want to be Flemeth's vessel, but she was perfectly willing for her child to be a vessel for some creature that she hoped would share its power. Oh well, she was likely under geas. That's over.

"Yes... well..." Anders said, his flash of anger soothed. "I told we could have other children. She's not ready to find that comforting. She'll be along."

Morrigan joined them soon, in fact, carrying a bag of odds and ends they had found about the mansion. Tara thought she looked unwell: her skin sallow, her eyes dull, seeming much older — even past thirty. It occurred to Tara that Morrigan might well be older than she had always thought. Magic — and Morrigan's was currently at a low ebb, apparently — could mask age to a surprising degree.

Tara whispered the reassuring news to Zevran, who gravely nodded, discreet in his satisfaction. It would not be necessary to poison the witch, after all. Others were not so restrained. Leliana shot Morrigan a very hostile look, and Alistair pointedly ignored her. They had noticed her absence from the funeral.

Prince Florestan and his chevaliers were leaving, too. Riordan

had urged the Prince to leave as soon as possible, wanting him to reduce his chance of contracting the Taint. The prince would go to Val Foret, and then travel around Lake Celestine to Montsimmard to spread the news of the end of the Blight. Then he would ride to the border to escort the Empress back home. A brief conference with Loghain gave him some assurance that there would be no difficulty about Celandine. The Fereldan, however, pointed out that Princess Eglantine would be remaining in Jader, where she was to marry the new arl. Florestan saw no point in contesting that, as the arrangement had been made by the late Duke Prosper. About Eponine, Loghain said nothing. Florestan guessed that she would be used as a pawn of some sort. Orlais was not strong enough to force this issue, and Loghain's temper was understandably uncertain.

Within the hour, the King of Ferelden stalked back out through the Gate of the Sun, his face like stone. Behind him marched his nobles and his captains, the army, the elves, the mages, and the Fereldan Grey Wardens. The sun rose higher as they left the walls of Val Royeaux behind them. Loghain did not look back at them. Others did.

"It's going to be a good day," Aeron remarked to Emrys.
"Bright, but not too hot. Good traveling weather."

In time, there were some of the usual remarks, the insults, the quips. The Blight was over, and life went on, as it always does. Teams of soldiers hauled the ballistae along, their carriages loaded with treasure.

Not all of the treasure was loot. Strapped to one of the carriages was a sword covered in cloth of gold, a suit of red dragonbone armor, and a metal chest containing the last of Bronwyn Cousland. Behind it trailed a big mabari with a weary gait, head down and tail between his legs, the image of inconsolable grief.

Thanks to my reviewers: RakeeshJ4, KnightOfHolyLight, Iemaru, Mazanti, Tirion I, Raxiselic, Isala Uthenera, Anon, Melysande, Chandagnac, , JackOfBladesX, Nemrut, Chiara Crawford, Mike3207, VM mercenary, sizuka2, MsBarrows, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Phygmalion, Tiolobitere, Candle in the Night, INeedAHaircut, ReploidAvenger, Kyren, Fenrir666, Death Knight's Crowbar, Robbie the Phoenix, darksky01, Girl-chama, RohanVos, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Lucy's Echos, The Warrior of the Light, Nitpick, Jenna53, Adventfather, BlackScyther, AD Lewis, jnybot, Guile, Guest, animeman12, dragonmactire, amanda weber, Zikarn Kraiss, darthas, Suna Chunin, FloridaMagpie, PhantomX0990, and Tsu Doh Nimh.

This is ending number one. It will be followed by an epilogue. The alternate ending will be posted afterward.

125. Recessional

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 125: Recessional

"Your Graces! My lords, ladies, and gentlemen! On this first day of Eluviesta, the thirty-sixth year of the Dragon Age, the three hundred and ninety-fourth from the founding of the kingdom, by command of Their Majesties, King Fergus and Queen Anora, I declare this Landsmeet in session!"

A rustle of expectation, as the king rose to make his speech from the throne. This was King Fergus' second Landsmeet as king, and he appeared to have settled into the role as if born to it. In his scabbard was the fabled sword Nemetos, and both he and his queen wore splendid dwarven-made crowns, the gift of King Bhelen of Orzammar. Relations between Ferelden and the dwarven kingdom were warm, though Bhelen retained a human diplomat to carry messages back and forth. The Blight had given most dwarves all the surface experience they could possibly desire. Nor were many dwarves emigrating to the surface, now that Bhelen's reforms had given opportunity to the casteless.

Carver Hawke, Warden-Commander of Ferelden, took his place among the notables, attended by his second, Catriona

Puckley, and his senior mage, Jowan. Magister and Lily sat, tails wagging a little, on their best behavior.

Because of the Wardens' noble service during the Blight, and in memory of Queen Bronwyn, the Crown had granted the Warden-Commander a vote in the Landsmeet. This was contingent on the Warden-Commander being Fereldan-born-and bred, and also on the appointment being approved by the Crown. The appointment was supported by the grant of land around Soldier's Peak: a considerable stretch of the Coast Mountains. It was in no way as rich as the city of Amaranthine, ruled by Adam Hawke, but the Warden-Commander had other holdings, and a prestige that placed him above all other Fereldan banns in order of precedence.

Carver smoothed his grey silk tabard, elegantly embroidered in blue and silver, and tried not to look nervous. Landsmeets were no new thing to him, though this was his first as Warden-Commander. He always made a point of standing off by himself, not aligning himself with his brother. It bothered Mother, but Carver was his own man, and the Wardens had their own agenda. Fergus was well launched into his speech: his voice resonant, his appearance handsome and vigorous, his manner authoritative yet genial.

"—and the friendly maritime rivalry among the cities of the Waking Sea —"

Carver smirked. "Friendly rivalry" was for the benefit of the foreign dignitaries. Plenty of rivalry, with precious little to do with friendship. Adam was ruthless in promoting Amaranthine

shipping, but had the sense to be moderate when it came to his fellow Fereldans. He was conducting what amounted to a private war with Ostwick, and relations with Viscount Marlein Selbrech of Kirkwall were decidedly frosty. Not that Adam was particularly worried, until the Kirkwallers could keep the same dynasty in control for two generations running. After the Marcher Wardens had paid their visit to Kirkwall, everything had changed. No Templar was likely to be showing his face there until the end of the age.

"—the secure succession, and the imminent birth of another prince or princess for the kingdom!"

Jowan nudged him, looking at Queen Anora. Poor woman... she really should have kept to her apartments. She was expecting the third royal child within five years —and expecting it any day, for that matter. No one would scorn her as barren now, but she looked as if she had paid a price for it. Ferelden's succession was indeed secure, with the births of Prince Caradoc and his younger brother Bryce. Carver's mother told her family that this time the Queen was hoping for a daughter, whom she would name after her own mother, Celia. Others might whisper hopes for the children to be given the great names of the nation's heroes, but Anora thought either Bronwyn or Loghain too heavy a burden of expectation to place upon a child, and Fergus, after consideration, reluctantly agreed with her.

Carver's stepbrothers, Arl Corbus and Bann Lothar, glanced his way and gave him affable smiles. They were growing up into fine young men and competent nobles, if a bit wild.

"—new opportunities for those seeking honest employment—"

Corbus' lands were the closest to the elven homeland, and he had done fairly well keeping the peace. Many resented the sight of elves traveling on the West Road, passing through South Reach and disappearing into the Brecilian Forest. There was some disgruntlement at the diminishing supply of cheap elven labor—and pretty elven whores. Carver glanced over at a group of whispering banns with some distaste. What did they expect? The Highever and Amaranthine Alienages had been completely emptied. Many in the Denerim Alienage had also fallen victim to the slavers. Now the place appeared to be nearly abandoned. The population of the Gwaren Alienage, too, had been halved, and there was a steady trickle from that city, going north... but not to Denerim. Carver had heard of ships from lands north of the Waking Sea, carrying elves to Ferelden. These put in at none of the large ports, but dropped the elves off along the Amaranthine coast, nearest to the elven homeland.

For elves were leaving human lands, never to be seen again. Foremost among them had been Tara, Warden-Commander of Ferelden. Loghain had given her his support, but in the end it was simply not enough to cope with the adamantine wall of prejudice and disdain. With Loghain gone, Tara had resigned her office to Carver. An elf mage was someone that many outside the Wardens could not accept. The First Warden had warned her, and however stupid and cowardly he had been about everything else, in this he had been entirely correct. How many times had she come back to Soldier's Peak from

Denerim fuming with repressed rage? The nobles of Denerim—at least those who had not gone to war—knew only one way to relate to her: they spoke to her and treated her as a favorite lady's maid. Even the Queen had ... well, recriminations were useless.

Zevran had done his best to defuse her anger, but Zevran was gone with her. He had not wanted to become a Warden, but on the march back to the Orne he had become infected, and accepted his fate with good grace. Carver smiled, remembering Zevran's words at his Joining:

"Some bodily fluids even I would prefer not to touch, but it seems I have little choice. I shall follow in distinguished—and charming—footsteps."

Tara and Zevran had paid a farewell visit to Orzammar, taking Shale and the other golems with them, to see Astrid and Brosca's little nephew and niece. Then they had departed. All the Dalish Wardens had likewise retreated into the elven homeland: Darach, Nuala, and Steren had preceded Tara, ostensibly on a mission. The newer Dalish recruits had gone a little later. A few city elves remained at Soldier's Peak.

Then, of course, there was the continuing issue of Adaia and Siofranni, who were still technically on the Warden payroll, but who had hared off to sea, and who answered to no authority but themselves. Tara had noted them down as going to "consult with our Tevinter brothers and sisters," but Carver did not think that was the terminology he would have chosen to describe raiding Tevinter slave ships. Fergus, of course, had

no problem granting letters of marque for the purpose. He had a soft spot for Captain Adaia Tabris. The ships discharged their elven passengers further south on the coast, and Adaia sold the empty ships in Denerim.

"—maintaining our national principles of freedom and protection under the laws for all—"

Admiral Isabela had stepped into the power vacuum left by the decimation of the Felicisima Armada. The Tevinters had at first taken advantage of the lack of pirates in the northern Amaranthine to expand their trade. Isabela and her fleet had happened on one of their ships by accident. After that, they sought them out deliberately. Not only could they feel virtuous about freeing slaves, but Tevinter slave ships always carried huge amounts of gold.

Perhaps Adaia had not meant to be a pirate...er...privateer. Originally, she and Siofranni had gone north to find and rescue Fereldan elves. Fenris, who knew Tevinter, had tried to make the girls understand the scope of that undertaking, but they lacked the frame of reference to grasp it. The slave market of Minrathous alone was nearly the size of the entire city of Denerim. They also— at first — had not understood the use to which the Tevinters would put the older captives. Those were not desirable as slaves, but were perfectly satisfactory fuel for Blood Magic, and apparently there was an insatiable market for such. The elderly... even the middle-aged... would have been bought and used up within a very short time frame. Adaia's efforts had not located more than a few dozen Fereldan elves.

If she could not rescue, then she would have revenge. Besides, waiting for the Tevinters at the nexus of the Amaranthine Ocean and the Waking Sea was far wiser than risking one's life further north. Fenris was still with them: he thought their quest worthy and noble, even if ultimately doomed.

"— and by prudence to avoid embroiling ourselves in foreign disputes —"

Ferelden was probably the most peaceful nation in Thedas at the moment, if only because news came to them slowly.

While the Rivainni Wardens were off fighting the Blight, their stronghold had been raided by the Qunari. Since it was held only by a small force, it had been sacked and the Warden garrison slaughtered. Before its fall, the Warden in command had destroyed all records and secret documents, and filled the place with traps. Quite a few Qunari died in their turn. When the Rivainnis returned, there was real fury. Had anyone known about this earlier, Sten would never have been permitted to return to Par Vollen with what was left of the Tome of Koslun. There had been retaliation by a temporary alliance of Rivainni, Antivan, and Tevinter Wardens. The Qunari no longer held Kont-Arr, their one foothold on mainland Thedas. Those professing the Qun— of whatever race — had been exiled from Rivain. The conflict only simmered now, but no true peace had been made. Perhaps Sten might do some good, talking to the Qunari leadership. Carver would prefer not to have to take his Wardens north. A full-blown Warden-Qunari war was not a pleasant prospect, and did nothing to

further the Wardens' mission against the darkspawn.

"—Our splendid improvements to roads, bridges, and harbors, made possible by King Loghain's skillful diplomacy—"

Carver smirked. Fergus was careful of Anora's feelings. Some nobles had described it as "Loghain's low, greedy peasant cunning." The improvements were perfectly real, and had been paid for by what amounted to the sale of the Imperial Princess Eponine.

Empress Celandine had been wed to Prince Florestan, and they were now ruling a much-reduced Orlais from its temporary capital of Val Foret. Though they had lost Jader and the north, the Empire was still incredibly rich, and a new city was being built at the mouth of the Orne, the land cleared and cleansed by the Orlesian Grey Wardens. Val Orne had been carefully planned, and quite a lot of the great monuments of Val Royeaux were being salvaged to adorn it. Even after the rigorous looting by the rest of the Wardens, there were things they simply could not carry off, or even find.

Eglantine, as previously arranged, was married to Alistair in a solemn ceremony at Jader Chantry. From all anyone could gather, it was quite a happy marriage. Alistair had always wanted someone to love. That left the Imperial Princess Eponine. What had happened to her, in Carver's opinion, was not one of Fereldan's finest hours, but he understood why Loghain had done what he had.

An heir to the Orlesian throne had a value to any ambitious

court. The Orlesian succession was fragile. Empress Celandine had born a child last year, but before that, Eponine had been the heiress-presumptive. Loghain had brought the girl back with him to Denerim, and had essentially auctioned her off to the highest bidder. Or, more correctly, to the highest bidder who was not Nevarran.

For Loghain had considered the growing power of the Nevarrans, and had no desire to give them more. A weakened but stable Orlais was a far safer neighbor. In the end Antiva had purchased an Orlesian Imperial Princess for an immense sum, which Loghain ploughed back into Fereldan lands and into Denerim itself. Eponine was thus the single most valuable article of loot taken in the war. Carver, of course, had absolutely no idea what the girl herself had thought about it.

"—for the honor and prosperity of the kingdom!"

Fergus was done talking, and there were cheers. Carver smiled and applauded dutifully. He had been listening with half an ear, and had caught the other major points. The Queen's university was expanding, filled with displaced Orlesian scholars; Tevinter ships were still not permitted to drop anchor in Fereldan ports; the Orlesians and Nevarrans had more or less settled on a border; Ferelden was not going to tolerate the war between the mages and Templars spreading into its territory. So far, that was raging hottest in the inland Marches: Starkhaven, Tantervale, and Hasmaal: cities that had been least involved in the Blight. Lately, however, there was trouble at the Circle in Cumberland, and word of battles in the distant cities of Andoral's Reach and Perendale. The mages

who had risked their lives for Thedas were not inclined to submit to imprisonment any longer. A great many mages had fled to Tevinter; others had come to Fereldan, where they were openly countenanced, though carefully regulated.

Here in Ferelden, mages were legally running clinics and serving in the army or city guards. Records were kept, and approved mages had their badges. They seemed to be blending into city life fairly seamlessly. Out in the countryside, however, one heard the occasional story of mages being mobbed, or a suspected mage child being stoned to death by frightened peasants, but the Templars still operated to protect them, even though somewhat differently than before.

Some of the Templars were acting independently of the Chantry now, their new headquarters established fairly quickly in Cumberland. The Chantry itself was still dragging out negotiations, unable to settle even on where to hold its conclave to elect a new Divine. Grand Cleric Muirin, aged greatly of late, was in effect free from all outside influences. Fereldan's Templars still recognized her authority. Aged Templars were cared for in the hospice established in the old cathedral dormitory.

Nobles were now being recognized. Nathaniel Howe and Rothgar Wulffe announced the birth of sons; Alistair and Eglantine had a new daughter.

It all went on and on. Demands to "do something" about the elves rose up from the Bannorn.

"Do what?" Bann Varel asked, rather testily. "You complain we have too few elves. How can the Crown—or anyone else—do *anything* about that? Well, maybe we could stop *killing* them, I suppose..."

His sarcasm was not appreciated. Fergus stepped in to cool the parties off. Later, after settling a bitter dowry dispute, the first day of the Landsmeet ended, and everyone was invited to the ball that night, which would begin at sundown. The King gently took the Queen's hand, and they walked from the Chamber, as the nobles bowed and curtsayed.

The crowd relaxed, and a band of minstrels, up in a corner, began playing. It was one of the Queen's innovations. Zoe Pheronis, the Royal minstrel, led the group. Carver recognized her apprentice Amethyne among the human players. She was becoming quite a pretty girl, and wore her hair in such a way that one did not notice at first that she was an elf. Carver vaguely remembered that Tara had once approached the girl about something, and Amethyne had been uninterested and unfriendly, telling Tara that she was a "minstrel, not an elf!" Perhaps that was she was still in Denerim. The Queen's minstrels had lodgings in the Palace. Amethyne probably had not set foot in the Alienage in years.

"Commander?" Catriona asked. "Are we going back to the Compound?"

He should, probably, for there were stacks of paperwork. However, this was the first day of the Landsmeet.

"What do you say we go out for a drink first?"

"Not me," Catriona protested. "I can't just throw on a velvet doublet and be devastating. If I really have to go to this swish-and-tits affair, I need some serious help. I'll see you two awful pillocks later." She stalked away, musing dolefully on corsets and hairpins. Carver grinned after her.

"Jowan?"

"Drinks? Absolutely. Nobody's going to find me devastating, anyway."

They were not the only ones who wanted to kill the next few hours in a tankard of ale. It was a long walk to the Market District and the Gnawed Noble, but Carver had not been to Denerim in months, and felt like reacquainting himself with the city.

Oh, Maker, here was Mother.

"Carver, darling! Are you coming to the estate? Emma is wild to see you. Hello, Warden Jowan."

Jowan bowed. "Arlessa Leandra."

She kissed Carver, of course, and he let her. She was still living at Bryland House. Corbus wouldn't hear of his stepmother and half-sister leaving; but Mother told him that she would stay until he was properly married, and then step aside for his wife. That would not be particularly soon. Corbus

was only eighteen, newly released from his guardianship, and enjoying life as the most eligible young man in Ferelden at the moment.

Mother looked harried, but that was only to be expected when a woman her age was dealing with two teenaged boys and a four year old daughter. She had nearly died in childbirth — *would* have died without Bethany's care. Instead, she had a treasured memento of her all-too brief time with Leonas Bryland. Lady Emma Bryland would likely have her share of adventures, and she was growing up as essentially an only child, since even Lothar was eleven years older than she. So far — and all the family was quietly holding its collective breath — the girl had shown no signs of magic. She did, however, like to make her dolls fight with swords.

"Not just now, Mother. I need to go to the Market and pick up some presents first. I'll come by before sundown and see Emma then, before I go back to dress for the ball."

"Oh, very well. But you're dining with us tomorrow. No excuses!"

"Er... will Habren be there?" He glanced around the Landsmeet Chamber, hoping against hope.

"Of course," sighed Leandra. "Where else could she stay? Don't begrudge her a few days at the Landsmeet, Carver. She hasn't many opportunities to mix in society."

"And I wonder why that is."

"Carver."

He gave her a kiss, and escaped. Jowan was smiling quietly. Carver elbowed him, and then saw a friend. Magister did too, and went over to sniff courteously at Scrapper.

"Alistair! Want to go out for drinks?"

"Always."

"Are you growing a *beard*?"

"Hey!" Alistair protested. "Don't you wound my manly vanity! Eglantine thinks it makes me look powerful."

"Your arlessa isn't here?" Carver had not seen her on the floor of the Landsmeet.

Alistair made a face. "It's a long, long trip, and with the new baby... no. I miss her, but she needed the rest."

Also, Carver thought cynically, he had heard that Arlessa Eglantine did not think much of Denerim, and did not like bending the knee to Anora, who was not Eglantine's equal by birth. She had not been to Denerim since the coronation.

The men and their dogs walked on, out into the fair spring day. Adam and Arl Nathaniel were just behind them, and Carver, Alistair, and Jowan paused to let the men catch up. Hunter gave a pleased yip at the sight of other dogs he knew. While they exchanged the usual pleasantries, Carver thought about this Landsmeet, and about Queen Anora, who had said

absolutely nothing in course of the day's proceedings.

The Queen was popular with the commoners, but had never really made many friends among the noblewomen. She seemed to like his mother, and Leandra spent quite a bit of time with the Queen, but the younger generation had never quite warmed up to her... even Arlessa Callista, who was pleasant to everyone. Some, like Arlessa Kaitlyn, Anora intimidated; some, like Charade, thought Anora was a heartless opportunist who was all too satisfied that Queen Bronwyn had never come home; some like Arlessa Eglantine, found her insufferably arrogant. Carver had always got on perfectly well with the Queen himself. Most men did. Maybe she was so accustomed to dealing with her father and her two husbands that she had no understanding of other women. It had seemed to Carver that Bronwyn had got on with her well enough, but looking back, it was hard to tell. He had been young and naive then, and Bronwyn and Anora were both diplomats by nature, who had loved the same man in their own different ways.

Now, of course, Queen Anora was a mother. She had trounced those rumors about a curse of barrenness with admirable dispatch, but was so involved with her pregnancies and her lyings-in and her child-rearing, that she had little time for politics. When one spoke of the Crown, one spoke of King Fergus, not King Fergus and Queen Anora. Anora was popular with the commoners, but Fergus was popular with *everyone*.

The three noblemen talked about their children; pretending to

scorn soft-headed sentimentality, but clearly proud of their families. Carver had not seen Berenice in the Landsmeet Chamber, and wondered if Adam had left her in Amaranthine. When there was a moment to get a word in, he asked about her.

"Berenice? Of course she's here. She and Callista are busily adorning themselves. Berenice had a bad bout of morning sickness today, but she should be fine for the ball, which is what she cares about. Be a good fellow and dance with her, won't you?"

"Of course."

Carver hoped that none of Adam's children would have magic, either. Sometimes he worried. Adam had led such a charmed life. He had been so *lucky*: knighted by a king on the last day of the king's life; in the perfect spot to catch a teyrn's eye; a rich bannorn vacant at just the right time; fancied by a pretty foreigner with a dowry; placed so no one would make him go west to the Blight Lands. Some day, Carver believed that all this phenomenal good luck must be paid for, one way or another. He just hoped the bill was not presented to Adam's children.

"Have you seen Bethany yet?" Adam asked.

"No. I just got into town last night. How is she? Is she coming to the ball tonight?"

"Probably not. She doesn't care much for such events

anymore, you know. I haven't been here long either, and she gets home late and leaves early, so we've hardly had a chance to talk. Mother says she'll be at dinner tomorrow."

"I'll get her a present, too. I wonder what she'd like?"

"Something that smells nice, I daresay, after dealing with the festering sores of unwashed paupers. No, I didn't get her that myself. There was a shipment of Hercinian linen that was impounded for harbor fees. Bethany's clinic always needs linen."

Nathaniel spoke up. "Your sister is a wonderful woman. A pity she won't be joining us."

Adam shrugged. "She's quite lost interest in anything so frivolous as dancing. She might as well be a Chantry sister. Probably would be, if she weren't a mage."

Carver did not agree, but also did not want to argue about Bethany in front of others. If she had not been born a mage, there was no telling what Bethany would have done. Now and then he tried to talk her into Joining the Wardens, but she was very... happy... with her life, and with her friends and colleagues. She had bought the houses on either side of her own, and expanded the clinic. King Loghain had paid to have the buildings faced with stone, the upper story enlarged, and the roof tiled with slate to reduce the risk of fire. It was an impressive establishment now.

"We'll only be steps away. I'll look in on her."

"Sounds good," Jowan agreed casually. He'd always had a certain.. fondness...for Bethany.

Denerim looked prosperous. Ferelden was, of course, one of the great winners of the Blight. One could make the claim that Nevarra had gained far more, since it had absorbed all of Orlais north of the Blight Lands, but Fereldan had not done badly, either. Shipping duties and taxes from Jader were enough in themselves to make the Crown rich. Denerim had grown considerably, and the city was spilling past its walls.

A carriage rumbled past them. Those inside — Bann Alfstanna and her husband Lord Rhys, old Bann Fredegunda, Lady Keyne Mac Coo, Bann Stronar and Lady Ailidh, called out greetings. They were off to the Market, apparently, to make some last-minute purchases before tonight's festivities. A little later, Corbus, Lothar, and their friend Ser Bevin rode past, joking and rough-housing.

"Are you going to the Gnawed Noble?" Lothar yelled. "Too bad! We'll be there before you! I daresay we won't leave you a drop of ale!"

The boys galloped off, laughing.

"Insufferable young asses," muttered Nathaniel.

Alistair only chuckled. "It's not like we're old men ourselves!" His expression changed. "Though *that* makes me feel like one..."

The street opened out into the market here, and the view, framed by the buildings on either side, was of the statue that was now a major landmark. Queen Bronwyn and Scout were immortalized in bronze, watching over the comings and goings before them. Scout's nose shone bright as gold: it was considered lucky to rub it. As usual, flowers of varying freshness had been left on the plinth. There had been considerable debate about the statue, since many thought Queen Bronwyn should stand outside the Landsmeet. However, Calenhad was already there, and Loghain had preferred the Market, remarking that Bronwyn would find it less dull. He was the one who had insisted that Scout be included on the monument: the Nevarran craftsman had been puzzled at first, but then thought it lively and inventive.

"Poor old Scout," Alistair muttered.

A moment of silence. Bronwyn's mabari had never recovered from the loss of his human. He had lived on another year and a half, slouching after Loghain, and had even sired two litters on Amber before he simply did not wake up one morning. Loghain had him buried in the palace gardens, in front of Bronwyn's urn, with an engraved stone to mark the spot. Carver reckoned that once Scout was gone, Loghain had nothing left to stay for. Not even his grandsons could hold him.

"Well, now I definitely need a drink," Carver said. "That statue is bloody depressing."

"I thought you needed to buy presents," Adam pointed out.

"Drink first. Definitely."

Edwina's couches were as soft as ever, and they sank into them blissfully, off in the far, dark, private corner near the bar. The barmaids brought them ale and snacks, along with some crunchy treats for the dogs. Corbus, Bevin, and Lothar were by the door, laughing uproariously. They had joined another party of nobles.

"Things aren't so bad," Nathaniel said, apropos of nothing. "Things aren't so bad, here in Ferelden. The Templars haven't tried to annul all the mages, the mages aren't rioting in the streets, and nobody's trying to assassinate the royal family, like they did in Starkhaven and tried to in Antiva. We don't have to deal with a slave rebellion like the one in Vyrantium—"

"Ew." Adam grimaced, remembering the gruesome stories that had come out of Tevinter. Savage atrocities on both sides, and a merciless repression at the end. The only good thing to come of it was that some Tevinters had become convinced that owning slaves was more trouble than it was worth.

"— and no darkspawn," Nathaniel concluded. He glanced over at Carver. "I hope."

"Not on the surface, anyway," Carver agreed.

Alistair snorted. "No, not on the surface." For Nathaniel and Adam's benefit, he added, "Ferelden's in pretty good shape, even below. All that underground travel during the Blight really

worked wonders. There are still pockets and odd tunnels, here and there. It's a lot worse elsewhere. I heard from Leliana awhile back. The Orlesians were going to do some serious hunting for Broodmother nests out in the Western Approach. Riordan's pretty determined. No word since, but I expect them to be down there for a long time."

Maybe forever, he thought, but did not say aloud.

Carver grunted at the news. "If Leliana's in the Deep Roads, at least she won't be writing books that make me look like an idiot."

Some chuckles, the loudest, most irritating from Adam, of course. Leliana had written two immensely popular books about the Blight: neither of them the detailed military history some had hoped for. One was a book intended for children that had claimed a wider readership: *Bronwyn, Girl Warden of Ferelden*. Charmingly illustrated with woodcuts, it presented Bronwyn as a protector of the people, a friend of children and the oppressed, a pious and heroic warrior in the service of Andraste and the Maker. The final illustration, of Bronwyn and Scout looking out at a glorious sunrise together, was modeled after the touching statue in the Denerim Market. It was just the book for those who liked to think of Queen Bronwyn as an pure-hearted avatar of Andraste, returned to save her people from the darkspawn. Carver thought the book portrayed a milk-and-water Bronwyn; a ladies' tea party sort of Bronwyn; a Chantry-sister Bronwyn. He hated seeing it in the hands of impressionable girls like Faline and Jancey

Kendalls.

Leliana's other book, *Tales of the Blight Companions*, irritated him even more. It was certainly an interesting, readable book, containing all the stories Bronwyn and her friends had told each other. Leliana had not been present for all of them, but she had ferreted them out from the survivors. It also contained some material putting the stories in context, and Carver was mortified to discover that Leliana had included the oblivious stupidity with which he had told Bronwyn the all-too-appropriate story of "The Boy Who Found Fear at Last." Yes, he had been young, but the readers did not know that. It was mortifying, and everyone in Ferelden appeared to have a copy.

Another round came, and this loosened their tongues a little more. Alistair spoke first.

"I wonder where Loghain is right now."

Carver shook his head. "I wonder if he's even alive."

Jowan said nothing. Loghain was gone, taking Jowan's deepest, darkest secret with him. No one now would ever know that Jowan had poisoned Arl Eamon on Loghain's orders.

"He's alive," Nathaniel said, his grey eyes fierce in the dim light. "He had his sword and his mabari with him. I'd back him against anyone."

"Well, he certainly traveled light," Adam said, a little more casually. He had never felt much personal loyalty to Loghain. Adam was the Couslands' man, and was well pleased that his friend Fergus sat on the throne. "But where did he go? That's the real question. It's one thing to abdicate. It's another to *vanish* like that. There was a rumor that he'd had a message of some sort. Someone from the north who passed on some intelligence. What would make a king walk away from his throne?"

No one wanted to say out loud the most popular theory — the one whispered in cheap taverns and throughout the freeholds of the Bannorn.

King Maric is alive. Loghain Mac Tir has gone to rescue him.

Alistair blew out a breath. He could think of few things that would make a bigger mess in Ferelden than the return of King Maric. Granted, he sometimes wondered what it would be like to meet his father... to show him his city of Jader and his beautiful princess and their darling little girls... but it really and truly would be a mess.

There was another theory: the one that was supported tacitly by the Crown. King Loghain had abdicated and gone on a pilgrimage to the Urn of the Sacred Ashes, there to take vows as a holy brother. Alistair had trouble seeing it, but Cauthrien wasn't confirming or denying it, and she was Bann of Haven. People visited the great temple there, but none of it quite matched Bronwyn's descriptions. The Chantry refused to allow pilgrims access to the Ashes in their big elaborate urn in

the temple, and there had been some unrest because of it. No one had seen Loghain there, but they wouldn't, of course, if he had gone there to seek peace and contemplation. Alistair considered quizzing Cauthrien again, or maybe her husband, Lord Darrow, who knew Alistair from their time in Ostagar together

"Well, who knows?" Adam replied to himself, lightening the mood. "A little mystery make the world a more interesting place. Another round, I think."

"And more cheese," Alistair added. "Especially the smoked Amaranthine. It's my favorite. It always makes me think of Bronwyn."

"Cheese makes you think of Queen Bronwyn?" Adam laughed, a little incredulously.

Alistair was unfazed. "Smoked Amaranthine," he said loftily. "And Rainesfere Blue. The night of the victory at Ostagar... when Duncan fell... " his smile faltered. "We were both in awful shape after the Tower of Ishal, and she dragged me off to the Highever tent. Poor old Wynne came to heal us. The servants brought us food and wine, and those were the cheeses. It was the best meal I'd ever had... apples and little crisp oatcakes and glorious cheese. Bronwyn mentioned it to me... that last day. We had time to wolf down some food and I brought her a plate of what we could find. Among the odds and ends was a wedge of Haute-Cantal."

Adam smiled, not unkindly. "Again he remembers the cheese."

"Well, it was my last conversation with her, and her last meal, so the details are pretty much permanently stuck in my mind."

"I remember the cheese," Carver said, considering. "And the pickled herring."

"I remember the disgusting porridge we had the next morning," Jowan said. "We were all so miserable, it seemed perfect." He made a face at the bottom of his mug. "At least we ate. I don't think Loghain did, until Tara nagged him, just before the funeral."

"Tomorrow's the fifth anniversary," Jowan said softly. "We all loved her so much. Maybe that's why Loghain couldn't stand any more Landsmeets and their feasts and balls. The last time he saw her alive, she was flying away from him."

Adam said, "Fergus has to put up with it."

"The King wasn't there, and I'm glad," Jowan replied. "It was bad enough for him without seeing what happened."

"Better to have seen her a last time," Nathaniel disagreed quietly. "I wish I *had* been there."

"I understand how you feel," said Adam, "but too many were infected with the Blight sickness as it was, and it was a sad and weary march home for them."

"Too right," grunted Alistair. "We *did* love her, like Jowan says. Well..." he reddened, and waved his hands in excuse.

"... at once point I was actually *in* love with her. Stupid, stupid... but I was. I gave her a rose. She was really nice about it, but of course I never had a chance."

"I had a chance," Nathaniel said slowly. "I was *this* close—" he gestured with his fingers "—to a betrothal, when my father lost his temper with me and sent me to the Free Marches."

"Don't look at me," Jowan said, blushing. "I loved her, but not that way. I would as soon thought of Andraste *that* way. Besides, I was in love with someone else when I met her."

"Tara?"

"No." Jowan shook his head. "I don't like to talk about it, but not Tara. Tara was always a sister to me. I miss her."

"I was nineteen," said Carver. "I was in love with a *lot* of women: Bronwyn, Leliana, Adaia... yes, I really am out of my mind... Danith, Maeve. Anyone but a mage. That would be like being in love with *my* sister."

"Not Aveline?" Jowan teased. Aveline and Carver clashed frequently. She was currently a Senior Warden and in command of the little Ostagar post, far, far away.

Carver scowled. "No."

"You should find someone," Adam advised. "Both of you. Marriage is wonderful."

The married men dutifully echoed the sentiment. They even seemed sincere.

"It's a pretty serious responsibility, though," Alistair said, hesitating over his words. "Teagan wants me to contract for a marriage between his son and my little Moira! She's only three! I told him they're too young, and they might not even like each other!"

Nathaniel and Adam shared a glance. This was interesting. Did Alistair not understand that Teagan might be trying to position his child as a rival candidate for the throne? Moira Fitzmaric's bloodlines made her a very desirable bride. On the other hand, maybe Alistair — or Eglantine — understood *exactly* what was going on, and he was deflecting the intrigue with a mask of naivete.

"I'm not in any rush." Carver shrugged. "The Blight Companions gave me high standards." He finished his ale, tired of the conversation. "I've got to get some presents before the shops close down. Later, then."

"I'll come with you," said Jowan. "I want to say hello to Bethany."

They passed a table where Banns Ceorlic, Babcock, Repton, and Goelim had their heads together, talking in angry low voices. Carver caught a few words.

"—high time someone taught those knife-ears a lesson! We could go right into that 'homeland' of theirs and fetch out some

of them. Who'd be the wiser?"

"—And end up feathered liked a duck? No, thank you. Besides —ssssh!"

Carver gave them a look, and Babcock stared back. The others did not meet his eyes.

Jowan said softly. "They're all talk."

They walked on, out into the clean spring sunshine.

With the Landsmeet, all the vendors were out in force, displaying their best goods. Pretty girls sashayed through the Market, waving long sticks draped with colorful ribbons for sale. Carts offered minced pies and dumplings. A pair of jugglers performed for the crowd, while a ragged child held out a battered tin plate for coin. Beggars pleaded for alms. One man sat under the eaves of a chandler's shop, displaying the stumps of his legs and the sign "Wounded in the War." Carver did not recognize him, but it was possible he was not lying. He dropped a silver into the man's upturned hat. There were potion sellers, and toy sellers, and book sellers, and sellers of singing birds and fine embroidery.

There were people here to buy the wares, too, and not all were Fereldan. One saw Nevarrans, Orlesians, Antivans, Marchers from every city, and the dark skin of Rivain. Foreign faces, but not many elves or dwarves, and no Qunari at all, unsurprisingly.

A shrewish voice caught Carver's ear, and he winced, slipping behind a vendor's sunshade.

"Nine sovereigns for *this*? It's not even embroidered! Is this *magic* silk? Did *Andraste* wear it? I'll give you five!"

"It's Habren!" he whispered to Jowan. "Wait 'til she goes past!"

Jowan smirked, but indulged him. The dogs pricked up their ears and stared at a person they remembered they disliked.

The merchant refused to come down sufficiently, and Habren flounced away, her face red and angry. She was not enjoying her reduced circumstances, and to be fair, they were not entirely her fault. Had her baby lived, the boy's claim to the Arling of Denerim would likely have prevailed. But he had not, and Habren's hopes of ruling the capital through her child had died with him. She spent most of the year at her little manor south of Denerim, and was bored and lonely. Mother said the place was full of cats, and that Habren's handsome steward was shockingly familiar with her. Charade had confided to Carver that he shouldn't be surprised if Habren appeared to gain weight, stayed secluded in the country for a few months, and then adopted an unknown infant as a "ward" some time fairly soon. Habren was a bitter, disappointed woman, which did not make her company at family dinners any more agreeable than before. Worse still, if she saw Carver here in the Market, she would brazenly demand coin from him, and revile him if he refused.

Once his stepsister was out of sight, Carver hurried to buy his gifts. A young woman with an Orlesian accent offered scented soaps and oils. She was quite pretty, and Carver was glad to bargain for her wares. He hoped Bethany liked Andraste's Grace. Somebody he knew did. Was it Bethany... or Leliana? Oh, well. It was nice, anyway. The dogs sneezed.

A woodcarver had all sorts of jointed wooden animals for sale. There was a charming little mabari there, just Magister's color. Surely an aspiring battlemaiden like Emma would want a mabari? He looked again, and then chose a black one instead. Scout was gone, but still popular.

Jowan surveyed the crowd. "More foreigners here than there used to be."

"I suppose the Landsmeet brings them. That and the Cathedral."

Not the old Cathedral, of course, though that was still in use. The clinic nearby was bustling, filled with drunken brawlers with broken heads, fussy children with sore throats, and injured laborers. Carver did not recognize the Templar on duty, though he knew Sister Ursula, sitting behind her table to greet their visitors.

"Warden-Commander!" She smiled. "And Warden Jowan. I hope you are well. I'll tell Bethany you're here. Why don't you take a seat in the office? She's a bit busy..." The good sister bustled off, and the two men edged past the benches, with their dogs at their heels. Those waiting for treatment gaped at

them and whispered to their neighbors —at least those not moaning and clutching their heads.

The office was a nice little room with a cheerful fire. It had been a bedchamber originally, but Bethany had needed a place for storing books and records and for mixing potions and poultices. Voices came closer. Carver looked up, hearing Bethany outside the door.

"—Otto, I don't know what they'll say about that, but we can — Carver!"

She was as pretty as ever, though she was wearing her hair up and out of her way in a severe coiled plait.

"And Jowan. I'm so glad to see you. We've been incredibly busy."

Ser Otto was just behind her. He murmured something too low to hear, and Bethany leaned toward him, nodding. The Templar gave her a smile as he turned away. Carver scowled. He knew that kind of smile. Before he could start interrogating her, or making remarks about chaste "Chantry marriages," she saw the little parcel in his hands.

"Is that for me? That's lovely! Thank you so much! What's that?"

"It's for Emma," he mumbled, wrong-footed. "It's a dog."

Magister looked up at him quizzically. The object certainly was

not a real dog.

"I'm sure she'll love it. She's so adorable. Look, I'm sorry, but we're horribly busy today. Finn's visiting his parents, and Keili is nervous about delivering babies. I'll see you at dinner tomorrow. So nice to see you, Jowan." Another kiss, a pat on Magister's head, and Carver found himself hustled away.

He stalked through the door, blowing out an angry breath.

"Carver, wait!" cried Jowan, trying to get past a shouting merchant family, whose grandmother was complaining shrilly of her 'rheumatics.' Exasperated, Jowan shot a healing spell at the surprised woman, and hurried after Carver.

Carver stopped, and glared back at the clinic. "That Ser Otto is too friendly with her."

"You mean you think she's too friendly with *him*."

"Same thing."

"You know it's not. You can't tell Bethany how to live her life. Not even your mother can do that. Come on. Why don't we head back to the Compound?"

Carver sulked, too annoyed to notice Jowan's own disappointment, as they went the short way, through the Alienage. The gates were always open now. The main thoroughfare was paved with cobblestones and far better kept than it had been in former days. The reasons for that were not

much to anyone's credit.

The depopulated Alienage was being eyed with fierce greed by speculators. Of course, young Arlessa Faline had the largest holdings there, and the King, her guardian, managed her property with scrupulous, conservative care. Faline was due to reach her majority this year, and no one was quite sure what she would decide about the Alienage. Most of the remaining elves lived in the tall, sturdy building commissioned by Queen Bronwyn, and that was a Crown property. Fergus had declared that as long as there were elves in Denerim, that building would shelter them. The other real estate in the Alienage could conceivably command immense rents, due to the demand for housing. No one had quite yet found the nerve to demand the dissolution of the Alienage. Carver suspected that was coming.

The location, there in the heart of the city, was prime: with access to the Market, King's Way, and Cathedral Street. Faline could make a fortune if she tore down the derelict buildings and replaced them with fine townhouses. The rents she could command would pay back her investment—and more — within only a few years. So urged the Queen, who saw little reason to be sentimental. The very same sort of redevelopment had been done in Highever, and the former Alienage—now Cousland Square— brought in enormous sums for the teyrnir. Anora might not have the energy for much, but this interested her. She was preparing for the day, by gradually making the Alienage less of an eyesore, paving the street, putting in the sewer feeder line that Bronwyn had

wanted, and completing Bronwyn's plans for the building that replaced the rattletrap orphanage. It was quite a nice building, too, with an inner courtyard of its own, hence the name, "Queen Bronwyn's Court." If the day came that there were no more elves in Denerim, it would still do nicely: providing handsome, comfortable flats for those of more moderate means. The inner courtyard could then be planted with flowers, instead of cabbages.

A few faces peered out of doorways and windows, but very few indeed. Carver and Jowan walked on, and the dogs trotted beside them, pausing to pay their respects to the vhenadahl tree. It was considered important to keep that splendid tree alive, not so much out of respect for the elves, but because Queen Anora had decided that Denerim needed more greenery. Outside the walls, a triangle of Crown land had been set aside as the beginnings of a public garden. Nevarrans and Antivans and Orlesians had them, so Queen Anora had wanted one, too.

At the south end of the Alienage, the cobblestoned path crossed King's Way, and flowed into Cathedral Street. In fact, Loghain had straightened the old lane so you could look straight down it to the front of the new cathedral, Our Lady of the Sacred Ashes. It was not as big as the destroyed Grand Cathedral, but it was very beautiful in its own way, with a tall bell tower, windows of colored glass, and a staircase leading up to the arched double doors. There were quite a few people on the staircase. Where they there for Andraste? Or Bronwyn?

Perhaps they were there for the Ashes. People were beginning to make their way to Haven, but right here in Denerim was an authenticated pinch of Andraste's Ashes, sealed in a gold reliquary, watched over by the young priest who had been saved by Bronwyn years before. Sister Demelza was the assistant curator of relics, under the supervision of Mother Justine. The young woman had written a book about her miraculous cure by Queen Bronwyn, and was much sought out by pilgrims. Both book sales and offerings had brought a great deal of wealth to the Fereldan Chantry.

If he had time, Carver promised himself a visit. The cathedral was always worth a look. The statue of Andraste was as big as the one in Kirkwall, and gilded, and bore a strong resemblance to a young woman Carver had once known quite well, especially in the upturned eyes that all the world remembered. It was really a better likeness than the statue in the Market, though not as colorful as the portraits in the Palace or the Compound. Sometimes it was nice to see her again...

Later. He really must change, and he really must give Emma her present. Children loved presents. That reminded him...

"Don't let me forget to get something for Pepin while we're here. And Gwydion."

Jowan liked getting things for the children at Soldier's Peak, too.

"Pepin would like a new quiver. Something with a lot of color. Maybe one of the beaded Avvar ones. Gwydion's so little that anything would please him, though maybe we should go to the Wonders of Thedas..."

"Just don't get him a staff just yet, all right?"

Jowan chuckled. "You're right. He's too young for that. Maybe a golem doll."

He was fond of Gwydion, though Anders was very protective of his son, and would not allow him to be alone with Jowan. His thoughts found voice.

"He's such a fine little lad. I've never understood how Morrigan could just go off and leave him."

"Morrigan!" Carver spat the name. "Who knows what happened to her? Maybe a bigger hawk ate her. One can but hope."

Morrigan's shape-shifting had caused no end of upheaval in Thedas. Once mages discovered that the ability was no myth, the Fereldans were harassed by other Wardens, demanding to learn the art. They were warned that it was perilous magic. One of their mages at the battle had never returned. Morrigan had told them that she had no doubt become beguiled by her animal form and had forgotten she was an elf. Human mages were unimpressed. What was too powerful for an elf should be a small matter for a human mage. Tara had taught her own people as best she could, for Morrigan was more difficult and

refractory than ever since the end of the Blight, and loath to share secrets. Jowan and Anders taught the Wardens who came to them. Jowan suspected that Anders taught other mages as well: the apostates that occasionally made their way to Soldier's Peak, and then left, uninterested in joining the Wardens or registering for legal service to the kingdom. Sometimes those aspiring shape-shifters did indeed have odd, fatal accidents. Sometimes, they changed, and were unable to change back.

There had been a time when Morrigan seemed to be trying to make a go of it with Anders. She had been deeply depressed after the last battle, and Carver and others had attributed it to Bronwyn's death. Morrigan had seemed fonder of her than of other people, and clearly her loss had hit the witch very hard. She and Anders had settled down in the quiet and comfort of Soldier's Peak, learning much from Avernus, and working on the new grand scheme for the Wardens with some diligence. At the end of the first year, Morrigan was with child and in due course gave birth to a beautiful little boy she named Gwydion, after a legendary shape-shifting hero of long ago.

Once the child was weaned, Morrigan grew restless, and began leaving for days at a time, running through the mountain forests as a wolf, flying through the skies as a hawk. Her absences grew longer and longer, until one day it was clear that she was gone for good. Anders had searched for her, fearing that she was lying wounded and helpless somewhere, but in the end he had come home to take care of his son. The

boy already showed signs of being a powerful mage. Avernus had devised elaborate plans for the boy's education. It was such a pleasure for Jowan to know that the child would never be locked away in a Circle and threatened with death or Tranquility.

"By the time we get back to the Keep," Jowan said, changing the subject, "Malea should have laid her latest clutch of eggs."

Carver glanced about him reflexively. No one could possibly know what they were talking about. An eavesdropper would no doubt think they were talking about a chicken, or a pet goose. They were not.

It was still better to be cautious. "Don't talk about it here," Carver ordered. "In fact, don't talk about it until we're at the Compound, in the study, and all the servants are downstairs asleep."

"People will find out someday." Jowan insisted.

"I *know*. It's important to keep it secret until we've got it right and nobody dares interfere. Anyway, we'll be back for the hatching. That's what matters."

Jowan smiled, and then they walked on in silence, thinking about their grand scheme; the one that would put the Wardens back in the sky where they belonged. Tara, who had witnessed Bronwyn's death by dragon, had reservations about it, but Avernus was obsessed with it, fascinated by the story of Bronwyn's first ride on a dragon down in the Architect's

secret caverns. They had investigated, and found that some of the dragons had survived. If darkspawn could raise dragons, Grey Wardens certainly could.

Carver thought it a brilliant idea. It was the death of the Archdemon, not the flight itself, that had killed Bronwyn, after all. He had been there on another occasion to see her successfully ride a dragon and live.

Wyverns were useful in combat, but they were neither as big as mature dragons, nor did they fly as well. They had really not done all that well against the Archdemon in combat, though they might be of some use in the Deep Roads. However, a High Dragon against a High Dragon? Or a flight of them? *That* should do some damage.

Breeding tame dragons was not easy, but much of the work had been done for them already by the Architect's minions over the past several decades. The Architect had enthralled some of the beasts — the ones who had the greatest predisposition to be domesticated. The fierce, the wayward, he had killed. Avernus read the notebooks and did likewise. Most of the little dragonlings were still pretty aggressive, but each generation was better socialized, and now they were imprinting on humans to some extent. Based on the Architect's experiments with rats, there was a threshold at the eighth generation at which point all the resulting offspring would be tame. It took ten years for a dragon to be mature enough to reproduce. A very intelligent and amenable dragon named Malea was of the seventh generation. Her eggs would be the first clutch of the eighth. High in the Coast Mountains, not far

from Soldier's Peak, was a large cavern, warmed by a hot spring. Malea was established there, cared for by Ostap and some new recruits. Ostap had a healthy respect for dragons, but no superstitious dread of them. He had ridden one himself, however briefly, and lived to tell the tale. It would still be years before the dragons were large enough to carry a rider. Then...

Carver glimpsed Bryland House, and walked a little faster. He would have just enough time to see Mother and Emma, and then he would need to hurry to wash and dress. At the front gate, Jowan paused only briefly.

"I'll see you at the Compound."

"Come on in for a moment. I won't be long."

"No. This is family. Let's go, Lily." The mage gave him a wry smile and walked on, up the King's Way toward the Palace. Lily looked back at them, and then followed.

Carver wanted to tell Jowan to wait; that he was family, too; that he regarded him as just as much his brother as Adam—and a more likable, trustworthy brother, at that. But Jowan was already striding away, head down, and Carver preferred not to make a ridiculous scene in front of his mother's house.

So, instead, he presented himself at the brass-studded front door, and was admitted by the servant on duty. Without warning, a miniature warrior burst from the cover of an potted plant and hurled herself at his legs. Magister jumped, barking,

fond of the little human. She knew how to play.

"Carver! I got you! I got you!"

He picked up his little sister, swinging her into his arms.

"You did. And what's this?" He rapped his knuckles on the pot over her head.

"Ow! My helmet, silly. But it doesn't have wings. I want a helmet with wings!" She pushed the pot off, and it fell to the floor with a clang.

Emma was a very pretty little girl, even allowing for brotherly partiality. She was an attractive mix of the best of the Amells and the Brylands, which was pretty attractive material to begin with. Her dark hair curled softly, like Bethany's, and she had her halfsister Habren's large grey eyes, starred with long black lashes. They were rather like Bronwyn's eyes, in fact, except for the color, but Bronwyn had been born with grey eyes. Carver had not known her then. Emma was just as closely related to Bronwyn as Habren was, and it had been agreed that the two cousins somewhat resembled each other. Well, so people said. Carver had never seen much resemblance, because he had never seen Bronwyn expressing petty spite, and he had never seen Habren expressing much of anything else.

"Who were you fighting today, mighty battlemaiden Emma?"

"Ogres," Emma said, with frank honesty, pointing at the

potted plant. "I hate ogres."

"So do I. I brought you a present."

"Show me, please!"

"Let's sit down."

He found a bench and sat, shifting Emma's weight onto his lap, and sliding his bag from his shoulder. Emma reached out to pet the mabari.

"Nice Magister," she crooned. "Good boy. I like you even better than Hunter!"

Magister agreed. He had always suspected that both he and his human were superior to Hunter and his. They were *Wardens*, after all. The human pup was perceptive.

"I got you this," said Carver, showing her the little mabari.

"That's Scout!" Emma declared. She frowned adorably, remembering another black mabari she knew. "Or is it Lily?"

"It's yours. You can name your mabari whatever you like."

"Thank you, Carver," she said, well drilled in manners. "I wish he was real."

"Until you imprint a puppy of your own, this will have to do," he declared. Even as indulgent as Mother and the boys were, they knew Emma was far too young to train a mabari.

"All right. He has black hair. I'll call him... Loghain!"

Carver felt himself laughing and turning red at once, unable to make himself explain why she ought not to name a toy dog after the Hero of River Dane and King of Ferelden. Loghain himself would probably have been amused. He had been present at Emma's naming, and had even once held her in his arms, but she would not remember him, obviously.

"My dog Loghain." Emma murmured contentedly, "We'll have adventures together when *I'm* a Girl Warden."

It was possible, Carver supposed. He hoped for the best for his little sister. She could choose worse than to model herself after Bronwyn Cousland, that bright falling star.

Loghain had warned them that every generation faces its own challenges. All they could hope was that in every generation heroes would rise to meet them.

"Emma... let me tell you a story about a girl who made friends with a dragon..."

The End

(—until the second ending is posted next week)

Thanks to my reviewers: Tsu Doh Nimh, Girl-chama, DjinniGenie, Phygmalion, Reynes, Kyren, Nightbrainzz, Juliafied, Chiara Crawfor, Casey W, Anon, Raxiselic, Lucy's

Echos, sizuka2, Nemrut, Embertoinferno, AD Lewis, Judy, KnightOfHolyLight, Chandagnac, Wedger, Mike3207, Mazanti, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Mystricka, omolo, timunderwood9, Karsci, The Warrior of the Light, BandGeekNinja, ReploidAvenger, cementCANOE, Tangyman, le-maru, Tirion I, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Robbie the Phoenix, Herebedragons66, Melysande, JackOfBladesX, Suna Chunin, MurphysLaw89, VM mercenary, Mage, Marianne Bennet, MsBarrows, RedtheBattler, Kimbo91, imperial queen, Jenna53, Guest, mille libri, Cande in the Night, jnybot, lemonjay, dragonmactir, ThorShared, NorthernWarden, animeman12, FloridaMagpie, Fenrir666, Soseolga, Zute, Tselmeganvchaa, gdb, PhantomX0990, Josie Lange, DodgeSavage Truck of Bronze, and karinfan123.

Thus ends my story — except for the second ending, coming up next week. Once I'm done, I must go through the whole thing. I have typos to fix, dropped words to add, and subplots that went nowhere to delete. As always, I appreciate your feedback.

Some of you have asked when Aveline was not considered for the post of Warden-Commander. I didn't think it would be believable for all the old hands to stand back for her. Tara and Carver have seniority, and they were both much closer to Bronwyn, which would count for a lot. Carver also has very influential relatives, and that, in an feudal society, would be

seen as a plus. Aveline's father was an Orlesian chevalier, which would not help her. Finally, we know from DA2 that Aveline and Carver really don't get on. I don't think that would change. The difference here, is that instead of Aveline getting a leg up into the Kirkwall guard, and then blackballing Carver, it's Carver who has the leg up. He's not about to stand back for a woman he doesn't particularly like. (And based on the success, conduct, and efficiency of the Kirkwall City Guard, I'm simply not impressed with Aveline as a leader)

All right. Many of you will want to know exactly what happened to Loghain, so I'll tell you. This adventure happens much earlier than Alistair's similar adventure in the comics, so Maric is still in the Antivan prison. Loghain breaks him out—of course—and tells Maric what's been going on. Maric absolutely refuses to return and be king, and Loghain certainly doesn't want to be king anymore either, so the two old friends find a cabin in the woods and go fishing. Morrigan actually comes upon them on one occasion and they have a long conversation about her scheming.

Tara threw Flemeth's amulet into a lava flow. Flemeth, of course, has other horcruxes, but nobody's going to find one and use it for quite some time.

As to the dragon-breeding experiment, I have taken the idea from a famous experiment conducted in Siberia with foxes. By the eighth generation, they're as tame as dogs. Dragons

are much smarter and more useful, of course.

126. Alternative ending: Blood of the Dragon

Victory at Ostagar

(parts of this chapter are identical, or only slightly altered, from Chapter 124.)

Chapter 124 Alternative: Blood of the Dragon

The last flight of the Archdemon was low and slow, violet flames blooming from the dragon's bellowing maw. By the light of the fires in the city and the burning grass on the plain, people could see the little figures on the creature's back, even to the glitter of their spears. Those with spyglasses, like First Warden Wildauer and Hector Pentaghast, could see the red armor worn by the Warden on the dragon's neck.

A pair of Tevinter mages had remained posted on their lookout mound, disgruntled at being left behind. Now they were glad to be in a prime position to observe the Archdemon's demise. They even saw two of the Wardens tumble into the sea.

"Bad luck!" cried one of them, younger and more empathetic than the rest.

His friend shrugged. "Maybe they can swim, Julian. It wasn't

far to fall."

As Bronwyn's spear penetrated the Archdemon's brain, a shaft of unearthly light speared up into the heavens. It expanded into a gigantic white blossom that illumined the night sky like daylight. The boom that followed shook the walls of Val Royeaux.

"Oh," Athis murmured, gazing in awe. "That's what they meant by a 'bright light.'"

"It's... pretty bright," Pentaghost croaked. "Forget the darkspawn for now. We've got to see this."

Those remaining at the top of the tower now had to find a way to get down again. Between them and their friends on the ground was a spiral staircase of iron and bronze held by darkspawn.

Tara had a sudden inspiration. She rushed after Alistair, yelling "Stand back!" and released a blue-white bolt of lightning.

It sizzled down the staircase, curving, curving in an elegant helix; electrocuting nearly all of the darkspawn there. Tainted bodies jerked and shuddered away. Some remained in place, dead bodies rigid, eyes bulging, smoke rising from the top of their heads.

"Good job!" Alistair shouted, impressed. He and Carver knocked dead darkspawn aside as they raced to the bottom. Not all were dead, though, and they fought back savagely. The smoke of the burnt darkspawn obscured the way. Blades slashed out of nowhere; arrows whistled past.

They were almost to the ground when a shock wave shook the tower, making them stumble. Alistair got out the door first. They were just in time to see the huge churning fireball low to the north. Under the stars, a dragon fell from the sky, spewing the last of its fire, and the fireball dissipated slowly into dark smoke, hiding the stars.

"Bronwyn!" Alistair shouted, echoed by Tara, almost simultaneously.

By this time all the darkspawn in the cathedral courtyard were dead. More lurked in the compound itself: in the Cathedral itself, in the sullied gardens, in the scriptorium, in the dormitories. They would be hunted down eventually. Nor were all the Broodmothers dead. There were more nests: in deep chambers under great mansions, in the dungeons of the Palace, and further down, down, in the Deep Roads, where many of the captives had been dragged.

But at that moment, no one had anything on their minds but rushing out to see what had happened to the Archdemon.

Morrigan thought she had planned for every possible contingency; yet at this moment — a moment that should have

been one of triumph — she felt her schemes unraveling. She had believed that her ritual would benefit all her friends, and had prided herself on her cleverness. She had never expected Bronwyn to end up on the back of a dragon, flying above the earth. Her friend would survive the death of the Archdemon: there was a strong possibility that she would not survive the subsequent fall. The Avvar tumbled into the sea. A little later, Brosca slid away. Morrigan shrieked in frustration, flying ever faster to keep up.

If only she had confided in Bronwyn! If only she had told her that she could both kill the Archdemon and survive. With a little prudence, Bronwyn would understand that she should disable the dragon; force it to land. She could have then slay it and reap all the rewards. She might not like it, but surely, given time, she would see reason...

But Bronwyn did not *know* that she should force the dragon to land. Bronwyn expected to die either in the air or on the ground, and there was no way for Morrigan to inform her otherwise now. Anders would be angry: he would feel betrayed. Even though she trusted in her power over her lover, Morrigan did not relish the thought of the coming confrontation. For that matter, she was genuinely distressed that all these worthless Wardens had proved so ineffectual that Bronwyn must die to save the day.

That burst of emotion forced out a shrill "*cree!*" and she veered a little closer to the failing Archdemon, trying to think of some way to distract Bronwyn. Riordan was still stabbing at the dragon, bracing himself against the wing joint as he

tried to pierce the hide. He startled a little as the little hawk flashed by. His spear slid up, slicing neatly through a tendon. The Archdemon shrieked, its wing almost useless.

It could not flap to gain height; it could only soar. Obviously falling to the earth would be fatal, and reconstituting itself would be time-consuming and painful. The Archdemon tilted forward into a descent. It would land far from the Wardens, kill the two attackers, and trust to its ability to heal rapidly.

The tilt dislodged Riordan from his safe position. He lost his footing and dangled from the anchor strap, snarling curses. Bronwyn's stomach heaved again as the ground rushed up toward them. She swayed back as if a giant hand pushed at her whole body, and then as the flight leveled off, she was able to lean into her spear again. The butt of the weapon skittered off her breastplate to the left. She gripped it closer to the head, pushing hard. Dark dragonblood spurting out, and Bronwyn got a mouthful. It was heady, burning, hot and thrilling... intoxicating. She swallowed and thrust again, with a shout.

Dazzling light was a physical presence. She saw nothing else, and accepted that she was seeing her death.

Beautiful, she thought. *At least it's beautiful.*

The bellowing of the Archdemon vibrated up through her legs, shaking her body. The light enveloped her—

And then the shock wave struck.

Riordan slammed back against the dragon's body, but the strap held. The blow stunned him. Bronwyn was likewise unconscious, slumped to the side. The birds tumbled, helpless and blinded, until they thumped onto the ground. Morrigan landed harder, but at the short distance on loose, excavated earth had only bruises. Anders, further away, managed better, but still huddled in a little hollow for a moment, dazed.

The dragon skidded into the ground at a shallow angle, bounced ponderously, and then plowed on, leaving a huge scar on the Blighted ground far beyond the Wardens' lines, even beyond the ravine where the baggage train lay concealed. When it finally stopped, the dragon's tail twitched once, and then it lay still. Riordan was saved from the worst of it by the outstretched wing. Bronwyn was violently bruised when the stop threw her forward against the spiny vertebrae. Another jolt slammed her head against the dragon's skull, Not even the nasal piece could spare her a broken nose. The winged helmet saved her life, but rattled her brains. The last jolt knocked the helmet completely off her head, and it tumbled away, unregarded. She lay still, sprawled out over the Archdemon's head.

The first to understand that he was still alive, Anders gingerly shifted into human form, and rushed toward the vast bulk of the Archdemon. Hardly daring to hope, he scrambled up and pressed his fingers into Bronwyn's neck.

"Thank you, Maker! Thank you, Maker!" he babbled, and then remembered that the Maker had absolutely nothing to do with it. He had to get to Morrigan, but first he took a quick look at

Bronwyn, who had sustained some bad damage from the impact, even protected by her dragon armor. She was obviously concussed. Unstrapping her would be tricky alone. Instead, he gathered his mana for a powerful healing spell, and hoped that would hold her for the time being. From the back of the Archdemon, he could see distant figures running out of the north gate. He hoped they were not darkspawn.

Sliding down on the other side, he found Riordan, badly injured. Another concussion, a dislocated shoulder, and quite serious contusions from what looked like being dragged over rough ground. Another spell for him, and then Anders only had eyes for Morrigan.

"Morrigan!"

The hawk answered with a faint "cree!" Anders stumbled over to her.

"It's not bad," he assured her quickly. "Really not bad. Nothing seems broken, but you'll have some colorful bruises. Don't try to shift back... not until I heal you again."

The discomfort of knitting tissues caused her to cry out again, but she immediately looked better, and then lay trembling. Very carefully, Anders picked her up and carried her over to the Archdemon's half-opened wing. He laid her down gently, and cast a third healing spell. Then he turned to the others.

Riordan was easier to get to. Ander unbuckled the Orlesian and eased him back, scowling over the broken bones.

A horrible thought came to him: the Wardens would expect a Warden to die killing the Archdemon. If no one was dead, there would be curiosity and recriminations and even the suspicion that the Archdemon was not, in fact dead.

Anders could make that problem go away if Riordan did not survive. A simple spell, undoing his healing, would kill the Orlesian quickly and painlessly.

But he could not do it. Anders had killed in battle, but he had never murdered in cold blood. Mostly especially, he had never considered murdering a faithful friend who had been nothing but generous and helpful himself. If it had been another other Orlesian, or a Templar, Anders might have been tempted to simplify matters, but he could not bring himself to kill Riordan. Ashamed of himself for even considering it, he worked on healing the man's broken ribs.

The two young Tevinters on the scene confirmed that he would, first, do no harm.

"Some of them might be alive!" shouted Vyraco. "Hurry!"

The lifted torches gave better light than the half-hidden moon. Anders glanced up to see the two lights bobbing closer.

"Morrigan!" he whispered. "Fly away if you can. They're bound to ask questions. Find Loghain and tell him Bronwyn's alive!"

She felt much better and stronger, and took flight at once, winging swiftly away to the south. She was sore, but not in

disabling pain, and her heart was singing in triumph. Only a few moments later, the young Tevinters, stumbling over the rough ground, caught sight of Anders.

"I can't believe anyone survived that!" Julian burst out. "That's amazing!"

Anders called to them. "Are you Healers? I could use some help here."

Pleased that the foreigner was a mage, one said, "I am Julian Merulus, and this is my friend Vyraco. I'm a Healer. Vyraco will have to hold the torches."

"Actually," Anders said, sizing up Vyraco's greater strength. "He can help me get *her* —" he pointed to Bronwyn still tangled in her straps "—down from there."

"She's slew the Archdemon?" Vyraco asked. "She's dead?"

"Not yet," Anders said grimly.

"But how —"

"We'll figure it out later! For now let's just help her! I'm Anders, by the way."

Dragon scale did not burn, obviously. Vyraco laid his torch on the Archdemon's side and clambered up after Anders.

It was tricky, trying to unravel the intertwined leather belts. Anders finally drew a knife and cut through them. Then they

eased Bronwyn away, sliding her left leg over the dragon's limp neck. Julian peered up at them. Bronwyn's face was dark with blood. It masked her features; she scarcely looked human.

"Is her skull cracked?"

"Could be," Anders said. "Some of the blood is from a broken nose, and some from a scalp wound." He laid her down beside Riordan, and felt the skull bones carefully. With a murmured spell, he fixed the broken nose. Then he rubbed his fingers together, feeling the wrongness of the blood's texture.

"Not all this is hers," he said. "Get me something to clean her with."

Bronwyn, still unconscious, heaved a series of coughs.

"She's got blood in her mouth," said Anders, turning her head. He gestured to Julian. "Put your torch up there and help me heal her."

"Are you sure she killed the Archdemon?" asked Vyraco. "The man is alive too."

Anders answered impatiently. "The bloody Archdemon looks pretty dead to me, and no other Archdemons have made an appearance. It exploded just like it's supposed to. Bronwyn's tougher than anyone I know. A spear in the brain is more like to kill a dragon than an injured wing!"

"That's *her*?" Julian asked, handing Anders some linen torn from his underrobe. "The Dragonslayer?"

"Yes. Queen Bronwyn, Warden-Commander of Ferelden. She's killed a lot of dragons. It could be that she's better at it than other people."

"She's swallowed a lot of Archdemon blood," Julian said nervously. "Who knows what could do to her?"

Anders snorted. "Along with the darkspawn blood she's drunk and the Ashes of Andraste in her system? Watch how you talk about her."

"I don't mean any disrespect," Julian assured him. "It's just...we heard some amazing things. Some Orlesian noble left a copy of a White Chantry document in Cumberland." He whispered to his friend, "That's Andraste's Champion."

"That's it!" Vyraco hissed. "She had Andraste's Ashes! That's how she did it!"

Anders suppressed a grin, remembering a quarrel he had once overheard between two drunks in a tavern.

"If the Archdemon and Andraste got in a fight, who d'you think would win?"

"The Archdemon, I reckon..."

"Ha! But Andraste can call on the MAKER!"

Thrilled at this possible rationale, Anders tried to sound casual. "That could be. The Ashes have saved her before. She's still badly hurt. You... Julian? I need you to work on Riordan there: punctured lung, dislocated shoulder, concussion... take your pick."

"The Dragonslayer—"

"I'll take care of Bronwyn. You look after Riordan."

He had to argue again as more Wardens crowded up, peering at his patients, poking at the Archdemon, cheering and embracing one another. As senior officers arrived, the mob scene quieted somewhat. The young Tevinters pointed out their own commander. Vyraco handed his torch to another Warden to hold and went to speak to Elagabalus.

"The Archdemon is dead, Commander, but the slayer is alive," He lowered his voice to a thrilling whisper. "It's Andraste's Champion. The Fereldan Healer isn't saying too much, but it's clear he thinks she's been saved by a dose of the Ashes of Andraste!"

Thunderstruck and fascinated, Elagabalus pushed past the happy crowd to get a good look. He recognized one of his own junior people, Julian, who was assisting another Warden. Laid out on the Archdemon's wing were a pair of wounded Wardens. One was a young women, the other was a man in middle-age.

"Who's he?" he demanded.

"Riordan of Orlais," Anders replied, not looking up.

Elagabalus did not wish to interfere with a Healer, but reached out delicately with his own magic to confirm that the Archdemon was utterly and completely dead, and the humans present were not. An intriguing — if worrying — situation. Had the Archdemon's soul been destroyed, or would they presently see another, living Archdemon rising up, taking shape from a possessed darkspawn? If it were going to happen, surely it would have happened by now, based on all he had read...

More Wardens arrived. Here was Pentaghast, a little ahead of the others. Excited Wardens were rushing to him with the news. Ah, there was the First Warden. Such a conundrum. What ought they to do? Were they sure they young Fereldan woman was the slayer? He himself had seen others falling from the Archdemon. Could one have struck a last, lethal blow, and then the dying Archdemon had coasted in, crashing to its death? That was not an impossible scenario. Credit should be given where it was due, not offered as a tribute to glamor. Elagabalus foresaw some measured, reasoned debate. Everyone would have to be thoroughly examined.

By the time the First Warden was gazing at the scene, the air was full of gossip about "*Andraste's Champion!*" and "*Saved by the Sacred Ashes!*" and "*A miracle!*" Even the Rivainnis, who were not all Andrasteans, had eagerly joined in the rumors.

"Andraste's Ashes saved her?" the First Warden demanded.

"Is that even *possible*?"

Julian whispered to his own commander, "And she swallowed some Archdemon blood. We all know what dragon's blood can do."

Elagabalus did know. He had been involved in some research delving into the various uses of dragon's blood. It was an immensely powerful restorative. Combined with the Ashes, it could well have caused unforeseen phenomena.

Pentaghast climbed up on the dragon, examining its wounds.

"Who was up here?" he asked.

To Anders' exasperation, Wardens were climbing all over the corpse, doing a postmortem to determine the exact cause of death.

"Watch out!" he snapped. "Don't trample the wounded, you dozy idiots! Can't this wait for first light?"

"Alas, no," the First Warden said, deigning to speak to the Fereldan mage. "The blood must be retrieved and the facts established as quickly as possibly. If we are in danger from a resurrection of the Archdemon —"

"It's *dead!*"

" — or from some new danger, that must be ascertained immediately."

Loghain did not wait for the end. He was already pushing ahead like a one-man battering ram, the route to the Gate of the Moon vivid in his mind's-eye.

"Out the way! Out of the bloody way! You! Sten! Get the golems, and let's get out there!"

The dogs, not quite understanding what was happening, but comprehending fully that he was upset, ran at his side.

Sten grasped the urgency of the moment. "Golems! Form a wedge and force your way through."

The darkspawn melted before the golem's charge like butter, and fled to the north and south of the city, pressed on the other side by the Northern Wardens.

Further down the Avenue they came across a wyvern saddle, and in it, spilled onto his side, was Duke Prosper. Loghain could not be bothered with him, except to feel a spark of fierce relief that he was gone. Some Orlesians carried him to the side of the street and left him to be recovered later. The charge went on. They met the Nevarran Wardens, and a brief cheer rose, as they pushed through the gate and out onto the plain.

As the clouds scudded away, the moonlight shown bright on the plain north of the city. Clearly, this had been the site of a great pitched battle. Some grass was burning sullenly near a vast sprawling bulk: the Archdemon.

"There!" shouted Sten.

A flutter of wings, and white breastfeathers flashed past Loghain. In an instant Morrigan stood before him, rubbing her right arm in discomfort. Loghain saw her, slender and pale in the moonlight, and was unmoved by her beauty. He took a heavy step toward her, racked by questions he did not want to frame.

She spoke first, saving him from that.

"Bronwyn lives."

It was the best, the kindest, the quickest way to tell him. She gave him a moment to catch his breath and command himself, and above the gasps of relief and cries of joy, she went on.

"Bronwyn lives, and Riordan lives, and the Archdemon is dead. The First Warden, I dare say, is somewhat puzzled, and everyone is asking questions. Bronwyn is unconscious, but Anders is with her. Perhaps you should join them, lest the First Warden and the Tevinter mages take her apart to see what she is made of."

"Jowan!" snarled Loghain. "I need a wyvern!"

Not just one wyvern, but three paced swiftly across the plains to the body of the Archdemon. Tara, Jowan, and Morrigan ran along at a gait smoother than ice, bringing as many as they could carry to confront the northern Wardens. The dogs ran

barking in their wake, and the golems, astonishingly swift for beings of stone and metal, thundered behind. Nevarrans and Andermen backed away in alarm. Tevinters and Rivainnis wondered aloud. At first they had feared they were dragon thralls, but these were clearly wyverns, and on the back of the foremost was a big warrior in silverite plate who was no Warden.

"King Loghain!" Anders called. "She's here! She's going to be all right!"

"Riordan's there, too?" called Minjonet.

"He is. He's still out, but the bones will mend."

Loghain was utterly indifferent to the Orlesian. He slid from the wyvern's back, ignoring the ocean of awe rippling through the crowd, and went to Bronwyn at once. A Tevinter obligingly held up a torch so he could see her. Scout darted forward, frantic, and sniffed at his Bronwyn, whining. He licked at her face, which was still smeared with Archdemon blood.

"She's going to be all right, old boy," Anders said soothingly, whether to Loghain or Scout, it was unclear. "She got jolted around pretty badly, and she cracked her face against the Archdemon's skull, but there's nothing that can't be fixed."

Loghain crouched down by Bronwyn, eyes fixed on her. Some of the blood had been cleared away, and her nose was set, but shadowy bruises darkened her brow and cheekbones. Stripping off a gauntlet, Loghain traced a finger along her jaw,

wanting to feel the warmth of life to reassure himself.

"Of course..." the First warden said into the turbulent, excited crowd. "Of course we are relieved at the survival of our sister and brother, but many questions remain."

The whispers of "*Andraste's Champion!*" and "*The Sacred Ashes!*" rose again. Anders slipped over between Tara and Jowan and whispered a warning.

"They think that the Ashes saved her. It could be true. She handled, smelled, and ingested some, after all. She also swallowed almost a pint of Archdemon blood. That might have something to do with it, too."

Tara, in wyvern form, refrained from crunching Anders in her jaws, but it was difficult. Did the idiot not anticipate how suspicious Bronwyn's survival would be? Half of them might even think that the Archdemon was not really dead.

Loghain could think of nothing but getting Bronwyn out of the night air and away from the Archdemon.

"That may be!" he replied. "But my queen requires care. The beast is dead, and the darkspawn put to flight. My people are exhausted and must rest. We shall return to our quarters in the city now, and perhaps in the morning we can find answers to your questions."

Stooping, he gathered Bronwyn up in his arms, and laid her on Jowan's back, settling her carefully between the spine ridges.

"Bear her carefully," he commanded. Zevran tugged on Adaia, and they slipped down from Tara's back, making a place for Riordan. Once the wounded were situated, they headed slowly back toward the city. Loghain walked beside Bronwyn, his hand on her, keeping her balanced. The jubilant Wardens returned to Val Royeaux in the strangest parade ever seen by the Gate of the Moon.

The First Warden was quite put out. "But..."

"Perhaps tomorrow is for the best," Hector Pentaghast said, speaking a little louder. "Perhaps Queen Bronwyn and our brother Riordan will be able to join us then." He bowed to the departing Fereldan Wardens.

"Gather the blood first," Elagabalus ordered his mages. "We can process everything else later. The blood is essential and must be as fresh as possible."

There was much to be done. Teams hauled the barrels and kegs to the dead Archdemon, while other Wardens examined the dragon, finishing their analysis of events. While they were talking, a quite horrible idea occurred to Elagabalus. He nearly shouted it out, but in the current circumstances, that would lead to a pitched battle. There was another way.

Elgabalus caught Julian by the sleeve and hissed a command. "Be subtle. Go after the Fereldans and give them every assistance. Examine the Queen carefully. You must find out if she is with child. If so, she *must* miscarry. Do you understand?"

Even in the night, he could see the boy's eyes open wide and white. "Could that—?"

"It could. She might well be unaware of it herself. Do not ask her! I hope I am wrong, but if I am not, that child cannot be permitted to live. It is for the Queen's own safety. Go."

The other commanders remained for a time— even Visconti and Sainsby— making introductions and discussing the battle and the fall of the Archdemon.

"It *is* dead, isn't it?" asked Sainsby. "It hasn't risen again, and surely there wouldn't be such a display for a mere transfer."

Visconti was worried. "But the slayer lives. It's true that she won some Ashes. I even spoke to a woman who was with her, but I thought..." His thought faded into silence. He might have misunderstood Warden Leliana about the amount and disposition of the Ashes, and did not wish to muddy the waters.

Pentaghast looked at the short, sharp spears that had been retrieved from the corpse. Quite fine work, as were the spring-loaded anchors that had kept them secure.

"The death can almost certainly be attributed to Queen Bronwyn, as she was found next to the spear in its brain. No doubt all the Wardens who participated in the attack have some share in the kill— and Riordan's efforts clearly disabled it and brought it down — but the actual cause of death must be the head wound. Technically, then, we must consider

Queen Bronwyn the slayer of the Archdemon. Of course, we must hear the survivors' stories at length."

"And listen for what they do *not* tell us," muttered the First Warden's aide. His chief glanced at him and nodded.

"Maybe it was one of the Wardens who fell..." Sainsby theorized. " We saw that two fell from the creatures back into the sea. Maybe one of them threw the spear and the landing drove it in further."

"But if they were already dead, the Archdemon's soul would not go to them," objected Pentaghast.

"They might not have been dead," Sainsby replied. "They might have been swimming. Falling into the ocean isn't an inevitable death sentence, after all. Maybe one or both of them survived."

"This is all very unclear," Visconti complained, shaking his head. "But who knows? Perhaps past events were also confused, and we know only the cleaned-up story that our predecessors committed to parchment."

"But the theory is sound," the First Warden disagreed. "It is the only thing that makes sense."

Elagabalus held up his hand, thinking hard.

"The theory is based on a very small number of events. Perhaps a different individual, with different abilities or very

great strength of will, might successfully resist the onslaught of the Archdemon's soul, consigning it to the Beyond. We should not be too hide-bound, or close our minds to special circumstances. It is true that Queen Bronwyn has been exposed to an unusual number of magical substances. It is obviously true that she possesses great strength of will. There could be yet another explanation, however."

"And that is?" First Warden Wildauer demanded, confused and exasperated, wishing none of this had happened in his lifetime.

"Queen Bronwyn is a young woman... and a wife. If she were to be with child..."

"Maker's Breath!" shouted Pentaghast, horrified.

"I only suggest it as a possibility," Elagabalus continued, "and I have sent an excellent Healer to ascertain whether or not it is so."

Visconti could hardly manage to voice his question. "Are you suggesting that an Archdemon could be growing inside her? That is..." He was unable to find words.

"Not an Archdemon, necessarily," Elagabalus. "The Old God Urthemiel instead, perhaps. The fact that Bronwyn is herself a Warden complicates the issue. Were she not a Warden, but the spouse of one, it is clear that the child would be cleansed of the Taint. Since the mother herself is Tainted, that is not so clear-cut."

"I need a drink," Sainsby said frankly. "And a meal. And some sleep. I'm going back to the Warden headquarters in the city. Enzo, are you coming?"

"Yes... yes..." said the Antivan, still sick with horror. "But ought we not to warn her?"

"She is unconscious and wounded," said Pentaghast. "After such a shock, it is likely that she would lose any child she carried. Why torture her with something that is only a supposition? Have the Healer determine her condition. Ten to one we are worrying about nothing. Female Wardens do not conceive easily."

"That's true," sighed the First Warden, "though it still leaves us with unanswered questions."

"We are not likely to find the answers tonight," said Sainsby. "The morning is wiser than the evening."

"Then let us meet here tomorrow morning," said the First Warden. Meetings and conferences were things he understood well. And he was too tired to think, himself.

While the Wardens of Tevinter and Weisshaupt swarmed over the Archdemon, draining the precious blood from the corpse and stripping away hide and scales, Julian hurried after the Fereldans.

"Let me help you," he begged Anders. "I can't sleep without

knowing if they're all right."

Anders understood what it was like to worry about a patient, and gave the boy a brief smile, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Is it all right with your commander?"

"He said I could please myself," lied the boy. "We have plenty of Healers with us... but this is *history!*"

"All right. We took over a big mansion in the Place Reville. You can join us there. We'll want to clear more space for Riordan. I don't know about Bronwyn. Loghain might want her brought to his own headquarters. In fact, nothing more likely. Riordan mostly needs sleep at this point."

"I'm worried about the Queen's concussion," the boy said. "If there's blood on the brain—"

"Fine, you can assist me," Anders agreed, sympathetic toward anyone who cared about Bronwyn.

"Listen," Julian murmured, moving closer. "How did you get out there to them so fast? *You* weren't on the dragon, were you? How did you get to them so quickly?"

Anders shook his head. "I really can't say..."

The boy lowered his voice. "Was it *teleportation?*" he whispered. "Have you mastered *teleportation* in the far south? We have heard that the ancient elves had devices that

allowed them to travel over great distances, but the lore is lost."

"I don't know anything about teleportation," Anders said sharply. He was not sure what he ought to say about shape-shifting, especially to a Tevinter. Morrigan was right there, in her wyvern form, no doubt hearing the entire conversation. They walked back through the city, and now and then Anders checked Bronwyn and Riordan's condition. The Orlesian was showing signs of responsiveness. His eyelids flickered, and now and then he uttered a soft groan and some unintelligible words. Bronwyn was still profoundly unconscious.

Everyone was exhausted, of course. While there were still darkspawn in the city, they had been driven from the Place Reville, the Palace, the market, the cathedral compound, and the two major gate areas. The Avenue of the Sun was fairly secure, as long as one traveled with armed companions. Minimal guards could keep occasional forays at bay. The darkspawn were leaderless and nearly imbecilic: that did not mean they were not dangerous.

Loghain certainly did not care about cleaning out the entire city. That was a job for the Wardens. More accurately, it was a job for Wardens not from Ferelden. Those had already done their duty. As soon as Bronwyn was fit to travel, they were leaving this foul place. He wondered if he could get away with putting her on one of Isabela's ships. Probably not.

It was a long, long walk to the Place Reville, longer coming back than going out. Soldiers' steps dragged on the

cobblestones, and pikes scraped along listlessly. Even those on watch would not be able to function for more than an hour or so at a time.

Loghain insisted that Bronwyn be brought to his own headquarters: a once-splendid mansion facing the open square. A room had been cleared for him that seemed fairly decent. Obviously, the darkspawn had not been in every room in Val Royeaux—nor even every building. Parts of the upstairs here were merely dusty, and an orderly had taken care of that.

Once they reached the Place Reville, the wounded were carefully unloaded from the wyverns, and Riordan taken to the Warden's house and Bronwyn to headquarters. Then they shifted back to human shape. Julian nearly fell down, between the shock of seeing such magic and the curious change in air pressure created by the transformation of so much mass.

"Shape-shifting?" he gabbled, clutching Anders arm. Much was now explained. The Fereldans *did* have impressive powers of their own.

Anders had no time for magical theory. "We have work to do," he said. "Come on."

Leliana came with them, wanting to help, and among them they managed to unbuckle Bronwyn's armor, unfasten her underpadding, and get her washed. The Orlesian mansion had an inner courtyard, with a fountain that the darkspawn had not yet found and Tainted. In the cellar was a well, too, with good

water. Everyone drank thirstily. Julian worked hard and uncomplainingly, awaiting his chance to do a pregnancy scan. Loghain helped where he could, but was too busy with his officers to be able to spend every minute with his injured young wife. Finally, Anders and Leliana were distracted by the sound of heavy footsteps outside on the pavement. Leliana looked out the window.

"It's Shale!"

Anders looked too. In the torchlight, the shape and size of the golem were unmistakable. So too was the armor worn by the body in its arms.

"And Astrid."

Even at this distance, it was clear that the injuries had been fatal. They ran down the stairs and out into the square. While they were gone, Julian performed his painstaking scan. A dead Warden was no concern of his, but the living were profoundly interesting.

The murmur of gossip grew to a roar. A crowd gathered, with more and more dwarves. In short order, the events in the Cathedral became known. The nest under the Cathedral was destroyed, but Paragon Astrid and her party had perished. Others had been caught in the collapse. Shale had not been hurt, of course, and was able to clear some of the rubble and retrieve the Paragon, whom Shale had greatly respected.

The dwarves were quite devastated by the fate of Astrid. Much of the interest in the Archdemon and the deeds of the Queen were diverted to other, more specifically dwarven interests. The Paragon must obviously be given to the Stone in Orzammar. The Archdemon had been slain, and thus the Blight was over and with it any obligations the dwarves had to the Grey Wardens. They must return to Orzammar as soon as possible. Pjotin Aeducan wasted no time in seeking out Loghain and demanding to speak to him.

It had finally occurred to Anders that he had put Morrigan in terrible danger. It had also occurred to him that she had put *both* herself and him in terrible danger with her schemes. There was no way that Tara was going to think any of this was a good idea, and Tara's lover was a trained assassin...

He had been up a great deal of the night, caring for Bronwyn, but some time after midnight, she began breathing more normally, and fell into a proper sleep. The fractures seemed to be healing quickly, and no pressure was being exerted on her brain.

The Tevinter Julian had done well, too, and had eventually left, saying, "I desperately need sleep. My commander will wonder what I've been up to. May we meet again soon."

He bowed in the old-fashioned Tevinter manner, excited at the prospect of making his report: his very *satisfactory* report. The Fereldan Queen was not with child. It was possible that she had miscarried in the past — there were signs his magic

detected — but she was healing with astonishing rapidity, even for a Warden, and no parasitical life could be detected. She would be waking soon. No doubt she would wish to have familiar faces about her.

Anders was glad to see him go. He must speak to Morrigan. Soon after, the proud shape of a hawk was silhouetted against the red and purple dawn. Morrigan slipped through the window, and stood gazing down at Bronwyn.

"She looks much better."

"I think she'll wake soon. She seems fine. Maybe that dose of Ashes Tara gave her awhile back made the difference. I'm a little worried about all the Archdemon blood she swallowed. I hope it doesn't turn her into a raving berserker!"

"'Twould make her better able to cope with Loghain!" Morrigan said tartly.

Anders braced himself, and then said, "Loghain is not the most serious problem at the moment. I think Tara might suspect..."

Morrigan glared at him. "What?"

Ander bumbled on, "... I think she might suspect us of performing rituals that caused things not to work out exactly as planned."

Morrigan exploded. "You *fool!* You told her, didn't you? You

talked. You cannot be kept from *talking!*"

"I was worried!" Anders protested. "I was afraid for you! I wanted a second opinion, and Tara knows lots of exotic magic. She thought it was a terrible idea — for your sake— and told me I should talk you out of it. Obviously," he gave her a weak smile. "I failed."

Very alarmed, Morrigan saw all the dangers in a moment. "And now she will go tattling to the Wardens... to Bronwyn... to our companions... to the assassin! Do you understand what they would do to me?"

"I won't let them!"

"Fool," she muttered again, thinking hard. "I shall defend myself. We must allay their suspicions, and it would be best for me to leave this place as quickly as possible." She bit her lip, and then her eye fell on the bloody mass of the towels that had been used to clean Bronwyn. "I have an idea..."

Loghain came in shortly thereafter to see if Bronwyn was awake. He found Anders and Morrigan in quiet conversation. The witch seemed ill and exhausted.

"Are you all right?"

Morrigan attempted to draw herself up into a simulacrum of her usual haughty self.

"I am perfectly well," she declared. "'Tis only... 'tis only..."

Blood dripped onto the floor from between her legs, and she crumpled into Anders' arms.

The Wardens awakened slowly the following morning, recovering from wounds and overexertion. They were tired and sore, grieving for the dead, but elated at their victory. The first up had managed to make some sort of gruesome porridge, which, being Wardens, everyone gobbled down regardless of how it tasted or smelled.

"The Rivainnis claim they saw another wyvern—a live one — in addition to the mangled corpse near the Gate of the Moon." said Quinn.

Nuala and Steren looked at each other. "The dead wyvern was the shemlen noble's pet. Velanna must be somewhere in the city. We must find her and help her return to her proper form!"

"R-r-r-ight," Quinn said slowly. "Be careful, though. She might turn on you."

The Dalish couple looked briefly miserable. The loss of Danith still grieved them, and now, for Velanna to be trapped in the body of a beast... alone, confused... it was too much. It was truly terrible.

"We shall search for her, nonetheless," Steren affirmed.

Alistair joined the other early risers. "Some of us are

supposed to meet with the First Warden this morning. I don't know why they can't wait for Bronwyn to be up. Riordan, too, for that matter. What are they trying to pull?"

Carver yawned. "Maybe they're still trying to figure out what happened. Last night certainly proved a blow to ages of treasured lore."

Alistair spooned up the lumpy porridge. "If the Archdemon were still alive, we'd know it by now. And that light and that explosion... well, it couldn't have happened for anything less than the Archdemon being dead as week-old mutton."

Quinn said, "The dwarves say the Archdemon is gone and the Blight is over. They're pulling out today. I heard Kardol talking to some of his men. They want to take Astrid home to Orzammar for a state funeral. They'd like to take a formal goodbye of Bronwyn, but they're going today whether she wakes or not."

"Morning, all," Adaia called out, looking half-awake.

"Where's Siofranni?' Carver asked.

"She wants to sleep in a little. She said that when she's ordered to get up, she'll get up."

"The First Warden wants to see some of us," Carver warned her. "Maybe Siofranni doesn't have to be there, though. You should be."

"Ha!" Adaia scoffed. "As if anybody's going to ask *my* opinion!"

Alistair looked at her across the table. "I'm interested in your opinion."

"That's because you're just too nice. Not like me."

Alistair made a face. Maybe he *was* too nice. "Anyway, I want you there, if I have to be there. Tara and Anders, too."

"Who's talking about me?" Tara asked, entering the dining room.

She and Zevran had spent the night making love in celebration, and then making plans. Now was not necessarily the time to deal with Morrigan, but it was not too early to look at their options. Failing that, Tara had told Zevran flatly that she did not want to live in Thedas if it was also going to contain Morrigan's Old God baby.

"Fortunately, *cara mia*," Zevran had pointed out. "We have alternatives, yes?"

Tara was relieved not to see Morrigan at the table. One sight of her smug expression, and she would likely curse her, no matter what the consequences. As soon as Bronwyn was awake, they were going to have to tell her what had happened. Promises were all very well, but this was a terrible danger.

Leliana came through the door, dark circles of weariness under her eyes.

"Maker!" Carver exclaimed. "Were you up all night?"

"For the most part. There was much to do. My friend Silas is dead. He was in the Cathedral with Astrid."

Adaia came forward to hug her. "I'm so sorry!"

"Such a terrible night," Leliana murmured, distracted. "At least Bronwyn and Riordan are alive. Morrigan, too... it is very sad."

Tara looked up. "What happened to Morrigan?"

"A heartbreaking disappointment," Leliana told her. "Poor Morrigan. She was standing there speaking to Teyrn Loghain in Bronwyn's room, when she suddenly issued a flow of blood and collapsed. She has miscarried a child!"

"Oh." Alistair did not know what to say. He disliked Morrigan, but this was a *baby*.

"Has she?" Zevran asked, exchanging a look with Tara. "Such a tragedy! She is at the King's headquarters, then?"

"No," Leliana told them. "She was really very ill, and will need quiet and rest. The King ordered that she be taken to Captain's Isabela's ship and transported to Denerim with some of the other badly wounded. It was agreed that it would be best to get her away from the Taint. She was carried

down to the docks not long ago, with the rest. Anders was very distraught."

"I'm sure he was," Tara said, trying not to show how deeply, deeply relieved she was. "Perhaps they can have another child someday."

"Ah," murmured Leliana. "but it will not be the same."

"No, of course not," Zevran agreed.

The loading of the wounded onto Isabela's ships resulted in something of an exchange. The first boat to dock had a pair of passengers: one big and the other small.

"That's Morrigan!" Brosca called out. "Morrigan! Are you hurt?"

"I... am not perfectly well," Morrigan said, staring up at the little dwarf. "We all thought you lost. It is... gratifying to be proved wrong."

"I am a strong swimmer," Ostap said, "I saw Brosca go into the water not far away. It is fortunate that she obeyed me when I told her not to struggle."

Brosca burst out into a loud laugh. "I was too frozen with fear to do anything else. I've never been in deep water before. It's salty. And cold. You won't catch me doing that again. So Big Purple is dead and the Boss is alive, too!" Brosca enthused.

"We got the message from shore! Guess she was too tough for the Archdemon after all!"

"It is a great wonder," agreed Ostap. "Many of will sing of her deeds." He drew Brosca along, and bade Morrigan a courteous farewell. "May you have a peaceful voyage, with good health at the end."

"Yeah, take care of yourself," Brosca said.

"I... thank you," Morrigan managed faintly, remembering not to snap at people. She was supposed to be weak.

She was laid down in the boat with the rough tenderness that soldiers feel toward a beautiful woman who has just lost a child; and given halting, sympathetic words and awkward pats that she would not have endured in any other situation.

Even Isabela showed her some sympathy, and arranged from her to have a little box of a private cabin. Morrigan assured her that everything that could be done for her, had been done, and she now only required sleep. The mage on board would have more important work to do with the wounded soldiers. Isabela did not know Morrigan, and thus saw nothing odd about the woman's generous, self-sacrificing words.

Morrigan settled into the narrow bed, her hand on her belly, smiling up at the ceiling, enjoying the gentle rocking of the ship. In a few days, she would up and about, with time to reflect on how she would continue to trick the Wardens. The voyage to Denerim would be a long one, but not as long as

the march by land. By the time the rest arrived, she would have managed the feat of magic that would cause the child to be born in Drakonis, instead of Haring. And she would be careful never to confide in Anders, ever again.

Sounds came to Bronwyn dimly, as if she were underwater. The voices came closer, and she began to understand them.

"She's waking up," Anders whispered.

"Speak to her," Loghain said hoarsely.

Anders made a curious sound in his throat. *"I think it should be you, King Loghain. It should be you."*

"Bronwyn?" Loghain called, his voice low. A moment's silence. "Bronwyn? You've slept long enough!"

Bronwyn tried to open her eyes, and found them disgustingly stuck together. A damp towel passed over her face, and she pushed it away irritably. It had done the job, however, and she blinked up at a lined, anxious face. At her side, a muzzle pressed urgently against her, Scout whimpered, tail fanning the air. She groped out to run her hand over the shining black coat.

"Loghain?" She cleared her throat. "Maker, I'm thirsty. Loghain? I'm alive?"

His expression was beyond description. Bronwyn wondered if

he was actually near tears. His fingers, thick and calloused, stroked anxiously at her cheek.

"It would seem so."

She sighed. "Then Riordan died."

"No. The *Orlesian* is still alive."

She nearly sat up, head spinning, horribly frightened. Scout watched her, twitching. "Then the Archdemon got away!"

"No!" cried Anders, from outside her field of vision. "No! It's dead!"

Loghain sat down on the bed and took her gently in his arms. "The Archdemon is dead. We've won. It's over. The mages think it was the Ashes that kept you alive."

"Or all that Archdemon blood you swallowed," Anders muttered. "It certainly helped you heal a fractured skull faster than anyone I've ever treated."

Gingerly, Bronwyn reached up to touch her head. "I remember a bright light..."

Loghain snorted and held her closer. "Everyone saw that. I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm alive," she murmured, bewildered. Why should she be surprised? It was not the first time that the Wardens had been wrong. "I'm so hungry. And I'm *filthy*..."

"A bath is ready," Loghain told her, gesturing at a little hip bath in the corner. A silly Orlesian fancy, enameled in blue with gilded scrolls. He raised his voice, "And a meal is on the way, I believe!"

"Yes, Lord King! Directly!" answered a soldier's voice beyond the door.

Bronwyn managed a smile, looking up at Loghain, touched to see him so moved. Perhaps there was hope for them, after all. He saw her looking, and gave her a gentle kiss.

"You've done well, Dragonslayer."

"And you, Hero of River Dane. Now," she said, readying herself for the worst. "Tell me the butcher's bill."

To everyone's astonishment, within the hour, she stalked out of headquarters to show herself to the cheering troops. Scout and Amber bounded along like puppies. Outside was the dwarven supply wagon, now containing a body wrapped in silk and canvas.

"We are taking our Paragon home, Queen Bronwyn," said Piotin Aeducan. "Our work here is done. We shall go back to Orzammar and do our part to fight the tide of darkspawn there. Perhaps these surface events will give us a few years' respite."

"And we shall not forget our allies, my lord," Bronwyn

promised. "Nor our friends in the Legion of the Dead," she added, nodding to the sturdy Kardol. "We shall stand together in the Deep Roads again someday."

"I look forward to it, Warden."

Shale and the golems were going with them.

"I came from the Deep Roads," said the golem. "At least that's where that mage Wilhelm found me. If I want to know more, I don't see I have any options other than going back. The dwarves need us, and if Caridin told you the truth—though most people are born liars—we were all dwarves once. They are not nearly so squishy, too. I think I'll like it there."

"Then my thanks and best wishes to you. Perhaps we, too, will meet again in the Deep Roads."

"Nothing more likely," agreed Shale.

They departed, and after, Bronwyn's Wardens crowded around, wanting to touch her, wanting her to talk to them, everyone happy at her survival, but grieving over those who had not been so lucky. Jowan was shedding tears, embarrassed but unable to stop. Brosca hugged her, wiping her eyes for Astrid. Ostap bowed low. Tara hugged her, too. Zevran kissed her hand.

"The world would be poorer without you, Noble One."

"Too true!" agreed Carver, almost boisterous with joy. "Come over here, Fenris, and join the glad throng. Fenris," he told Bronwyn, "stood with the Qunari, and kept back the darkspawn on the north side of the Compound."

"My thanks," Bronwyn smiled at the tall elf. "You will not find me ungrateful."

Fenris felt himself near to blushing. "I did not do it for reward, but because it needed to be done." He knew he sounded like an ungracious prig, but Bronwyn only laughed and shook his hand.

Sten, too, was due some hearty thanks.

"I've heard," Bronwyn said, smiling, "that you were a tower of strength."

"It was a stimulating battle," Sten agreed, "and I believe that the Qunari played a not unworthy part. However, it was you, *Ashkaari*, who found a way to destroy the Archdemon."

She tried to find time to speak to everyone, for everyone needed attention. Leliana was very sad about Ser Silas, and many others were grieving for those who would not be going home.

"We're building a special pyre for the Wardens," Alistair told her, after a long embrace that had Loghain glaring at him across the Place Reville. "I'm so glad you'll be there."

Nuala, Steren, and Darach begged permission to search the east side of the city for Velanna.

Bronwyn said, "Of course you may. Don't confront her, though. If you find her, let me know, and we'll try to lure her out and confine her until she can be brought back to reason." She had little expectation of it, herself, but she was grateful to her Dalish comrades, and wished so spare them pain.

"And what's this about Morrigan?" she asked Anders. "I had no idea she was with child. I cannot tell you how sorry I am."

"Well..." Anders' expression was quite odd. "We're both young."

"Still..." Bronwyn pressed his hand. "It's a very sad thing. I owe so much to both of you. Anything in my power..."

"I know." The mage actually grinned. "But *you're* alive. That makes it all worthwhile."

Tara's lips thinned. She would need to tell Bronwyn the whole story, but not today, when people were trying to celebrate. Then, too, the truth made public would sully Bronwyn's victory and call her honor and courage into question. When they were home and safe, and had time to reflect on the facts of the case, she would make certain Bronwyn knew exactly why she had survived. Ironically, Morrigan, profoundly selfish as she was, had saved Bronwyn while gaining nothing for herself.

Serves her right, Tara thought, with bitter spite.

And then it was time to face the First Warden and the council he had called.

Riordan would try to make the meeting, but Minjonet was going to represent him until he was able to join them. Visconti and Sainsby approached Bronwyn, almost as if they were a bit afraid of her, which was annoying. Bronwyn kept a smile on her face, however, and let them plague her with questions all the way out the city gate. Scout growled softly when the others crowded her too close.

"I don't remember much after I stabbed the Archdemon," she said. "A bright light, and then I suppose I cracked my head. I really know no more than you."

The rest of the commanders were equally inquisitive. Benches and light, x-shaped chairs were set up under the open sky, not far from the half-stripped corpse of the Archdemon. Eyes like stilettos raked over Bronwyn from head to toe. She felt oddly glad of her dragon armor, even if it fit uncomfortably without much of her usual padding. She could tell them — and Tara could support the story — of how she had ingested the Ashes of Andraste not so long ago, and how extremely vigorous she had been since them.

For that matter, she felt very well indeed, aside for regretting the loss of good friends and brave comrades. The incessant questions irritated her, tempting her to shout at the fools, wondering what they would do if she simply walked away. She must not lose her temper, but it was difficult. She wished that Riordan were here, but in her heart she acknowledged

that he would likely be as puzzled and suspicious as everyone else. Indeed, she herself could not account for her own survival.

Warden scribes took copious notes; Warden artists sketched the scene, hoping to paint splendid pictures to adorn the Warden posts through Thedas. If many of them focused on capturing the likeness of Queen Bronwyn, it was only to be expected. Her huge black dog, the artists felt, added a touch of the exotic, the picturesque, to the composition.

The Wardens' Council declared that Riordan, as soon as he recovered, would be the new Warden-Commander of Orlais. No one questioned it; no rival claimant was proposed. His deeds spoke for themselves.

"Now that the Blight is over," First Warden Wildauer continued, "it would seem appropriate for Ferelden to have a proper Warden-Commander. You have served admirably as a stopgap, Queen Bronwyn, but perhaps it is time for someone of more experience to step in."

The Fereldans stared at him, holding their collective breath. Bronwyn actually smiled, though it was not a particularly nice smile. She rose to her feet and stared down at the First Warden.

"Someone of more *experience*?" she drawled.

Pentaghost winced, glancing at the looks on the Fereldans' faces. This kind of condescension was hardly the way to

begin. Besides, it was not the argument he would have made himself. The queen of Fereldan surely was too busy to also manage the Wardens, and her input should be sought as to a suitable replacement. This? This was not going to end well. In fact, offending her like this meant that all chance of a prolonged, intensive inquiry was at an end. They had been reassured that the Queen Bronwyn was not gestating an Archdemon. It was a time, surely, to celebrate.

"Someone of more experience..." Bronwyn repeated. Her gaze hardened, and her voice rose to storm of contempt.

"More experience doing *what?*" she exploded. "Perhaps I have little experience playing politics in Weisshaupt, but killing darkspawn? Slaying dragons? Exploring the Deep Roads? I challenge you, First Warden, to find any Grey Warden in Thedas who can match my experience. Can *you?*"

An embarrassed silence followed, similar to that at a posh evening party when a guest has emitted a loud fart. The First Warden gaped in surprise at her defiance, and then flushed. Bronwyn was not about to let him answer. Her blood raged in her veins, willing her to strike down this pettifogging bureaucrat.

"Perhaps you think someone has greater experience gathering allies or working with fellow Wardens across borders. Do you? I'll match my experience to his. Perhaps you think other Wardens have more experience piecing together an order with *nothing*: no help from Weisshaupt, no assistance from other Wardens, while dealing with constant assassination attempts,

while being dismissed as a mere 'barbarian' by the ignorant fools of Thedas. Do you think I don't know what you think of me? Do you think I didn't know that you wanted me to *fail*? That you wanted me *dead*?

"When I was conscripted, I heard a great many fine words about the brotherhood of all Wardens: how Wardens fought the darkspawn wherever they found them. What a laugh! Not *one* of you here could trouble himself to come to Ferelden's aid. Not *one* of you cared what happened until Val Royeaux was destroyed! Only one man in all Thedas stood with us. Let me give all honor to my friend, Riordan of Orlais, who came to me in secret, contrary to orders, at the hazard of his life, to help and advise me, to tell me what needed to be done."

"Your Majesty..." Visconti, terribly embarrassed, tried to soothe her. "Queen Bronwyn..."

"I'm not *done* yet, Brother Enzo," she said, cheeks as red as her armor, green eyes flashing dangerously. "I'm not done talking about how highly I think of Riordan. He *knew*. He *knew* that what mattered was killing the Archdemon. Not playing sad little political games of power and prestige. Not submitting meekly to a man I'll wager has never confronted a dragon or a Broodmother face to face, sword to claw. Functionaries are all very well in peacetime; but when the darkspawn rise it is *fighting men* who matter."

Anders looked at her in alarm. She was as angry as a dragon herself. Leliana was nervous; remembering all too well the

way that Father Kolgrim had sounded: he who drank dragon's blood to make himself bold. Bronwyn had yet more to say.

"How do you think I felt the night the darkspawn destroyed Val Royeaux, the capital of a land that had sent endless assassins against me, that had spun webs to murder my family, that hoped to murder me, that hoped for my country to be raped and ravaged by the darkspawn, that hoped thereby to render Ferelden an empty, nameless wasteland ripe for colonization? I was tempted to let the darkspawn do their worst; I don't deny it.

"But the temptation did not last. Too many innocents would suffer. My enemies were not the merchants and peasants of Orlais, but the proud and powerful; those who thought their actions could never have consequences to them personally. How wrong they were! Further, I knew that if I did not fight the darkspawn here, I might very well have to fight them in Ferelden after all; after the Archdemon had swelled its horde to irresistible numbers.

"But finally, I knew that killing the Archdemon was my *duty*. I am a Cousland. I don't know if that means anything to any of you here, but it means something to me. '*A Cousland always does his duty.*' That is my family's motto, and I would never dishonor my blood by cowardly inaction. So I used the crown of Ferelden to build a force large enough to challenge the horde. I won the dwarves and elves to my banner. The Archdemon lies slain by me, Bronwyn Cousland, Red Queen of Ferelden. If any man wishes to challenge my tenure as

Warden-Commander, then here I stand ready to defend my rights."

Wildauer's eyes bugged out. He sputtered, "We can't choose a Warden-Commander by right of combat!"

Sainsby leaned close to Visconti, and muttered. "Sounds like a good system to me."

Pentaghast, who was no coward, spoke into the tension. "Your Majesty, I hold you in all respect. It may be, in time, that your duties as Queen leave little leisure for the needs of the Grey Wardens."

"Well spoken, Brother Hector," Bronwyn replied. "I heard nothing but good of you from my Wardens. That is a reasonable observation, and as such I will heed it. You may well be right. When that day comes, I shall step down, and my appointed successor will assume those duties. Any Fereldan Warden can now boast a wealth of experience, and I have complete confidence in them all."

"Perhaps," Elagabalus said, oozing a calming influence on the assembly like oil on troubled waters, "perhaps we should turn our attention to sharing out the Archdemon's relics. There is the blood, and the wing membrane, and the scales and bone..."

Riordan arrived, pale and tired, but hailed by all, and took a seat by Bronwyn. He was rather surprised at the brilliance of her smile and her general air of glowing vitality. It was quite

extraordinary, considering how badly they had both been wounded.

They turned to the practical aspects of ending the Blight, not daring to bring up the entire issue of unexpected survivals. The spoils were divided among them, with an occasional wary look at Bronwyn, who lounged gracefully in her seat, as splendid and watchful as a dragon lying in wait.

At noon, the Fereldans and Orlesians gathered to say the words for their dead at the Place Reville. Ordinarily, they would have waited for sunset, but this must be completed today, and the army rested, for Loghain wanted to depart first thing in the morning, and leave the Blight Lands behind.

Dead trees and ruined houses had contributed to the pyres. Wearing only his smallclothes, Duke Prosper was laid on one, already among the nameless dead, for looters had divested him of his magnificent armor, his plumed helmet, his wyvern-hide boots, his jewels, and even his silk handkerchiefs.

The Wardens had their own pyre, and Fereldans and Orlesians alike were laid on it. Quinn wept openly, as he laid Niall and Maeve side by side. More tears were shed for other comrades: for Cathair and Sigrun, for Bustrum and Clovis, for Nevin and Oghren and all the rest. They would all be burned here, all alike, whether human, elf, or dwarf, for there was no way to carry them either to a green wood or return them to the Stone in proper fashion. Kegs of wine were rolled out of cellars to see friends and fellow warriors off in style.

There was a stir in the crowd, and a group of Orlesian chevaliers approached, led by Prince Florestan. He carried a long object wrapped in cloth-of-gold. With some trepidation, the Prince bowed to Loghain and Bronwyn.

"Your Majesties," he said, his scarred face grave. "Nothing can express the gratitude of Orlais for your heroism and generous deeds. I wish to present a token of my regard. I pray you accept it. It was never ours, anyway."

He opened the wrappings, and revealed something remarkable.

Bronwyn's eyes lit, as she recognized, the shape, the symbols, the runes...

Florestan smiled at her, with a nod. " Yes, it is Nemetos, the Sword of Calenhad, taken from King Venedin of Ferelden in Blessed 8:24. I knew where it was kept in the Palace, and thought it a great dishonor to hoard it away from its rightful owner. Let it be a symbol of peace between us." With another bow, he offered the sword to her, hilt first.

Loghain was cynically aware that he was being snubbed, but it was not an effective snub if he did not react to it. What did he care for the ancient sword of the Theirins? Maric had had a fine sword, too, but Loghain had never considered using it.

"The Sword of Calenhad," he declared, giving Bronwyn a little wintry smile. "And very right it is that the blood of Calenhad should wield it."

"A splendid, historic weapon," remarked Bronwyn. "I thank you, your Imperial Highness, for your courtesy."

Yes, a fine weapon, and it would look well hanging on the wall of the Landsmeet. She supposed she must wear it for the time their paths lay together with the Orlesians, but the blade did not sing to her like her Keening Blade. Perhaps this had sung for Calenhad, her ancestor, but he was no more.

That bit of theater complete, it was time to pay tribute to the dead. With her clearest, most ringing tones, Bronwyn led off the speeches before the pyres. Somehow her voice seemed stronger, more resonant. Scout grinned up at her fiercely, proud of his human.

"We gather here to give due honor to our friends; to our brothers and sisters, who gave their lives for all the world..."

Bronwyn and Loghain, Florestan and Riordan, each said a few words before the pyres were lit. Perhaps there would be a time of harmony between the lands, though the estimate of the duration varied among the four leaders present. Loghain's reckoning, unsurprisingly, was the most pessimistic: perhaps a decade at most. Even that would be something, and would permit Ferelden to grow strong in the interim, without the constant menace on its western border.

As their most reliable friend among the Warden on the northern front, Hector Pentaghost saw that the Fereldans

received their fair share of the spoils of the Archdemon. Bronwyn did not trust herself to endure another meeting with the First Warden, and he seemed equally glad to avoid her. Kegs of preserved blood and bundles of hide and bone were loaded onto Isabela's ships. A small amount was kept by Bronwyn, for use on the march to Ferelden. An issue niggled at her conscience, and she had decided, if the appropriate moment came, to discuss it with Riordan, at least.

Pentaghost visited the makeshift camp at the Place Reville to coordinate his activities with the Orlesian Wardens. He was remaining here for the foreseeable future, as was Riordan. Both Orlais and Nevarra had the greatest stake in clearing the remains of the horde from the Blight Lands. There were obviously other nests here in the city, and the Wardens would use poison and bombs to prudently destroy them.

"The operative word," Riordan remarked, "being 'prudently.'"

Then too, though no one spoke of it aloud, there was the magnificent loot of Val Royeaux. The city would be Tainted probably until the next age, and only Wardens would be able to sift through the rubble in safety.

"We will be expected to pay some percentage to the Empress," said Riordan, "but the Wardens will keep a great deal."

"I promised Sten he could have the Tome of Koslun, if he could find it," Bronwyn reminded them.

"He is welcome to it," said Pentaghast, with a shrug. "It seems fair. The Qunari fight well."

"And eventually," Riordan said, "we will most likely learn that at first hand. For now, however, let them go in peace."

"We Fereldans, however, will leaving tomorrow as early as possible," Bronwyn told them. "We've got too many people in danger of being Tainted. We'll clear out the darkspawn to the Orne as we go. Besides, we've got to get back home eventually. There are still darkspawn in the south and west of Ferelden."

Merrill had told her that the Dalish would travel with the Fereldans. It was a sensible decision. Though the Keepers had ordered their people to be careful, there were those who had contracted the Blight sickness, and no doubt others would show signs, given time. If they did, they would simply Join the Wardens, and continue the journey back to Ferelden.

For there was no use in going anywhere else. The elves were safest with their Fereldan friends. The First Warden had not even troubled himself to speak to them. The Orlesian Wardens had been grateful, but it was unlikely that would be the general consensus in the Empire. It was wisest and safest to remain with the army until they reached the Fereldan border, which was now west of Jader. Then the Dalish would go their way: to their new lands in the kingdom.

"Prince Florestan and his chevaliers are leaving as well," Riordan told them. "I urged the Prince to reduce his chance of

contracting the Blight sickness. His plan is to go to Val Foret, and then travel around Lake Celestine to Montsimmard to spread the news of the end of the Blight. Then he will ride to the border to escort the Empress— with your permission —" he said to a smiling Bronwyn "— back home."

"There will be no difficulty with that," said Bronwyn. "I promise you."

Her conscience pricked her again. She took a breath, and said, "There's something you need to know, though, before we leave, and you can pass it on to the First Warden and the others. One of our Wardens came up with an improved Joining potion. It is only right that you share in this discovery."

"An improved potion?" Riordan asked. "What does it do?"

"More people survive the Joining, for one thing. We've tried it, and we've had a *lot* fewer deaths. Now's the time to use it, with all the soldiers exposed to the Taint."

The two men glanced at each other, intrigued and hopeful.

"And it may..." Bronwyn hesitated, not sure how much was the potion, and how much Avernus' powerful Blood magic. "...It may prevent the Calling, or delay it. It works on people who have already Joined too, because we all took it with no ill effects. I'll have Tara write down the formula for your mages."

"That sounds..." Pentaghost gestured his wonder. "like a brilliant idea." He looked at her keenly. Perhaps this new

Joining potion was the answer, at least in part, to the mystery of her survival. He vowed to spread the news immediately to the rest of the Wardens, and did so.

The Antivans, Orlesians, Nevarrans, Rivainnis, and Marchers were quite elated at the news. The Wardens of Weisshaupt and Tevinters did not seem all that impressed. To Riordan and Bronwyn, Pentaghost confided his suspicion that they had already had some such improvement, and had not troubled to inform the rest of the order. First Wardens typically stepped down on their thirtieth year of service, but no one had ever heard of a First Warden going to Orzammar for his Calling. He had assumed that they had another entrance to the Deep Roads further north, but perhaps there was another, more infuriating explanation.

The idea made him feel very unsettled, and then he asked Bronwyn more about the invention of this potion. She asked that he keep what she was about to tell him to himself, then began to recount the adventures of a very old and terrible Warden by the name of Avernus.

At sunset, Sten and his Qunari made a formal leavetaking of Bronwyn and the Wardens, for they were staying in Val Royeaux, of course, to undertake their search for the Tome of Koslun.

"I certainly hope you find it," Bronwyn told Sten. "You deserve it and more. We say in Fereldan that '*Fortune favors the brave.*'"

Sten allowed himself a faint smile. "or '*the foolish,*' but sometimes it comes to the same thing. I was not certain at first what words to use when describing the sight of you flying on a dragon through the air, but you trusted in your abilities, and your faith was justified. I, too, have faith. I shall find the Tome of Koslun and return it to Par Vollen. My report to the Arishok will be long, and much of it will be about you, and the worth of the Wardens."

"And about your discoveries in southern lands," said Bronwyn. "Take this little pamphlet with you. A soldier named Tanna assembled it, and it contains recipes — that is, formulas — for every kind of cookie she knows. Share them with your comrades, and think of our days together!"

Other farewells were made that night. Some were quiet and tender; some were violent and raucous. In the Place Reville, at the Palace, and in the Imperial Market desperate, ferocious looting raged from cellars to garrets. Soldiers begged Wardens to go with them while they pillaged, promising them an extra share to make sure the riches they took were safe. Had it been any place other than Val Royeaux, Loghain would have given strict orders to respect property and keep discipline.

But Loghain lay in Bronwyn's arms that night, and did not care what his men did here.

First, she gobbled down a supper sufficient for three men, and then could not wait any longer for him. Her blood was up, and

she locked the door to their rooms and tore at his armor as if he were a captured enemy. Loghain was amused, surprised, and rather awed at how fiercely, how swiftly she pounced on him, green eyes aglow in the flickering lamplight. She seemed perfectly healed. Even her bruises were gone. With his effulgent consent, he was pinned to the bed and ravished, wishing that he were twenty years younger for her sake.

In between their love-making, they could hear the noisy celebrations, barely kept in check by the officers.

Bronwyn laughed softly, tracing Loghain's chest with a teasing finger. "There won't be much plunder left for the rest, after our people are done with the place."

"Good," he said, glad not to have to play the diplomat. "They deserve all the plunder their packs can hold. More coin circulating means prosperity at home. Cauthrien and her men found quite a bit of treasure in the Grand Cathedral."

"And *that* treasure might well pay for our own new Cathedral in Denerim..."

"Nothing more likely," he agreed, pleasantly distracted. "*Our Lady of the Sacred Ashes* sounds like a good name to me."

Under the next day's red dawn, the King and Queen of Fereldan, followed by their Wardens, nobles, soldiers, dogs, and Dalish allies, marched out of Val Royeaux through the Gate of the Sun. Irving and Greagoir, baffled by their own

survival, gathered their own people and went with them. Going home seemed utterly anticlimactic, but they could think of nothing else to do. Teams of soldiers hauled the ballistae along, their carriages loaded with treasure.

The Dalish Wardens were more downcast than the others. They had searched all over the city for Velanna, and at times they seemed to be on her trail, but the wyvern was cunning and elusive. They would have to leave her to her fate.

Loghain did not look back as the walls of the once-great city shrank into the distance behind them. Val Royeaux was now one with fabled Arlathan: a place where people had lived and were happy, but which was now no more. It would be the preserve of Wardens and plunderers as long as this age lasted, and very likely longer than that.

Bronwyn did look back, and sighed deeply.

"Don't waste your pity on them," Loghain growled.

"Pity? No. I'm ashamed to say I wasn't thinking about the poor slaughtered innocents at all. This adventure is over. *The Blight is over*. Whatever shall we do with the rest of our lives?"

"Live them, I hope," said Loghain. He glanced at her, a ruby flame of hope burning in him that he hardly dared cherish.

"We'll build that Cathedral. Give our promised aid to the dwarves. Bring the nobility into line. See justice done in the kingdom. Maybe... have a child... Bring up a Fereldan prince who will always do his duty." He looked away, not wanting her

to see the desperate longing written on his face.

She was not deceived for a moment. She brushed her shoulder against his, their armor briefly clanking, and smiled at him until he was forced to smile back, just a little. The dogs, happy that their people were happy, capered about, glad at the prospect of a long walk.

Aeron strolled behind them, strumming his lute. He lifted his voice, and Leliana, after a brief, internal struggle, joined in. Other voices were heard, and the tune carried them out of the Blight Lands, under the springtime sun.

*"When duty calls me, I must go
To stand and face another foe
But part of me will always stray
Over the hills and far away.*

*O'er the hills and o'er the way
We'll live to fight another day.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.*

*When evil stalks upon the land
I'll neither hold nor stay my hand,
But fight to win a better day
Over the hills and far away.*

*O'er the hills and high and low,
Through Jader, Lydes, and Val Royeaux,*

*The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away."*

Thanks to my reviewers: silvereagleXI, Josie Lange, DodgeSavage Truck of Bronze, Reploid Avenger, Meatzman2, modeiohem, Nightbrainzz, KnightOfHolyLight, DjinniGenie, RaZoRMandiblez, Melysande, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Chiara Crawford, Marianne Bennet, Inveleth, JackOfBladesX, imperial queen, Girl-chama, MsBarrows, Guest, riverdaleswhiteflash, Aoi24, le-maru, Mike3207, Phygmalion, Sash'Rahaal, Guest, Candle in the Night, Erisian, Tirion I, PSG1John, Raxiselic, Robbie the Phoenix, Casey W, sizuka2, Kamidaze duck, BandGeekNinja, Acaila, Wedger, Tselmagnavchaa, Guile, Halm Vendrella, Herebedragons66, amanda weber, Jenna53, Suna Chunin, Lucy's Echos, dragonmactire, Chandagnac, jnybot, dragonblade3200, Zute, Shadowhawke, and karinfan123.

Inveleth has posted a lovely picture to DeviantArt: "Heroes Die Young." It's quite a good likeness of Bronwyn. Thanks, Inveleth!

JOdel continues to create thrilling illustrations for the upcoming version of VaO at her Red Hen site. See my profile page for a link to her wonderful work. It will be some time before the story is edited and posted, but I will certainly announce it both on my profile page and here with a short bonus drabble.

All we have left is the second epilogue! I'll include some musical notes with that, especially concerning the soundtrack of Alexander.

127. Alternative Epilogue: Dragonseed

Victory at Ostagar

Chapter 127: Alternative Epilogue: Dragonseed

"Her Majesty visits Soldier's Peak every spring, just after the Landsmeet. Everything is going to be perfect for her, or I'll know the reason why!"

Cook was raging at the kitchenmaids again. That was always entertaining. Brangaine watched from the shadows, hoping the distraction would allow her to snatch away one of the little cakes on the silver tray.

The girl slipped in among the kitchen barrels, hoping the flour dust would not make her sneeze and give her away. Eavesdroppers learned many useful and important things, which was why she had honed this particular skill. Besides, Mother was looking for her, wanting to find fault with something or other. They had been quarrelling all day long. Brangaine would much rather hear about Queen Bronwyn's arrival. Her godmother never forgot to bring her a present, and it was always something wonderful.

The Queen was coming a little earlier than expected this year. She had dealt with the Landsmeet with great dispatch, since

no one cared to contradict her these days. Uncle Carver had been at the Landsmeet, of course, but had gone ahead of the Queen to alert the castle to her arrival. She had other visits to make before coming here.

There was noise upstairs, and Brangaine heard Mother calling for her. She slid back further into the shadows, determined not to answer. Today's lessons had not gone well, not because Brangaine could not do the spells, but because she hated the way Mother always spoke to her.

If she must have lessons — even though she was a tall girl just turned fourteen — she had much rather have them with Father, who always made a game of it, and whose face crinkled up so nicely when he laughed. Mother laughed, all right, but it was always a bad sign. Mother had a rather ugly laugh. Mother laughed when she thought people were being stupid, or when something horrible happened to someone. It had taken some time for the idea to sink in, but Brangaine had now concluded that Mother was a very cruel person.

And when Father was busy teaching the acolytes, Brangaine would much rather go up to the dragon caves and learn from Ostap and Brosca. They would let her help feed the dragonlings and watch while they trained the new teams. The five-year-olds were big enough now to be taken out for aerial training with their Warden partners. How beautiful they were in flight, and how they called to something in Brangaine that she could not yet find words to express.

Mother said it was a second-rate manner of flying, riding on a

creature's back, and that when she deemed Brangaine mature enough, she would teach her a proper shape herself. So far, it was always "not yet."

Brangaine grinned fiercely at the bustling kitchen help, her eye on marzipan cakes exquisitely decorated with spun sugar flowers. If she tried hard enough, she would be of the shadows, snatch a treat up, and be hidden before any of the silly mundanes were able to take note of her.

She was magical — very magical — as both Father and Mother agreed. There were mages, and then there were mundanes, but no mage or mundane was exactly the same as every other.

Some mundanes feared magic, which was why Brangaine's family lived at Soldier's Peak now, instead of at the Warden Compound at the Palace in Denerim. More mages were out in public now, due to Queen Bronwyn's wise reforms, but most people, when confronted with a magical child, still thought she belonged at the Circle of Magi, where her magic could be controlled and trained.

Some mundanes had quasi-magical powers themselves, and the line between magical and non-magical was often blurred. Queen Bronwyn herself, after all...

Brangaine narrowed her eyes, gathered her mana, and gave the silly maid Nerila a *push*, using her magic. If she prepared carefully... it worked, this time! The maid paused, mouth open, looking dazed. In a flash Brangaine was out from cover,

and the lovely little cake was captured and carried off to be savored at her leisure. It was dainty and perfect: its delicate glaze perfectly white, but for the exquisite rose at the top.

It was such fun to steal like this, though it was just as easy — and rather safer — just to look in the servitors' eyes and tell them to give her what she wanted. They were so simple, for the most part, and most of them were intimidated by a mage child. If she asked in the right way, they would probably give her the keys to the spice closet and the treasury. Better not to risk it, though... not yet, anyway. Mother was clever at knowing when Brangaine was up to something.

She would tell her so, too, in that old-fashioned, affected, *horrid* way that Brangaine hated more and more, day by day. And then she would *smile* — that nasty, mocking smile— as she said it:

"So, Child... do you think I do not know that you are doing mischief? I know what you have done, even before you do it. 'Tis the Mother's Gift."

There were days when Brangaine thought she had had just about enough of Mother.

And then, too, sometimes she did not need magic at all. In the past year or so, boys — and sometimes even grown men — went all silly over her. They would stare, foolish grins on their foolish faces, and gape as she passed. One servant boy had left flowers in front of her door until Mother had caught him at it. She had screamed at him and chased him down the hall.

When he tried it again, she had switched him for it, the little willow branch whipping in a storm of hissing blows, scratching his face bloody. Then he had been sent away, which Brangaine thought a great pity, since she was quite fond of flowers.

Mother had called the boy's floral tributes 'trash' and thrown them out the window. Mother only liked beautiful things if they were also costly, and made of gold and jewels. Brangaine was beginning to wonder if Mother had a soul.

If Brangaine could manage to control her magic well enough, the Queen had promised she should come to Denerim and spend some time at Court. She could study ancient languages and lore with Aunt Tara and healing with Uncle Jowan and Aunt Bethany. Not to mention the thrilling life lessons to be gleaned from Uncle Zevran!

She felt very much in command of her magic now. The mages here fussed and coddled her, giving her dire warnings about the temptations of demons in the Fade. Brangaine really had no idea what they were talking about. The Fade was lovely, and Brangaine felt utterly secure there. Now and then she awakened, believing that she must have been dreaming of lovely voices singing in the distance: two perfect voices in harmony, and sometimes, in her dreams, she joined in, in an ecstatic descant octaves above them. Nothing could harm her in the Fade. It was the day-to-day world that was the challenge.

The Queen was a great believer in the virtues of children

spending some time in fostering, to learn new ways and to keep noble — or powerful — children from being spoiled. Mother did not like the idea of anyone having control of Brangaine but herself, but even Mother would not be able to defy the Queen of Dragons.

Brangaine had saved the spun sugar rose for last, as it was almost too pretty to eat. Almost. It was made of sugar and was therefore ephemeral. Keeping it past its prime would cause it to rot and decay and lose all its transitory beauty. Aunt Leliana had taught her a song about that very thing: that sometimes brief things were more beautiful because they *were* ephemeral, like her little edible rose. It might be fun to learn to make them, but she had liked her lessons in music and dancing better, if only because they vexed Mother so much. That would be another advantage in going to Denerim. Aunt Leliana was there, and Brangaine could learn from her again. Leliana had told her she was exceptionally gifted and that her voice would be exquisite when it fully matured. The Queen would agree to it, because she was fond of music herself.

Brangaine also loved pictures and statues, and there were few enough of them here, in the Maker-forsaken Coast mountains. Soldier's Peak was not exactly full of fine art. There was a conventionally dull statue of Andraste— though Brangaine liked the way it was made so flames rose from her uplifted hand, fed by a vessel of oil. There was an old statue of Korth the Mountain Father out in the garden, which had a certain rough-hewn sincerity. Sometimes she joined Ostap

when he prayed to him, though she liked the Lady of the Skies better. There was the ugly, fly-specked painting of Commander Asturian, so dark and dingy you could hardly make out his face. Of course there was a vivid portrait of the Queen in her dragon armor, looking amused. Brangaine said hello to it every day. Aside from a few crude still-lives and seascapes, that was all there was to feed a ravenous, ever-increasing hunger for beauty. If she went to Denerim, perhaps she could have drawing lessons with the Queen's court painter, Messere Donati.

There was so much to see, so much to *do* in Denerim, and even it, everyone knew, was hardly the greatest city in Thedas. Rumor was that Jader was easily its equal, even after the building of the new Cathedral in Denerim, and the improvements to the Palace and the Market District.

Brangaine wanted to see the Cathedral. She had heard that the stained-glass windows were a wonder. There was a round one in the front, called a 'rose window' that was made with every color in the rainbow...

Brangaine wondered if the Queen would bring her a new gown, or perhaps some jewelry. Perhaps a lute of her own! That was an exciting thought. If the Queen gave it to her, Mother would not dare to take it away. Of course, if she *did* go to Denerim, the Queen would give her new garments anyway, since she would not want a fosterling going about in hideous rags of homespun and goathide.

She would certainly not miss any of the other children here. Silly creatures, all of them, except for Rica. Rica understood

the dragons even better than her parents. She could practically talk to them, even without any dragon blood to help her along. It was nice that Rica had a useful ability, considering how awfully homely she was. Avvar and dwarf was not a combination tending toward good looks. Brangaine preened a little, admiring the lock of silky black hair hanging down over her shoulder and her long-fingered white hands. Noticing that they were sticky, she hastily licked the last of the sugary crumbs from them and wiped them on her skirt.

Someone was coming. Brangaine knew Mother's impatient footsteps all too well. Mother could not follow her quite as well nowadays, since Brangaine had learned the secret of the little ring of of dragonthorn wood that Mother had made her wear. Mother would simply have to make another, if she wished to track Brangaine like her forest prey. It had been no end of effort and work, but Brangaine had taken off the ring and stared at it, wishing *hard*, until it was just a little bit smaller— too small for even Mother to force on her finger.

Of course, if Mother grew exasperated, she might shapeshift into a wolf and sniff her out. That was horrible and degrading, especially when she captured Brangaine's wrist in her yellow fangs and dragged her along. She had done it more than once, and heartless people had seen it, and laughed and laughed. Brangaine gritted her teeth, hot with remembered outrage. Someday, she would have her revenge on them all.

"Morrigan!" called a voice, and Brangaine relaxed a little, smiling. She liked Uncle Carver. He was handsome, and not a bit afraid of her. And she knew he thought she was pretty.

She had heard him say so to Leliana once.

"Brangaine's going to be a raving beauty. She's already the prettiest girl at Soldier's Peak!"

Brangaine smiled again, basking in the compliment.

"What now?" Mother asked, clicking her tongue with impatience.

Carver was not afraid of Mother, either. He was quick with his big sword, and knew all the Templar tricks.

"The Queen's party has been seen on the road. We need to assemble on the steps to greet her. Could you go fetch Anders and the others from the Mages' Tower?"

"I cannot find Brangaine. The wretched brat has run away again."

Carver laughed. "I'm sure she'll be there to see the Queen. She generally knows what's going on."

Mother huffed, but did as he asked. Brangaine smiled, spitefully pleased. Others might wonder why Mother put up with other people at all, but Brangaine had discovered that the Wardens had their limits. Mother was not a Warden herself, and there had been a time that she quarrelled horribly and constantly with the other inhabitants of the Peak. The Queen tolerated her for old time's sake. Brangaine, hiding in a cupboard, had overheard a certain private conversation. The

Queen told Mother that the price of her life of comfort and security and doing whatever she liked when she liked was that she must not insult Father's brother and sister Wardens ever again. Now, instead, Mother made do with insulting Father and Brangaine. She really was quite awful.

I wonder if it's because she's jealous?

Brangaine slipped out of her hiding place and dashed down to the laundry to wash her face and hands, turning this new, interesting idea over in her mind, rubbing mental fingers over it like a smooth bit of marble.

Brangaine looked into the sliver of mirror over the wash basin, wiped away a smudge of sugar on her nose, and admired the reflection. Yes, she was the most beautiful of them all— girl or woman, man or boy— at Soldier's Peak. Mother had once been a great beauty— and Father still pretended she was — but Brangaine was quick to notice the spreading lines at her mother's eyes and brow and the deep creases of bad temper and dissatisfaction at her mouth. Her figure was still slim, but sagged in places where it had once been — what was the word Ketil had used? Yes... where it had once been... perky.

I'm prettier than Mother already, Brangaine realized, with a swell of delight. In a year or two, no one will look at her anymore, when they can look at me instead. Soon everybody will want to look at me. They'll come from everywhere to look at me, and if I'm not here, they'll go home disappointed.

And she was much nicer than Mother. She had learned

manners from watching the Queen and her noble friends. She could speak courteously to people, and thank them properly when they were kind and generous, whereas Mother's tongue stumbled over any attempt to express gratitude.

I'm more interesting than Mother, too. All Mother can do is magic... and she can't even heal! I can do magic and I can play the lute and sing beautifully and embroider better than anyone I know and dance every court dance and tend flowers so they bloom in glory and I've read all the books in the library except for the locked-up ones. And I know Arcanum and Tevene and Orlesian.

But even that was not the heart of the matter.

The last straw for Mother must be that I'm more magically talented than she is. No wonder she won't teach me to shape-shift. She knows I'll be stronger than she is soon, and then she can whistle if she thinks she's going to tell me what to do! She's trying to hold me back.

It must be true. There was a Warden whom Mother had not wanted Brangaine to meet: the terrible old man who never left his rooms in the Mages' Tower; the one that the Queen always paid a courtesy call on every year. Of course, Brangaine had made a point of sneaking in and seeing him anyway. Brosca had taught her how to pick locks ages ago. She did not try to see him often, but when she did, she always learned something new and memorable.

Avernus had found her very interesting. He had sat her down opposite him and asked her all sorts of questions. He had even asked for the date of her birth and had puzzled over it for some time. He had tested her magic and even pricked her finger for her blood. Brangaine, looking back on that was a little uneasy about that, but Avernus had wanted to test it, and had told her that she was going to be—

"Extraordinary."

He had quite the creepy smile, but they had agreed between them that Mother was not to know that they were friends. It was quite impossible to give him a *push*, and it only made him grin like a skull. He was one of those people, like Mother or the Queen, that Brangaine could not make do as she liked. In his case, it made her like him, as someone who enjoyed her company without being magicked into it. Warden Avernus knew absolutely heaps of magic — even magic that was beyond his own power. He had approved of Brangaine's interest in music and art and told her how important it was to discover one's own talents. If she did not wish to be a Grey Warden — and he agreed that it would be a disaster for her - then it was best that she stake out her own destiny and do things that no one had done before.

"The world can never have too much Beauty," he told her. It confirmed her opinion that Avernus was a very wise man. Brangaine knew in her heart that that was a great truth. If she could, she would make everything ugly and tiresome into something beautiful and interesting. Either that, or erase it altogether.

She fingered her ugly, shapeless, too-short gown of unbleached linen with distaste, wishing she had something worthy to wear to celebrate the Queen's visit. She had been growing out of her clothes at a great rate lately, and nothing she had worn last summer fit her anymore. This horror had belonged to one of the castle maids. Mother was useless with a needle. Brangaine would have to make something herself, once she wheedled worthwhile linen from the housekeeper. It was too bad the Queen would have to look at such an eyesore.

On the other hand, she mused, if Queen Bronwyn sees me in this, she's likely to be sorry for me and give me something nice.

Bronwyn Cousland, the Red Queen of Ferelden, the Dragonslayer, the Hero of Ostagar, Andraste's True Champion, the Victor of the Fifth Blight, was still a beautiful young woman.

Brangaine looked upon her, as she always did, with great pleasure. The Queen was only thirty-four, after all; in her prime and likely to stay there for quite some time. Vitality in her was brimful, like a glittering lamp. She glowed among her retinue like a ruby set in steel. At the moment, the Queen was not in armor, but in a gorgeous crimson riding gown that one longed to touch. Brangaine felt she could never be tired of admiring her. She had always felt connected to the Queen somehow, as if she were her real mother, or the mother she

should have had.

She had brought a very large retinue with her this time: much larger than last year's: her maids, her children's maids, and her young private secretary, Mistress Demelza. Though she was disappointed not to see Aunt Leliana, Brangaine's cheeks flushed hot with satisfaction at the sight of the royal children, every one of them healthy and blazing with great good looks. She had not seen them in years, not since she had made that awkward slip with her magic that had banished her to Soldier's Peak.

She remembered Crown Prince Gareth best, of course. They were nearly of an age, and had played together when they were little. There was little resemblance between that pretty little boy and the lad on the cusp of splendid manhood before her. He was already tall and broad-shouldered, though still a beardless youth. His hair was black as her own, and shone like a raven's wing. Turning a little, he glanced her way, looked startled, and gave her a bit of smile. Yes! She had almost forgotten the dimples! Brangaine smiled back. What eyes he had! Like bits of blue mountain ice under strong dark brows. It was a finely modeled face, she knew, remembering what she had learned of sculpture. Good cheekbones, strong jaw, handsome mouth. His nose was high-bridged, but Brangaine thought that made him look more aristocratic. He was a lovely lad, taken altogether. Of course, everyone always said that about princes, but Gareth really looked as princes were supposed to, and very rarely did. A young mabari trotted up the stairs after him, alert and prideful.

Prince Cormac was twelve, and Brangaine remembered him, too. A slender, handsome youth, said to be something of a scholar already. No one was quite sure what to make a scholar prince, but Brangaine was alive to the beauty of books and learning herself, and was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. People discreetly remarked that he looked more like his father than any of the other children. He sat his horse in perfect ease, and had a mabari puppy following him about. By that standard alone, he was a true Ferelden. Brangaine had heard that the party would next stop at Highever, where they were to visit the Teyrna's university. At least a scholar prince would have a proper place to study and clever companions to learn beside. Brangaine remembered that girls were permitted there too, and briefly pictured herself among other young robed scholars. Interesting...

Sliding off their horses amidst giggles and teasing were the princesses, both ten years old. Twins were held to be very unlucky, especially in situations where succession order mattered, but the Queen bore them anyway and had not permitted a well-meaning midwife to put an end to the weaker one. Twins were supposed to look exactly alike, but Princess Eleanor and Princess Maude did not. Both had the same chestnut-brown hair as the Queen, but Eleanor had Gareth's bright blue eyes, while Maude's were a stormy grey. Maude was a bit taller, too, and a great deal more lively. Nonetheless, they were both very pretty, and their clothes were were a delight and a marvel, with Eleanor in cornflower-blue and Maude in a wonderful leaf-green.

There was another girl with them, about Cormac's age: an ethereal young girl in opulent garments who reminded Brangaine of a white mouse. She had plaits of the palest golden hair held back from her face by a sapphire clasp, very white, blue-veined skin, and eyes of aquamarine. A groom helped her down from her horse, addressing her as "Lady Moira." Brangaine made a face at the sight of a girl that age, unable to dismount on her own, and decided that she was a fool. The two princesses dashed up on either side of her, and linked arms with her, pulling her along, as if she were their pet.

In the Queen's retinue were the Teyrn and Teyrna of Highever, with their own children, and quite the mob they were, even after leaving the two youngest at home. Brangaine did not remember them well, but she knew her heraldry, and besides, who else would be joking with the Queen like that? The Teyrn did not much resemble his sister, since he looked like a big scruffy, hugable bear. Silver threaded in his hair and beard, but his smile was like the sun. Brangaine had always heard good things about Teyrn Fergus. Even Mother approved of him. He noticed Brangaine, and turned to his wife, saying, "There's a pretty little girl."

Teyrna Anora, Dowager-Queen of Ferelden, who gave Brangaine a nice smile, was also worth a look. She was a very attractive woman, though years of child-bearing had thickened her figure. Her hair was still a rich dark gold, and arranged in elaborate plaits that were as splendid as her jewelry. Brangaine studied the arrangement carefully, hoping

to use some of the elements herself.

Less easy to remember were the names of the horde of young lords and ladies trooping after their parents. She could only remember the eldest two: Bryce and Caradoc, both tall, sturdy boys. The two girls, one blonde and one brunette, and the younger, dark-haired boy were quite unknown to her. She would have to eavesdrop on the servants if she were not to appear ignorant. With their party was a grey-haired Nevarran woman who was supposedly the famous minstrel Zoe Pheronis. Surely she would perform at the feast! With her, carrying her instrument cases, was a well-dressed young elf girl. Probably her apprentice. Brangaine admired her bright garments with a surge of envy. Apprenticing to a minstrel would be fairly good fun.

With the Queen, of course, was her elven bodyguard, Ser Zevran Aranai. Brangaine beamed at the sight of him, exquisite, perfectly groomed, and deadly as the blades he carried. Some people still stared when he was introduced, Brangaine was told, but the scandal of the Queen knighting elves and surface dwarves in the wake of the Blight had died a natural death over the years. Ser Zevran was also her Uncle Zevran, as he was the husband of her clever Aunt Tara. Who, alas, was not here, but back at the Warden Compound with their little girl. Aunt Tara and Father and Mother had once been friends, but apparently the Blight had killed that. Now they avoided each other whenever possible.

Everyone made their reverence to the Queen and the royal children, and Uncle Carver made some sort of speech of

welcome. He looked genuinely glad to see the Queen, which was proper and pleasing. The Queen seemed pleased, too, happy to see everyone, speaking to some of them as she swept up the steps and into the Keep. Brangaine edged as close as she dared, listening to the talk.

They had been friends and playmates, so Brangaine saw no harm in having a word with Gareth before tonight's feast. The princes and princesses were being lodged in a suite of grand rooms above the great hall, and it was a simple matter to weave in and out among the bustling servants.

To her delight, Gareth recognized her at once. He gave her a smile and waved her into the sitting room. The dogs sniffed at her, and retreated to the other side of the room. The bigger one growled a little.

"Stop that, Rambler! It's Brangaine, isn't it? Warden Anders' daughter? Maker, it's been years, and now we're almost grown up! Cormac, do you remember Brangaine?"

"Of course I do," replied the younger boy, politely setting his book aside and rising to speak to her, as a gentleman should. "You made me play the part of the darkspawn."

They all laughed at that, and Brangaine remembered it well: poor little Cormac made to go "Arghhhh!" while they smote him with pretend spells and swords...

One of the servants brought in a tray of cider and snacks to hold them until dinner, and Gareth invited Brangaine to join

them. She plumped herself down on a low stool by the table, admiring the finger sandwiches. Cook never made those for Wardens, who after all would not have found the whole tray more than a mouthful.

"These are gorgeous," she remarked. "Smoked salmon!"

"They *are* nice," Gareth agreed. He raised his voice, shouting through one of the doors. "Hurry up, you girls! We'll eat the lot before you're done primping!"

The girls hurried out, laughing, pulling each other's plaits.

"Oh! Look at the lovely cakes!" cried Eleanor, reaching for one.

The white mouse-girl stared at Brangaine, a look of bewildered disgust on her face. Not deigning to speak to Brangaine directly, she turned to Gareth.

"What is that... that...*girl* doing here? Why are you letting her steal food?" To her maid, she said, "Odette, tell the churl to go away and fetch more water for my bath."

Before the maid could transmit the message, Brangaine jumped to her feet, fists clenched, cheeks flaming.

"Fetch it yourself! I'm not a servant!"

Odette, the maid, tutted in a scandalized way. The white mouse was livid with shock.

"How dare you speak to me like that! I'll have you whipped and turned off for insolence!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Stop yelling, both of you!" yelled Gareth. "We invited her, Moira. She's a friend."

"A strange sort of friend!" Moira sneered daintily. "She looks like a beggarmaid in those rags!"

Knowing it was only too horribly true, Brangaine hissed in baffled rage. She wanted to hurt the white mouse: she wanted her to crush her and burn her with magic. She wanted to give the white mouse a *push*, and make her hit her head against the wall. If she did, Queen Bronwyn would never take her to Denerim. Gareth laid a hand on her arm. The dogs, confused, ran about the room, adding to the noise.

"She's very pretty, though," Maude said. "I like her hair."

"She's pretty enough to be a maid in the royal apartments," Eleanor agreed generously.

"Brangaine is a Warden's child," Gareth told Moira and his sisters. "We used to play together in the Palace."

"I daresay she wore that exact dress," Moira sniffed. "It looks shabby enough!"

"Ooo!" cried Maude, delighted at the scene. "Fighting words! A fight! A fight!"

"Maude, really!" her sister reproved her. "Not a fight." Her eyes lit with mischief. "A proper *duel*."

"Don't!" cried the white mouse. "Don't be so hateful. I don't know how to fight! *Maman* forbids it!"

Brangaine looked her rival up and down. She had seen enough fighting to know how to go about it. For this, she would not even *need* magic.

"Too bad," she said. "Maybe after I thrash you, you'll know you have to take responsibility for your words."

"I'll tell the Queen! I am her goddaughter!"

"So am I!"

"Liar! You're a lying, raggedy peasant! An ugly, dirty *churl!*"

They glared at each other, poised for battle, fingers ready to scratch, instinctive enemies. Brangaine knew, in a flash of insight, that they would always, always, be at odds, and perhaps over greater matters than a few spiteful insults.

The princesses squealed with laughter. The dogs barked, jumping and fidgeting. Gareth was backing away, disconcerted by all the fiery girlish emotions on view. He glanced at Cormac for support, but his younger brother had taken up his book again, and was pretending to be oblivious of his surroundings.

"Don't look at me," he muttered. "She's not *my* betrothed. Too bad Fiona wasn't the eldest."

The maid wrung her hands, unsure what to do. Very likely things would have deteriorated even more. But the door had opened a few moments before, and the quarrel was overheard by someone with the will to act.

"That's enough!" Queen Bronwyn rapped out, stepping in between the girls. She looked angry. A hush fell. Even the dogs crept away, tails between their legs. Bronwyn gave the useless maid a hard look which sent her scurrying back to the girls' bedchamber. That done, she spoke to the children.

"Moira: Soldier's Keep is the home of the Wardens, and thus Brangaine's home. Thus, you are a *guest* in her *home*. I never want to hear you use the word 'churl' again. We'll talk later about this." She turned to her crestfallen daughters. "You are guests, too. Not very nice ones at the moment. Unpleasant quarrels are not something to egg on for your own amusement." She glanced briefly at her sons with a hint of disappointment, and then lifted Brangaine's chin up to her with a gentle hand. She smiled. "Growing again, I see. Let's find you something for the feast tonight. I'm sure Mistress Korvath has something in the stores."

They walked downstairs together, the Queen's arm around her. People drew back and bowed to them. Brangaine's heart quickened again, not with anger and shame, but with delighted pride and affection. This was lovely. This how it *should* be

between a mother and a daughter.

"Is that girl Moira really going to marry Gareth?" she asked softly.

"That's the plan," Bronwyn said. "Lady Moira Fitzmaric is the granddaughter of King Maric. The royal lines will be united by the marriage. I'm going to foster Moira for a few years so she can learn our ways, and how to play the part of a Fereldan princess."

Brangaine had just enough sense not to remark that it was rather hard on Gareth to personally unite the royal lines by marrying a stuck-up white mouse. The Queen smiled, seeming to guess what Brangaine was thinking.

"Princes and princesses don't have your freedom, Brangaine. Plans are in the works for Cormac to be betrothed next year to the Arl of West Hills' daughter. Maude will almost certainly marry Lord Padrig Howe, and Eleanor..." she sighed. "Eleanor might have to travel even farther away. The King of Nevarra has asked for an alliance."

"They're not being fostered?"

"Oh, they've visited often at Highever over the years, just as their cousins come and stay with me now and then. Actually, Cormac will be spending quite a bit of this year down in the south, visiting his teyrnir of Gwaren and learning the business of ruling from Arl Corbus Bryland. Gareth is going to Val Orne this summer, to polish his manners at the Orlesian Court. As

for the girls, when they turn thirteen... or perhaps fourteen... they will be fostered by the families of their future husbands."

They were soon down in the storage rooms, and one of the female clerks was coming forward, anxiously eager to serve the Queen.

"We need something festive for my goddaughter Brangaine."

Embarrassed, the clerk checked the records and blurted out that Brangaine, daughter of Warden Anders, was not due her clothing allotment until Summersday. The Queen was not inconvenienced by that in the least.

"Oh, this is isn't the allotment. This is something extra. I'll repay the Wardens out of the Privy Purse. We need a festive gown for tonight and something better for day wear, too. She's a long child, but not yet a woman. Let's start looking, shall we?"

They found wonderful things: new boots that actually fit; a green linen gown for everyday, to be girdled by a dark green belt embroidered with a pattern of wild roses.

"I'll embroider roses at the neck and wrists of the gown," said Brangaine. "I've learned to embroider really quickly and well."

"Have you?" Bronwyn asked, surprised. "That's very... ladylike of you. I was never very skilled with a needle myself."

"Look!" said Brangaine. "I did this!" She pulled out a pocket

handkerchief that she had covered with a profusion of flowers. Andraste's Grace and embrium ran riot in satin stitches, with their golden hearts executed in neat, uniform Orlesian knots.

"That's very fine work," Bronwyn told her. She smiled oddly. "Very fine indeed. It reminds me of my mother. She embroidered beautifully."

"I made a handkerchief just like it for you," Brangaine told her proudly, "but with red roses. It's up in my room. I'll give it to you before you leave."

"That would be lovely. I have never seen better work."

The dress for the feast was even more wonderful: silk in an unusual, rich shade of lavender, trimmed at the shoulders with a shiny leather that was a little darker in color. The belt was wide, though not a corset, and was decorated with three rows of amethyst studs. It was of the same puce leather as the trim.

Bronwyn ran the belt through her fingers. "Dragonhide. From a dragonling, by the fine texture. Not all of them live, poor things."

"This is a costly garment, Your Majesty," the clerk dutifully noted, as she helped pin it in a few places. "It was made for the wedding of young Warden Selwyn, but was returned to storage, since she died before it could ever be worn."

"Oh, I think I can somehow afford it," Bronwyn said, her tone

sharpening. Brangaine knew she had little patience with fools, even when they were doing their duty. To Brangaine she said, "With your gold locket and earrings, you'll be quite the fine lady."

"I hope Mother lets me wear them," Brangaine said gloomily. "She has all my jewelry locked up in her room until she thinks I'm *mature* enough to be trusted with it."

"I'll talk to her," said the Queen. "Surely for one night she need not be so cautious."

The green dress would be delivered to her room later. Brangaine begged to be allowed to keep her finery on, since the feast would be called very soon.

"Of course. Let's find your mother."

Back up the steps they went, up and up, the cynosure of all eyes. Brangaine strode proudly, head held high, no longer looking so unworthy to be a Queen's goddaughter. Indeed, some people might take them for mother and daughter by blood. At least she was not as silly as those pretty fools, Eleanor and Maude, and their horrid pet white mouse.

Uncle Carver stepped out of his quarters and wanted a word, and the Queen had Brangaine wait for her by the door. The Queen and the Warden-Commander looked serious, so Brangaine edged closer, wanting to hear what they said, even if she didn't understand it.

"You received my report about the elves, I hope," he said, his voice low.

"Of course. It's hardly surprising that so many have gone to the new homeland, even with the improvements I've made to the Denerim and Gwaren Alienages. I understand there's quite the charming village in the homeland now. You must have heard the talk at the Landsmeet yourself. I hoped I would be invited for a visit, but they prefer to keep to themselves, which is hardly surprising. For Grey Wardens to desert... Perhaps it is not desertion, exactly. Perhaps they are merely scouting the elven homeland. I suggest you send a formal query to Keeper Marethari."

"I did." Uncle Carver looked grim. "I was told they were no longer there. The problem is, I see no way they could be anywhere else. I wrote to Tara about this, too, hoping she had some other sources. She wrote back, and said that Marethari wasn't a liar. I get the feeling that there's something going on; something big, but no elves will talk. Has Zevran said anything to you?"

The Queen bit her lip, hesitating. "I... may... have been told things in confidence. You cannot repeat this to anyone. The fact is that many elves have made the decision to leave Thedas altogether."

Brangaine's eyes widened. This was fascinating. It explained the gradual disappearance of all the elven servants at Soldier's Peak over the past few years.

"Leaving?" Carver rubbed his brow. "Adaia and her ships, of course. I haven't heard from Fenris in over a year. You don't know where they're going?"

Bronwyn hesitated again, and said, "No. They're going to a place where humans will not enslave them, or exploit them, or even condescend to them. I understand, of course. If I were an elf, I'd gladly kill every human in Thedas, starting with the Tevinters. That does not, however, mean that I'm happy when Grey Wardens forswear their oaths."

"You've been pretty lenient with Adaia."

"I have my reasons. Having a force to thwart Tevinter and Qunari incursions at sea is useful in itself. Besides, she became a Grey Warden because a human nobleman behaved in an unspeakable way to her, and the man was beyond the law. Why should the elves trust us, in the end? I can only answer for my own honor. I cannot answer for how my grandchildren may keep my promises."

"You don't think the elven homeland will last forever, then."

"My dear Carver," she said, with a bitter smile. "I know better than anyone that nothing lasts forever." She shrugged. "Keep Darach and the rest on the rolls. They may come back. One never knows. But do not pursue the matter."

She gave him a nod as they parted, and then smiled at Brangaine, gesturing at her to join her.

"I've written to your father about you spending a little time in Denerim. He thinks it would be good for you. It's always important to broaden one's education."

"Would you really take me with you?" Brangaine knew that usually, whatever Father said, it was Mother who would make the decision. But this was different. Surely Mother would have to obey the Queen. Brangaine's spirits danced at the prospect.

The Queen smiled. "Yes, why not? A few months in a new place would be quite educational, don't you think?" The smile faded. "I can't tell you how much I regret being sequestered at Highever when I was young. I quarreled with my parents when I was about fifteen, and they never took me to the Landsmeet again. I stayed at home for years and years, brooding over my imagined wrongs, holding close to unhealthy obsessions. Seeing more of the world would likely have set me straight. And you, my dear, don't have a mabari to keep you company." She squeezed Brangaine's shoulder, smiling ruefully. "How I miss my poor old Scout."

"I'm no good with most animals," Brangaine confessed. "Dogs and horses don't like me. I get on with the dragonlings all right, though. Ostap says he'll take me up on Melikar soon."

"That sounds like great fun. You must help show me about the caverns before we go. I'm thinking about establishing some of our friends on Dragon's Peak. The name sounds like destiny to me."

"To me, too!"

They stepped out onto the slender walkway connecting the main Keep with the Mages' Tower. The wind was sharp up here, the spring air nipping at them, pulling at their hair. Far below, the footmen and grooms unloaded wagons and carriages and walked out the horses.

"Denerim quiets down considerably after the Landsmeet," said the Queen. "A great many of the nobles go to their lands for the growing season. Some come back to town in the winter if they don't care much for hunting. The only time the city is really crowded is for the Landsmeet... well, beginning two months before — while everyone is getting a new wardrobe — and for a few days after. We have a lot of weddings then, so more people can attend. I'm afraid you'll find Denerim rather dull at the moment."

"Oh, no! I can't wait!" Brangaine told her, her heart pounding at the glory of it. "I need to get away. No one here understands me." She glared at the figure emerging from the tower. "Especially *her*."

Morrigan stalked toward them, glaring back at her daughter. She had been a horrible mood all day, and was clearly spoiling for a fight.

"I have been looking everywhere for you. Where have you been? And why are you dressed as if for a pantomime? Go to your room and change at once!"

"Hello to you, too, Morrigan," the Queen said coldly, clearly displeased at this rudeness. "The gown is a gift from me to my goddaughter. It should do nicely for tonight's feast."

"She will dirty it. I trust it did not come out of our allotment?"

"It is a *gift*," the Queen repeated, her voice sharpening. "And if she dirties it I shall give her *another!* We were just off to get her jewelry."

"So she can be fine for your grand event? She is already vain enough!"

Brangaine blushed at the sneer. Yes, she wanted to be fine. She wanted Gareth to see how much prettier she was than the white mouse. The Queen, Andraste bless her, backed her up.

"I seem to recall that her mother is not averse to wearing jewelry, either."

"As you wish. If she loses her trinkets from carelessness, she had best not come crying to me!"

Brangaine wondered what would happen to an ordinary commoner who spoke to the Queen in such a way. She was ashamed of her mother's bad temper and bad manners. It was an ugly scene, and Brangaine hated ugly scenes. Clearly, the Queen did, too, and she flushed with anger.

"In my opinion, Brangaine would benefit by some time away

from home. When I leave, I shall take her along with me for a visit to Denerim —"

Mother went white. "You would not dare! You would take my child... my *only* child from me..."

"For a *visit*, Morrigan! It's plain that the two of you are at odds. A holiday for Brangaine would allow a breathing space for both of you and a chance to adjust to the fact that she is *growing up*."

"And you think yourself better able to raise my child?" Brangaine had never seen her mother so furious. "Better than her own mother? You would take her away from her father? Is this a piece of spite because your own children no longer have a father of their own?"

Brangaine blinked. Mother must be really angry if she brought up Father, because she generally behaved as if Father was of no importance at all. She had even tried to take Brangaine with her and run away from Father. Twice. Brangaine had screamed too loudly the first time for her to make a clean escape. The second time, Brangaine had simply refused to go. Mother could have gone if she had left Brangaine behind, but she would not do that.

The Queen was holding firm, unimpressed by Mother's scolding tongue. "Anders agrees that a change of scene would do Brangaine good."

That stopped Mother for just a moment, and then she was

even angrier.

"You went to Anders," she fumed, "*behind my back*, and talked him into this! You would have done better to be so persuasive with Loghain!" Her eyes narrowed in malice, "It is not I," she drawled, "whose husband left me *for another man*."

A silence, while the Queen's green eyes flashed. Brangaine held her breath. No one ever mentioned King Loghain. *No one*, because everyone knew how he had left the Queen and his children to look for King Maric, who was rumored to be alive and a prisoner somewhere in the north. He broke the Queen's heart doing it, as all the world knew, and he had not been heard of since. Mother had really gone too far this time. Perhaps Mother knew it too, for she stepped back a pace, and her smirk faded. The Queen simply stared at her.

"And you know what I said to him then," Bronwyn said, with deadly calm. "I said that if he tried to depose me and dispossess my children, he and his friend had better come with swords in their hands and an army at their back. I do not endure insolence and treachery... from *anyone*. Now, if you please, Brangaine requires her jewelry for the feast. There is no need to pack for her journey, of course, until the day after tomorrow. She *will* be leaving with me."

"I forbid it! 'Tis an outrage! You steal from others, not satisfied with four of your own spawning —"

Brangaine's shame burst from her lips. She struck out at her

mother, in full cry.

"Stop it! Just stop it! You spoil everything! Everything you touch, everything you say is ugly! I hate you! I *hate* you!"

Her mother's ringing slap knocked her back, and Brangaine stumbled. perilously close to the edge of the walkway. Mother grasped at her, the strong fingers digging in like talons. Brangaine shoved her away, stumbled again —

—And fell from the bridge, screaming, tumbling over and over in midair. Dissolving into the wind were Mother's screams and the Queen's screams, blended like the strange song Brangaine heard in the Fade.

She stretched out her arms to slow her fall, her gown snapping like the tail of a kite. Something unfolded from deep within her, layer upon layer, and molten peace flowed throughout her body. Her arms stretched, and stretched, and caught the cool, invisible currents.

—And she was flying.

Soaring really, low over the castle courtyard, with men and horses in miniature, like the view from the High Tower. People pointed and called out, children ran out to stare. Brangaine saw Rica far below, shading her eyes with her hand, her straw-colored hair catching the light. Brangaine wanted to wave at her, but she needed her wings for flying.

Wait.

Wings?

Her lovely lavender sleeve was now.. somehow... a broad lavender wing. A very distinctive sort of wing: the kind she knew from the dragon caverns.

She almost panicked, which would have been fatal. Instead, she kept her eyes on the horizon, and began a careful banking turn. The Queen must be in a state. It was easy to explain though. She had shape-shifted out of self-preservation. Her unconscious mind — the part that worked hardest when she was in the Fade — had made the connection between the color of her gown and the dragon hide on it, and had caused her to take the form of a dragon, rather than of a bird or a bat. It was... obvious, really. The fact that she had dragonhide on her clothing had eased the change.

A whoop of triumph escaped her, and it came out as a roar that echoed through the mountains. She flapped her wings, rejoicing in her power, and rose up into the burning blue of springtime. Mother was a hawk, chasing her, scolding her, uttering a frantic "*Cree, cree, cree!*" Brangaine turned her head on her magnificently long neck and roared back, coughing out a sputter of flame that surprised them both. The hawk darted away to avoid a singeing, and returned to the bridge, changing back into her human form. The next time Brangaine looked, she saw the Queen and Mother engaged in a furious quarrel. She flew closer, and zoomed over their heads and back, unable to catch more than a few words.

"—Liar!" the Queen raged. *"You've lied to us for years."*

You've lied about everything. How smug you've been, knowing you tricked us all! Even the name was a mockery! I suppose Anders—"

"— hadn't, you'd be dead! All your great plans —"

"—You did it for yourself! You did it for your own selfish reasons, the only reasons you've ever done anything! Get out of my sight! I don't want—"

She was tall and terrible, and Mother must have been truly frightened, for she ran back to the Mages' Tower. Brangaine knew that there would be trouble later, but for now, she only knew glorious freedom.

The Queen was still on the bridge, and her posture radiated fury and alarm. Brangain felt the link between them more strongly than ever before, and glided in, backwinging clumsily, but managing a safe landing. The Queen was still watching her, terribly upset. Her green eyes were absolutely wild.

Oh, Maker. How do I change back now?

She had overheard her share of lessons, but it was one thing to eavesdrop, and another to put the teaching to the proof. She steadied herself on the walkway, assumed the humble posture adopted by imprinted young dragons to reassure the Queen, and then concentrated hard. And then concentrated again.

It was like a full-body sneeze in reverse. Brangaine swayed,

but did not fall. She gave Queen Bronwyn a tremulous smile.

She wondered why the Queen looked so very, very sad.

"Urthemiel," Bronwyn whispered mournfully. "How could I not have known?"

"I'm sorry?" Brangaine asked, not understanding. Still, the name thrilled her, like a great line from a poem. She wondered what caused the Queen to think of the Archdemon at this moment. She approached her nervously, hoping the Queen was not angry.

"I thought I was going to die."

Were those tears in the Queen's eyes? Queen Bronwyn *never* cried. But now she was, and she put out her arms to Brangaine, and held her close. Brangaine wondered if the Queen felt that powerful bond, as strong as blood, surging between them now, the way Brangaine did.

"I turned into a dragon!" Brangaine whispered, trembling with excitement.

"I saw you," the Queen whispered back, her voice oddly choked. "A splendid dragon."

"Can I still come to Denerim?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I think that's best. Yes." She wiped her eyes. "Maker's Breath! You need to be as far from Soldier's Peak as possible. We shall travel to Denerim, and you shall study

music and magic and art all you like. And we shall go together to the Cathedral to pray to Andraste for strength and courage. Perhaps we shall go even farther than that, and make a pilgrimage to her shrine in the Frostbacks."

Brangaine saw it all, like the kingdoms of the earth spread out before her. "When I'm big enough, we can fly there together."

"And so we shall."

A horn sounded below in the valley, summoning them to the feast.

The End

A final, heart-felt thank you to my reviewers, both of the last chapter, and of any and all previous: Nemrut, DjinniGenie, Casey W, sizuka2, Tirion I, Nightbrainzz, Chiara Crawford, Costin, riverdaleswhiteflash, Ellyannah, Lucy's Echos, skycomv2, kirbter676, New Zealand 5, Phygmalion, FaeRakhasa, karinfan123, le-maru, Mike3207, Imharold, Robbie the Phoenix, MsBarrows, JackOfBladesX, Anime-StarWars-fan-zach, Kyren, MemoriesoftheForgottenGuardian, Cjonwalrus, The Warrior of the Light, Lehni, Lyssa Terald, ThorShared, Superstar Kid, dragonmactir, Jenna53, jnybot, BlackScyther, Marianne Bennet, mille libri, olivegbg, Suna Chunin, Candle in the Night, AD Lewis, KnightOfHolyLight, SilverEagleXI, Isala Uthenera, gullwing13, Josie Lange, Zute, and imperial

queen.

An Old God has absolutely nothing to fear from any being in the Fade. They're top predator there. Urthemiel is, of course, the God of Beauty. Did anyone in the Dragon Age (and I include Flemeth, who might well make an appearance some day, and Morrigan) ever stop to think what that meant, or had the lore of the Old Gods faded so completely that they were all lumped together as identical?

It's one thing for Flemeth to rear and control Morrigan. For Morrigan to think she could control an Old God in the same way was foolish hubris. By the time that Morrigan realized that she needed to isolate Brangaine to better control her, it was too late.

Zevran was saved from the Taint by the last dose of Ashes. Thus, he is here a knight rather than a Warden.

For Loghain, Maric will always come first: before Rowan, before Celia, before Anora, before anyone. Much of it no doubt is due to the trauma of his father's death, and Gareth abjuring him to protect his king. And I think Loghain has a martyr complex and a streak of masochism. He would absolutely glory in doing what he would consider not only a right thing, but something that would cause him personal misery. He may return: one never knows.

Some of you might not think that a cheery guy like Alistair and a sweet young princess like Eglantine could produce a

priggish little madam like Moira. Guess again. And Moira has plenty of good traits, too: she's not like Habren at all. She's quite capable of being a nice friend to the princesses and falling in love with Gareth. Nonetheless, she's been raised to be intensely aware and proud of her lineage. As a corollary, it's only natural for her to look upon others as lesser beings and to expect them to know their place.

I spelled Urthemiel's mortal name as Brangaine rather than Brongaine, because Brangaine is an actual name.

JOdel's illustrated version is progressing splendidly, and Bioware has agreed to allow her to use some of their concept art. When it's ready, I'll let you know!

In the course of thinking about and writing this epic, I listened often to some of Vangelis' music for the film Alexander. If you want to follow my mental soundtrack, here are my titles, followed by the soundtrack designations: Tracks 1, 13, and 17 had a huge impact on the development of the story.

Track 1: Dawn over Ostagar (Introduction)

Track 2: Bronwyn Cousland (Young Alexander)

Track 3: The Warden Treaties (Titans)

Track 4: The Deep Roads (The Drums of Gaugamela)

Track 5: Anora's Garden (One Morning in Pella)

Track 7: The Brecilian Forest (Eastern Path)

Track 11: Shieldwalls and Siege Engines (The Charge)

Track 12: Climbing the Rock (Preparation)

Track 13: Along the Imperial Highway (Across the Mountains)

Track 14: The Shrine of the Ashes (Chant)

Track 15: Blight Lands (Immortality)

Track 16: The Flight of the Archdemon (Dreams of Babylon)

Track 17: Bronwyn's Pyre, or, if you prefer, The Wardens' Pyre (Eternal Alexander)

128. An Announcement and a Postscript

If you have not heard elsewhere, the illustrated Victory at Ostagar is now edited, posted, and available for viewing at JOdel's Redhen site. Not only did JOdel do terrific work on her own, she also contacted Bioware and patiently waited for them to approve the use of some of their art. Thank you, Bioware. You can find a link to the site in my profile page. All praise to the mighty JOdel. Search the left hand menu for "The World of Dragon Age." The work is in five volumes: The Girl Warden, Warden-Commander, Dragonslayer, Andraste's Champion, and The Red Queen. It's very graphics-heavy, and quite brilliant. I went through my original text and fixed oodles of typos and other, more substantive, mistakes. Eventually, I'll find time to make the corrections to the ffdotnet version. Since this site disapproves of chapters that are mere notifications, I have included here a short glimpse into the future of my DA universe, when the story of the war is written. You can't please everyone...

An Announcement and a Postscript:

Written by the Winners

"I think there are too many elves in the books," declared Lady Ethelswyth, Bann Ceorlic's younger sister, waving her hand at

the newly-released volumes on the inlaid table. "And I'm not the only one who says that."

"I don't," her friend Ser Bevin disagreed. "Most think Sister Susanna and Sister Joyce have done a brilliant job putting together the whole story. And they've got pictures. Everybody likes pictures."

"Too many *e/ves*," insisted Ethelswyth, with a delicate shudder. "The bits about the mages are a little exaggerated, but basically all right. Nobody questions that they were useful. But the elves get too much credit. And the scholars at the Queen's University agreed, and wouldn't agree to publish the series without making 'extensive corrections,' so I must be right."

Ser Bevin was not convinced. "Sister Joyce is a rebel. She published the books herself so nobody could interfere with her concept. Not the University. And certainly not the Chantry."

"She's going to be in all sorts of trouble, and Sister Susanna, too. Red Hen Publications," sneered Ethelswyth. "What kind of name is *that*?"

Arl Corbus and Bann Lothar were announced, and pushed past the servant, arms full of books. Corbus waved a red-bound volume. "Have you read it? Isn't it wonderful?"

Bevin grinned. "Ethelswyth thinks there are too many elves in it."

"Rubbish!" Corbus laughed, and helped himself to refreshments. Ethelswyth bristled, but only a little, since she had great hopes of a forthcoming proposal.

Lothar turned the book over in his hands. "Queen Bronwyn *did* have a lot of elves about her. They were always very civil to me. Very superior to the common run of them, obviously. Are Faline and Jancey coming today?" He waggled his brows at Bevin, who turned very red.

"Later," Ethelswyth shrugged. "They had an appointment with that dressmaker I told them about. Maybe she can persuade Faline to wear blue instead of those awful, sick-making shades of green."

"Look! We're in here!" shouted Lothar, thumbing through the index. "Corbus is in here a lot!"

"Well," Ethelswyth pointed out, blue eyes glowing with flattering, albeit sincere admiration. "He actually fought in the Blight, after all."

Corbus blushed. "Just a little bit, really. I was only a boy, you know, but I'll never forget it..."

"The Paragon Astrid figures largely in the books," said King Bhelen, over dinner. "The deeds of the dwarves have received due honor."

"Indeed," agreed the Shaper of Memories, "Three copies of

the volumes are now housed at the Shaperate. One is in special storage for use by posterity. Paragon Astrid will never be forgotten."

King Bhelen speared another slice of tender surface veal, and grunted in satisfaction. His sister was a pleasant subject to contemplate in retrospect. In life, not so much.

"Nor was Warden Freydis Brosca neglected," murmured Queen Rica, squeezing the hand of her daughter — technically the adopted daughter of Gytha Aeducan, known to all in Orzammar as Paragon Astrid. Freydis Gytha rolled her eyes, and smiled at her mother a little condescendingly. It was an intoxicating thing, to have been head of one's own noble house from the day of one's birth. If only Mother would keep quiet about her humble origins. It was so embarrassing.

"Perhaps there are too many *e/ves* in the books," said Prince Endrin, in casual criticism. "Their numbers were certainly insignificant, compared to our army and the notable contributions of the Legion of the Dead."

"Perhaps so," said his father, with a shrug. "It was composed by surfacers, after all. No doubt one of our own will do better. Fewer elves would make the narrative more straightforward."

The books were not so well-received in the elven homeland.

"It is a disgrace!" protested Hahren Sarel. "The elves are hardly mentioned at all!"

"Oh, I don't think that's true," Keeper Merrill disagreed mildly. "There's heaps about Tara and Zevran, and Danith and Adaia, too. And all the Warden elves are described in detail. I'm in there, too." She smiled. She had marked all the pages where her name appeared with delicate whitewood leaves. "And I saw your name on page—"

"It's a disgrace," Sarel repeated, vehement in his anger. "The shemlen illustrator clearly does not know what a real elf looks like!"

"I love the pictures," said Merrill. "They're very pretty."

"Humph!" snorted Sarel. "And the shemlen author does not give the clan names of the Dalish who fought in the war against the Blight. A typical piece of shemlen arrogance."

"The authors probably do not know the clan names," said Merrill, a little sadly. "How could they? They might never have seen or spoken to an elf in their lives."

"A fortunate thing," said Sarel. "The less we have to do with such creatures, the better."

"It's simpler, to be sure," murmured Merrill to herself. "Is it *better*? I hope so. Time will tell..."

"And the way Velanna is depicted!" fumed Sarel. "An insult! A disgrace! An outrage!"

The Arishok set down the fifth volume, his reading complete, and sat musing over his memories for some time. A plate of spice cookies was on the table at his side. He took one and munched it slowly.

One had to be careful when reading history. History was much an art as a science. Life, it must be admitted, was all confusion and inclusion, and art all selection and discrimination. In making a coherent narrative of the Fifth Blight, the author had sometimes simplified some events and omitted others. The illustrator had depicted the characters in the history in the most flattering, interesting way possible. Time was neatly compressed—sometimes contorted out of its true shape—in tidy, colorful print and handsome Antivan leather. To that extent, the books were, like all narratives, untrue. As the Qun said, there was no chaos in the world, only complexity. Still, there was truth of a kind to be found.

He could not complain of his own depiction in the books: he was the Other; the one by which the human heroes defined themselves. Still, his courage and steadfastness were recognized and respected. The Qunari had been a small presence in the great struggle of their time, but his own deeds had been recompense in some degree for the regrettable, impetuous Qunari attack on the Rivainni Wardens.

The events of the Fifth Blight had been the forge upon which his own life was shaped: the great opportunities that led to his elevation to Arishok. Only by the hardships and challenges he had experienced in the war against the darkspawn could he have achieved the unique honor of returning the Tome of

Koslun to his homeland. Sten, then Acting-Karasten, then... Well, he had gone from honor to honor, from promotion to promotion; and now he was at the pinnacle of power among his people. His days were replete with work and duty; and yet... at night, he still dreamed of chill southern nights by smoky campfires, of strange foreign voices telling tales, of laughter and comradeship beyond expectation, of brave hearts and high adventure. Truly, as the poet said:

*"I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move..."*

He took another cookie, and consoled himself with the Qun.

"The tide rises, the tide falls, but the sea is changeless..."