The Return
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Summary

A young boy's curiosity leads him to a conversation with an old man in a back alley, which leads to a monumental change for the monarchs of Ferelden. Who knows where this decision will lead the nation and its people. Is it too soon for such amends, or is it just in the nick of time?

This story was previously posted on FF.net, but this is an edited version which will be updated to fit Inquisition timeline.
A Chance Encounter in the Lower Market

A damp, windy day, a dark back alley, and the curiosity of a child in the lower market of Denerim led to a simple encounter that would change a life forever -- again -- and lead Ferelden into turmoil -- again.

The lower market of Denerim still bore some marks from the siege of the darkspawn eight years earlier. The high market was fully restored, the Palace District of course, but here there were condemned former storefronts and houses half-fallen in, crumbled masonry, and scorch marks on the stonework from the fires, left both by the darkspawn themselves and those used to clean the corruption they left behind. He'd hid himself in the junction of the back of one of the taverns and the adjacent warehouse to escape the bitter cold wind and passersby both while he rested and ate the apple he'd bought from the stall around the corner, but there was no place safe from the inquisitiveness of a child and it did not surprise him when a boy, eight or nine years old perhaps, stepped up to him and squatted on his hunkers just past arm's reach and blinked owlishly at him. The quality of the boy's clothes did surprise him a bit, for most children in the area were dressed rough.

"Are you a soldier?" the boy asked after a time, big blue eyes fixated on the heavy kite shield and iron longsword that rested beside the big man.

He cocked a forbidding black brow at the lad and deliberately cut a slice of apple with the wicked silverite blade of his skinning knife. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that you shouldn't speak to people you don't know?"

"All the time," the lad said, smiling, and plopped onto the cobbles in an attitude of absolute trust. The big man stared for a moment, then burst out in a hearty laugh. He popped the apple slice into his mouth and cut a larger quarter. He handed the boy the slice of apple.

"You're a bold pup, I'll give you that," he said. "You don't look like you belong in the lower market, though. Having a bit of illicit adventure, lad?"

The boy thanked him beautifully for the bit of fruit, and blushed at the insinuation that he was out of bounds. "I... sneaked away from my nurse when she was looking at silks in the upper market. Looking at girls' things is boring, and papa will just laugh about it later. Mama will scold, but she's busy with the baby so it'll be all right. Are you a soldier?"

"I was once, long ago. Now I'm just a wanderer. Your papa won't laugh if harm comes to you, and the low market is dangerous. Particularly for little boys who look like they come from wealthy
families and who are so incautious as to stop and chat with large, heavily armed strangers.”

The boy grinned, showing a mouthful of fine white teeth. “If you were a bandit or a ruffian, Ser, I should not have stopped. I’m not completely without sense, as my mama says.”

The big man smiled, unable to help it in the face of the lad's infectious easy joy, but there was sadness in his smile. “Ah, but my lad, I've been the one, and I'll always be the other. So you see your perceptions are not so clear as you think. What is your name?”

“Duncan, Ser. And I don't believe you are a bandit or a ruffian, for if you were, why would you tell me so?”

“Well, Duncan, perhaps I would tell you because I knew you would not believe me if I did,” he said with an air of aged wisdom thinly veiling a deep vein of humor. The boy seemed to recognize that humor and smiled in response.

“I saw you buy that apple,” the boy said. “Apples are expensive this year, since the harvest was so bad. And still you shared it with me. Why would a bandit share, and why would he not steal the apple?”

“Logical. You are a learned man, Duncan?”

“I have a lot of tutors, if that's what you mean, Ser.”

“And are you a good student?”

The boy winced slightly. “Yes, Ser. I try to be, anyhow.”

"Keep on trying. Education is a gift not many children receive, and the ones who do seldom appreciate it until it's too late,” he said, and winked. "You evidently know how to amuse yourself in your free hours, since you're clearly the adventurous sort."

"Are you educated, Ser?”
"Not particularly. And not so much when I was a child. It is much more difficult to pick up book learning when you're grown, but I did my best."

"You speak like you're educated."

"My life has been quite the education on its own. Unfortunately I am rather a dull scholar, and am still learning." He wiped the blade of his knife clean on a red handkerchief he pulled from his deep coat pocket. "Don't you think you'd better get back to your nurse now, Ser Duncan? I dare say she's through looking at girls' things and is probably searching for you by this time."

"No, she'll finish her shopping before she comes looking for me," Duncan said, quite calmly. "She has to find some things for Baby Anora."

The big man seemed momentarily taken aback by the name. "That's your sister?" he inquired after a moment.

"Yes, Ser. She's cute, but she's too small to be much fun," the boy said, and made a face. "And sometimes she smells bad."

"Babies often do. Tell me, Duncan-brother-of-Anora, how did you happen to come by your names? Both seem to me rather familiar in some way."

"Well, Ser, I was named for a man my papa served under when he was a Grey Warden, and my sister is named for our mama."

"So your father was a Warden and your mother is named Anora," the man said, with a strange, almost hopeless note in his voice the boy couldn't figure out. "So that means your name, Ser, is actually Prince Duncan...doesn't it?"

The boy's face fell. "Well, yes Ser, it is. But I'd rather not be called that, if it's all the same, please."

"It is not all the same, my Prince. And now I know you must return to your people. You should not be out of the care of your attendants."
The big man rose to his feet and gathered his things. The shining silverite knife, with its ornately carved halla horn hilt, he sheathed in its ancient but well-tended scabbard and, briefly evincing indecision, handed it to the boy. "For you, my prince."

"Ser, I…thank you, but I can't…"

"My father gave this knife to me," the big man said, "when I was not much bigger than you. I've been able to count on that blade when everything else in the world failed me, and it will give me satisfaction to think that now it will be there for you."

The boy stood slowly and accepted the offered tool. "Well I can't say I understand, Ser, but thank you. Thank you very much."

The big man placed his big hand gently on top of the boy's golden curls for a brief moment, and then with a light caress chivvied the young royal toward the head of the alley. "Speak to the guard sergeant standing on the corner, my prince," he said. "He'll see you back to your people. I am very pleased, your highness, to have met you."

"Wait, what's your name, Ser? You never told me."

The big man smiled, as sadly as before. "I have no name, my prince."

"Everyone has a name."

"I had one once, but I fear that I lost it, Your Highness." And the big man disappeared behind the warehouse and was gone into the forbidden back alleys of the Alienage in an instant.

A little downhearted from this exchange, Prince Duncan obediently went to the city guardsman posted near the tavern doors and received his assistance in returning to his nurse in the high market. That worthy woman scarcely acted as though she had noticed his absence, but she broke off the rest of her shopping expedition and took the prince home to the palace, where he was immediately swept into the strong arms of his father, King Alistair.

"Well, my little man, what mischief have you been havocking, to bring nursey back from the
market before she's finished shopping?" he said, with a kiss on the boy's pale cheek.

"I wandered into the lower market, papa, and the city guard had to bring me back," Duncan confessed.

As predicted, his father's response was a hearty laugh. "What a scapegrace you are! And won't your mother scold? Come sit with papa, my boy, and tell me of your adventures while your nurse finishes her outing without your merry hindrance."

Without a care for propriety the King carried his son into the vast throne room and sprawled across the royal seat with the child on his knee. Gravely, Duncan took the knife from his pocket. "I must tell you about the man I met, papa."

"So you must, particularly if you took that rather expensive-looking blade from his person," Alistair said, still merrily, but with a look of worry on his ingenuous features.

"He gave it to me, papa, once he realized I was the prince. I tried to put him off, but he was insistent. He told me that it would give him 'satisfaction' to think I had it. I believe the knife was very special to him, he said his father gave it to him when he was small. I'm not sure why he would be so happy to think of me having it, since I'm nothing to him."

"You're a prince, my little man, and I've told you how it may be sometimes; good and loyal sons and daughters of Ferelden feel quite protective of you, and want to know you are safe and well. After all, there were fears that your mother and I would never be able to produce an heir of our own."

"But he said it would make him happy, papa, and yet he seemed so sad. I wanted to be able to cheer him, but he walked away from me. I'm worried about him, papa, for I think he had no home."

"I think perhaps you'd best tell me the whole story, my son."

And so he did, and as he did his father's face grew more and more thoughtful. "Let me see your knife, my boy, while I think on it, for I confess myself as puzzled as you by this exchange."

The prince handed over the scabbard, and King Alistair drew the knife out of it. "This is a fine piece of work," he said. "This blade couldn't have come cheaply even today, and it looks old
enough to have been made during the Occupation when silverite was doubly dear and hard for a
Fereldan citizen to acquire. Are you sure this man was native?"

"Oh yes, papa, he spoke the King's tongue and had… kind of a southern accent," Duncan said, but
he said it doubtfully.

"What do you mean 'kind of,' my boy?"

"I'm not sure, papa. Have you ever heard someone talk like they were from the west of Ferelden
and the south?"

"Sometimes, my boy, when they lived in one bannorn as a child and many years in another bannorn
when they were older, the new region's accent kind of 'overlays' the old without completely
replacing it."

Duncan nodded, his face cleared with understanding. "That was the way he was, then. He had a
growly western accent with a barky southern accent on top of it."

Alistair laughed at his son's description of Fereldan regional accents, but a moment's thought
marked it an accurate assessment: in the west, people living huddled in the foothills of the
Frostback mountains spoke in deep, throaty voices with a bit of a Clayne brogue. In the south,
particularly in the deep south like Gwaren, people tended to speak in high, sharp tones and bit off
their consonants aggressively. Trying to imagine what the two accents would sound like combined
was difficult, but a particular voice he had not heard in many years edged its way into his thoughts
unbidden. Disturbed, he turned the blade over in his hands. A carving on the hilt caught his eye,
and he nearly dropped the knife into his lap in his surprise, which would have put paid to the
possibility of his producing any further heirs to the kingdom. Carved just below the pommel in
elegant script was a name and a date: "Loghain; 8:85." Below that, etched smaller and plainer,
were the words, "With your father's love."

"Did this man tell you his name?" Alistair asked, alarming his son more than a little with his
sudden paleness of skin.

"No, papa. I asked, but he said he'd lost it. How do you lose your name, papa?"

"You do something bad that doesn't suit it," Alistair said, distracted. He returned his attention to
his son. "What did he look like, this man?"
Duncan thought for a moment. "Well, papa, he was very big. Bigger even than you. And he was kind of pale, and he had long black hair going streaky gray and blue eyes."

"Blue like yours?"

"No, papa. Much lighter. Like the sky when it's cold out."

*Maker's breath, it was him*, Alistair thought, but all he said was, "What was he wearing?"

"A long, dark leather coat. I'm not sure what else he was wearing because he had it buckled shut. But he had a bow and quiver on his back, and he was carrying a big longsword and a huge shield like a big shiny kite."

"What was his heraldry?"

"He didn't have a picture on his shield, papa. But it was all scratched up like the pots when the scullery boys take the steel wool to them."

"Like he'd scrubbed off his heraldry."

The little boy shrugged. Alistair hugged him and sent him to the nursery, whereupon he immediately called the captain of the city guard and swore out an arrest warrant.

"If he resists, don't force the issue. Stand down and set a watch on him. If he'll come quietly, bring him in, but *gently*, Captain. Don't rough him up or anything. Send word to me *directly* the moment he's in custody."

The Captain, a decade ago a young Sergeant nominally in charge of a mixed bag of illegitimate nobility and hand-picked hatchet men equally useless for patrolling the seedier areas in and around the lower market, looked worried but clicked his heels smartly and bowed himself out. Nervous and fretful in his own right, King Alistair threw himself back onto his unwanted throne thinking dark thoughts about himself, the big man in the lower market, and the Maker's troublesome sense of humor.
An Armistice of Convenience

*I knew I should never have come to Denerim,* Loghain thought as he stepped out of a dockside pub called “The Fishwife’s Cloister” and found a small regiment of city guardsmen advancing upon him, but the thought wrung a grim smile from him. He'd hoped to find penance and redemption with the Grey Wardens, but that was not to be. It would serve him well enough to find some degree of it in the bowels of Fort Drakon. At least it would be dying at home rather than abroad. And hey, he'd gotten to meet his grandson, even if the boy would never know it.

"Loghain Mac Tir?" the nervous Captain said. "I have a warrant for your arrest, Ser, sworn out by King Alistair. I ask you to relinquish your weapons and come peacefully."

Loghain snorted softly and put his hands on his hips. "If I refuse?"

"Then I am under orders from the King to allow you to do so."

Loghain laughed. "That kind of honesty doesn't serve, does it?"

"Please, Ser. I have no particular wish to arrest you, but His Majesty is His Majesty."

Loghain looked the Guard Captain over closely, and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Kylon, isn't it? I recall when you were so desperate as to post bounties on the Chanters' board. It seems you've improved your lot since then. Good to see you survived the Blight."

The Captain looked uncomfortable and embarrassed, but nodded graciously. "The warrant, Ser…?"

"Ah yes, the warrant. Well, far be it from me to naysay the King of Ferelden." He dropped sword and shield and unslung his bow. "Guardsman, do your duty."

Kylon looked relieved. "Thank you, Ser." He gestured for some of his men to gather the discarded weapons. A contingent of guardsmen surrounded the elder warrior and he was escorted in that way to Fort Drakon, where he was put into a cell with a courtesy that most arrestees did not enjoy, and was left alone.
Loghain dropped onto the straw pallet that he supposed would be his bed if they left him alive long enough to sleep. So Alistair was to have his execution after all, and he hoped the boy took some comfort in it. He knew that he would. He amused himself with wondering how it would be done while he waited for his sentence to be handed down. Most likely it would not be public, which more or less ruled out hanging. There was the ever-popular rack, of course - he could see it from where he sat, looking as though it hadn't seen much use in recent years - but that particular implement wasn't all that effective on people in excess of six feet in height unless specially designed to accommodate the unusually tall, which was why the deceptively innocuous framing of the rack's corollary, a squeezing device, hung on the wall nearby. But Alistair, unless he had changed very much, had no taste for torture, and more likely than not he would simply be beheaded quickly and efficiently disposed of, ideally before Anora found out he was ever in Denerim. With luck, she'd never learn his fate and Alistair's marriage would continue in the peaceful armistice they seemed to have found with each other.

"I confess, I'm not sure whether I'm glad you allowed Captain Kylon to arrest you, or whether I'd rather you'd refused."

Loghain looked up from his contemplation of the blood-stained rack into the ghostly evocation of a lost friend in the face of Maric's illegitimate son on the other side of the bars. "The years seem to have been remarkably kind to you," Alistair continued. "I'd have expected someone your age would have gone to his Calling by now, but I suppose an old dragon is tougher than an old man. Why are you here? The First Warden sent you to Montsimmard, and that was the last I heard."

Loghain spread his hands. "I'm not a Warden anymore."

"Really? Because I was under the impression that being with the Wardens was meant to be your chance at salvation, and simply leaving them doesn't seem like much of a redemption."

"I wasn’t given the choice. Have you ever heard this one before? Three men were sentenced to death by hanging, an Orlesian, an Antivan, and a Fereldan. They brought the Orlesian up on the gallows and gave him a chance to say his last words. He spit upon the platform and declared himself an innocent man. They put the noose around his neck and pulled the lever, but the platform didn't drop. 'The hand of the Maker has saved this man. Release him,' the magistrate demanded. Then they brought the Antivan up and let him have his say. 'I am guilty - screw you all!' he cried, and they put the noose around his neck. The lever was pulled but, once again, the platform refused to drop. Once more, the magistrate called it an act of Divine Grace and commanded the man's release. Then they brought the Fereldan up for his own last words. 'When I was down below I saw that there's a lot of rust on the release mechanism. If you oil it up, I think it'll drop just fine.'"

Alistair's lips twisted in a reluctant grin. "I believe I have heard that one before, yes, though I think it was the Orlesian who told everyone to go snog themselves."
"It may have been, I'm not that practiced at the art of telling jokes."

"Funny and xenophobic as it is, what is the point of that tale?"

"I was granted another stay of execution. The Wardens kicked me out. Being as dumb as the Fereldan in the joke, I came home to have yet a third chance to put my neck properly in the noose."

"They… kicked you out? What for?"

"Being myself. What else?"

“In other words, you pissed them off,” Alistair said, and folded his arms across his chest.

“Basically,” Loghain said, mimicking the King’s stance and disapproving expression.

“What did you say to them?"

“That using a blood magic ritual to kill all the remaining Old Gods before they wake up and start the next Blight was madness and shouldn’t be done. Now they want me dead."

Alistair’s jaw dropped at the words “blood ritual.” “What? No. No, the Wardens would never do that.”

“Wardens do anything to stop the Blight. Whether it makes any bloody sense or not, apparently. When I made my run, the mages had already killed half a dozen Grey Warden warriors in order to bind demons to themselves for this damned ‘ritual’ of theirs.”

“And speaking out against it put you on their hit list?” Alistair said.

“I didn’t even speak out as loudly as I’m known for,” Loghain said. “I tried to be diplomatic. They weren’t prepared to listen to the likes of me, and they didn’t want me around to mess things up,
either. Now they're looking for me."

“But why are they so set on this plan in the first place? Why are they doing this?” Alistair asked.

Loghain looked at him with those cold, grey-blue eyes. “Haven’t you felt it, Warden Alistair? That tickle at the back of your skull?”

Alistair gulped. “You mean… the Calling. I’ve been so worried, thinking my time was near. I’m not ready. My children need me, and I need them.”

“Every warden in Orlais is hearing that right now, and I think that’s also why all the Fereldan wardens have disappeared as well, given that I’m still hearing it even here. Not so clearly, thank the Maker. If it makes you feel any better, I’m at least eighty percent certain it’s fake. Can’t prove it though. Maker, I wish I knew where Warden Cousland was. She could help me figure it out, if anyone could.”

He paced in his cell and shook his head. “However it came to pass, I am no longer a Warden, and the Orlesians seemed quite happy to be rid of me, which I found unexpectedly hurtful, and so, being on the run and rather at loose ends, I wandered back to Ferelden. I kept to the quiet places for a time, avoiding people, but like the proverbial bad bit I suppose it was inevitable that eventually I should turn up in the Denerim market. I had a mind to see how far along the reconstruction had come and hear news of the kingdom, for I confess I’ve failed to keep current as I was unaware that there was an heir to the throne. It seems fitting, somehow, that the little devil would rat me out.” He grinned.

"He didn't know who you were," Alistair said, apologetic despite himself.

"No, and I hope he still doesn't."

"He's a smart boy, and he'll figure it out once he finds the carving on the hilt of that knife you gave him."

The grin dropped off Loghain's face like he'd been punched. "Damnation. I'd forgotten that father inscribed it to me. I don't suppose there's a possibility you could scratch that part out before he sees, is there?"
"Assuming he hasn't found it by now, is there any particular reason why I ought?"

"I didn't want to hurt the lad."

"And why would having his grandfather's hunting knife hurt him? Aside from the possibility that he might cut himself, that is."

"The knife isn't so sharp as the shame. I'd rather I'd never known the boy existed than to have him live with the knowledge that his traitorous grandfather was executed shortly after giving him a gift."

"Executed. Is that why you think I've had you brought in?"

"What other purpose could you have with me? The Warden spared my life, and you made it clear that despite her machinations to put you on the throne, you very much resented the fact she bestowed upon me the so-called 'honor' of the Joining, to the point that, Blight or no, you refused to follow her a step further. Now at last is your chance to find justice for Cailan and Duncan and all the others who died at Ostagar, and in the chaos of the civil war."

Alistair took a step back from the cell bars and folded his arms across his chest again. "Before the Landsmeet, I followed the Warden because somehow I knew, even though I'd only just met her, that she was smarter, stronger, and a better leader than I could ever dream of being. I followed her without compunction into a few situations I didn't exactly agree with because I trusted she knew better than I, and for the most part time has borne that assumption out. Time has also shown me certain…evidences that I did not have at the time we faced you down at the Landsmeet that day, and I've come round to the opinion that perhaps in this instance as well she may have had the right of it. She saw something in you that was worth the effort of salvage, even though you stood with the man who slaughtered nearly her whole family, and I should have been adult enough to respect that decision even if I could not then understand it. I don't have the strength of character, I fear, to forgive you for your actions, Loghain, but I was wrong to resent your entry into the Wardens, and wrong to leave them for it."

Loghain gave him a long, considering look, then a huff of breath before he nodded and said, "I don't know that you're correct about the Warden's wisdom in sparing me, but thank you for suggesting it might be so. I would have met my death that day content at least in the knowledge that I left Ferelden in strong hands, but I found a certain dismay in the idea that my life's blood might splash my daughter as I died. She was standing entirely too closely."

"Ah yes, your daughter. At last we come to the reason you're here." Alistair cocked his head to one
side and chewed his lower lip as he appeared to chew over his words. "Although I could never have believed it when I married her, I have come to... care... deeply... about Anora. She can be rather brusque and is dreadfully impatient, has next to no sense of humor, and rides me harder than a dwarven bronto drover, but she is also a... remarkable... woman, the perfect example of a wise monarch for me to live up to, as well as the loving mother of my children, which means quite a lot to me as I never expected to be able to have children and she came to motherhood with some reservation. Duncan and Baby Anora are the joys of my existence. I am a man who is happy in his family."

"And glad I am to hear it," Loghain said quietly. "Your children are fortunate in both mother and father, I think."

"Yes, well, whether I like it or not, you too are family, and though she doesn't speak of it often, it is clear to me that Anora misses you terribly, particularly now that she is a mother. I didn't exactly have a proper father in my life, though Arl Eamon did his best I know, so perhaps I'm not in a position to understand exactly what it is she misses so, but it doesn't matter as the end results are the same. The happiness of my family that I love more than life is not complete because my wife cannot share her children with her own mother and father. I cannot bring her mother back to life, but there is something I can do about reuniting her with her father."

Loghain was silent for a moment, digesting that, then said, with a wry angle to his heavy black brows, "So you have him arrested?"

"I wanted the chance to speak to you without her knowledge. The fact that you allowed yourself to be taken into custody suggests that you are contrite, even if I doubt seriously the chances that you've become submissive."

"So what are you trying to say, exactly?"

"I'm saying that it seems to me fairly commonplace for a man to dislike his in-laws," Alistair said with a touch of growl in his voice. "I feel that I may have lost my senses, but if you'll pledge me your oath that you'll take no hand against the crown of Ferelden -- meaning me, Anora, Duncan, or anyone else that might legitimately wear it one day -- then I will take you from this place and restore you to the bosom of your family this very day."

"Pledge you my oath? You would honestly take me at my word?"

Alistair sighed deeply. "For Anora's sake, yes. I would."
"Hmph. You do love her, don't you?" He considered that for a moment, and then climbed up off the floor of the cell to take a knee. "Very well, my liege -- I hereby pledge upon the tattered remnants of my honor and my everlasting love for my daughter that I will never take a hand against any legitimate heir to the throne of Ferelden, up to and including yourself. And while you are correct in assuming that I am not exactly what one might properly dub 'submissive,' I do hereby submit myself to your will as my rightful King, and you are welcome to toss me around at your whim and put me into all manner of humiliating and/or painful situations as you see fit."

Alistair let out a noisy breath. "That will do for the nonce, I suppose." He took the jailor's heavy ring of keys from where he held it beneath his arm and unlocked the door. "Don't make me regret this." It was difficult to say whether that plea was directed at his father-in-law or the Maker.
Anora sat rocking and stitching peacefully in the nursery while Duncan drew pictures of warriors and dragons and Baby Anora played with her building blocks and occasionally threw them at her mother or brother in a fit of baby pique. Struck in the shin with one such lightly flung missile, Anora's response was a thin, slightly unwilling smile. Maker save the King, his daughter had the bellicose personality of her maternal grandfather.

Alistair poked his head around the doorjamb only a few minutes after she had that thought, and rather shyly requested entrance into the shrine of babydom. That in and of itself was unusual, for the King reveled in the nursery and did a good deal to increase pandemonium and mischief with his willingness to join in with his children's games, and took it as a matter of course that after a long, hard day ruling the country, which he hated having to do, he should be allowed an hour or two to have full swing with his little ones.

"Yes, you may enter, of course you may, do come in," Anora said, with that dry smile that said she was aware her husband was having her on in some as-yet unspecified leg-pull.

"Anora, do you recall, some years ago, when you asked me if there was a possibility that I would allow your father to return to court someday, and I said quite jokingly that it would be a 'cold day in Denerim,' and you threw rather a large book of Antivan political reforms at me?"

She stabbed her needle savagely into the pinafore she was embroidering, though she still smiled. "Yes, I remember."

Alistair shivered theatrically and stepped out of the doorway. "Brr. Chilly in here, isn't it?"

A huge dark figure stepped in to fill the space he'd vacated, and at first Anora could not credit her own eyes. It couldn't be…

"Hey, that's the man I met in the market," Duncan said.

Anora rose slowly to her feet, allowing her needlework to fall unheeded to the floor. "Hallo, dear," Loghain said. "Motherhood suits you, it seems. You look well."

"Father…" she said. She made a valiant effort to maintain proper decorum befitting a woman
who'd been queen for more than a decade and a half, but halfway across the floor her resolve broke and she covered the last few feet at an undignified pace that called to mind the little girl with blonde pigtails who'd run to greet her father after a long absence. She threw her arms around his neck and he hugged her tight.

When he put her down she stepped back and looked him over critically. "You've gone gray," she said.

"Ha! That started happening around about the time you were born, not that I'm suggesting there's a correlation."

She continued to stare fixedly at him, not at the iron that had crept into his black locks over the years or even at the new lines in his hatchet-carved face, but at his clothes - a simple sleeveless jerkin of the style worn by the common Fereldan man-at-arms, padded but not particularly protective, and a heavy leather coat. "What?" he asked.

"I'm just wondering when was the last time I saw you in anything other than plate armor."

His only response was a noncommittal grunt.

Duncan came forward then, a look of reproach on his face. "Ser…you're my grandfather?" he asked. It sounded like an accusation.

"I…yes, my prince, I am."

"Why didn't you tell me so before?"

Loghain squatted down so that he was eye-to-eye with the boy. "I didn't know how, or whether I had any right."

The boy considered that for a moment, then said decidedly, "I suppose I forgive you, then. But you still should have said something, rather than walk away and leave me." He ran to his sister and dragged her forward by one arm. "This is Anora. Say hello to grandfather, Annie."
The little girl's chubby angel face twisted up into something ugly and baleful. She took the block she was chewing out of her mouth and threw it into Loghain's face with a powerful, "No!" Loghain caught the block before it could strike him.

"Little spitfire, eh?" he said calmly. "Reminds me of someone else."

The little girl tore herself from her brother's grip and toddled as quick as her short little legs could take her straight for her father, who caught her up and held her tight. She hid her face in his chest and glared suspiciously at her grandfather with only one enormous blue eye visible.

"She's a trifle...willful," Anora the elder said with a note of apology in her voice.

"She's a daughter of Kings and Mac Tirs," Loghain said, standing up fairly easily considering the age of his knees. "In other words, my dear, you're doomed."

"I believe she's tired," Alistair said, though the triumphant note in his words indicated he was happy there was one other soul in the room who shared his mistrust of the former Teyrn. "I shall put her down for an N-A-P," he spelled, knowing his daughter's aversion to the n-word. Too bad for him, she had learned to spell that particular word. "Noooooooo!" she shrieked defiantly, the word trailing off only because she was borne away through corridors of thick stone walls that blocked the sound.

"She's got lungs, hasn't she?" Loghain observed.

"Alistair envisions a future for her as a proud shield maiden, terrifying her enemies with her powerful battle cry. He does get a bit out of sorts, however, when I make mention of the fact that that would be following in her grandfather's footsteps. He seems to think his own war cry as intimidating as yours, and I haven't the heart to tell him that his screams are a bit on the anemic side," Anora said.

"And what of this young man?" Loghain said, turning to Duncan. "Warrior or politician?"

"A bit of both, though I think his aspirations may include becoming a great artist as well," Anora said, and stroked her son's blond hair.

"Very ambitious. Do you draw, young prince, or paint, or what?"
"I should like to try my hand at sculpture, but mother says I mayn't do more than clay modeling until I'm older. I have some drawings - would you like to see them?" the boy said eagerly.

"I should like that very much, my prince."

The boy ran for the stack of papers he'd been working on with the boundless energy and enthusiasm of youth, causing his crusty grandfather, who'd lost his youth early and in a particularly difficult and dramatic fashion, to smile. The boy came skipping back again and, suddenly shy, showed his charcoal drawings of warriors and dragons.

"I've not an eye for art myself," Loghain admitted, "and I don't suppose I can tell good from bad, but these seem very well done to me. Your dragons in particular look terrifically fierce. I wonder that any warrior would have the courage to face them."

"Have you ever seen a real dragon, grandfather?" Duncan asked.

"Yes, I have."

"Did you slay it?"

"Not myself alone." But he had struck the killing blow, against both the shapeshifter Flemeth and the High Dragon worshipped by the cult of Andraste.

"Did it frighten you?"

"Dragons are frightening creatures, my prince."

"Mother, was that a proper answer?" Duncan asked.

"No, my son, but my father doesn't like to admit that he is human enough to feel fear."
Loghain's mouth twisted up into a reluctant grin. "Very well, since you require a proper answer that only a mortal man could give -- yes, I was very afraid."

"And still you faced the dragon?"

"You do what you have to do, my prince."

Duncan pondered deeply for a moment, face drawn into a quizzical knot. "Grandfather…are you a Hero? I have read some histories that say you are, but I have read others that say you are not."

"No, my prince. I am no Hero. There was a time when I was seen as such, but I successfully proved history wrong."

"We will talk about this when you are older, Duncan," Anora said quickly. Her eyes telegraphed "shut up" at her father.

"I know -- it was what happened during the Blight," Duncan said. "Because you abandoned the field at the Battle of Ostagar, and because the Banns stood against you, and because you stood against the Warden until she defeated you in single combat at the Landsmeet."

"Yes, my prince. That is exactly correct."

"But what I don't understand is why that happened."

"I wish I had a good explanation for you, my prince, but unfortunately the only reason I have is that I was afraid."

"Of Orlais?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid of Orlais, too."
"Duncan, whatever for?" Anora said.

The boy looked uncomfortable. "I know that you and papa don't want me to hear you when you speak of such things, mother, but sometimes I can't help it. I've heard you talking with your advisors about how some of the nobles in Orlais want the Empress to go to war against us." He drew himself up to his full three and one-half feet of height and looked as directly as possible at his tall grandfather. "If it happens, Ser, you will help father fight them off, won't you?"

"My boy, I don't know that he would welcome my assistance, or even that I should offer it. But your father is a great warrior in his own right -- you needn't fear that he requires the help of an old man like me. With the troubles the Chantry is having with the templars and mages fighting, and with Celene having fits with her cousin, I don't think anyone is seriously thinking about starting a war with us right now anyway. Too much else going on."

He sent the boy back to his drawing, saying that he'd like a chance to speak to Duncan's mother. "You were in Orlais, father," Anora said quietly when they were alone. "Do you really think they won't attack?"

He sighed. "I left some months ago, you understand, but there was a growing voice amongst the ruling classes that called for invasion. Ferelden's defenses are still weak, the unblighted lands not fertile enough to keep our armies fed through an extended siege, and that with our own difficulties between templar and mage they expect us to be distracted enough to be easy pickings. They want our port cities back, and to erase the embarrassment of the Rebellion from the histories, and it seems they don't find Alistair nearly as willing to capitulate for peace as they evidently expected Cailan to be. They might have satisfied themselves with some sort of accord with him, but Alistair they'd prefer to crush."

"Celene is still treating with us," Anora said.

"And hopefully she has the strength to keep her wolves at bay," Loghain said, but his tone suggested he doubted it. "There are few in the Orlesian court that seem to agree with her diplomatic policies with regards to Ferelden. I know I shattered any illusion that I am capable of being objective with regards to the subject of Orlais, but I would be very surprised if they didn't move against us within the next few years. Perhaps sooner even than that. And her cousin Duke Gaspard de Chateau or whatever the fuck his name is… is just about ready to cut her down and take her throne from her, and he, I believe, will come rolling right through Ferelden as his first act as Emperor. Just because he can."

"Alistair…is a fine warrior…" Anora said, with a crease of worry between her brows, "but he's
bollocks as a tactician."

"Then it is fortunate that he has you."

"You taught me, father, but I've never been tested."

He put a hand on her shoulder and smiled reassuringly, or at least it was meant that way. "Don't go buying trouble, my dear. I'm a bloody-minded old man and I've always been paranoid, particularly about the Chevaliers, so put the thought from your mind for now. There'll be warning enough if it ever comes to pass, and if worse really comes to worst I have faith in your brains, my girl. If I have any claim to intelligence at all you're a thousand times smarter than I."

"I will be sanguine, father, if I have your assurance that if they do invade you will help in any way you can -- even if we cannot let Alistair know you're helping."

Loghain's smile became pained. "If I am able, Anora, I promise you, I will help."

*****

That night, as she prepared for bed, Anora surprised Alistair with a rare unsolicited kiss. "Thank you, Husband," she said. "I know this cannot be easy for you, and I am grateful. For the first time in years I feel as if the world was finally coming back around to something that feels like normal. I know you think my father must always have been a traitorous bastard, and I'll admit he's hardly the sweetest turd in the shithouse, but -- "

Alistair laughed out loud. "The sweetest turd in the shithouse? Your majesty, that was a decidedly crass thing for such a fine queen as yourself to say."

Anora smiled. "I was taught the wiles of diplomacy by your father, but my father taught me how to fight and, if inadvertently, how to curse." She picked up her brush and began smoothing out her long hair, though normally she would wait for her handmaiden Erlina to assist her with that. "In any event, what I was trying to say is, he's my father, and even if he isn't gentle I love him. I still can't quite wrap my mind entirely around what happened with the Couslands, and Arl Eamon, and the Alienage, and Ostagar... Part of me thinks it must all have been Howe's doing, and my father just another victim of the man's poison."
"Your father never exactly denied any of the charges against him, except for sending the blood mage Jowan to poison Arl Eamon."

"But you see, husband, it doesn't surprise me in the least that my father would accept blame for things he had no knowledge of provided he could see they'd happened. He would consider Howe under his charge, even if not his control, and my father always taught me that you are responsible for the actions of those under your command."

"Jowan said your father hired him personally. He recognized him from portraits."

"Which has always puzzled me greatly. My father considered sitting for portraits a waste of time and treasury money, and I've never seen a depiction of him that looks anything like him. Our son didn't recognize him from his portraiture -- could you?"

"They do seem... rather misinformed about certain features," Alistair admitted reluctantly. "Like the fact that he isn't a dragon or a mabari hound, though in my opinion he could as easily be either."

"The portraitist King Maric hired to paint father took rather a dislike to him, for some unaccountable reason," Anora said, with a wry smile. "He went out of his way to make him as bestial as possible."

Alistair sighed. "So perhaps Jowan lied about who hired him, or perhaps he was mistaken. Mages don't get much political training, I know, and even Templars are pretty well cut off from the goings-on of the outside world, so perhaps he was even hired by Howe and only assumed in some way that it was Loghain, though the man wasn't a shadow of your father."

Anora put down her brush and squared off before her husband. "I would never ask you to trust my father, Alistair, not after what he did. Regardless of whether or not he was personally guilty of every atrocity committed during the Blight he was certainly guilty enough, and even I cannot entirely forgive him for it. But he is a man of honor. He damaged that honor horribly by doing what he thought was necessary, but I cannot believe he destroyed it utterly. Don't trust him, husband, but don't discard him. He could be a tremendous aid to us if... something untoward were to happen."


"There are other helps he could give us, husband, but yes. That is the worst-case scenario I believe
Alistair's mouth twisted into a moue of revulsion, but he said grimly, "I'll take it under advisement, my dear. Maker knows I'm no tactician, but somehow I find it difficult to place myself and my country in the hands of a man who betrayed my brother to his death."

*****

"What are you doing, grandfather?" Duncan asked, the next day in the training yard.

"Fletching," Loghain said, not intending to sound curt, as he wrapped eagle feathers to an ironwood shaft.

"But why?"

"Because I was running low on arrows."

"You could take some from the palace armory," Duncan pointed out. "Or buy them at the market."

"I prefer to do it myself." He continued his task in his steady way, and the boy pulled up a stool and perched himself precariously upon it to watch.

"Why do you wind the feathers around the shaft so?" Duncan asked. "That's not the way the royal fletcher does it."

"Which is why I prefer to do it myself," Loghain said, with a wry smile. He saw the boy was curious so he explained. "It's called rifling, lad -- makes the arrow spin as it flies so that it goes truer and further. The Dalish do it so, which is one of the reasons why they're such deadly archers."

"Have you known any Dalish, grandfather?" the boy asked.

"I've encountered a few of them. Can't say I know anything much about them except their arrow-
craft, and through painful experience at that.” His smile broadened a trifle as he remembered the arrow that had gone almost all the way through his shoulder decades before.

"Father uses a crossbow, when he uses a bow at all," Duncan said. "He says its better than a longbow."

"Your father wears plate armor," Loghain said. "When I wear plate, I prefer a crossbow myself -- a longbow requires more dexterity and range of motion to use properly. A crossbow also is not dependent upon the strength of the archer but upon the strength of the bowstring and the mechanism used for firing it, and doesn't require as much training to use well. Despite that, I still prefer a longbow when I have the space to use one. My mother taught me to shoot, as her father taught her, and there's an involvement to drawing a bow and firing an arrow that I don't feel when shooting a bolt, and I'm never as accurate with a crossbow as a longbow. It's also very much slower to load a bolt and crank the bow than it is to knock and arrow and fire."

"Are you a good shot, grandfather?"

They were sitting beneath the low wooden roof that protected the preparation table and weapon racks in the training courtyard. Loghain picked up his longbow, knocked a freshly-fletched arrow, and fired -- straight into the center of the head of one of the stuffed men set up as targets on the far side of the open space, a perfect shot at three times the distance the royal archers stood when they trained, and from a seated position.

"Fair," Loghain said.

Watching from a narrow balcony two floors above, Alistair saw the shot and heard his son's excited shout. He ran a hand through his short blond hair and grumbled aloud.

"My son is lost to me."

"Nonsense," Anora said, not looking up from the papers she was reading inside near the balcony door.

"He is," Alistair insisted. "He doesn't care to spend time with me anymore, your father is far too interesting, with his arrows and his…Archdemon-slaying."
"Father is new to Duncan, and unknown, and like any child he is curious and no doubt anxious to win his regard. He hasn't abandoned you, Alistair, and he'll come back around once the new wears off."

Alistair continued to grumble under his breath for a time, and like a wise woman Anora chose to simply ignore him. "At least I have my daughter," he said at last in an audible tone, for Baby Anora still steadfastly refused to acknowledge her grandfather. Anora did not rise to the bait, and Alistair subsided.

Later that night, when the whole family was gathered in the nursery to talk and watch the children play, Baby Anora decided to assert her superiority over all other living beings and her utter disregard for sleep. Her defiant screams were sufficient to keep her nurse at bay when that long-suffering servant came to put her to bed, and even her mother found it difficult to approach in the face of such volume. Finally, after a particularly ear-shattering roar, Loghain roared back.

That was all, an inarticulate roar with neither sense nor threat in it, only a degree or so louder than the child's. It was sufficient to give the toddler pause, and she stared at him for a moment wide-eyed. Then she opened her mouth and roared again, louder, still with her gaze fixed wonderingly upon her grandfather. With a narrow smile curving one side of his mouth, he echoed her cry again, and louder still. The child took a deep breath and emitted the loudest roar she'd ever managed in her short life, only to have it overshadowed once more by a roar from her grandfather, a sound loud and terrible enough to make a dragon blink. The nurse fled in terror, and even Alistair caught himself cowering involuntarily.

Baby Anora did not cower. Indeed, as the sound faded into a ringing silence her little bow-shaped mouth split in a huge grin and she held out her arms. "Up!" she demanded of her grandfather imperiously. He lifted her into his arms and she snuggled against his shoulder, vanquished but happier about it than most so conquered. Loghain carried her to her room and tucked her into her crib himself.

Anora looked at her husband's comically tragic expression as he saw his last hopes dashed and couldn't stop herself from bursting into laughter.
The Calm Before the Storm

Time passed, but it did not pass quietly. The rogue templars fought the rebel mages and everyone they accused of giving them assistance on the bannorn until it seemed that the common folk of Ferelden would be wiped out. The chaos within the Chantry increased until it seemed the Andrastian religion was destined to collapse completely, and fear for just such an unthinkable outcome kept most nations in Thedas in turmoil. Despite the troubles, or perhaps because of them, the threat from Orlais grew ever more certain as days passed into months. Some said Celene would never allow her armies to attack, others claimed she was only pretending diplomacy in order to wait for the opportune moment to strike, and still others knew with sick certainty that regardless of whether the Empress's intentions were honorable or not, sooner or later the intrigues of the Orlesian court would catch up to her, and if she continued to refuse the demand for war she would find herself at the receiving end of an assassin's craft.

Alistair and Anora kept as much of this from their children as possible. Parents always make such efforts to shield their children from the horrors of the real world, and while some are better at it than others, few ever really succeed. At the very least children know when their parents are afraid, even if they don't quite understand the why, and it scares them.

Not having a hand in the running of the country, and with no men to train or strategies to plan, Loghain had little to do except whack away at scarecrows in the training courtyard, and so as the kingdom's troubles mounted and the King and Queen spent longer and longer days at court attempting to solve them, he slowly and somewhat reluctantly stepped into the role of Chief Babysitter for the prince and princess. He loved both his grandson and granddaughter dearly, and he'd enjoyed fatherhood very much, but he'd always felt more than a bit out of his element when it came to spending a lot of time alone with any child, up to and including his own. They made him feel clumsy and oversized, not to mention crass and occasionally stupid.

Keeping them active settled that last problem, for as long as he could forestall their endless and, to him, unanswerable questions then he would not have to reveal that his head had never been able to accept a great deal of learning beyond that which was necessary to swing a sword or read a map. The processes that went into making the sky blue, for instance, might potentially be of some value to someone, but had absolutely no relevance to him, and when Maric, insisting upon some formal education before making him over into high nobility, had attempted to clutter his mind with such things he had planted both heels and rebelled. "Why do I need to know what makes the bloody sky blue?" he'd demanded of his friend, "or whether the earth goes 'round the sun or vice versa? What possible difference could knowing such things ever make for me? It won't make me a better general and it won't make me a wiser Teyrn, if you're truly so set on this ridiculous idea of raising me." Maric smiled, shook his head resignedly, and set aside the books of natural philosophy in favor of books on politics and government, and the study of languages. Loghain never learned how to speak any other than his native tongue to any degree, but he learnt to understand well enough to know when foreign delegates were being duplicitous, which was all he cared about. And so when Duncan and Baby Anora were in his care the goal was basically to keep them too busy to talk, and wear them out so that they'd sleep until someone with answers, like their mother, came to hear their questions.
At first it was obvious that Alistair was not especially happy with the new arrangement, particularly when he found son and daughter laughing ecstatically on the back of a trotting pony, going round and around in a circle at the end of Loghain's lead rope, but as time went on and he saw no harm seemed to come of any of it, he began at last to relax his guard. He worried more about his daughter than his son, for Loghain behaved more gently toward the lad and seemed rather fierce toward the girl, but in the course of time he realized that far from being frightened, Baby Anora reveled in the roars and rough games. And he saw, too, the way the old warrior's hard features softened whenever he was with either child, and he recognized that the man truly adored his grandchildren.

In a rare respite from the cares of rule one day some months after Loghain's return to Denerim, Alistair and Duncan were together in the stables to greet the arrival of a litter of mabari pups born to the stablemaster's bitch. Duncan scratched behind the ears of one tiny blind puppy and said to his father, in a casual it-makes-no-nevermind-to-me-one-way-or-the-other voice, "I was wondering, Father, if you might not teach me to ride a horse one day soon."

Alistair, who had never been on horseback a single time in his life, was too embarrassed to confess such to his son. "I don't know, Duncan, I'm awfully busy these days, and it seems to me you're a bit too small yet to ride a full-sized horse. I think perhaps you should stick with your pony for now. When you're older we'll see about getting the riding master to teach you proper."

"Oh. All right, then," Duncan said, as if he didn't really care, but the crestfallen expression on his face went straight to his father's heart. The boy excused himself shortly thereafter, as it was time for his afternoon lessons, but Alistair stayed in the stables awhile longer, looking over the horses and thinking dark thoughts about them, as though it were their fault he could not teach his son to ride.

"How about having the riding master teach you proper?" The deep, harsh voice startled him out of his brooding.

"Andraste's ass, Loghain -- how long have you been here?" Alistair demanded, blushing because he'd allowed the man to see him start.

"Long enough," Loghain said. He stepped out of the shadows, leading a tall, heavy-bodied charger. "Haven't got a whole hell of a lot else to do so I ride a lot. You, on the other hand, don't ride at all. Do you?"

"Ruling a kingdom takes up a lot of time," Alistair said with some asperity, attempting to cover his chagrin with pompousness. "Just because I don't ride to the hunt with the frivolous nobility doesn't
"Your father was practically born on horseback," Loghain interrupted, "and the best that could be said of him by the time he died was that *most of the time* he didn't fall off. *You* were treated more or less like a scullery boy at Redcliffe, and for whatever reason the Chantry has for it, in all my years of life I've never seen a templar on a horse. You were never taught to ride."

There seemed no use in further denials, but Alistair could not meet the man's eyes when he mumbled, "No, I wasn't."

"Being your properly submissive half-captive and all I shouldn't say this, but a King that can't sit a horse is something of an humiliating statement for a nation. So I repeat: why not have the riding master teach you proper? Then you could teach your son to ride and not be embarrassed to speak of it."

"I don't have time," Alistair said defiantly, but he blushed again as he admitted, "and besides, the riding master would laugh."

Loghain considered that. "You're probably right," he confessed. He led the horse forward and patted its glossy chestnut neck. "But Stew-Bone here won't laugh, and I have no sense of humor that anyone's ever been able to detect. All you need to do is learn to get on a horse's back and off again without tripping or being caught up and dragged, and to sit on his back and not fall off the minute he starts to move, and then you could go to the riding master for proper lessons without feeling a stupid ass."

Alistair took a half-step forward, almost yearningly, but he said, "I'm not so sure I haven't detected at least the faintest trace of a sense of humor in you, Loghain."

"Well, perhaps I'm beginning at this late date to develop one, as it seems my life for the past decade or so has been something of a dirty punch line, but I promise you I shan't laugh."

The King took another half-step forward, like a stray dog who wants a kind master but is afraid of being whipped, and eyed man and horse warily but with hope in those hazel depths. "You'd...teach me the basics, then? So that I could at least keep my seat and not look a bloody fool?"

"No more than you usually look, at any rate," Loghain said, amiably enough.
Alistair didn't seem to notice the slight. He took yet another half-step and asked, "Why would you do that?"

Loghain sighed, fixed him with a steely eye, and said in a low, serious tone, "Duncan is my grandson, and he seems to have rather set his heart on having his father teach him to ride."

It occurred to Alistair then, with dawning wonder, that his children were the bridge connecting him to this man he was beginning to find it hard to hate, and that one day they might make it possible even for him to begin to forgive the transgressions of the past. Perhaps it was even already happening, too gradually to notice.

From then on, when they could find the time and the privacy, Alistair took lessons in horsemanship from Loghain. This tutoring usually took place after dark, as fears for the kingdom kept Alistair wakeful on many nights and Loghain seemed almost never to sleep. In time the King learned how to hoist himself into the saddle without too much awkwardness, how to dismount competently if not entirely with grace, and to sit upright and not feel as if he were about to plummet headfirst out of the saddle at any moment, but even then Loghain claimed he was simply too hopeless to risk the humiliation of public lessons, and the private tutoring continued. In truth, both men found these secret lessons something of a comfort, for different reasons. For Alistair, though he could not admit it even to himself except down very deep in his heart of hearts, they were somewhat fulfilling to the absence of a father figure he'd never in life felt so keenly as when he became a father himself, and for Loghain it was "something to do," for he was a man who did not thrive in stagnation. And Anora, who was not let in on the secret but who knew what was going on under her nose regardless, watched as both men learned more about each other than Alistair learned about horses, smiled triumphantly and said nothing.

On one moonlit ride along the Pilgrim's Path outside the city gates Alistair felt confident enough in both his saddle and his mind to ask something he'd wanted to for a long time.

"Did you… know my mother?"

"No," Loghain said tersely, and Alistair was abashed.

"Of course you didn't, that was a stupid question to ask. She was a Redcliffe serving girl, why would you have known her?"

Loghain looked over at him rather too quickly, the moonlight showing a strange expression on his face, but he looked back at the pommel of his saddle again before Alistair could begin to fathom it. "I never spent much time at Redcliffe, even before Eamon married."
"Wait -- what was that look for? You know something, don't you? About my mother?"

"No, my King, I don't."

"You do," Alistair insisted. "Or at least you think you do. What is it?"

Loghain sighed. "I don't recall Maric spending any great time there, either."

Alistair puzzled over that statement for a moment, then laughed. "I don't mean to sound boorish but I don't think it absolutely necessary for him to have frequented the place. I'm told once is enough for some men."

"Aye, true," Loghain said, with a touch of a coarser, commoner accent creeping into his voice from beneath the time-polished tones of nobility, "but I have my doubts that it was Redcliffe your father was visiting during the time you must have been conceived, Your Majesty."

"What are you saying?" Alistair said, suddenly grave.

"I don't think the poor serving girl who died bringing forth a bastard son was really your mother. But I don't know, and Maker knows I should keep my suspicions to myself."

"You don't know? Did Maric never tell you who my mother was?"

"He said it was she who died. But he was never a particularly good liar, was Maric, and he looked a bit shifty when he said it. Then too it just never added up to me. Maric wasn't at Redcliffe once, to my knowledge, in the year before you mysteriously appeared there -- looking a bit too large and strong for a newborn, in my humble opinion -- and while it shames me to say he had something of a roving eye he wasn't a man the servants ever had fear of, if you catch my meaning. The man was in mourning, he had been for two years, and I never caught wind of any indiscretions in that time. Believe me, I was keeping watch."

"Wait -- are you saying the King wasn't my father, either?" Alistair said, in some alarm.
"No, though I'd once had some hope of that, you are clearly Maric's son. But I don't think your mother was any serving girl. She existed, all right, but I believe she may have been only a convenient coincidence. If your real mother was who I think she was, it worked out well for Maric, and the kingdom, and even to some extent you that it happened that way."

"You know who my real mother was?" Alistair fairly shrieked.

"Calm yourself. Maker's breath, I wish you'd never brought it up, but now the cat is out the bag, so to speak, I suppose I can't plead ignorance and ask that you forget I ever said anything. Remember, Alistair -- I know nothing, I only suspect, and given our history you have good reason to feel most uncertain about things I only suspect. That year was the year Maric let the Grey Wardens back into Ferelden, and the first thing that happened was they came to us at the palace and asked for my help in a Deep Roads expedition to find the Warden Commander's missing brother. I didn't trust them and said so, and thus Maric offered to go instead, which I flatly refused to allow, and so that night without a word to anyone he snuck away with them -- or at least that's what he told me happened. I was never entirely sure the Wardens didn't simply kidnap him."

"I don't understand."

"Maric spent an awfully long time in the Deep Roads with those Wardens, and three of them were women. One was rather elderly and ended up dead, another was a dwarf and seems to have vanished into the Deep Roads with some sort of intelligent Darkspawn, and the third... I don't know what ultimately became of her, but I know she survived the debacle that concluded that particular adventure."

"So you're saying that my mother was... may have been... a Grey Warden?" Alistair sounded awed. "Tell me about her -- what was her name? What did she look like? Do you know anything about her at all? Did Maric tell you nothing?"

"Calm yourself," Loghain said again, more firmly. "Maric said little to me about any of it, which was odd enough to raise my suspicions still further, but I'll tell you what I do know of her, which I fear is next to nothing. Her name was Fiona, she was I suppose quite pretty, and she... she... " He cut himself off short and sighed.

"What? By Andraste's Holy Sword, man, what?"

"Understand, Alistair, that if what I say were to be repeated by anyone else your rule would be in serious question, even if the banns didn't immediately rise against you. Fiona... was an elf. She was also... a mage."
Alistair had been leaning across the space between their horses further and further in his eagerness to hear, and Loghain didn't notice in time to stop him from tumbling out of the saddle at the shock of those words. He dismounted and helped the King to his feet.

"I'm a… half-blood?" Alistair said weakly. "And a mage's son?"

"You understand now a bit better, perhaps, why Maric found it impossible to claim you," Loghain said, sounding disgusted even as he said it. "If you were the offspring of a King and a serving girl 'twouldn't be much said. Most noble bastards have a few literal bastards running about and more than one of the banns and even one of the Arls are the result of trysts between noble fathers and elven servants, but if it were known you had mage blood then the Grand Cleric was like to call an Exalted March upon Ferelden, bloody stupid bitch that she was. But as I said, even I was never told the truth, if truth it was, so I don't know that anything I've said has credence."

"And yet it sounds so dreadfully easy to believe, somehow," Alistair said, and the moonlight reflected off his sickly smile. "Well. I feel rather as if I'd been in an earthquake."

"But you've survived it, and in time you'll get over it," Loghain said. "Know this: I don't care whether your mother was a mage or a servant or the bleeding Queen of Antiva, if Maric put her with child then Maric loved her. He wasn't terribly wise in his love, but he had a way of making even the worst people a bit more worthy somehow -- take me as proof of that -- and I don't find it very difficult to suppose that she must have loved him as well. Was she a good person? That I can't say, for I did not know her."

"But did my father love me?" Alistair asked, and his voice was that of a lost child.

Loghain sighed. "He never spoke of it to me," he admitted, "but I believe he loved you. It seemed to me from that day forward that he carried a terrible sadness and regret, and I believe that it stemmed from the fact that he could not be the father you needed. He tried his best to make up for it by being a stronger and wiser King than he had been in years past. I regret to say it gladdened me, for there was a time it seemed Maric would simply fade out and leave me holding the reins, and no matter what you think I tried to do in the wake of Ostagar, I never aspired to the throne."

"Let's head back to the palace," Alistair said. "Will you help me into the saddle? I don't think I can quite manage it on my own just now."

"Of course, my King," Loghain said, and gave him a boost. They rode back to the city in silence.
"Hello, what's this?" Loghain said alertly as they passed through the gates to find the city streets ablaze with light and abuzz with activity.

"I don't know. You don't think someone could have… ?" Alistair ventured nervously.

"Not a chance. I'd have seen or heard something if we were followed. No, this is something else."

He kicked his horse into a gallop until he caught up with a bustling soldier and demanded to know what was afoot.

"The Orlesians, m'Lord!" the man gasped, eagerly if inaccurately as Loghain was no longer entitled to an honorific. "Scouts from the western bannorn report an army advancing upon the border! We're being invaded, Maker save us!"

Loghain and Alistair shared a grim look. "Blast and damnation," Alistair swore. Reining in his excited mount, Loghain could not but agree with that assessment.
Loghain was in attendance at the emergency consult Alistair called because the King was too distracted to forbid it, the Queen would never think of it, and none of the other nobles present quite had the courage to deny him entrance. He paced restlessly at the back of the war room while frightened fools bickered and whimpered and made of themselves a terrific headache.

"We don't have enough men," Arl Eamon said at last. "Your majesty, we've had recruiters out for months and still we can only manage to field perhaps five thousand men, most of them untrained. If the Chevaliers number only ten thousand we shall be lucky, from what the scouts report."

"Seems to me we often fielded rather less than five thousand men during the Rebellion, and we still managed to win through," Loghain pointed out, unable to restrain himself any longer. "We defeated an entire bloody Blight with little more than that. Your Majesty, I don't ask to be put in command of men, or to speak strategy to you, but I beg of you, let me fight. Put me in back of some B-company, for all I care, but do not force me to stand idle and safe while men rush headlong into war."

Alistair ruffled his scruff of hair distractedly. "Actually I was rather hoping you'd have some idea exactly how we are to take our five thousand untrained soldiers and defeat ten thousand or so top-of-the-line Chevaliers before they make it to our homes and fields. I hope you're not saying you won't help with that."

Loghain stopped short, with a near-comical look of surprise on his face. "Are you actually… saying that you'd like me to suggest tactics?"

"Is there another man in this room with more experience at fighting vast numbers of Chevaliers with very little at his disposal?"

"Well, I… let me think a minute…" Loghain contemplated the scale map of the bannorn with its tiny figures of soldiers and cavalry. He ignored utterly the mutinous muttering of angry nobles indignant that the traitor should be put back in charge of their destinies.

"The scouts say the Orlesians are moving toward Sulcher's Pass, correct?" he said at last, as he dashed aside the figurines representing the armies and reset them to his own satisfaction. "That's a nice open space as far as passage through the Frostbacks goes, but it's not as open as Gherlen and it's going to funnel them, and all the nice open valleys are on the Fereldan side. If we manage to get there ahead of them, we can hold them there and their numbers won't make as much difference to them as if we met them in the open bannorn."
"We'd never make it there in time," Arl Vaughan Urien Kendalls declared. "Why, that's a good solid week's journey, and they've a jump on us."

Loghain looked at the man from under severely knitted brows. "A week for one fat fool riding in luxury in a closed carriage, perhaps, but four days' hard march for an army in haste."

"Even so, it would take the full strength of our forces to keep them pinned down," Eamon argued. "We cannot commit everything we have to one vain attempt to stop them cold in a single blow."

"If not at Sulcher's Pass, then where, Eamon?" Loghain asked. "At Redcliffe, with the screams of innocent women and children ringing in our ears? At the gates of the capital? On the streets outside the royal palace? Are you so eager to sentence our children to the same fate we suffered at the hands of our Orlesian masters? They think we are weak, easy prey, and we must show them that we are not to be trifled with before it costs us more than we can afford to pay."

"You can't be thinking of a direct head-on assault, father," Anora said. "Show us what you truly intend."

He grinned at his daughter, looking more than slightly wolfish with his teeth bared so, and he reached out and placed a single figure of a knight with sword and shield directly in front of the flags and figures representing the Orlesians. "This is what they'll see," he said. "A small contingent of rather weary-looking infantry, not more than a thousand strong."

Anora's gaze sharpened and she nodded as she caught his intent. "They're expecting weakness... and you intend to give them what they expect."

"And then when they've committed themselves to charge against these men, you'll send in the rest of our forces to flank them," Alistair added thoughtfully.

"On both sides," Loghain said, and placed two horsed figures one on either side the horde of attackers. "As much cavalry as we can muster to take lead in the assault, and the rest as infantry to mop up what the horsemen can't finish off. If we manage to take them off guard we can tear their defenses open in a matter of moments. Then it's just a matter of routing them. Easier said than done, I know, but it can be done, which I believe is the point. This is not so different to what we did at River Dane, though we're in a far more defensible position than we were there."
"King Alistair, you would not allow this man to lead another such assault after what he did at Ostagar, would you?" Eamon demanded. "You could never trust him not to quit the field and leave you in the lurch, just as he did to poor Cailan."

"My plan does not call for me to stand with either flanking army," Loghain said, loudly enough to shout Eamon down. "Indeed, there is only one place I need be, and that is at the head of the small contingent of infantry that draws the Orlesians into position."

"Why is that?" Alistair said. "It seems to me that you'd be more effective at the head of a cavalry division."

Loghain chuckled. "Not in the least. As Anora said, the Orlesians need to see weakness. I intend to show them that. When they see that Ferelden has only managed to field a small army led by a decrepit old man, they'll be practically falling over themselves to have at us."

Alistair's eyes, and Anora's, were not the only pairs of eyes to turn incredulously upon the immense and stalwart figure of the champion. He drew himself up to his full height, taller than anyone else in the room, and inquired irritably as to exactly what everyone was looking at.

"Decrepit old man?" Alistair said. "Perhaps you haven't taken a good long look in the mirror lately, Loghain, but except for a bit of snow on the mountaintop, you don't look particularly feeble. You look, in fact, very much as though you could fold me five ways and toss me across the Waking Sea to Kirkwall."

"Ah, but after half a week of hard trudging and short commons, I shall not be looking especially intimidating. I will go out of my way to ensure it, in fact. While I was in Orlais I learned something rather interesting -- the Chevaliers are still very much afraid of me, more so than I ever believed they were. I'm practically an Archdemon myself, to hear the ridiculous tales they tell, and I often amused myself when my duties for the Wardens were finished by feinting at Chevaliers I met at training grounds -- they practically wet themselves to avoid me. I believe that if we show them evidence that the once-mighty Loghain has grown old and tired they will lose all sense and caution and fling themselves pell-mell into melee against me, all so very eager to be the one to strike me down. They'll be ripe for a good old-fashioned lesson in why it is never wise to incite the ire of a true King of Ferelden."

"One good thing, at least," a young nobleman Loghain didn't recognize said. "Most likely the Chevaliers won't have any mages with them."

"We won't either, however, and we'll sorely miss their aid," Eamon said soberly.
"I think I can help you there," a new voice said from the doorway of the war room. They turned to look and many jaws dropped at sight of a tall woman in heavy dragonbone chainmail emblazoned with the griffon of the Grey Wardens. She removed her helmet and shook down her long tail of blonde hair. She was not entirely pretty but she was certainly striking, with fierce blue eyes peering out from heavy makeup like warpaint, and a dark black tattoo boldly above her left eye and down her right cheek. "Ferelden's magical community owes me something of a debt of gratitude, and I believe I can persuade some of them at least to leave off fighting the templars long enough to come to the aid of their country."

"The Warden Commander!" someone exclaimed, and the cry was taken up by other voices. "The Warden! The Warden! The Hero of Ferelden!"

The woman strode forward, moving easily despite the weight of her encumbrances, and held out a hand to Loghain. He took it and shook it firmly. "I'd heard you were back in the country. Nice to see you in your proper element, Ser," she said. Then without relinquishing his hand she cocked her head to one side and looked at him curiously. "There’s something off with you."

"A story perhaps for another time," he said. "If it so happens that another time comes to pass."

She laughed, a disarmingly merry sound considering her ferocious mien. "That's what I like about you, Loghain. Always so willing to spin a good yarn, but always 'at another time.'"

"Warden," Anora greeted politely, stepping forward with a slight curtsey. "Good to see you are well."

"And you, Anora. It's been awhile, hasn't it? You haven't aged a day."

"Elilia," Alistair said in cautious greeting. He nodded but the Warden stepped up and hugged him tight round the middle.

"Don't be that way, Al -- I explained to you all the many good reasons I had for doing what I did, and I'm under the impression you've come to understand them better of late. In all these years you'd think you could have learned to be friendly with me again." She stepped back and took a good look at him. "You've put on weight. Being King agrees with you, it seems. Or perhaps it's being Daddy."
"Not to sound ungrateful for your presence, Warden," Eamon interjected cautiously, "but why are you here? I know you are not exactly afraid to put your oar into national affairs, but if you are here to assist us now won't the Wardens object?"

"Don't give a damn if they do," Elilia Cousland scoffed. "I was a daughter of Ferelden long before I was ever a Grey Warden, and while I cannot commit the rest of Ferelden's Wardens to the cause of retaining our sovereignty I most certainly can and I most assuredly will throw my glove in the ring and fight. If Weisshaupt wants to censure me once all is said and done, let them."

“Where have you been all these long years?” Alistair asked. “Where have the wardens been? Have you all returned?”

“We have,” the Warden said. “If you want the truth, we’ve been searching for a way to counteract the Calling. Some time ago, I began to feel my time had come. I returned to Soldier’s Peak to say my final goodbyes to my warden comrades -- I felt I owed them that much -- but when I did, I discovered that they were all feeling the Calling. I convinced them to come with me and search for a way to counteract the symptoms, so that we could continue our duties without the threat the Calling brings. We have been unsuccessful thus far -- I decided I must return when I heard of the Orlesians plans to attack.”

"If you can truly sway a few mages to join us, Warden, we'd be in your debt," Loghain said seriously. "Again."

"I'll wager I can go one better," Elilia said. "Maybe two better. Give me a fast horse and I'll rally the werewolves of the Brecilian Forest and entreat Orzammar to send a contingent as well."

"Maker's breath, Eli, do you really think you could do all that? In time?" Alistair gasped.

"I can make one hell of an effort," Elilia said with a grin, "and I think you remember just how the world shakes when I put a bit of muscle into it."

Loghain snorted. "I know I do. Give her her horse, Alistair."

"Straight away," Alistair said with alacrity. "Can you leave at once?"

"Don't need to," she said with a laugh. "I'm only teasing."
"What?"

"Afraid so. You see, I've had King Bhelen on standby for some time, after wrangling a commitment from him of ten golems and a company of fifty berserkers. And I brought the dozen mages I was able to round up along with me, and they're ready to march with the battalion. I am on my way now to the Lady of the Forest where she hides with those werewolves that still possess their minds, and while I can't promise they'll join forces with us I believe that they will. So you see the horse needn't be that fast, provided you can spare a messenger to send for Orzammar in my stead."

"Will you put the Warden in command of a cavalry division?" Eamon demanded of Loghain.

"It would be an admirable answer to the problem I have in coming up with a suitable candidate," Loghain said, with a note of inquiry in his tone and the elevation of his eyebrow as he looked at her.

"Not me, my friend, I'm sorry. I can ride but one thing I've never learnt to do is fight from the saddle. I would be far more effective unhorsed."

"Then perhaps you should head up an infantry division instead," he said heavily. "Damn it all, why are good horsemen so thin on the ground in this bloody country?"

"I can fight from horseback," Eamon said. "I will take a division, if no other is to hand."

Anora laughed, a brittle sound. "And what if you were to suffer an attack of gout at an inopportune moment, Eamon? Good Ser, you have grown very fat and old indeed in these last years."

"Then whom?" Eamon said, bridling.

"Me. I shall lead a cavalry," the Queen said matter-of-factly.

There was a loud outburst from the floor, and when it at last settled they found Loghain silent and contemplative. He looked at his daughter with some pain in his expression.
"I strove always to keep you from war," he said at last. "I taught you to fight and to defend yourself and then spent the rest of your life ensuring that you should never put to use what I taught you. So much that went badly during the Blight was directly as a result of my putting myself between you and the commission of your duty as Queen because while I knew you had the strength to face what was coming, I didn't want you to have to. I still don't want you to fight. But I shan't stand in your way this time, if you truly think you must go to war."

"Wait, you can't just let her be a soldier," Alistair said. "What about the kingdom? What about our children?"

"Chances are that even if things go badly for us at Sulcher's Pass, one of the three of us will survive to care for Duncan and Anora, and the country -- if any of it remains to us," Anora said calmly. "Even if all three of us were to fall in battle I should not regret it provided our deaths ensure that Ferelden -- and our children -- are safe, far from the fighting. I will fight."

The Warden stuck two fingers in her mouth and gave a loud wolf-whistle in approbation.

"Who will take the other cavalry?" Anora said, after a gracious nod at her ardent supporter.

"Alistair," Loghain said.

"Whoa, wait -- Loghain, I can't lead a horse charge. I don't know how to fight in saddle," Alistair said, telegraphing panic at his unofficially appointed general.

"My King, you have until we reach Sulcher's Pass to learn." He addressed the entire assemblage. "This is war, ladies and gentlemen, and while our enemy may not be the twisted hordes we faced during the Blight the danger to our homes and our way of life is just as real. The time for political debate has passed, and now we must all commit our full strength and will to the task of protecting our homeland from those who seek to wrest it away from us. It is time again for Ferelden to make a stand."

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"Not a half-bad army, I'd say," Elilia Cousland commented as she walked up and dropped to the ground behind Loghain, sitting back-to-back with him with her long legs outstretched before her. "You may thank me for my part in that later with extravagant gifts; jewels and precious metals will
be sufficient."

Loghain snorted. "What use has a reckless battle maiden like you for diamonds and gold?"

"Well, I can always trade them later for nice equipment," she said. "Speaking of, that couldn't possibly be the armor you're intending to wear tomorrow, could it?"

Loghain looked down at the sturdy leather armor he wore, heavy but nearly ten stone lighter than the massive plate he traditionally utilized. "It will suffice."

"It will suffice to get you promptly and efficiently slaughtered," she argued. "I know the way you fight -- dear Maker, I counted on the way you fight. You take the hard hits so we poor lesser mortals needn't."

"That's the way I fight in plate, but it's not the only way I know to fight," Loghain countered.

"Ha. I'd bet anything its exactly the way you intend to fight tomorrow. If not, then why not toss that blasted shield aside and swing something with a bit more force behind it than that longsword?" She hefted her own enormous greatsword in illustration. "You can't act as an efficient defender when you're undefended yourself, Loghain."

"For my part of tomorrow's battle, what I'm wearing will suffice," he insisted. Elilia sighed, recognizing the tone of irrefutable resolution in his voice, and dropped the subject.

"I feel pretty good about the battle, don't you?" she said. "Once Orlais realizes we've got strength of arms and of allies, they should all run back home to Val Royeaux and not trouble us no more, right?"

"That's the hope," Loghain said noncommittally.

"I'm counting on my werewolves and golems to cause them to shit themselves, and with your battle plan we'll tear them apart."

"Yes."
"Loghain Mac Tir: A damned good fighter, but he talks too much. Can't get a word in edgewise."

"I'm only waiting for you to draw a breath so that I may slip in a word or two."

She chuckled. "You're worried, aren't you?"

"I'm always worried before a battle. Any number of things can go disastrously wrong, no matter how solid the plan."

"Do you think Good King Alistair will be able to stay on that horse long enough to lead a charge?"

"That's one of the things I'm worried about."

"Then why make him command of a unit? Why not take Anora and Eamon instead?"

"Anora was right: Eamon is too fat and old to fight. And Alistair is King: if he manages to charge successfully, it will mean a thousand times more to the morale of our fighting men than if the Arl of Redcliffe did it. And he's not so bad ahorse as he thinks. Maric didn't figure out the fine art of staying in the saddle by twice again as long."

Elilia elbowed him in the side. "I didn't want to say anything about it, but you're how much older than Arl Eamon?"

"Probably not as much as you think," he said grimly. "Three or four years, if I remember what Rowan once told me a'rightly. But unlike Eamon I haven't spent my declining years with my ass planted firmly upon velvet cushions, eating candied grapes and Orlesian chocolates, wearing ridiculous velvet tunics and silk pantaloons."

"Personally I've always thought you'd look rather well in velvet tunics and silk pantaloons," Elilia said wickedly, "particularly if the silk pantaloons weren't cut quite full enough."

"Curb your tongue, you wretched harpy," Loghain said without rancor. He checked the spit he was
"Have you eaten yet? I believe this rabbit is nearly ready."

She laughed. "Why do you think I came over here? Life at camp improved greatly once you took over for Alistair as cook."

"You're a worse cadger than that dog of yours was," Loghain growled. He cut off a generous portion of the sizzling meat and gave it to her. "Bon appetit, as our perfumed and painted foes say."

"Feels just like old times, doesn't it?" she commented before rendering herself speechless with a huge bite torn directly from the carcass with her teeth.

"Just like old times. Yes, indeed, it did feel just like old times, although the old times he felt were older than the woman who accompanied him. He'd told the Warden once that the past was always with you, and attempting to ignore it was both impossible and potentially disastrous. But he'd never felt so locked within the past as he did now. Any moment Maric would come bounding up to him, eager and friendly as a particularly enthusiastic -- not to say stupid -- dog, and perhaps Rowan would come along behind him, always more sober than her betrothed but laughing with her eyes and mouth, and they would sit by his fire and tease him unmercifully, each in their own way.

"Loghain, has anybody ever told you that you have the prettiest eyes?" Maric might say, for it was his favorite gibe to compliment too fulsomely and upon things Loghain considered inconsequential, and his eyes were a frequent target. "Don't you agree, Rowan? Doesn't Loghain have the prettiest eyes?"

Rowan would nod, straight-faced and dry as toast. "They are rather pretty eyes, Maric, yes."

"They are pretty. They're like two portholes looking out upon the Waking Sea, don't you think?"

"Or drops of Lake Calenhad."

"Oh no, no no, Lake Calenhad is far too dark and murky." Maric would object. "No, they're definitely the color of the Waking Sea. And what I like best about them is, if you look very closely, you can see the Kraken swimming 'round in them."

And finally Loghain, equal parts exasperated and amused, would snap, "How many times a day, Maric, must I threaten your life?"
"What are you grinning about?" Maric asked. Loghain blinked three times rapidly and the face resolved into that of the current King and the phantoms of the past vanished.

"Just a ridiculous memory," Loghain said to Alistair. "Is anything wrong?"

"No. Just been going around the camp with Anora, trying to boost morale. It's pretty high already, though, with the Warden's reinforcements and all. Everyone seems to feel we stand a damned good chance tomorrow. I still wish you'd try and talk the Queen out of leading a charge. She'd listen to you."

Loghain chuckled ruefully. "What gives you that idea?" he said. "Anora has been gleefully rejecting my suggestions and ignoring my commands since she was first born."

"Maybe so, but you could pick her up and lock her in a closet, or something."

"Didn't work out so well when Howe tried it, as I was told."

"Well, yes, but that's because I came along and killed Howe," Elilia pointed out, through a mouthful of rabbit.

"Which you wouldn't have done had I not sent Erlina to convince you to do so," Anora interjected, coming up out of the shadows. She was resplendent in mail of volcanic aurum, gleaming red-gold in the firelight. She looked every inch the warrior queen as she stood beside her warrior husband, and if anything more imposing despite her smaller size.

Loghain picked a shred of meat off the rabbit's flank, popped it in his mouth, and chewed reflectively. "Well," he said after he swallowed, "I suppose I could toss Erlina in the closet with you. You'd want some company after all."

"Try it and see what it gets you."

He laughed. "Tough talk, small one. Consider yourself fortunate that I find myself disinclined to make the effort."
"That and a lack of ready wardrobes," Elilia said.

"Can't I convince you not to do this?" Alistair asked Anora seriously.

"No, husband, you cannot."

"Anora, I'm afraid."

She blinked at him in surprise. "Of course you are. It's a battle -- everyone is afraid. But we all have a duty to perform, and we will all do what we must. Ferelden depends upon it."

He made some effort to speak, but was unable to find words. So instead of speaking he stepped forward and wrapped his wife in a tight embrace. She returned his affections awkwardly, eyes wide at the shock of it. He kissed her on the cheek and said "I love you" in a voice hoarse with emotion.

"Oooooooo, " Elilia hooted. Loghain tossed a glare over his shoulder at her and she shrugged at him. "Well, Leliana wasn't here to do it, so I felt obliged."

"Sometimes I can't imagine how you possibly managed to defeat me."

"You wanted me to."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't try and bullshit me, milord. If you didn't want me to win that duel we had you'd never have taken a knee, out of breath or not -- and don't think I didn't notice that you stopped panting in roughly two seconds. You yielded, Loghain, and you're not exactly one for surrender. The most immediate and inarguable reason I had for not executing you as Al wanted. There were other reasons, of course, but I don't care to divulge them as you'd only get a swelled head," she said in a hoity-toity manner.

"Give me one other reason you had," Loghain said suspiciously.
"Well, you blew me off my sodding feet with a war cry. I respect that."

He snorted and let the subject by. The King and Queen were walking back to their pavilion, arms linked, oblivious to the exchange. He watched them for a moment, feeling oddly satisfied. He never would have thought his undemonstrative, dry-witted girl would find love and happiness with such a man as Alistair, but she seemed to have done and he was glad of it.

"Hmm, wonder if they'll manage to get any sleep tonight," Elilia said, peering over his shoulder at them.

"Arrest that lunatic mouth," Loghain warned. "I'll not hear crude speculations upon my daughter and her lawfully wedded husband."

She grinned, laughed, and kissed him on the cheek. "I seem to remember you telling me that you have trouble sleeping before a battle," she said while he sat stunned. "If you want to join me in my tent, there's an old remedy for insomnia we could try. I'd suggest it to the royal couple, but I think they're probably already putting it to use."

He turned his head and looked at her, agape. "Now I know you're mad," he said. "Either that or I am. You are not suggesting what it seems you are, you couldn't be."

"I believe I am suggesting what my friend and fellow Warden Oghren would call 'bucking the dirty bronco.' Does that truly make me mad?"

"The last time you came to me at night before a battle you persuaded me into sleeping with that blasted marsh witch. Now you want me to sleep with you?"

"I know I'm not as beautiful as Morrigan, but I didn't think you'd mind that."

"Beauty's not the question here, 'tis sanity."

"Well, that time I was concerned with survival -- yours and mine. This time… let's just say I've missed you."
"Like an impacted tooth. Why in the Maker's holy name would you want to sleep with me?"

"Because you're a nasty, rotten, grey-haired old man with a dreadful disposition, virtually no personality and a face like a collapsed lung. I find that incredibly attractive."

He pushed her away, half-laughing. "You hussy. Quit teasing me, it's beneath you."

"You ought to have learned, Loghain -- nothing is beneath me. But I'd genuinely like you to be. You can be over me, too, if you've the stamina. Somehow I suspect you do."

He stared at her and his grin slowly faded. She knew as much about the womanly arts of seduction as a maul, but despite the mockery in her words she was serious, Maker save him. It was shocking, but more surprising still was that he found himself wanting to take her up on the offer.

*No matter how tomorrow goes for the nation at large, you know full well this is like to be Loghain's Last Charge. Might as well go out in a blaze of glory.*

"'Face like a collapsed lung?' he parroted. "What exactly does a collapsed lung look like, pray tell, and how did you come to be aware of it?"

"Come to my tent, and I'll tell you all about a little Qunari tradition I've learned of called the 'Blood Eagle.'"

He stood up and pulled her to her feet along with him. "If I come to your tent, Warden, there'll be no further talking."

Her lips, as always painted slaughterous red, curved in a salacious smile. "Works out perfectly for me."
Loghain awoke before the morning horns well-chilled by the damp Fereldan night despite the armful of warm woman he held. The Warden had one leg thrown over both of his, one arm around his neck, and one battle-roughened hand resting upon his stomach very near that patch of now almost completely gray hair that was usually hidden under his smallclothes. He allowed himself a moment to simply watch her sleep, wondering at the faint marks he’d left upon her body that proved he’d had her. Elilia Cousland might have been too mannish and fierce to be classically pretty, but by the Maker she was a beautiful woman. And Maker knows he didn't deserve to lay with her.

Cautiously he extricated himself from her embrace, trying not to wake her, but as he moved her hand slid on his body, she grumbled something inaudible, and her fingers closed upon his half-erect phallus -- pleasant, but unproductive in terms of preparing to greet a day of blood and death. Gently and with some reluctance he pried her hand from his sex, dressed hurriedly, and left her tent, feeling cowardly and blessing the lighter armor he’d chosen that required no assistance to don. The Warden hadn't offered herself to him with any expectations, he knew, but sneaking away in the pre-dawn dark made him feel low and mean.

There'd been a time when he'd been a good sneak, as adept at the fighting arts of cunning and dexterity as he was now with the unsubtle skills of raw power and rugged constitution, but that was in his teen years, before a final unexpected period of fast growth in his early twenties had made of him as much a giant as his father before him and decades encumbered by armor weighing nearly as much as he himself did robbed him of a portion of his former grace. He could still move with eerie speed and silence when he thought to do so, but even at his best he was not particularly inconspicuous -- people noticed a man who was closer to a qunari in size than to the typical human, who rarely reached and even more seldom surpassed five feet ten inches. Long before mid-morning, when the scouts reported the enemy was at last in sight, the entire army was aware of the fact that Teyrn Loghain, as he was still thought by most, had spent the night with the Hero of Ferelden. In general, among the rank-and-file at least, this news was met with approval.

By the time the armies were in place the tickle he'd felt in his lungs when he awoke had deepened into a wracking cough, causing concern among the men and for Anora in particular, who demanded he see a healer before he came down with something serious. But of course he was coming down with something serious, exactly as he'd intended, and a healer's ministrations were both unnecessary and unhelpful, and he told her so firmly without explaining further. She bit down on her lips and the torrent of invective she desired to fling at her stubborn sire and turned her horse to rejoin her division. Loghain turned to the scout who came to report to him and demanded his information, ignoring the way the lad's eyes widened in alarm when he caught the sound of a raspy wheeze in his bark of command.

"The Chevaliers are within two miles of us, Ser," the soldier said, with a smart salute. "No sign of scouting parties."
That was welcome news. The Orlesians loved playing their games of intrigue and espionage, but when it came to moving troops they could usually be counted on to simply clump together and march hell bent for leather, heedless of the possibility of ambush. He'd depended upon that hubris during the Rebellion and it had served him well. He was heartened to see they'd failed to learn the lessons he'd so ably taught them. He turned to the small division of infantrymen and wardogs he commanded.

"All right, boys, this is it -- try and make yourselves look tired," he bellowed, grinning, and the soldiers snickered and echoed his grin. He barked to the dwarven berserkers the Warden had insisted he place with his own men in exchange for keeping werewolves, golems, and mages under cover with the flanking attackers to stay well hidden behind the taller humans until the command was given for them to surge ahead. "They're coming, men, but fear not -- we will take the day, for our homes, for our families, for Ferelden. They've been hard on the march all the way from Val Royeaux and doubtless they are hungry and parched. Let's show them our brand of hospitality, shall we? And feed them a good meal of Fereldan steel and wash it down with Orlesian blood!"

Their roar of approval, mingled with the excited barking of the mabari hounds, was almost deafening, and probably could be heard by the Chevaliers as they approached, but Loghain didn't care. He brought out his great kite shield and rested its lower edge upon a stone and leaned upon it as though for support, and during the tense time of waiting he deliberately worked up his cough and the wheeze in his chest as much as he could. After a particularly violent coughing fit, when he could hear a certain ripple of unease in the men who stood with him, he turned and gave them a droll and exaggerated wink and grin. Laughter erased worry as the men were reassured all was well, and they snickered amongst themselves to think what fools the Orlesians would be to ever believe that Loghain Mac Tir was sickly and weak.

Finally the Chevaliers, depressingly strong in numbers though thankfully as slow as he remembered them in tactics, came through the pass and were called to a halt some fifty yards from the Fereldan line. The general of the Orlesian forces urged his mount ahead a few paces and called to them.

"Fereldan commander -- by order of Empress Celene the First of the most holy empire of Orlais, stand down."

"Celene can go roll in the mud and finger herself," Loghain called back, not repressing the few ragged coughs it caused to speak across that distance, "and she's out of her bloody mind if she thinks Ferelden is just going to surrender on her command."

"Blasphemous Dog Lord!" the general spat back, incensed enough to make his horse prance nervously. "How dare you speak so of Her Grace the Empress? You will die for your foolish
bravado, but first I will know your name so as to ensure that it is never uttered again by a living soul!"

"I am Loghain Mac Tir, and this won't be the first time someone has tried to wipe my name from history's page. Better men than you have tried, and you'll fare no better than they." He noted with satisfaction the way the Chevaliers began to shuffle and prance much the way the spirited horse did, and the air of uncertainty that washed off of them in palpable waves. He let it build for a moment, then doubled over his shield and hacked so terribly and for so long it seemed entirely possible that he would cough up one of his lungs. He finally straightened up and wiped bloody slaver off his chin with a hand he allowed to shake visibly.

The Orlesian general narrowed his eyes. "You have grown old, Loghain Mac Tir, and you are no longer the warrior who by dumb luck alone defeated our knights at the River Dane. How terrible for such as you to come to the end of your days a useless husk of the man you were. Fortunately the Empire is merciful. Let us end your suffering. Attack!"

Loghain hoisted his shield and drew his sword in the same motion. "Archers!" he bellowed. Two hundred arrows flew through the air and landed with precision amongst the Orlesian lines, knocking out a great number of men. "Loose!" Loghain called again, and the air sang as arrows flew once more. "Forward!" he called, and the two lines of soldiers, one so strong and the other, seemingly, so very weak, surged towards each other. When only ten yards separated them Loghain gave the order for the berserkers to move up. The sudden appearance of fifty heavily-armed and armored dwarven ragers swinging enormous mauls slowed the Orlesian onslaught only a fraction, but it was a welcome fraction. The soldiers came together with the ring of steel on steel and the screams of injury from both sides. Chevaliers went flying right and left as the dwarven hammers cut wide swaths through their line, dogs dragged others to the ground and savaged their throats, and Loghain himself shrugged off any sign of illness and proceeded to bash, slash, and otherwise terrorize any Orlesian unlucky enough to come near. If any of his men still harbored fears that their general might not be faking the weakness with which he'd lured in the Chevaliers they were put to rest when he managed to send three knights in heavy plate flying back with a single blow of his mighty shield.

At last it seemed the Chevaliers were fully committed to their assault, and as many of them were packed into the valley Loghain had chosen as was possible. He gave the signal, the mightiest battle cry he'd ever uttered, loud and terrible enough to knock back the knights and soldiers surrounding him in all directions. It echoed off the mountains and came back to their ears amplified a hundredfold, and so terrified the Orlesian forces that it seemed for a moment that they might break ranks and run for home right then and there despite their superior numbers. They weren't given the opportunity. Like ocean waves crashing across a narrow breakwater from not one but both sides, the bulk of the Ferelden forces surged over the rim of the valley and were upon the unlucky Orlesians before they'd fully recovered from the terror that had seized them. Golems pelted them with boulders the size of ponies, mages cast down horrible spells of lightning and ice and fire, werewolves bounded into their midst and began laying waste to men and horses with shocking brutality, and knights on horseback preceded the remainder of Ferelden's baying hounds and screaming infantry and tore great gaping holes in the Orlesians' flagging defenses. It was not an
easy rout by any means, the Orlesians numbered too greatly and were too highly trained for that, but the Fereldans and their allies exhibited the tenacity and perniciousness they were known and frequently reviled for, and after several bloody hours it was clear that the Chevaliers were finally outnumbered by their foes -- and when they realized as much, with no commanders remaining to lead them, they at last broke ranks and ran. The army followed for a few miles, bringing down as many as they could, ensuring that they would not rally and make a second attempt. When they were certain their enemies were well and truly on the run and thoroughly humiliated, they returned to the valley and their encampment to begin the task of cleaning up after the slaughter, honoring the fallen, and healing the wounded. Alistair drew his horse up alongside Anora's and gave her a close inspection before he was satisfied she'd taken no serious injury. He himself had a deep gash on his leg, but it was not life-threatening. He smiled at her in wordless triumph and she found herself smiling back.

The Warden bounded up to greet them both, slathered from head to foot in blood and gore, sporting injuries that would surely add to her already impressive collection of scars, but grinning ferociously with bloodlust and battle rage still evident in her crystal blue eyes. "That… was one hellacious good fight," she said. "No gooey disgusting Darkspawn with hardly any brains or equipment at all, a foe with skill and fine steel and the clash of metal on metal and glorious battle! Remind me to give my compliments to your father, my Queen. Only he could have orchestrated such a masterpiece of death and violence."

"I do wish you would speak to him, Warden," Anora said, allowing worry to crease her brow, "for that would mean you'd found him. I haven't seen him since we charged."

"With blood and meat and boulders flying every which way, and frequent eruptions of fire and ice, that's hardly surprising," the Warden said, turning about to scan the ranks of soldiers. "I don't think I saw one thing outside the foe directly in my path since joining the fray."

"You would think Loghain would be visible now, though," Alistair muttered low. He appeared to have his own fears for the general's safety. "I suppose he could be out of sight behind a golem or a horseman, but…"

"I'm sure he's fine," the Warden said, but she now sounded anxious, too. "There were far more Chevaliers than we expected, but we still crushed them into a fine powder, didn't we? I hoped we'd be able to embarrass them so badly today that Celene and her bloody nobles would think twice about the wisdom of sending any more forces against Ferelden, but now I think we may have gone a step further than that. We may have actually put enough of a dent in her precious legions to make her unable to send them against us in the near future. That should be a splash of cold water on the fires of those who advocate invasion."

They reached the edge of the valley, their slow conversational pace -- set for the convenience of the Warden who was afoot and limping but who cheerfully refused the offer of a mount -- allowed
a number of cavalry and foot soldiers to pass them. They heard a cry from the men in their advance, and someone shouted for a healer. "The Teyrn! He's wounded!"

The only proper Teyrn on the field of battle that day was Fergus Cousland, who was safely mounted a few feet to the left of his sister the Warden. "Loghain," Alistair clarified, but Anora had already kicked her mount into a run. He and the Warden caught up as quickly as they could. They saw the queen slide from the saddle and drop to the ground beside the prone figure of a fallen colossus. She pulled his head into her lap and wiped the blood and sweat and hair from his eyes with the handkerchief she drew from the cuff of her armor. "Healer!" she bellowed with volume and command equal to anything her father was known for.

None of Loghain's many apparent wounds seemed especially serious, but the cumulative effect of them had to be draining. Still, it didn't seem quite to explain the ghastly pallor of his face, the way he seemed utterly drenched in sweat, or the clammy coolness of his skin.

"Blast you, Loghain," the Warden swore. She dropped to her knees and began pawing at his armor, searching pockets and pouches for something. "I knew you were going to do this. What did you take, you… you… you man?" She spat the word at him as though his gender were the worst epithet in her vocabulary.

"Eli, what are you talking about?" Alistair asked in bewilderment.

"The damned fool took something, I know he did, to make himself weak and sickly. What was it, Loghain? Deathroot? Belladonna? Some sort of animal venom? I know you've got some on you somewhere, just in case your illness needed a boost before the Orlesians swallowed the bait. Ah ha!" She pulled out a packet which she opened, revealing a fine off-pink powder speckled with glittering blue like bone ash and ground sapphires mixed with a few drops of blood. She looked at it quizzically for a moment, then before anyone could stop her she took a deep sniff of it.

"Be careful!" Alistair warned, horrified.

"Spindleweed and elfroot with an infusion of highly-processed lyrium dust," the Warden said, with her eyes gone wide.

"Spindleweed and elfroot? Is that the antidote to whatever it is he took?" Anora asked.

The Warden shook her head. "This is no antidote, Your Majesty. Maker's breath, it's not what he
took that made him sick, it's what he didn't take!" She could see they didn't understand, so she explained. "It's medicine, don't you see? This is the treatment for Bloody Lung!"

"Bloody Lung? I thought that was an Elven disease," Alistair said.

"Might as well be, since the lyrium in the treatment means only the Chantry can dispense it, and they do so at prices the usual victim can't afford. Bloody Lung breeds in foulness, and it's highly contagious when untreated, so it runs rampant in the worst alienages. We haven't had an outbreak here in Ferelden, thank the Maker, but it's known in the Free Marches, common in Antiva, probably rampant in Tevinter, and has lately reached epidemic proportions in Orlais. I assume that's where he contracted it, though I can't imagine what Warden business would find him among the quarantined. Open his mouth."

Alistair held Loghain's mouth open and the Warden poured half the contents of the package down his throat, with brandy from the flask she carried to wash it down. He swallowed reflexively and began to show signs of returning consciousness almost immediately. She gave him the other half of the dose and his eyes fluttered open weakly.

"He'll be all right now, won't he? This is the cure?" Anora asked anxiously. The Warden regarded her solemnly.

"He'll be better, my Queen, but there is no cure. The medicine stops the disease from spreading further, and slows its progression, but at best it only prolongs the victim's life. Missing a dose is strongly cautioned against by Chantry dispensaries, and I wouldn't put it past him to have skipped more than one. I doubt very much that he hasn't ruined what health he still enjoyed by this ploy."

"Damn you, Father!" the Queen burst out angrily. "There had to be another way!"

Loghain looked up at her with no sign of recognition in his eyes until his mouth moved and he spoke in a hoarse voice they had to lean forward to hear. "What makes the sky blue?" he asked.

Bewildered, frightened by what seemed like delirium, Anora blinked a few times and stammered out, "It is said that it is caused by the refraction of sunlight through water vapor that hangs unseen in the air."

Loghain smiled. "If I live long enough for Duncan or Anora to ask me, it's good to know I'll have a proper answer for them, even if I'm forced to confess I don't understand a word of it myself."
"You great ass," the Warden said. "Don't scare us like that. Andraste's tits, man, I didn't save you from the Archdemon just to have you die fighting some bloody Orlesians."

He coughed, and a fresh spot of blood appeared on his chin. "And here I thought it was I saved you from the Archdemon."

"Can you stand, Father?" Anora asked. He nodded and they helped him to his feet. He looked embarrassed by their concern. "There has to be something we can do. We have magic -- surely our healers can cure him."

The mousy little mage that had answered the queen's summons shook her head sadly. "If it is indeed the Bloody Lung, Your Majesty, magic presents no cure. I can restore a portion of his strength, however, and am honored to do so." She cast a whirl of light and magic that caused his wounds to knit and some color to return to his face. The mage curtseyed deeply and hung her head. "I regret I can do no more than this."

"Not your fault, girl," Loghain said curtly. "Give your talents to the wounded and worry not about me. In the old days King Maric told me once he thought I was simply too ornery ever to die, and perhaps he was more right about that than he knew. Seems to me I stand a better than average chance of beating this blasted disease."

"I know of a way to ensure it," the Warden said darkly. Alistair shot a sharp look at her. "We're not far. I suppose I've no right to ask it of you, but would you please help me to do it, Al? There must be a party to manage it, as you know, and if Loghain's strength should fail I'll need yours added to mine to bring him through the Gauntlet."

"I'll do it," Alistair said firmly, without a shred of hesitation. "Who will be our Fourth?"

"Fergus would come if I ask," the Warden said.

Anora broke in to this private exchange. "I don't know what the two of you are speaking of, but if a fourth sword arm will in some way save my father's life, then look no further than me."

"Do you remember, Loghain, when I took you through the ruined temple to the peak of Mount Daverus to face the High Dragon?" the Warden asked. "You asked me then what lay within the building we did not enter, and I wouldn't tell you. How would you like to see for yourself?"
"Does this have something to do with what saved Arl Eamon’s life?" Loghain asked suspiciously. "His crackpot wife said it some sort of bloody miracle."

The Warden nodded. "Indeed. The temple is truly the final resting place of Andraste. There is a Gauntlet that must be passed in order to reach Her, but the merest pinch of Her ashes will cure your sickness forever."

"What of this Gauntlet?"

"The Trials you must pass to prove your worthiness are not insurmountable. In truth they're rather easy, though I suspect the truly unworthy would find harder obstacles barring their path than we did. Just a few puzzles to test the mind, the will, and the cooperation of your party. Alistair and I have been through it so we should be able to guide you even if the specific Trials have changed."

"Seems an unconscionable waste of the King's time," Loghain said airily.

"That is for me to decide, I believe," Alistair said with a severity and command he could not have achieved ten years ago. "I shall put Teyrn Fergus in charge of things here and the victory march back to Denerim. You, I, the Queen, and the Warden are going to pay a visit to Holy Andraste. End of discussion."

He broke away to his task then, leaving Loghain standing slightly shocked, and Anora took the opportunity to draw the Warden aside for a private talk. She poked a finger in the warrior's chest and stuck her face up close to hers.

"Did you sleep with my father just to keep him from sneaking some sort of poison?" she asked.

The Warden was taken aback, but rallied. She looked the Queen squarely in the eye. "No, Your Majesty."

Anora studied her eyes for a moment before drawing back, satisfied. "Good."

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Even though it was her idea from the get-go, the Warden seemed unaccountably grumpy as they trudged cross-country to the hidden temple. Loghain thought he might know why -- during the time pre-Denerim he'd spent traveling with her throughout Ferelden and even the Deep Roads, "wrapping up unfinished business," as she put it, he'd noticed she had a penchant for looting -- anything and everything they found, in fact, which accounted for why she kept that Orlesian girl close at hand at all times. Leliana had an annoying voice, prattled endlessly, and required constant attention in battle or she'd be knocked out cold despite the fine armor the Warden had no doubt made a gift to her of, but she could pick a lock with ten times the dexterity of the assassin Zevran. All those dead Chevaliers back at the battlefield represented untold fortunes in shiny objects and equipment, and someone else was going to benefit from it all. He did see her stoop quickly and scoop up a cameo brooch from the breast of one foe as they were leaving, however.

He had a hard time believing that the ashes of Andraste were really at the far end of this little side-trip they were making, or that they would truly have the power to heal him if they were. He had an illness, yes, but in his considered opinion what he was dying of was nothing more nor less than a bad case of old, and there could be no cure for that. This was a waste of time. It was right that he die, he'd been prepared for it a long time now. He'd come back to Ferelden, despite thinking Alistair would call for his execution, because damn it all to the Void and back if he couldn't die useful then at least let him die at home. Stopping the Orlesians' plans to invade would make him feel that he was dying both useful and at home, which was the best hand fate could deal him.

There was another, under-the-surface reason why he didn't want to go along with this grand scheme of the Warden's, one that he did not like to have to speak of aloud. But the map he carried about with him in his head showed the village of Haven and the temple where he'd helped the Warden slay their holy High Dragon was quite a goodly walk from Sulcher's Pass, and he was bloody tired, and it wouldn't do to let them get too far out of their way before he managed to talk them out of it.

"You said this Gauntlet of Trials can only be passed by the worthy," he said to the Warden. "While I believe in the Maker and all that, I can't say I've been a good little Andrastian since… ever, really. What makes you think I can make it through?"

"You will," the Warden said simply. "It's not difficult. I don't even know if it's really real."

"How can you say that?" Alistair said reproachfully. "You passed through the Gauntlet, you saw the Urn, you touched the ashes… you certainly saw that they saved Arl Eamon's life. You know it's real."

"I know it works, Al, that's a very different thing. Oghren said there was lyrium in the mountain, even in the construction of the resting place, powerful lyrium of a type he'd never felt before."
Maybe *that* was what made the ashes a curative -- I don't suppose we'll ever know for sure. Seems a little more likely to me than the idea that the charred remains of a dead woman have retained some blessing of a Maker that doesn't seem to give a good flogging damn about His favored creation *or* the Bride he supposedly chose from amongst us. He let her bloody well burn, after all.

"*You* were deemed worthy and yet you'll stride along calmly blaspheming the Maker and His Bride," Loghain said wryly. "I suppose I don't have so much to worry about, then."

"Let us leave aside the subject of the provenance of this curative for the time being, shall we?" Anora said. "You are at least quite certain that it will *work*?"

"Pretty damned," the Warden said. "Brought Eamon back in a heartbeat from poisoning and the after-effects of being held captive by a demon, not that I haven't had some doubts in the years since that he actually *deserved* to live. Bloody Lung shouldn't be much of a problem compared to that, I would think."

Alistair glowered, but held his silence. The Warden saw it and clapped him on the back hard enough to make him stagger a few paces. "Come on, Al -- you claim the man *did his best* for you, but it always sounded to me as if you were barely tolerated and shuffled off to Chantry School as fast as humanly possible."

"He repaired my mother's amulet," Alistair began, but then he remembered Loghain saying that the Redcliffe serving girl might not have been his actual mother, which made him think that perhaps the bastard son she'd died giving birth to most likely *also* died just as the woman's daughter had been told, and that since the boy was evidently not *Maric's* child, he might well have been *Eamon's*. Further meaning that the amulet might never have been repaired with the intention of returning it to *him*.

The Warden was unapprised of Loghain's conjectures, but she sighed and clapped Alistair on the back again. "You are a sentimental fool, Al." Blushing and half-crushed beneath the weight of dawning reality, Alistair could not deny it.

Despite the mage's healing and the dose of treatment the Warden had forced down his throat, Loghain was experiencing certain difficulties keeping up with the younger folk over the rough terrain, alarming as even a day before he could have run all three of them into the ground in terms of endurance if not speed. Before they'd covered half the distance the ragged wheeze was once again evident in his breathing, and the occasional cough wracked up aspirated blood that stained Anora's white handkerchief with tiny pink spots. *I'll have to buy her another one,* he thought dimly, for even thought was difficult when so much of his energies were necessary just to keep one foot plodding in front of the other step after step.
The Warden saw he was flagging and shored him up on one side. "Not much further. Just hold it together another couple of miles. Easy for an old warhorse like you, right?"

"Right. Easy," he said raggedly, but pressed on, without the energy to spare to feel embarrassed by needing to lean on the woman's shoulder so. It was more than a couple of miles to the foot of the mountain temple, but Loghain was nothing if not relentless and made it, tired and out of breath but still with strength to spare. The Warden was anxious to press on but allowed them a moment to sit and rest upon the steps of the antechamber.

"By the Maker," Anora said reverently, "this place is magnificent."

Loghain grimaced. "By my memory, even though the Warden had already cleared the main rooms pretty well, it is less magnificent than it is run-down and sadly defiled by generations of dragon-worshipping fools. And there's dragon shit everywhere, as I recall."

"Not in the Gauntlet, though," the Warden was quick to assure the Queen. "The Guardian wouldn't let the cultists near -- they were unworthy, of course -- and it's clean in there, if not entirely untouched by the decay of time."

"The… Guardian?" Anora said doubtfully.

"The spirit that guards the ashes," Alistair explained. "He looks a formidable warrior for all he's not entirely solid and all, and I for one was glad that fighting him wasn't part of the Gauntlet. He just asks you a very personal question for which you already know the answer, and he doesn't even seem to care whether or not you answer him. I suppose he can see the answer in your eyes, or something."

"We're here for Loghain, and he'll be the one who must take the lead in the Gauntlet itself," the Warden said, "but when we came before he asked all of us questions. Prepare yourself, Your Majesty, because the questions he asks are the type that open some emotional wounds. Like Al said, though, you really don't have to answer."

The Queen looked momentarily pensive as she considered what emotional wounds this spirit would choose to rankle, but her expression settled back into its usual polite neutrality and she tossed her head. "Let him ask. I daresay I won't be taken unawares by anything he might say."
"Are you rested enough, Loghain?" the Warden asked. "Without another dose of medicine to hand I don't want to dally. With the High Dragon dead I think it likely we'll meet no resistance in the form of cultists, and hopefully no more dragons showed up to hatch out what eggs we left to spoil on their own."

"There will be a fight, though," Alistair said. "Shadows of ourselves, if the Gauntlet does not vary. You can expect it to be… grueling."

The Warden shuddered, and it did not look theatrical. "Shadow Loghain. A sobering thought. I would suggest we target that particular shade first and deal with the rest after it falls."

"The Shadow Loghain might be as ill as the real one," Alistair pointed out. "It might not be as formidable as we expect."

"Let's hope. Being knocked off my feet by a roar from the real thing is humiliating enough -- to be bowled over by something I can't even properly see would be far worse."

"There's a ponderation for the ages for you -- could Loghain repel himself with a war cry?" Alistair said, smiling.

"The Sten might have been able to give us an answer to that," the Warden said, shaking her head. "I remember he spent hours one day while we were walking the Imperial Highway trying to explain to me the sound of one hand clapping."

"I thought you said you did not wish to dally," Loghain pointed out irritably.

"So I did, and so I don't. Let's press on."

They climbed up through the temple's many levels, into and through the Wyrmling's Lair, and they encountered no resistance and indeed few if any signs that anything had entered the temple in the years since they'd killed the dragon, since they hadn't allowed Genetivi or anyone else to inform anyone about the discovery. Eventually they came once more to the bright sunshine on top of the mountain peak. They paused briefly at the bleached remains of the High Dragon as they passed.

"Maker's breath," Anora breathed. "I realize that the Archdemon was the greater foe, but this… this is impressive. Who was with you when you killed it?"
"Me, Oghren, Wynne, and your father," the Warden answered. "Loghain actually killed it -- he seems to have a knack for dragonslaying. Perhaps because by the time the bleeding things were ready to fall he was the only one of us that still had enough stamina to strike the damned thing down. I actually thought he killed the Archdemon but evidently it was only knocked out for a moment -- and then I felt a little bit like a pretender, making that final blow after he'd crippled the beast for me."

"We all worked together to cripple the beast," Loghain said. "With the Archdemon as with the other dragons we faced. The kill falls to all who battled, not the one who happened to land the final blow."

"Even Wynne?" the Warden teased, knowing that there'd been no love lost between Loghain and the healer, although by the end of their association the mage had relented somewhat in her low opinion of the former Teyrn, which had from the start mostly been a reaction to how much she had adored Cailan, who probably could not have picked her out of a crowd of three, and Alistair, in whose company she spent the remainder of her life. Her state funeral had been a scandal that reached Loghain's ears even in Orlais, where he kept himself busily occupied in not hearing news from home for fear it should send him on a murderous rampage through the streets of Montsimmard.

"When she cast spells of ice and stone to slow the beast, and spells of healing to keep the rest of us alive? Yes, even Wynne."

"Her will always petered out before Loghain's," the Warden confided to Anora. "Morrigan's, too, for that matter. Remember when we were clearing out the Brecilian forest and we found that trap the ancient shade had set for travelers?" she asked Loghain.

"The fake campsite. Yes, I remember."

"Two mages in our party, and all of us were trapped in the thrall of the spirit's spell. All except Loghain, that is. Wynne managed to wake up before the rest of us did, thanks to her guardian spirit, but she was badly sapped and hardly any help to him in slaying the beast. I remember how upset she was that she'd succumbed when you didn't. Didn't she actually end up accusing you of being an apostate?"

"She did, yes."
The Warden laughed at the memory. "Well, enough reminiscence. The Gauntlet awaits."
"Welcome, pilgrims, to the shrine of the Most Holy Andraste."

Loghain sized up the creature -- he could not think of it as a man -- that stood before them. It looked like a man, except for being somewhere in the neighborhood of eight feet tall and, as Alistair had said, not entirely...solid, but despite the vague sense of translucence of the image the overall impression he received was of immense formidability. That warhammer on its back looked like it could do real damage. The other impression he got from the creature, an equally immense calm spanning a thousand patient years, suggested he didn't have to worry about it unless he did something sacrilegious. He prepared himself for a fight regardless -- impressions were, after all, only impressions.

The Warden bowed her head to the spirit. "Guardian. We have come to honor Andraste, and seek her aid to heal our comrade Loghain, who suffers a terrible illness for which there is no cure."

The spirit nodded back. "I remember you, and your companion as well. Two unrecognized pilgrims do I see, and all of you have traveled a long and arduous road. You have faced many trials to get here, and more await before you may come to the resting place of the Revered. Before you enter the Gauntlet, allow me a moment to ask of you each a question."

The Warden was now looking to him to take the lead, as were the others, and the Guardian clearly expected answer of some kind, so Loghain stepped forward and gave his own nod. "Ask."

"Loghain, son of Gareth, father of Anora, protector of one King and betrayer of another. You despise the Chantry, revile the Divine, submit yourself to the will of few and are apologetic to none, and resign yourself to suffer the fate of the unworthy, doomed to wander the depthless dark of the Void denied the Maker's favor and the love and forgiveness of those gone before you. For which of your crimes do you believe yourself damned?"

Loghain drew himself up tall and squared his shoulders. "For all of them, Spirit."

The Guardian shook his head sadly. "That is not the answer in your heart."

"I thought you said he didn't require an answer," Loghain muttered to Elilia.
"Evidently he wants you to come to some realization that you haven't had yet."

He looked back at the spirit, defiant for a moment, and then sighed. "You want to know for which, Spirit? The truth is that I don't know which sin tolled the death knell for my soul. Was it for failing to protect my mother as the Chevaliers held her down and raped her before my very eyes and then slit her throat? Was it for running away and leaving my father to die without even a fare-thee-well to let him know that I loved him and would spend the rest of my days begrudging his willing sacrifice? For loving the woman to whom my best friend was betrothed, whether or not she was the woman he wanted? For leaving Cailan, a son to me, to die for a promise I made long ago to a King who was already dead and a conspiracy that may well have existed only in my own mind, even if I am still not assured of it? Or perhaps for selling innocent Fereldan citizens into slavery -- some of the elder of which were good men I once served with, men who helped me free our country from its own slavery? I don't know which of my crimes is more heinous than the others, Spirit, but I know that I am damned, and so I say again: for all of them. I carry my mistakes with me."

The spirit nodded. "That is the answer in your heart."

Alistair put a tentative hand on Loghain's shoulder. "You can't hold the blame for everything -- " he began, but Loghain brushed him aside impatiently.

"Don't spout worthless platitudes at me, pup. Whether I can or I can't makes no nevermind, as the fact of the matter is I do."

The Spirit turned its attention to Anora. "Anora, daughter of Loghain, wife of Alistair, Queen of Ferelden."

"Ask your question, Spirit. I am not afraid to face my own demons."

"You failed to produce an heir for your husband Cailan, and many in the Kingdom claimed that you must be barren, even attributing this infertility to a curse of the Maker because of your parents' common origins. Cailan was unfaithful to you, having dalliances with many other women, and you were fully aware of the machinations of certain nobles to have you replaced as Queen. You even feared that this infidelity and conspiracy may have been what caused your father to leave Cailan to die at the hands of the Darkspawn, though the truth is that he did not know of it."

"He bloody well does now," Loghain growled. The spirit ignored him.
"Do you fear that you drove Cailan to move against you?"

Anora hung her head for a moment, then raised her face to meet the Guardian's gaze and laughed bitterly. "Of course I do. I am what I am, by nature or by training, and I am not…warm, by any means. I have often wondered if I had been more patient, more…loving…perhaps Cailan would not have sought his pleasures elsewhere, and perhaps he would not have striven in so foolhardy a manner to assert his own unique space in the history books if I had been able to set my own pride and ambition aside a bit in order to make him feel his were of value to me. If I am expected to feel bad about not giving him an heir, however, I can only point out that I have given Alistair two and none of Cailan's other women begot him any bastards, so I have set my guilt about that aside."

Alistair did not attempt to placate his wife as he had her father -- her response would have been identical -- but he did put an arm around her shoulders. "Cailan wanted out from under his father's shadow, and mine as the extension of it, not yours," Loghain said.

"Elilia, daughter of Eleanor -- once before you passed through the cleansing flame, but the path you have trod since then has been no easier than the path that led you here before. For the whole of a decade you have faithfully executed your duty as a Grey Warden, yet lately there grows in you a sense of dissatisfaction. The First Warden is a posturing, hypocritical fool, you think, and you feel a certain disgust at the rules you chafe against and cannot fully understand. The demands for secrecy and isolation gnaw at you, you feel that much could have transpired differently for Ferelden had the Wardens only been straightforward about their purpose from the beginning, and questions about why some things were allowed to happen -- and why no aid was ever sent aside from one elderly Orlesian Warden -- have begun to eat away at your insides. You long to cast aside your calling and live the remainder of your days as your own master. Can you justify the abandonment of your duty, or is it true that your primary reason for wanting to leave the Wardens is that you have grown bored of it?"

The Warden seemed momentarily shocked, then embarrassed. "I am bored, and bothered, and frustrated and angry and dissatisfied, in equal measures. I would like nothing more than to cast aside the mantle of Warden-Commander and make a break for freedom, whatever that means. But I can't run from myself, can I? And I cannot abandon my honor." She looked deeply depressed at the thought.

"Alistair, son of Maric, husband of Anora, King of Ferelden," the Guardian said, at last turning to the final member of their party. "You, too, have passed through Andraste's holy fire, but another fire has since scorched your soul. This man betrayed your comrades to their deaths. You called for his execution, but your desires were not fulfilled. Moreover, the man was made to stand among those very Wardens he betrayed, and you abandoned them because of it. Now you stand at his side, and you have even entrusted much of the fate of your beloved Ferelden to his care. So tell me, who was the greater traitor? The man who quit the field to save a portion of the army he commanded rather than risk all to save a foolhardy King and Wardens who did not trust him with most vital information, or the man who abandoned his friends to face a dreaded foe without him because of a fit of childish and murderous pique when his desire for vengeance upon a submissive foe was
unfulfilled?"

Red to his ears, Alistair stammered over his answer for a moment before his head dropped and he said, "My betrayal was the greater, Spirit. It took me many years to realize it, but now I understand how wrong I was to call for base revenge, and I am grateful to Elilia for denying it to me."

"Ha! Not as grateful as I am," Loghain said. Then he put a hand on Alistair's shoulder and said, as kindly as he could manage, "Don't fret, lad -- I would have killed me, too."

"The way is open to you, pilgrims," the Guardian said, and vanished.

"I don't think any of us is doomed to damnation," Elilia said when he was gone, with a severe glare for Loghain. "Nor do I think that Anora is in any way to blame for Cailan's stupidity -- he struck me as pretty much born that way -- and as for you, Alistair, you betrayed no one. You were to be King, and you could not be both King and Warden. That's for prickish hypocrites like the First Warden in the Anderfels."

"Nice try, Eli," Alistair said quietly, "but I know better than that."

"No one is going to talk any of us out of the way we feel about ourselves," Anora said. "It's just part of what makes us who we are."

"The riddling spirits are up ahead," Alistair said. "At least if the Gauntlet is the same."

"Answer their stupid questions correctly, Loghain, and their spirits will unlock the door to the next area. The riddles were of the self-evident sort last time," the Warden said, with a long-suffering sigh.

Indeed they were, and Loghain, who'd never had much patience for riddling, was hard-pressed to give a straight answer rather than deliberately replying with absurdities. If it could justly be said that he had an underdeveloped sense of humor, he was fairly certain these creatures had not even the concept of such. Finally he was through the double-line of shades and the door stood open. Elilia touched him gently on the shoulder. "Just be prepared: the next part is harder than anything else in the Gauntlet, even though it doesn't really test you on anything."

A figure stood in the open doorway, another shade of some sort, and he approached cautiously. It
was a woman, small and slender, with fair hair gathered into a soft bun at the nape of her neck. He recognized the outline…

She turned to face him, and he looked down in shock and sadness into the face of his mother.

She smiled, though her eyes were sorrowful. "My son, for too long you have carried this grief and guilt my death has caused you. You were only a child, and there was no way for you to protect me from my fate. Indeed, it was my duty to protect you, as your father and I tried so hard to do. Even as I lay dying my only fear was for you, my son, my only regret that you had to suffer the pain of witnessing my demise. Release these feelings you have harbored for too many years, and free yourself at last from the pain they have caused."

Though she herself was ethereal, she pressed something very solid and real into the palm of his hand -- an amulet, shaped like a tiny mirror. "Take this, and let it be a reminder to you that you can no more be the remedy for all the world's ills than you can be the cause."

She vanished then, without another word. Loghain stood for a moment, turning the pendant over and over in his big hand, and then a strangled moan escaped his throat and he staggered and would perhaps have fallen had his companions not rushed to support him.

"I told you so," the Warden said, sadly.

"Let's move on," Loghain said hoarsely. The next area pitted them against their doubles, and while it was a hard-fought battle it was hardly impossible as the shades had skill but seemingly no tactics. They tore down the battlefield-controlling Shadow Loghain, then focused on the heavy-damaging Shadow Warden, and Shadow Anora with the bow she'd used in battle rather than the wicked blades she wielded now was easy pickings after knocking out the defenses of Shadow Alistair. Building the ghost bridge was a piece of cake since two of the party already knew the trick of it and the mechanism involved was self-evident to Loghain and Anora as well. He crossed over the solidified structure and the others followed after. They entered the chamber where Andraste awaited and approached the altar that stood before the line of protective flames.

Loghain read the inscription, did a double-take, and read again. He turned to glare accusingly at the Warden. "Am I interpreting this damned thing correctly?"

She snickered wickedly. "More than likely, given that thunderous disapproval I see in your eyes."
"I will not strip naked and walk through fire."

She shrugged. "Then you will not come to the ashes, and you will die with blood in your throat, a miserable, defiant old bugger to the last gasp, and I will take great delight in the fact that the last words you hear upon this earth will be mine as I tell you what a thrice-damned fool you are."

"Come on, Loghain -- it's not that bad. We had to do it before, and what's worse, we had Oghren with us," Alistair said, pulling a face. "And Wynne!"

Loghain gestured wildly at Anora. "And I've got my daughter."

"Look, you just touch the altar and the clothes disappear. Walk through the flames, the Guardian says 'Congratulations, blah-de-blah,' and hey, presto! The clothes are back on. No muss, no bother, and no particular need to look at anyone else in their radiant glory," Elilia said. "It's probably just an illusion in the first place, nakedness and fire, to see whether you really have enough blind, stupid faith to do it. Religions are always insistent upon utter stupidity in their followers."

"Eli," Alistair said despairingly.

Loghain regarded the altar for a moment in evident disgust, then shook his head, reached out, and touched it. The Warden might have been right in claiming the nakedness he experienced upon that simple action was merely illusion, but the cold draft in his nether regions felt real enough. Deliberately not looking anywhere but straight ahead, he forged through the flames.

The Guardian appeared. "You have passed through the Gauntlet. You have trod the footsteps of Our Lady Andraste and walked through the flames, and like her you have been cleansed."

When the spirit vanished their clothing reappeared. Glad to have it over and done with, Loghain stalked up the tall stairs to the small urn set before the grand statue of the lady Herself, his companions close behind. "All right, Warden, we're here. What happens now?"

She removed the lid of the urn. "Now I take a pinch of the ashes, and -- " she flicked them directly into his face. He recoiled, almost losing his balance on the top step, and glowered at her fiercely.

"I don't think that was entirely necessary, do you?" he snarled.
"How do you feel?" she asked anxiously.

"Livid."

"That's not what I meant, bone-brain," she said. "Do you still feel sick?"

"Don't we have to pray over him, or something?" Alistair asked nervously. "The mage who used them on Arl Eamon did."

"Yes, but I never heard or read once that it was necessary," Elilia said. "Cough, Loghain."

"What?"

"Cough, damn you -= so we can see if you've still got the Bloody Lung."

He made the effort, but found he could not. He took a deep breath and discovered he could fill his mighty lungs clear to the top without pain or hindrance. He let it out gustily. "I think it's gone," he said, surprised.

Elilia's smile was enormous. "I knew it would work!" She hugged him, then pulled back so that he was at arms' length and looked at him. "I can't sense you. Loghain -- you are un-Tainted."

"What?" he said.

"Feel yourself. You'll see what I'm saying is true."

He pulled away altogether and pondered. "I... it seems impossible, but... you may be right. I feel very different."

"This is wonderful! Andraste cures the Blight! It's not what I was out looking for, but it's actually better still, for all who aren't wardens!" As if in celebration Elilia plunged her gauntleted hand
back into the urn and "accidentally" flicked another pinch of ashes in Alistair's face. Anora groaned to see the Prophetess flung about in so casual a fashion.

Alistair sputtered indignantly. "What was that for?" he demanded. "I'm not sick!"

"Yes you are," Elilia said. "You have the Blight. And that is not a good thing for a King to have, is it?"

"Eli, if Andraeste's ashes could cure you of being a Warden you would not be one now," Alistair said. "You've had your hand in that urn three times now."

"I've never actually touched the ashes, Alistair -- I've always had friggin' armor-plated gloves on when I handled them. Thought it might break the enchantment if I made direct contact."

She put her hands on his shoulders and held him at arm's length, studying him intently but actually sensing him rather than seeing him. Finally she grinned and clapped him on the arm heartily. "Not a tickle! The old girl came through for me again!" Her prancing, in heavy armor, caused the pedestal to wobble alarmingly, and Anora shrieked slightly as the urn came close to toppling.

Loghain looked at the urn contemplatively. "So Andraste's ashes cure the Blight, eh?" he said thoughtfully. "That's something to ponder, isn't it?"

He turned back to the others. "Warden?" he inquired. She turned to him. "Yes, my friend?" He plunged his fist into the urn with nearly blinding speed and flicked a pinch that was more like a scoop of ashes in the woman's face. She screamed bloody murder as the cremains of the Maker's Chosen stung her eyes.

"Why did you bloody do that?" she shouted, incensed.

"Oops," Loghain said calmly and unrepentantly.

She raved, she swiped at her face, she sputtered and blustered incoherently. "I'm not -- I'm not -- I'm not a Warden anymore!" she wailed.

Loghain shrugged. "That's what you wanted."
"It is -- it is not!"

"It is according to what you said to the Guardian," he pointed out. "The only thing holding you, you said, was duty and honor and the bloody taint. Now you don't have to worry about it anymore, you can no longer perform your duty and your honor remains intact."

"This isn't what I wanted!" she repeated, shrieking.

"Too late now. And too late to worry about it, as well. If the First Warden complains, just tell him it's all the fault of that dreadful Loghain."

She reared back, hands doubled into fists, and flew at him. She knocked him back into the pedestal which toppled, upsetting the sacred urn. With a strangled cry, Anora flew for the falling container and managed to catch it midair and right the topless vessel before the precious contents could spill. Alistair grabbed the lid and slammed it down onto the container and together King and Queen held onto it, panting with the fright of the near disaster.

The ex-Warden's first assault seemed to have drained the fight out of her, and she flagged against Loghain's chest, sobbing like a child. "Dear Maker, Loghain, I hate you for this…but thank you."

Loghain, who understood both her anger and her fervent gratitude better than anyone else present except, perhaps, Elilia herself, held her close and stroked the long tail of her hair. "You're welcome."

"Yes. Well. We're all very happy that everything has worked out so well for all parties involved, but perhaps we could adjourn to elsewhere before we destroy a treasure of the ages?" Anora said, still sitting awkwardly on the steps with the urn in her lap.

"I agree. We have more than what we came for. Now let us leave, please," Alistair seconded.

"Fine, but let us set the Holy Lady to rights, first," Loghain said, uprighting the fallen pedestal and taking the urn from its protectors. "Like dusting off her skirts after knocking her down in the street."
Alistair arose and helped Anora to her feet. "All right, let's go," he said. To their mutual horror, however, Loghain removed the lid of the urn again, produced an empty coin purse from his belt, and scooped a large handful of the ashes into it. *And went back for more.*

"What are you doing?" Anora asked, mortified.

"Andraste cures the Blight," Loghain said simply. "She was a Fereldan girl, they say, so I can't imagine she'd begrudge her homeland the salvation she offers."

"You can't…Loghain, this is utterly *blasphemous,*" Alistair said, too bewildered to object more strenuously.

"The people who were corrupted during the Blight have all perished long ago, or gone to the Deep Roads as ghouls," Elilia said, looking more interested than objecting. "What is it you plan?"

"Let's leave this place before the Boss has a chance to object," Loghain said, looking around for the Guardian, "and I'll tell you."

They did not immediately speak of the pilfered ashes Loghain carried tied to his belt loops as they headed down the mountain, possibly because none of them thought it entirely prudent to do so while wending their way back down, for all they knew watched every step of the way by Andraste's immortal guardian spirit, or perhaps because all of them were feeling rather husked out by the experience and thinking somber thoughts. For her part the now *ex-Warden* vacillated between burning rage and manic joy, and the others allowed her to draw ahead of them for safety's sake.

Alistair and Anora dropped behind Loghain as well, letting him travel on ahead until they felt they had a safe distance between them for private words, though Anora cautioned her husband that her father's ears were keen. They walked together in silence for a little while, and then Anora said, with a mixture of wonder and bitterness in her voice, "I never knew a thing about my grandparents before today. *Father's* parents, I mean, of course - I grew up with my maternal grandfather, though my grandmother died when mother was a child. I knew my grandfather's name, and had been told by *King Maric* that he had been a Knight who died in his service, but father never spoke of them at all. Now I suppose I know why. Evidently Maric left out some pertinent details regarding my grandfather's death, if father feels he 'ran off and left him to die,' and still begrudges his 'sacrifice,' and I can't even begin to *imagine* the horror of witnessing my mother raped and murdered before my eyes -- nor do I want to. It's all very disturbing to take in at once, to say the least. And to top it all off, I'm not sure quite how to feel about the fact that the image of grandmother the spirit presented looked so very much like mother."
"Don't read too much into it," Alistair said. "The image is a reflection of what the spirit sees in your soul, not the departed themselves. Frankly I thought she looked a lot like Wynne, and I'm sure the Ward -- that Elilia saw someone who looked like Eleanor Cousland. When we were here before the shade was reflecting Eli's father, but to me he looked like Duncan, even though I'd seen portraits of the Teyrn and knew they were nothing alike."

Anora seemed relieved. "That is comforting to hear. I find something a bit disturbing in the idea that father would marry a woman who closely resembled his mother...all the more so because of what happened to her."

"What did you make of what he said in his answer to the Guardian about 'loving the woman betrothed to his best friend?'" Alistair said. Then he blanched as he realized that was rather a tactless question to pose to the man's daughter, of all people.

Anora sighed. "Queen Rowan. Do not look so, Alistair -- there was nothing to it after she married the King and father married mother. He told mother when he met her that he'd been in love with Rowan, and she told me about it after the queen's death, when father went to Denerim to help King Maric. I don't think he ever really stopped loving her, either, but he loved my mother more, which is all I care about. I'm sure it made him feel terribly guilty, though, since his idea of fidelity is not unlike a mabari's and he doesn't understand that humans are not driven to bond solely to one master for life. He expended a great deal of energy making continual restitution to mother for what he considered his unfaithfulness, though I've never heard so much as a peep from even the most vicious of quarters that father was ever a bounder or kept a mistress." She laughed, suddenly, surprising Alistair. "Someday I shall tell you about the rosebush he brought back from Denerim for my mother's garden. If that wasn't self-imposed penance, I don't know what is."

Quizzical, wondering exactly how roses and penance worked together in such a way to make such a dry and occasionally acerbic lady as the Queen laugh aloud, Alistair made a mental note to remind her of her promise to tell that story as soon as they had leisure for it.

Anora was watching her father now with a thoughtful expression. "He hasn't been the same man since mother died. I know you find it hard to believe that he was ever anything approaching domesticated, but he certainly does better under the civilizing influence of a wife." Then her gaze rose to Elilia, far ahead in the distance, and her lips drew into a slight pout. "Of course, it could also be good for him to have a companion whose life experiences and outlooks are not so much different from his own."

Alistair caught her gaze before her meaning, and when at last he divined it he burst into a hearty laugh. "So you don't think Eli would be a civilizing influence, but you think they could have a lot in common, eh? Please tell me you're not contemplating becoming a matchmaker for your own father."
She sighed. "I fear that is entirely unnecessary. I'd prefer he chose a more…gentle…woman but at least I cannot find fault with her lineage. Lady Elilia is wild but she has a stout heart and usually honorable intentions. Not to mention she's excellent at producing valuable allies, which must mean she has more charm than she likes to let on."

"Maker's breath, Eli is a Lady again, isn't she?" Alistair said, surprised. "Or is she? I mean, does her title automatically return to her just because she's no longer a Warden?"

"I think we would have to satisfy convention by hosting a ceremony to reinstate her to noble rank, and I'm sure Teyrn Fergus would like to see his sister officially honored so, but as far as I'm concerned she is as she was born. We never took her title away from her, after all -- the Wardens did that."

"And you think that Loghain is…that they would..." Alistair blushed and wiped his sweaty brow with his bandana. "You believe that rumor, don't you, about…what went on…last night?"

"Lady Elilia essentially confirmed it for me."

The look on Alistair's face said that he was considering something he did not like to be forced to consider. "…Ew."

"What are you 'ew'ing about?" Anora demanded indignantly.

"Well, it's just that…oh bugger, I'm just going to say it -- she's a lot younger than he is, and beyond all that she was like a sister to me during our travels together, and he's my father-in-law, so that's just...ew."

"Well I'll leave you here to ponder that," Anora said primly. "I need to have a private word with my father."

Too dignified to trot, Anora walked away at a rapid pace and with a certain tilt to her head that said she was likely to be miffed with her husband for some time. He, however, was too distracted by the sight of her still-shapely backside swaying away with the golden mail clinging as seductively as such armor could ever, and scarcely noticed her displeasure.
Anora caught up to Loghain, though she did not catch him unawares. "Hello, dear," he said absently as she approached. "Not too upset by what that fool spirit said, are you?"

"About…?" Anora ventured, uncertain which part he was referring to.

"About you and Cailan. And that bloody conspiracy he mentioned you seemed to know all about. I want names, by the way, and I'll have a reckoning, by the Maker."

"Let it lie, father. It is water that passed under a bridge long burned. No, I'm not upset about any of that. I made my peace with those particular demons long ago, and if the memories still have the power to put a little sting in my heart they're still no more than memories. I've even learned to forgive Cailan. And the nobles involved. And here I am, still Queen, so I feel I've made good my revenge."

He chuckled a little at that and subsided, though Anora knew him well enough to believe that he would not content himself with docility and would likely attempt to ferret out the names some other time. He needed to be distracted, and distraction was a fine side-effect of courting.

She gestured at the Warden, who was at that moment lashing out with violence at a half-crumbled pillar that shook and crumbled still more beneath the force of her assault. "Go to her," she said.

"If I were wearing plate I might consider it, but in nothing but leathers I feel that would be suicidal at present," he said.

"She needs you," Anora insisted. "You took away the taint, and that is a good thing because she wanted to be free of it. But you also took away her purpose. You need to make her see that there is still good and noble work for a woman of her skill and courage, and that she need not feel bereft. The Wardens may have no further use for her, but you must make her see that Ferelden still needs her."

He sighed. "I just hope she thinks that's enough."

She watched him trot to catch up to the lady. She had very deliberately not told him to 'go forth and conquer yon damsel,' for such a command, even couched in terms of a request, was very apt to strike upon his perverse side, resulting in him assiduously ignoring Elilia until the end of days. Either relations between them would progress naturally…or they would not. Uncharacteristically optimistic about it all, Anora thought they probably would. Elilia Cousland had never struck her as
the sort to seduce and abandon, and her father had not in all his years shown himself inclined to same, so *something* must exist between them, whether it be a burgeoning love or merely a strong attraction that could develop into something stronger with time and attention. She would content herself to wait and see.

Alistair caught up with her in time to watch with her as Lady Elilia raised a fist to Loghain, seemed to tremble upon the precipice of some intense urge, and then socked him on the arm. "For Eli, that's a friendly gesture," Alistair said, but he winced as Loghain rubbed the spot she'd struck. "Maybe a little harder than she usually hits, though. What did you say to him?"

"I told him that she needs him to help her come to terms with her new life. I'm hoping he can make her see how important she is to Ferelden, Warden or not. Not only is she one of our greatest Champions, but on the more practical day-to-day side of things she's a Cousland. If her brother continues to refuse to remarry, it may be up to her to supply a proper heir for the Teyrnir."

"With your father as the begetter," Alistair said, a little sourly.

"That's for the two of them to decide."

He sighed. "I suppose it is at that. Still hard for me to wrap my head around, though. I mean, the man hired the Antivan Crows to *kill* her."

"I suspect she's forgiven him for that. Mainly, perhaps, because its something she very well may have done herself if she felt the need."

"Elilia, hire assassins? Never. She'd much rather kill her enemies herself, face to face."

"So would my father. Sometimes you're just too busy to get around to it, however. Lady Cousland and my father are...a *lot* alike. In many ways."

Alistair looked at the two warriors now walking peacefully side-by-side, hands not *quite* touching, and could not believe it. "Loghain is serious and always stern. Elilia is merry and jocular -- *even* when she's in a blood-induced battle frenzy. I don't see it."

Anora's mouth curved in a slight smile. "Those are the masks they wear, painted a certain way just like an Orlesian's. Or if the analogy is too odious, like the way Elilia uses cosmetics to make
herself more fierce rather than more attractive. Underneath the war paint, the machinery clicks along in very similar fashion."

Alistair pondered for a time, unconvinced, and eventually they reached the foothills and Loghain brought them to a halt at a nice clearing in a wooded area.

"We should camp here tonight," he said. "It's quite late and we don't want to be on the roads after dark. We can catch up with the army early enough tomorrow."

"We don't have provisions," Alistair said, and gave his wife a sidelong glance, "or tents and bedrolls."

She seemed amused. "Do you think I've never slept rough before, husband? I assure you I am quite capable of making do with packed earth and a campfire." She unslung her bow. "I can even provide us with the evening meal, I dare say."

"I'll find wood for the fire," Loghain said, and moved off into the forest in search of limbs and tinder.

"Well. I feel…superfluous," Alistair said whimsically as he and Elilia were abandoned to their own devices and the Mac Tir contingent set about making preparations for the camp. "Granted, that's a common feeling, for me."

Elilia began scratching together stones for the firepit. After a long period of silence, she finally spoke.

"When I was sixteen, my parents took me to Denerim for a grand salon Arl Eamon threw at his estate to celebrate Satinalia. Father said I was old enough to have my own adventures in town so he gave me some silver and let me have free run for the day as long as I promised to be back in time to get ready for the party. I was late, of course, and got back just in time to slide into my seat between mother and father at the banquet table for the feast -- sporting my brand-new face tattoo. I thought mother would die of shock and shame. I think that was when the noble lords and ladies of Ferelden first started calling me 'The Cousland Barbarian' and even father wasn't particularly happy with me about it. Said it made me look like a vulgar sellsword. Seems appropriate now, since that's all I've left to do."

"Elilia, you do not need to turn mercenary," Alistair protested. "Anora and I discussed it, and she's
of a mind that you should be restored to your birthright as Ferelden nobility. I fully agree with her on that. We need you, there's nobody I trust so much as I trust you, and with all that's going wrong with the world these days Ferelden needs her defenders."

She sighed. "I don't feel I deserve any such thing. Loghain may have intended for me to be guilt-free about this, but I'm not. I wished this upon myself, and I feel bereft of honor."

"You'll get over it," Loghain said gruffly, coming back into the clearing with an armload of twigs and brush. He began laying out a careful chimney of branches over dry tinder in Elilia's firepit and lit the stack with a spark from the flint he carried always. "And personally I like your ink, though I can imagine the fuss your folks made."

The blaze was going to his satisfaction so he stood up and crossed to where she sat and pushed her hanging head up to meet his eyes with a finger beneath her jaw line. "Chin up and plod on."

A fire seemed to spark in her eyes, a moment of anger perhaps, but then a different look settled onto her restless features and she nodded firmly.

"Are you going to tell us your plans for Lady Andraste?" Alistair asked, to change the subject.

"While dinner is cooking, if we're fortunate enough to have any."

"You shan't, if you don't come help me with it," Anora called out from some distance. She sounded slightly out of breath. Loghain headed in that direction and returned with his daughter by his side and a good-sized buck slung over his shoulder. "Hoped for a brace of rabbits at the least," Anora said, sounding rather self-satisfied. "I expect this is much better after a hard day's work on short commons."

"Maker's breath, but we have had a day, haven't we?" Alistair said, awed. "The battle feels like it happened a lifetime ago, but its been less than a dozen hours."

Loghain took his belt knife and dressed out the deer with speed and efficiency born of long practice. "This blade isn't as good as the one I gave Duncan," he said, grinning, "but it's serviceable enough, I suppose." He built a stand out of branches and spitted one of the back haunches and set it to roast.
"So what are your plans?" Alistair said, drawing the subject back to Andraste's ashes.

Instead of answering directly, Loghain reached into the map pocket on his belt and took out a well-worn parchment. He spread it on the ground so that they could all gather around it to see. It was a map of Ferelden but the borders were not quite correct, pushing far into the holdings of Orlais and even encompassing part of the Free Marches. It was either the work of a power-hungry tyrant with a lunatic streak, or the whimsical doodle of a fanciful imagination. His dark glare dared them to say something about it. No one did.

"Here's where the Darkspawn first attacked," he said, pointing to Ostagar with a stick of charcoal he also took from his map pocket. "Of course they eventually spread across the entire face of Ferelden but as you know there are certain areas of the bannorn that still bear witness to their passage."

He swiftly sketched a line straight north from the ruined fortress through the village of Lothering, now only a Blighted memory, almost to the middle of the bannorn. Fast strokes of charcoal roughed out a dark black stain on the map that covered all the land now laying useless and abandoned, unable to produce much-needed crops or sustain livestock, an area of about a hundred square miles of vital farmland and more still of forest and marsh. The region he marked out was quite accurate, by Alistair's accounting, but something about it…

"Andraste's sweet flaming skirts!" he swore colorfully. "That looks just like a -- "

He stopped himself, embarrassed, but Loghain nodded grimly.

"A cock and balls? Yes, it does at that. Very appropriate, considering that what the Darkspawn did, essentially, was to rape us up the backside."

Elilia groaned and covered her face with both hands. "Loghain, if you had ever encountered what happens to the female captives the Darkspawn take when they raid, and if fate had chosen to bless you with a womb instead of testicles, you would not be so keen to make such a metaphor."

He waved that aside. "What the Blighted lands look like on a map is of no consequence. What they mean to the hundreds of poor Fereldans who scrape and scrabble and can just barely manage to feed themselves is more important. If those lands were fertile again, it would be that much easier to feed our people -- and put a lot of our unemployed back to gainful work."
"So you want to…spread the ashes…on the land?" Alistair asked.

Loghain nodded. "Or sow them into the ground."

"A fine idea, if it works," Anora said, somewhat doubtfully. "But would we have enough ashes to cure it all?"

Loghain shrugged. "If we manage to take back only a little land, 'tis better than none at all. Hard to say how many acres per pinch could be restored."

"With the size of your pinches we'd run out of Andraste within half a mile," Elilia said, eyes still irritated and apparently smarting from the dusting she'd received. "Better let me measure out the doses."

"All right, my Lady Cousland, by all means, do. Seems fitting enough to me that you should save Ferelden's ass from the flames again, assuming that it works."

Though she'd clearly been jesting, at Loghain's words her face grew reluctantly contemplative. "I could organize a bit of an expedition, I suppose," she said slowly, "make something of an adventure out of it. After all, there are always plenty of places to go and people to kill in the wild spaces of Ferelden. And if it works, 'twould be a worthwhile endeavor."

While Anora was glad to hear the former Warden take even a half-hearted interest in something, she pursed her lips and felt disgruntled. If she was off on what could potentially be a months-long trip to the south reaches then she wouldn't be around for any romance to bloom, and Anora found that a trifle disheartening. She was beginning to like the mental story she was spinning of her father's courtship to this wild woman, and their eventual marriage. Then Elilia looked at Loghain almost shyly and said, "You could come with me, if you want. It was your idea, after all."

Loghain regarded her steadily for a moment, then nodded slowly. "An adventure in the wilds with the Cousland Barbarian? That sounds grand indeed."

*****

As Loghain had promised they arrived back at the army encampment bright and early the next morning. Healing and other such duties had proceeded apace without them under Teyrn Fergus's
guidance, but there was such a lot of things to do that it was likely they would not be ready for the triumphant march back to Denerim for another day at the least. Loghain had not had a chance to properly absorb the fact of the victory, and the battle seemed to have taken place so very long ago that he was surprised to still see dead on the field. Great pyres stood ready to receive the bodies of the fallen Fereldan soldiers as well as the one Circle mage who perished, but there was apparently some confusion over what to do with the six dead dwarves and the dead werewolf, not to mention the scores of slaughtered Chevaliers. With a deep sigh and an expressive roll of the eyes, Loghain cut through the chaos by simply asking the dwarves and werewolves what they'd like done for their dead. The dwarves, of course, wanted to take their fallen back to Orzammar and "return them to the stone," which they were quite welcome to do, and the werewolves seemed puzzled at the thought that anything should be done for their late brother-at-arms. "If the humans have some problem with leaving him to be properly eaten, then they are welcome to burn him with their own dead."

"What about the Orlesians?" Fergus said, when Loghain told him these things. "There are so many."

"They'd stand as one hell of a warning, for some months at least," Loghain said. Alistair heard and was, predictably, shocked.

"We're not just leaving them there, are we?" he said, appalled. "We have to burn them, if not for propriety's sake, then for the smell and the illness dead bodies spread."

"Smell and illness? There is no village nearby," Loghain said blandly.

"But this is an important trade route regardless!"

"With Orlais," Loghain said patiently. "And even if you're really fool enough to continue to treat with them after this, they might not be willing."

Anora stepped smoothly into the breach, olive branch at the ready. "Very true, father, but there is value in being perceived as merciful. If we were to properly burn the Orlesian dead and return the ashes to their homeland, that would send the message that Ferelden is prepared to be magnanimous, which might net us nothing from Orlais herself but which could be looked upon with great favor by other nations. We could gain allies from such a move. Then, too, sending Orlais such a very large container of ashes as would doubtless be necessary would send another message…"

"That message being, 'Don't fuck with Ferelden,'" Loghain said, concisely if crudely. "All right, then, waste wood if you're going to, but if you're going to burn 'em, burn 'em separately. No
"Ferelden who died for their country ought to suffer the indignity of being mixed up in the ashes of a bunch of painted ponces. Nor the werewolf, neither, though evidently they don't care about such things. He -- or maybe 'twas a she -- may not have bent knee to any human lord but it fought alongside us bravely and should be accorded all appropriate honors as a soldier of this nation. The mage, too, though I know the Chantry will moan about that. We should honor the dwarves for their sacrifice as well, though they're making their own arrangements for the disposition of their dead."

"I'll talk to the Lady of the Forest and find out the werewolf's name…and gender," Elilia interjected, with a lopsided grin. "I'll make sure it's entered properly in the record of the fallen. I suppose I can do the same with the dwarves and the mage. I talked them all into fighting for us, after all. You've got most of the regular army sorted already, don't you, Fergus?"

He nodded. He was looking at his sister rather strangely, Loghain noticed, and he thought he knew why - even though ordinary people couldn't exactly sense the Taint they could always tell that something was slightly "off" about Wardens, and Elilia had lost that wrongness. "There are still soldiers unaccounted for, partly because some of the dead have been...difficult to identify. The unfortunate results of friendly-fire, both from the mages and the golems. We hope still to find the rest lost among the scores of Orlesian dead and wounded."

"What are we doing for the Orlesian wounded, by the way?" Alistair asked.

*Kill 'em, and add 'em to the burn pile,* Loghain wanted to say, but kept his peace.

Teyrn Fergus looked embarrassed. "Nothing as yet, Your Majesty. Our Healers are stretched to their limits as it is, and I did not wish to commit valuable resources without your express approval."

"Well, we certainly don't want to take care from our own men, but we should definitely treat as many of the Orleans as we can save."

Fergus looked pained. "And do what with them, Your Majesty? They number in the hundreds, possibly even more than a thousand. I fear we have not the manpower to take so many prisoners, and then there would of course be the logistics of holding them, and presumably feeding them."

"We cannot take them prisoner," Anora said firmly. "They are too numerous. Slay them."

"What? No!" Alistair protested. Anora cut him off aggressively before he could say more.
"And what are our options if we do not, Alistair? Waste our few healers’ talents and our limited medical supplies on men so badly wounded that many shall doubtless perish regardless, only to stuff them into every dungeon we can find from here to Denerim to rot and starve because we can barely feed our own citizens? Or perhaps you would prefer that we heal those who can be healed and then send them home to Orlais, there to rejoin new regiments and march against us anew? That does not strike me as sound planning, either."

Though her words were harsh her expression, for a wonder, was not. She looked, if anything, rather haggard at that moment. Maybe even sad. "This is the part of ruling you've yet to master. Sometimes being King means you must be cruel."

He hung his head, abashed. Most un-Kingly, but that was Alistair. "You're right, of course," he said glumly.

Elilia put a hand on his shoulder. "Think of it this way, Al. Any Chevalier who couldn't run from the battle was most likely hurt very badly, and most likely the best thing we could ever offer them at this point is a swift and merciful death. For the ones who would have made it…well, at least it’s quick, and an honorable death for a soldier. More so than dying in prison, at any rate."

Alistair called over his shoulder to Loghain. "Did my father ever master this part of the job?"

Loghain shook his head. "He did it, when it was necessary. Can't say that he ever got particularly good at it, though. But that's what I was for."

"Doing His Majesty's dirty work."

"Sometimes it was dirty. Most of the time just dreadfully disagreeable. All of it an unfortunate necessity of ruling a nation, perhaps particularly one so wild and little united as this."

"Little united."

"That may be exaggeration. Might be closer to the mark to say 'not united at all.'" The King turned to look at him, questions in his guileless eyes, and so he condescended to expound. "We fielded five thousand regular army. How many more could we have fielded had more of the bannorn been able to rally their troops for us? Twice that? My guess is closer to three times that. How much easier this battle would have been if we'd had fifteen thousand men on the field. I'm sure they didn't refuse their aid, that would be stupid of them, but they would have prevaricated, sending
back word that there were complications with their equipment, or delays in troop movement, anything and everything to avoid having to make a definite promise as to exactly when they could send their men. And all because they're too small-minded to see past their own little demesne to the welfare of the whole. Do you think that little prick Kendalls would have bothered sending out his troops if he didn't live practically at the feet of the royal palace?"

The little prick in question was standing not too far off, and was predictably offended, but when he made to make some protest Loghain shot him a thunderous glare and he subsided. "I see the shields of Highever, Dragon's Peak, West Hills, Redcliffe, South Reach, and Gwaren, and I see the shields of the Amaranthine regulars, as well -- and most of them sent far fewer men than I'm sure they had, but at least they sent them. But where are Oswin? Whitewater Falls? Dunlan? Rainsfere? Where are two score of banns? They come out of the woodwork at the Landsmeet, to squabble like mongrels over pig knuckles, eager to wrest some concession or other from the Crown and the rest of the nation for their own little rat-spit pickings, which are all they care about. Its always been a bloody wonder to me that anything is ever resolved in this damned country, and most of the time it just gets argued over continually forever. Don't believe me? Just try getting the fucking hemorrhoids to stand and fight for their country when there's no King on the throne. Maker's breath, I don't miss politics."

Bann Teagan bridled at those last few sentences and put himself quite in the former Teyrn's path. "You demanded that we -- " he began, furious.

"I demanded only that you defend your homeland," Loghain said, as he pushed the nominal Arl of Redcliffe onto his backside in the mud rather gently, all things considered. "I don't count you among the vultures who opposed me just to make a play for the Crown, Teagan, but your little outburst on the floor that day fed the flames of dissention nicely. I was wrong about the Darkspawn threat, and maybe not altogether correct about the immediacy, at least, of the threat from Orlais, but the civil war that erupted after that did much to ensure the devastation of our nation. Perhaps I could have stood to be more diplomatic when I addressed the Landsmeet, but by the Maker, I never realized before that day that I would have to kiss ass to get the lords of this nation to stand and defend it. Blame me for naiveté, I suppose."

Evidently King Alistair had recently tasted some of the bitter flavor of trying to pull his rag-tag country together, because he smiled sickly and made no attempt to defend the man who he considered an uncle. "Hard words for the bannorn, Loghain," he said. "And yet you claim to love this nation?"

Loghain tossed his head like an impatient horse. "A man may love his homeland and despise its government quite easily. But I've proven that I can do nothing to change it, so I suppose I have no right to bitch. And it could always be worse. The sodding Free Marches can't even solidify into a genuine nation."
"You'd rather we ruled in the manner of Orlais, with the Crown seizing all power and granting the privileged few only the right to lick the King's boots and trample the peasantry?" Teagan said, more subdued but still smarting and fuming.

"If the Maker Himself came and told me that was the proper way to run the country I would spit in His eye and tell Him to piss off," Loghain said. "We need solidarity and organization, not tyranny. As it is we have a King and Queen attempting to rule over a grand mess of smaller Kings-and-Queens-in-their-own-minds, and we should not be surprised at the resulting chaos."

Nobody seemed to have anything more to say to that, or more likely nobody wanted Loghain to say anything further since he looked, at that moment, close to murder, so orders were given and the various nobles drifted back to their own little regiments, not a few of them thinking mutinous thoughts. Fergus Cousland, loyal defender of the throne that he was, did not exactly feel that what he'd heard was incorrect, but Loghain had stood by the man who slaughtered his family, whether or not he'd had prior knowledge of the actual sacking of Highever, and so he went about his duties much disturbed in mind. His sister seemed to trust the man, perhaps even to like him, and Fergus trusted Elilia. Perhaps Loghain was a man of honor despite it all, though he did not think that honor was spotless…

After a time Elilia sought Fergus out, bearing with her a scroll of parchment upon which she had noted not only the names of the allied deceased but the living as well. "Thought it would be good to get them on official record now," she said as she loped up in her rangy way. "The werewolves won't want to stand in the city square for official thanks, after all; the Chantry would probably brand our poor mages if they took their proper bows, and the dwarves want to head straight back to Orzammar 'before they lose their stone-sense,' which is too bad, because the golems would look marvelous in a royal procession." She noticed her brother's discomfiture, and correctly divined the cause. "Long dark thoughts about Howe, right?"

"Why did you spare his life?" Fergus asked. She didn't need to ask whose life he was referring to. She shrugged expressively.

"He surrendered."

"There had to be more to it than that."

"There's a lot more to it than that, but it boils down to that in the end. Perhaps you'll understand better if I put it this way instead: I spared him because I get him."

"You…'get' him…" Fergus said doubtfully.
'I get him. I understand where he's coming from. Maker help me, I could see his side of things. He was wrong, but I would have been equally wrong had I been the one in his position."

Fergus scoffed, "Elilia, you would never do -- "

"Oh, but I would, Fergus, and I have. Maker willing, you'll never have to know just how far I've gone in the pursuit of what I saw as my duty. Some of the things I've done may be worse than anything Loghain had a hand in. And because I understand him, I understood exactly why someone like that would ever take a knee rather than fight to the last bloody breath, as that slimy bastard Howe did. By that time he knew he couldn't stand alone before the wolves and protect Ferelden, but he needed to see whether I could before he'd step aside and let me. And he yielded, knowing I was virtually honor-bound to slay him regardless, to show not just me but every slack-jawed ninny in that Landsmeet that he knew I was. And if I could bring him to his knees, who among them would have had the stones to defy me further?"

Teyrn Fergus smiled wanly. "And you saw all that, did you, in the heat of the moment, with his neck turned to your blade and your future King calling for his blood?"

"In the heat of the moment I saw a proud foe proudly girding himself to accept whatever punishment I saw fit to mete out. No, I had set myself to win an ally that day, if at all possible, though I confess I never thought he'd actually submit. He doesn't exactly have a precedent for it, does he? I wanted Anora for Queen, and she wanted her father alive. She'd still have married Alistair if I'd killed him, I'm sure. She's her father's daughter and she does her duty, regardless of how distasteful or outright dishonorable she finds it, but she wouldn't exactly have been my biggest fan thenceforward. Then, too, its better to have a man like Loghain at your back than at your throat. I think yesterday proved the wisdom of that."

"Sister, I think it would be wise for you not to show Loghain too much favor," Fergus ventured, a little timidly. "The men have been delighted to bandy about the most unfortunate and unsupportable rumor -- "

"That Loghain spent the night before the battle in my tent, Big Brother?" Elilia interjected. "And what if he did?"

"Please do not bait me, Sister," Fergus pleaded. "I seek only to protect your reputation."

She laughed harshly. "My reputation requires no such protection, Brother, I assure you. And
unfortunately I am not baiting you, either. Loghain and I spent the night together. Is that truly so very terrible to think of?"

Fergus shook his head, his eyes closed. "You were always rather…*unpredictable*, Sister, but this… this…"

"Loghain is a great warrior, Brother, and he has known what hell it is to be a Warden, which few can understand. I find him quite…*attractive*, even though he looks as if the Maker were in something of a hurry when He made him."

Fergus barked laughter, though probably not at his sister's mild humor. "I…cannot speak of this now with you, Sister. A later day, when I have had time to wrap my mind around this fresh horror, we will talk more on it. I beg you only, as one who loves you dearly, not to act further upon this so-called attraction until we have had a chance to discuss this thoroughly."

"Until you have had time to marshal your most compelling objections and persuasive threats, you mean," Elilia said, somewhat haughtily. "I shall do as I have always done, Brother, and follow my own heart and mind. It seems to have served me well so far. 'Hero of Ferelden,' and all that. But if we must, we may speak later. Right now I'm going to go track down that cute little mage that healed Loghain. I have a job offer for her."

She left Fergus then, and went to find her mage, but she found Loghain first -- or rather the other way around. He pulled her behind one of the supply wagons to speak privately.

"Did you tell your brother about what I did to you?" he asked, and with that conversation still fresh in her mind she misinterpreted the question.

"He left me no choice. And of course now he feels that you have utterly besmirched my heretofore *impeccable* reputation," she said, with an eloquent roll of the eyes.

"In what way?" Loghain asked indignantly.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because of what happened during the civil war, or more likely because you don't have a title anymore."

Loghain looked at her for a moment in utter bemusement, then shook his head slowly. "I feel
morally certain that we could not be speaking of the same thing."

"Wait -- what were you speaking of?"

"You remember. The little accident I had on purpose with the ashes?"

"Oh!" She blushed momentarily bright red, the first time he'd ever seen her evince humiliation. "No, no, I didn't say anything about that. I don't think it's a good idea to spread that information around very far, if possible, at least for now. It's going to be bloody hard to explain and I'm sure there'll be a reckoning with the Wardens, which I don't care to think about now."

"Good, because neither do I. Time enough to deal with it all later, when there's a bit of time to think first. Wait -- what did you think I was speaking of?"

"Well, rumor has it…"

He frowned. "Rumor…?"

She sighed and laughed. "You're not the only early riser in an army camp, you know."

"People have been…talking."

"They tend to do that, not that you'd know anything about it, God of the Silent."

He ignored the jibe. "Who else knows?"

"Everybody," Elilia said lightly.

"My Lady…"

"Everybody that matters, at any rate. Fergus. The King and Queen -- well, the Queen at least,
though I expect she'll have told Alistair by now. Probably the other nobles have heard, and by now the tale has circulated quite thoroughly among the soldiers and has most likely grown most sordid indeed. Are you worried about your reputation, perhaps? Or that I would use this in some way to ensnare you? You needn't. I am capable of taking the hint."

"What hint?"

"Not that I've much experience in such matters, but when a man leaves a woman's bed -- or bedroll, in this case -- before dawn and without waking her, he's saying, 'Thank you, but no more please.' And that suits me well enough."

"You think that I -- " His face worked for a moment as he tried to find the right words or actions. The one he settled upon was risky. He took her face in his hands and brought his mouth down onto hers with almost bruising force. She resisted momentarily, but then her own hands plunged into his hair and she kissed back. When he pulled back a bit after a long moment she looked disappointed. "Sometimes a man is just saying that he'd like to let the lady sleep."

"You made not the slightest sign...I thought you just wanted to forget."

"You made no sign either, leastwise to me," Loghain pointed out, his amusement faintly evident in his voice. "Given that we had not a private moment to speak of it, it seemed to me wise to wait for a better moment for frank discussion of what passed between us...and what might come of it."

"What...might come of it?" Elilia asked hesitantly.

"Depends on what you want out of it, I suppose. I can't imagine its something you'd actually want to repeat, but it wouldn't be the first time I've been wrong about something."

She drew back with a sly look. "Well, I guess I'll have to think about that. And soon, if we're truly going to travel together, sleeping rough beneath the stars in the wild places with no one at all to tell us what to do and what not to..."

"Something to look forward to, at any rate. You do realize, of course, that the Crown is going to have plenty of work for both of us, most like, before we can ever see if my foolish little fancy has any foothold in reality? Anora would love to swap you out for one of her more troublesome Banns, I'm sure."
"Probably so, but we're going just the same, as soon as we can break away. Which reminds me, I was looking for that mousey little healer girl. I'd like her to come along. You seem to have been looking for a place to die lately, and it's not happening on my watch."
Victory March

Most of the mages casually melted into the wilderness before the army even began to march, but a small handful stayed on, hoping their service would gain them clandestine support from the King and Queen, and perhaps under-the-table appointments in the army or the palace itself -- and they probably would, too, as long as they continued to behave themselves. After all, as the Empire was once again after Ferelden, the royal family wasn't likely to be tremendously popular with the Chantry for the foreseeable future, even if the Fereldan clergy had not received any word. Loghain was of a mind to suggest kicking the bloody Chantry out of Ferelden, but even he could see the flaws in that plan. People needed their godhead, of course, even though he couldn't quite understand why the Maker required demure women backed up by a well-supplied army to liaise with what was supposedly His favorite creation. *Not that everybody in the clergy is a corrupt hag*, he thought to himself in an effort at fairness. One member of the Chantry in particular had become very like a true mother to him during a very bad period of his life.

He didn't like to think such things, but from time to time he questioned not only the Chantry but the Maker Himself. It seemed to him rather suspicious that the "true" god did not seem to be the first. And how could any other god, real or false, ever usurp power from the ultimate god? He was not much given to the sort of deep philosophical musing that engendered such questions, and he certainly didn't have the education required to support or refine his wonderings, but sometimes that whole story of Andraste -- how the beauty of Her song caught the Maker's attention and so He whispered to Her wonderful things and convinced Her to raise an army in His name -- sounded more than a little dubious, at best. Either the Maker was something a clever and powerful woman created out of wholecloth to raise support for her crusade against Tevinter, or perhaps the Maker was real... but not strong enough to depose the old gods on His own. A sly Trickster god lurking in the shadows until He found a strong Champion to do His dirty work for Him. And then He left her to the bloody flames. Or he supposed there was a third option, that Andraste was off her bleeding conk.

Or a fourth option: that he was a paranoid old man who spent too damned much time thinking about things he knew nothing of.

Elilia tracked down her mage, at last. Loghain vaguely recalled speaking briefly to a healer shortly before being dragged off into the mountains on a quest he would still consider a tremendous waste of valuable time had not two rather dreadful mistakes been rectified: neither the King nor Elilia were now Wardens, which meant they were now free to do their proper duty by their country without interference from foreign powers. With the full pouch of ashes at his belt holding the hope of a fruitful future for the bannorn he felt pretty good about that particular day's work. He would have to warn Alistair and Anora not to speak of the ashes he'd taken, not that he expected Anora at least would require that warning, because it seemed likely enough to him that the Grand Cleric would consider sowing the earth with the ashes of the Prophetess rank sacrilege. If it didn't work they could always put the ashes in a vault at the palace, for emergency use, or he supposed he could even be persuaded to return them to the temple if Alistair wheedled hard enough, though he wouldn't relish telling that Guardian fellow that he'd taken two scoops of Andraste. The mere fact that he hadn't reappeared immediately seemed to suggest a sort of tacit approval, however. It was
hard to imagine a creature like *that* did not know what they were doing at all times in his domain.

The men left behind at the battlefield would be in charge of continuing the burning of the Orlesian dead, which was going to take awhile. They'd been left with five large chests that had been emptied of the medical supplies they'd carried, and most likely they were going to fill all of them with the ashes once they were done, which would certainly be a "message" to the Empress and her toads. A smaller vessel containing a portion of the communal ashes of the Fereldan dead rode in state with the Revered Mother and her priests, and the rest had been respectfully buried before they began burning the Chevaliers. They'd left a decent force of men at the border to guard it under the command of Ser Cauthrien -- *King's Protector* Ser Cauthrien, these days, governing the teyrnir of Gwaren held in conservatorship for Baby Anora, and Loghain was quite proud of his protégé, though he thought she looked rather more harassed by the tribulations of governance than she ever had as a commander of soldiers, something he could certainly sympathize with -- and the rest of the army was now two days out of Sulcher's Pass, on their way back to Denerim and the grand victory celebration that Anora was probably already busy planning, if the number of scouts she was sending ahead of them meant anything. Knowing her, it meant several days of meticulously-detailed festivities, with parades, feasts, ceremonies, and dances. He glowered in her direction. As much as he wanted to see Duncan and Baby Anora again, the idea of the celebrations that lay ahead filled him with a sense of dread. Hopefully, not having any title or even official rank within the army, he would not be forced to attend…but he seriously doubted that.

Thinking about the prospect of being put on display galled him, and he turned his gaze back to Elilia and her new pet. He had not yet been introduced to the mage and remembered little about her since he'd been too busy trying not to choke on his own blood at the time he met her, and Elilia seemed to have decided to take her brother's warnings about propriety to heart, at least for the march home. Probably for the best, truth be told, but he still felt a pang of disappointment every time she briskly steered her charge away from him if he strayed too near, or favored him with a supercilious smile and a nod of condescension as she passed by wordlessly in camp. One might have thought that she was old enough by now to have settled a bit, but it seemed she was still the same coltish spitfire that had been simultaneously the trial and pride of her parents.

Elilia -- for the moment at least still known as the Warden to the others marching with them -- had not yet noticed his eyes upon them, so he was free to look his fill. The mage was quite petite, particularly next to the young giantess with her mighty sword, and though he could not tell beneath the tasseled hood she wore, Loghain thought she was probably an elf. The bodice of her dull buff-colored robes was quilted and the faintly ridiculous hobble skirt was patterned oddly like snakeskin, though he did not believe it to be made of any sort of leather. He had but limited experience with the Circle, not enough to know for certain that there was any sort of uniform for the mages, but he had a vague understanding that robes of that style were supplied only to elven females. There appeared to be no difference at all in the style of robes worn by human and elven men. Made no sense at all to him, but what did he know of magic aside from the fact that it was useful when it was on his side and deuced annoying when it was used against him? He wondered at the color she wore. Most of the Circle mages he'd met dressed at all times like gaudy peacocks, but this one seemed more like a peahen. He found it hard to imagine that she would have the guts or the stamina to be of any use to them on a long hike through the bannorn, but she'd survived the battle so she was either tougher than she looked or smart enough to keep the hell out of the way. And it would be useful to have a healer along, he supposed. Even though he was working on
changing his fighting style to suit his advancing years he always ended up bloody sooner or later, and Elilia was a magnet for trouble. If they were lucky she'd know a good fighting spell or two, as well.

Too old to keep using myself as a battering ram, Loghain thought grimly. Too bad I'm also too old to fight with much nimbleness, instead. Perhaps it would be best to just keep throwing myself headfirst into the thick of things. Dying in battle would be far preferable to wasting away of some disease or even just the steady ravages of cruel Time.

It was funny to think about, but not in a laughing sort of way, that of the triumvirate of friends that led Ferelden to victory over their oppressors, he was the only one still living. He'd always expected to die first, if not in battle then by hanging, as an old woman rumored to be a hedge witch near where he'd spent his earliest childhood said he was born for. Certainly he'd never thought to worry about the possibility that he would one day be old. Yet here he was, silver-haired and if not exactly sage then at least beaten into a weary sort of wisdom that was as close as he was likely to come. In the fewest possible words, it sucked.

He supposed there was still every possibility that he could one day be hanged.

"What thought makes you so cheerful all of a sudden?" a voice at his elbow said, startling him. He turned his head to see that Elilia had dropped back to walk beside him.

"Oh, does the Lady deign to speak with me, a lowborn soldier?" he asked in mock surprise. "What will her noble brother say?"

She waved it off with an expansive gesture. "I've decided that its time I inflicted you upon our new companion. It would be well to see if she can survive the shock."

"Very droll."

Elilia gestured to the little mage, who was still walking ahead of them, casting shy peeks over her shoulder every few steps. She fell back to join them, and Elilia put an arm around her shoulders companionably, or perhaps protectively. Loghain couldn't quite tell which.

"This is Seanna Surana, late of Kinloch Hold. Seanna, this is Loghain Mac Tir. He used to have a lot of high and mighty titles, but he's just a regular slob now. Except for being the Queen's father, of course, which I suppose is a high and mighty title on its own."
Seanna? That was a slippery-sounding name, and he doubted he'd be able to manage it without a lot of practice. The mage pushed back her hood for the first time, revealing the expected pointed ears and large, luminous eyes. "An honor, Ser," she said, in the same very quiet, deferential voice he vaguely remembered.

"Your skills as a healer will be greatly appreciated, I expect. Can you do anything else?" he said, and then silently cursed his clumsy tongue for its perpetual brusqueness as she flinched at the question. He sincerely hoped she hadn't taken it to mean…anything untoward.

"I know a few elemental spells," she said shyly, "and a lot of spells of support. Useless in terms of bolstering an army, but quite handy for aiding a small party that may have need to fight. I can also cook, and fetch water, and dig latrines if that's what you need me to do. I can even provide some entertainment -- " here she looked momentarily both embarrassed and alarmed -- "by which I mean I know many stories and can sing a few songs."

"What has the Warden told you about our plans, exactly?" he asked.

She looked momentarily confused, and Elilia said cheerfully, "Well, I told her not to call me 'the Warden,' for starters, Loghain, so it is unnecessary for you to stand on foolish ceremony."

"I see. Elilia then -- what has she told you about what we are to do?"

"She said that you would be making an expedition into the Blighted lands, possibly all the way into the Wilds."

"It is indeed possible, though I couldn't guess at this point whether it is likely. You understand that even if we do not go so far as that, we will be traveling light and likely living rather rough? If our plans meet with success there is no telling how long we'll be on the road, either."

"I understand, Ser. I don't mind hardship." A bitter edge crept into her voice at those words, and Elilia's look to him over her head said that she would have things of significance to tell him at a later time.

The little mage still looked young and weak to him but Elilia had a keen eye for allies, so he supposed she'd work out. And despite the deference and respect in her voice at most times, there was a wary underpinning to her shyness, an almost feral mistrust dancing beneath the layer of
unassuming civility. He suspected she had a Past, despite the way the Circle seemed tailor-made to prevent its inmates from having any lives at all. He made an effort to speak kindly as he told her she was very welcome to join their venture. It was best to tread lightly with mages, after all, and if she'd suffered in her life he had some sympathy for her. It couldn't be easy to be locked away and reviled for an accident of birth, and being an elf as well probably made it all the harder, no matter what they said about mages being treated equally. They could not offer her the freedom and safety she would have enjoyed as a Grey Warden, of course, but if she sought to escape the Circle's confines and the current fighting by joining them -- well, in the current political climate, Loghain was quite willing and happy to defend her from any templar stooge that came to harass her.

"I told her she could stay with me while we're in Denerim, so the Queen doesn't have to put herself out finding her another room," Elilia said, with a significance to her voice Loghain understood. Anora might order suitable lodgings for the guest of her favored champion and her father, but the servants who fulfilled that order would have their own ideas of what was "suitable" for an elf. The visitor's suite Elilia would be occupying, since she did not wish to stay at the Warden's compound, would no doubt be large enough and comfortable enough for the two of them, particularly since it was doubtful that the mage was truly any more used to grand luxury than Elilia was these days. It was a good arrangement in another way, as well, for Elilia would be present to stop any impertinent inquiry into the girl's talents as well as to chaperone her integrity, since even well-disciplined palace guards were not unknown to treat female elves as fair game, despite the penalties enforced by royal decree.

"So we keep waving to the freeholders and pandering to the Banns that offer us their rather limited hospitality on the way, and when we reach Denerim it's 'Smile Smile Smile' -- 'Scowl Scowl Scowl' in Loghain's case, since that's the only facial expression he's capable of -- and play up the victory for the cheering masses. I only hope the Royal Personages don't make us detour to any of the larger cites along the way for more of the same. I'm ready to have it done with already and it hasn't even started."

"You and me both," Loghain muttered.
"Please, my Lady, do remain still! These alterations are very delicate!"

"Ouch! Damn you, woman, you stabbed me!"

"With a pin, Elilia," Queen Anora said, sounding both amused and exasperated. "You've been stabbed by worse."

The beleaguered dressmaker made another minute adjustment to the bodice of the garment she was measuring. "It shall be over soon, my Lady, I swear it." Indeed, she was obviously quite looking forward to having done with her obstreperous client. She backed away and looked Elilia over from head to foot, critiquing her work and the way it draped the powerful and frightfully unfashionable body beneath it. She could not, as she feared, make a silk purse from this particular sow's ear, but she did her best out of pride of appointment. At least she has a fine womanly bosom, so no one should think my lovely gowns are being worn now by men...hopefully.

"I believe the breadths are as they should be now, Your Majesty," the dressmaker informed the Queen gravely, with a curtsey. "I have the proper measurements and will have the gown ready before the Presentation in three days. Shall we speak of trimmings?"

"We shall speak of getting me out of this monstrosity as quickly as possible," Elilia growled.

"Hold -- you can't take it off until we've decided how it should be finished," Anora commanded. "Are you certain that particular shade of blue is appropriate to the Lady Cousland's rather...golden skin tone?" A polite way of saying that Elilia had spent too many years baked in the sun and looked more like a farm girl than a noblewoman. The rich cerulean shade popularly known to Fereldans as "Cousland Blue" was a good shade to use when making the statement that she was being restored to her family title, but it had clearly never been intended to be worn by someone with such dark skin. At worst the effect could be said to be garish, and at best it was certainly eye-popping.

"Once the dress is finished, Your Majesty, it will not be so conflicting. All it requires is careful attention to trimmings. Silver is the tradition for the Couslands, I know, but I believe that gold threading and trims will help to offset and balance out the shades. I know that it is High Summer, but I believe a trim of fox fur and ermine about the cuffs, skirts, and corselet would be quite elegant, and draw attention away from certain...unfortunate...features."
"Such as?" the Queen asked, and Elilia winced, not wanting to know.

"The...shoulders, Your Majesty...are rather...broad."

"Those broad shoulders have saved Ferelden," the Queen said, clearly more amused than stern. "All of Thedas, in fact."

"Oh, no one respects the Lady Warden more than I, Your Majesty, what she has done for all of us is simply fantastical. But she is...difficult...to clothe."

"Well, do your damnedest," Anora said, in a fair imitation of her father. "It is not Elilia Cousland the warrior who will stand before the Landsmeet to receive her title, but Elilia Cousland the high-born lady."

"Can you remind me of why that is again, exactly, Your Majesty?" Elilia said through gritted teeth. The heavy fall of flocked wool was hot and itchy and uncomfortable and she longed for the familiar encumbrances of her armor. She did not miss the days when her mother stuffed her into foolish frippery and forced her to parade in front of all the eligible noble sons -- of bitches, most of them, though she wasn't always sure whether it was truly any fault of their mothers. She had a horrifying presentiment that Anora was now doing exactly the same thing to her, for the same purpose -- to marry her off to some rich house. As if any of Ferelden's noblemen would consider her marriageable! She'd run her blade through the heart of the first man bold enough to propose -- with extreme pleasure if it happened to be that rapist bastard Vaughan Kendalls!

Finally the Queen and her royal dressmaker were finished arguing the fine points of fashion. Elilia neither knew nor cared what they at last settled upon, even though she was the poor fool who would be forced to wear it for however long the Landsmeet Presentation lasted. Such things had a dreadful tendency to spin out tediously. She fairly panted with impatience as the ridiculous gown was carefully removed from her figure by a small army, it seemed, of elven assistants. She had forgotten what it was to wear a boned corselet -- and this one hadn't even been laced properly! Bereft of all but her smallclothes, Elilia stood with her feet braced and her hands fisted upon her hips, unabashed, as another team of elven servants scurried in with her armor. The dressmaker eyed her muscled frame with undisguised disapproval, particularly scandalized by the many livid scars she bore. The worst of these, a puckered line extending from her left armpit all the way down her side, curving beneath the breast and terminating just above her navel, had been put there by the Archdemon itself, and had very nearly ended her role in that final assault. Only a furious attack of healing spells from Wynne, Morrigan, and the Circle mages present to assist allowed her to raise her sword and battle on.

Once more properly dressed, Elilia was allowed to escape the Queen's clutches. They'd been in Denerim a week, and much of that week had been spent in exactly the sort of mind-numbing
company she dreaded -- vacuous nobles congratulating themselves heartily for things they never had a hand in, idiotic remarks about the beneficence of the Maker from brain-washed priests and Chantry hangers-on. Thank all that was good and holy for Loghain, a splash of cold, sensible water amidst the boil of foolishness and drunken revel. Thank the Maker for Seanna, for that matter, since the mage's shyness gave Elilia a perfect excuse, when needed, to bow out of the worst of the carousing and take her back to their rooms for peace and quiet. And then of course there were the Blessings, the Dedications, the Funerals, the Processions -- all of which found her standing in full armor and at full attention for hours beyond counting while some buffoon droned away in speech after speech. Even Alistair was guilty of it -- one of his addresses last a good forty minutes. He'd changed a lot from the young lad fresh from templar training, too afraid to put himself forward even to take the lead over a completely green recruit. At least his heart was still a good one. Anora's speeches were more frequent but also more satisfactory. The Queen liked to get to the point quickly, hammer it home, and then retreat and let her well-chosen words do the work they were intended for. She rarely exceeded ten minutes in any address, and never went beyond fifteen. Elilia applauded her economy of words but couldn't quite forget that all of this fresh hell was at the Queen's behest and plan.

Loghain was asked -- nay, commanded -- to speak, but his spare speech surpassed even his daughter's. "We won. Isn't that enough?" he growled, and stalked away in a state of high dudgeon. Elilia had seen him pocketing sweets from the serving tables all that evening, and knew he had no taste for them. "Waste of jaw energy," he called such things, and eyed with deep suspicion anyone over the age of ten who seemed to enjoy such treats. Anxious to escape lest she be called upon to speak next, Elilia drew Seanna along with her and followed the man through the empty corridors of the palace to the nursery, where they had their own private revel with the young prince and princess, too young to attend such a late-night gathering even though Duncan had been forced to put in an appearance at the start of it. The children were far better company than their elders, though Baby Anora threw a comfit in Elilia's face with deadly aim. The little innocent had quite the temper.

Elilia teased him about smuggling food to his grandchildren. "Do you recall when we were about three days out of Denerim and we were beset by that pack of Blight-crazed wolves at that place where they'd set all those bloody useless traps for them? If I remember correctly, you asked in quite an irritated manner whether any of the rest of us had committed the sin of carrying table scraps, luring them."

"I…vaguely…remember that," he said cautiously.

"I always meant to call you on that, since only the day before I saw you taking a bit of cheese from your belt pouch and tossing it to my dear old hound Kiveal right in the middle of the roadway. And at several occasions I saw you feeding him scraps of roast boar, long from any meal."

"…Your point?"
She elbowed him hard in the ribs. "You were the one carrying table scraps, you great ox!"

He tried hard to scowl, but the expression crumbled rapidly and he actually laughed along with Duncan, who thought it quite a fine joke. Baby Anora did not quite understand what was funny, but not to be outdone she at last emitted a loud "Haw!" That set everyone off in another burst of laughter, which rather fretted the child for a moment before she, too, was laughing quite merrily -- so much so, in fact, that she gave herself a case of the hiccoughs and was rescued by the nurse, who whisked her away to bed.

Loghain was different with the children than he was with other people, Elilia saw with some approval. Gentler, even in the tone of his voice. She had not thought him capable of not sounding harsh, that years of growling and barking and bellowing had roughened a throat never designed to be melodious in the first place, but once in awhile when he spoke to his grandchildren -- particularly to Duncan, who was much more sensitive than his sister even though he seemed to have a fine burgeoning manliness to him -- Elilia caught tones in his voice that were almost soothing. Musical, even. She beamed upon the sight of the great warrior with the happy young boy enthroned upon his knee until she realized with some disgust that her feelings were becoming distinctly broody and maternal. She liked children well enough when they were someone else's, but she'd long ago settled herself to never having any of her own.

"…My Lady?"

The quiet inquiry brought her back to the present with a start. She paused and allowed Seanna to catch up with her -- in her eagerness to leave the stuffy dressmaker's stuffy parlor she'd completely forgotten her new friend, who'd waited patiently and without comment upon a settee by the door the whole time she was fussed and fitted. "Sorry, Seanna. My mind was wandering. Am I walking too fast for you?"

"No, my Lady, but I feared you would walk straight through the wall of the tavern, you seemed so intent upon your trajectory," the mage said, with the slightest hint of a laugh buried in her deference. Surprised, Elilia looked ahead of herself and saw that she was indeed but a few preoccupied strides from slamming straight into the side of the Gnawed Noble. Sheepishly she detoured to the front of the building.

"You wanted a chance to browse The Wonders of Thedas, didn't you?" she said. "It's just around the corner here. And I asked you to please stop calling me 'My Lady.'"

"Yes, my Lady," Seanna said, and now there was far more than just a hint of laughter in her voice. Elilia smiled. The girl was loosening up, which was good. Like most of the close companions that drew to the stalwart warrior woman's company over the years, the mage's story was not an happy one. Hopefully her life would be a bit more enjoyable now, even if more dangerous. Elilia held the
shop's door open for her and followed her inside.

"Oh my...all these books...are for sale?" the mage said wonderingly. She'd grown up surrounded by books, of course, but none she could call her own. The small bag of sovereigns Elilia had paid her upon their return to the city was the first coin she'd ever even seen. The only things she'd ever owned were those things issued her by the Circle -- basic robes, plain wooden staff, a hood, and a ring inscribed with the mark of the Circle. She was now to embark upon the thrilling adventure of her first purchase, and Elilia went along to ensure that her money was not turned down simply because she was an elf. Many merchants wouldn't take anything higher than silver from "knife-ears," assuming the only way they could acquire gold was through theft.

"They are indeed, Seanna. Lots of other things for sale here, too. Models of exotic creatures from faraway lands, clothing bearing powerful enchantments, runes, jewelry. I even bought a map of ancient Tevinter here once, a present for Loghain. Wouldn't have guessed he'd care about maps of places he's never been and wouldn't go if he were paid coin of the realm to do so, but frankly I think he likes maps the way most people like paintings. Cartography's just another art form, to him."

Seanna cast an impish eye at her. "You're very fond of Lord Loghain," she observed slyly.

"He's no lord, Seanna, not anymore -- although it wouldn't surprise me at all if Anora manages to talk Alistair around to some sort of title for him eventually, even if its one of those faintly condescending titles that are really just demeaning jobs fobbed off on younger sons presented by their noble parents as courtiers. And I like him, yes. We've been through a lot of shit together. Manufactured quite a bit of it for each other."

"My understanding is that he tried many times to kill you."

Elilia laughed and thumbed through the pages of a book on Nevarran dragon hunters, looking for pictures. "Sometimes it seems that all of my best friends have tried at some point to kill me. Loghain isn't the only one."

Seanna ducked her head and hid her smile behind a copy of a book with the provocative and puzzling title of _Hard in Hightown: Siege Harder_. "He is very handsome, for an older man."

Elilia's burst of laughter at that was loud and piercing enough even to make the Tranquil storekeeper turn disapproving eyes upon her, but she paid him no mind. "If you think ogres are handsome, I suppose."
"I believe that you do," Seanna said, forest-green eyes shining with merriment.

"Seanna, what is that book you're looking at? I believe it may be warping your poor innocent mind." She snatched away the volume and scanned a few pages. It appeared to be a seamy romance about a corrupt guardsman who was systematically working his way through every unattached -- or otherwise -- woman in Kirkwall while at the same time engaging in ferocious pitched melee with scores of thugs and cutthroats. Pirates, even, and Tevinter slavers. Utter trash. Seanna had to jostle her rather roughly before she could tear herself away from it.

"You shouldn't read things like this, Seanna, they're not good for you," Elilia said. She made to put the book back on the shelf but slipped it beneath her copy of *Nevarran Dragon Hunters* instead. She didn't care for the passages about sex a bit, of course, but she'd been pulled away from a battle to protect a poor young mage girl from a group of power-mad templars and she had to know whether Donnan Brennakovic managed to save her or not. It was only fifteen silvers, after all. "If you must know, Loghain has certain qualities I do find rather attractive in a man. His appearance isn't one of them, nor his personality."

Seanna leaned in close and whispered. "You've bedded him, haven't you? The rumor flew all about the camp, but I didn't know to believe it until I saw the two of you together."

"Seanna!" Elilia said, shocked, but then she burst into a fit of the giggles. Girlish and ridiculous, but she couldn't help it. "We shared an… intimate moment, since you brought it up. For several hours, in fact. He may be old, but the man's got staying power."

Seanna giggled. "I get to read that after you're done with it," she said, and tapped the cover of *Nevarran Dragon Hunters* with one long, tapered fingernail. Elilia knew she had no interest at all in the techniques involved in killing dragons. She grinned at the little mage.

"Deal."

They finished their shopping, chatting and giggling together like schoolgirls. Elilia bought a small scale model of the Archdemon Urthemiel -- "In memory of an old fiend" -- in addition to her books. Seanna bought several books, a pair of good quality leather-soled boots with soft oilskin sides to replace the flimsy and rather ancient ones that wore out on the long trek back from the battle, and a beautiful silverite chain from which depended a large cabochon of deep blue lapis inlaid with a half moon of mother-of-pearl, rounded and polished to perfection until it seemed almost a natural part of the larger stone. She immediately presented this rather pricey treasure to Elilia, who attempted to refuse.
"Please, take it. I've never been able to give someone a gift before," Seanna said. The imploring look in her eyes was something Elilia couldn't defend herself against.

"All right. Thank you, Seanna, it's absolutely lovely." She put it on at once. It felt strange and heavy and very out of place, but there was something soothing in the cool stone when she touched it with bare fingers, and without question it was the most beautiful piece of jewelry she had owned since becoming a Warden. She always liked to ferret out the things that made her companions' hearts skip and give them gifts accordingly, and now she had extra incentive to watch for that special gleam in Seanna's eye.

"Shall we go back to the palace now?" Seanna asked. "I believe we may just have time to make ourselves presentable for dinner."

Elilia made a face. "I do so hate dining at the palace. When I became a Grey Warden I put all such nonsense as soup spoons and salad forks and elbows-off-the-table out of my head completely, and I don't care to be forced to remember it now!"

"You don't have to stand on proper dining etiquette, you know," Seanna said, with an ill-stifled laugh. "Loghain certainly doesn't. He uses the same fork for every course and scoops up peas and beans with his knife."

"I'm just surprised he doesn't swallow the utensils," Elilia said cheerily. "That man's appetite is enormous. The way he packs it in, you'd think he was still a Warden."

"At least if he is not an overly formal diner, he is not a piggish one," Seanna said fairly. "Some of the so-called 'high-born' that dine with the King and Queen make the most infernal noises as they eat, and they let the gravy dribble down their chins, no matter how delicately they quirk out their pinkies when gulping down ale and wine."

"Ah, that's right. They sat you next to poor old Arl Wulffe last night, didn't they? He's a relative of mine -- well, pretty much all the nobles are, to some degree -- and he's probably the only man in Thedas gruffer and more ill-mannered than Loghain. But he's a good soul, he is. I'm glad he finally remarried. Lost both his sons to the Blight, working hard to evacuate his people before they could be overwhelmed by the Darkspawn. Not many nobles put so much on the line for the poor folks they were meant to protect, or lost so much. That new wife of his seems a decent sort, and their little girl is a darling."
"What do you think the Queen has planned for you at the Landsmeet?" Seanna asked, after a period of companionable silence. Elilia sighed heavily.

"Terrors and torment, no doubt. Loghain is a cunning man but generally you can count on him to attack you head-on as long as he's the one in the vanguard. His daughter is much more subtle. It's difficult to defend against a foe that kills you with generosity and heaped honors."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, unattractive old battleaxe though I may be I am still sister of a Teyrn. It would serve her well to auction me off to some unmarried nobleman, particularly an unbiddable one that doesn't do things quite Her Majesty's way. As the 'Hero of Ferelden' she would expect me to quickly usurp my husband's power and then she would have a powerful ally in the Landsmeet where once she had a foe. Little as I care to admit it, I'm often of Anora's mind about what should be done in this country, if not always in perfect agreement as to how. It's why I felt it was necessary to keep her in power. She's much better at the day-to-day business of ruling than Alistair could ever have been without her to teach him, and she's not afraid of the ruthless part of being a monarch, either. Alistair on his own, I fear, would quickly have become the puppet of Arl Eamon. Anora is too much her own woman to ever be manipulated like that."

"Why do you say such things about yourself?" Seanna said reproachfully. Elilia nodded to the palace guardsman as they passed by into the massive and rather dour structure.

"Say what things about myself?"

"That you are an 'unattractive old battleaxe.' You seem a beautiful and kind-hearted woman to me, and not at all old."

"I'm thirty-one."

"And I'm thirty-four!" Seanna flashed back.

"Well, I know, but thirty-four doesn't look as bad on an elven woman as thirty-one looks on a human woman. And believe me, on the marriage market a thirty-one year old woman is indeed very, very old. A lot of Ferelden noblewomen are married off at sixteen. It wasn't that long ago that the proper age was considered to be fourteen. I was that young when my mother started scouting for suitable husbands for me, not that I think she meant to give me away so soon. At one point the
best prospects looked to be Vaughan Kendalls and Thomas Howe -- both absolutely loathsome creatures, one a philanderer even at a very young age -- with a taste for unwilling women, no less -- and the other a drunkard from the age of twelve. I don't think my mother believed the rumors about them, or she never would have considered them suitable, I'm sure. One Satinalia we spent in Denerim old Arl Urien was pressing his son's courtship suit so hard that I was terrified I would be married by First Day so I ran off to the docks and got this tattoo. Absolute scandal, it was, and my parents were horrified, but it put paid to the Kendalls trying to win my hand for their odious son. I'm glad to see he still hasn't married, because I would fear for any poor soul saddled with him for a husband, but it worries me, too, since he's quite an obstacle for the Royal Agenda at the Landsmeet, not that he has any brains with which to refute them. Anora would certainly like to have him quietly and effectively squashed, and what better way to do that than with a strong-willed wife to whom people would prefer to listen? I should be forced to murder him if we were wed, but on the upside Denerim would undoubtedly be the better for it, even if they hanged me."

"Ew, don't say such things," Seanna said, with a little shudder. "What is his own agenda?"

Elilia snorted. "To live as decadent a lifestyle as one can live in poor, simple Ferelden. I thought for a time my cousin Arl Bryland would marry his daughter Habren to Vaughan -- cut from the same cloth, they were -- but apparently he finally did his duty by her as her father and sent her off to the Chantry to make penance for her wicked lifestyle. Last I heard she'd actually taken Orders. 'Mother Habren.' A terrifying thought, to be sure. In any event, I should perhaps have warned you about Vaughan before now. He has a taste for elves, I fear to say, and frequents the Alienage as if it were his own personal whorehouse -- not that he pays the poor girls anything, or allows them the choice. I'd kill him right now, if I could get away with it. Any road, he doesn't want to lose his toys so he blocks any and all proposals the Crown makes to improve conditions there. Anora had to fight him tooth and claw for six years before she finally managed to slip a proposal for improved drainage by him. It wasn't much of a win, but at least the elves aren't hip-deep in rainwater half the year anymore. And it's my fault, too. Old Arl Howe was keeping him locked up in his own dungeons and I let the bastard go so he'd speak out for me at the Landsmeet. Still not sure why I didn't just gut him right there, but I needed the support. I think. Might still have gotten the majority vote without him."

She walked the long corridors to their room in glum silence for a time, her big head hanging, until they reached their door. "No use moaning about past mistakes, I suppose," she sighed at last. "I wish I could go in there and take hammer and nails to all the shoddy carpentry and clean the place up so it's properly livable, but all their homes are owned by humans and if they were in any better condition they'd evict the elves and move in people who can pay higher rent. The Crown has been trying to buy the properties for years but Vaughan won't let the owners sell out. He's got stones, blocking the King like that. Hmm…I wonder if an anonymous private party could start making quiet purchases and buy the whole place out from under Kendalls before he knew what was happening?" she mused.

"It would be a bold move," Seanna said, "but a hopelessly expensive one."
Elilia grinned at her. "Being a Grey Warden has been astonishingly lucrative for me, dear. When I'm officially a Lady again, my brother intends to give me my proper share of the family inheritance, as well. In three days’ time I could potentially buy out a dozen Alienages, if the property owners will only sell to me. I've a mind to do it, too."

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First Warden:

Ser;

I write to you in deepest regrets, tendering my reluctant resignation from the ranks of Grey Wardens. This was not a decision I was allowed to make for myself: circumstances beyond my control have found me quite completely devoid of all Taint, and I am no longer fit to perform my proper duties by the Order. I recognize that my abrupt departure from your ranks leaves the Order without an acting Warden-Commander of Ferelden, and I would like to take this opportunity to recommend my faithful Second, Senior Warden Nathaniel Howe. He I will leave in direct charge of the Wardens at Amaranthine until official assignments may be handed down. I would further recommend that if you were to choose instead to install a Warden-Commander from outside of Ferelden, it would be politically apposite not to choose a Brother or Sister from the ranks of Orlais. Wardens are Wardens, we all understand, but Ferelden is not Orlais, and has good reason to mistrust those from that land at this time.

Personal Regards,

Elilia Merwynnan Cousland, formerly Warden-Commander of Ferelden

Elilia finished off this missive with a grand flourish, blotted it, folded the parchment, and sealed it with wax dyed bluish-gray. She fixed that with the gryphon seal of the Grey Wardens. Even if the First Warden was stupid enough to send his own man to take the position of Warden-Commander, it would take months for the message to reach him far away in the Anderfels. Nathaniel was the kind of man who could make good advantage of such time. She addressed another parchment to him, writing to explain the situation with more detail and considerably less brittleness to the courtesy. She also apologized, to him and the other recruits she'd gathered in her years as Commander of the Grey.

When you Joined, I asked of you to stand with me in the duty that cannot be forsworn. It would be right of you to feel I have betrayed my Oath, and all of you as well, for I cannot say with honesty that I did not wish to be relieved of the burdens attendant upon being a Grey Warden. I consider
you my Brothers and Sisters still, and though I may now be the family exile, still do I consider you the finest men and women I have ever had the honor to serve with, and I am fiercely proud of my Fereldan Wardens. Give the Darkspawn my fondest regards, Friend Oghren, and the next time you raise your glass perhaps you could raise it once in memory of me. Nathaniel, scowl and curse me as you will, but know that I have been honored to serve by your side. There is no one else I trust to navigate the treacherous waters of Command and Politics combined. To each and all of you, serve well and stand true. You are all that is best in the Wardens, and never forget it.

That last line was all the warning she felt it prudent to send, and Nathaniel was a canny fellow. He would know what she meant by it, and no more trusted the external hierarchy of Wardens than she did. It would be well.

Now if only she would be. She turned in her chair to look at the gown spread across the coverlet, awaiting her. If her mother could have seen it, she would have fairly swooned over it. Leliana the Bard would have delighted in the silken skirts and the elegant trimmings, the daring cuts to allow advantageous view of her few "womanly qualities." Even Morrigan might have unbent from her typical cool indifference to say that it was "adequate for the purpose." Elilia thought it a fright. She had been invited once to the wedding of a notably fashionable Lord and Lady Nameless who had done up the festivities in the finest Orlesian style, and the centerpiece of it all was a massive five-tiered cake with sugared crenellations and tower defenses, rock candy rose blooms, and colored icing of a rich emerald green. That cake had not looked either one whit lovely or edible to Elilia, and this dress reminded her of it very much. It was not green but blue - Cousland Blue, despite the threat of garish clash between gown and skin - and though it was done up in something of the way the dressmaker had suggested it bore the stamp of personality strongly enough to identify it as an original creation of one Anora Mac Tir. Granted, Her Majesty's taste was supposed to be impeccable, so Elilia guessed that everyone else at the Presentation would like it well enough, particularly the ones who enjoyed the peephole in the corselet that allowed full view of the inner curve of her breasts. She'd never seen Anora wear anything so revealing.

Anora had seen her in her smallclothes, so presumably she was aware of the fact that below the neck Elilia Cousland was not burnt to a golden tan by the sun, but was in fact as pasty white as any good High-Born Fereldan woman. Perhaps she wanted the unmarried men of the Landsmeet to see that, too, and imagine that the newly-reborn noblewoman's body was as soft and pleasing and unmarred as any other slag's. If they were by that tricked into marrying her they would be in for an unpleasant surprise.

Seanna came in from the adjoining room, where she'd been deeply engrossed in the tawdry romance Elilia had bought at the Circle shop. She was carrying the book with her.

"Listen to this: 'Caught within her web, Friedrich was helpless to resist the dusky pirate goddess, the ideal of woman, the idol of sex. Bared before him in all her glory he allowed her to push him unresisting onto the bed, to strip him of his noble garments. Wordlessly he reached out to her, wanting only to worship at the heaving altar of her bosom, but she laid him roughly by. He allowed her her will, for it was far stronger than his own, and above him she bucked, plunged, reared, rode
his pommel with wild abandon until at last he spent himself within her. Then, tenderly, she lifted his head and allowed him his reward. He suckled like a babe until a sudden pain wracked his body, and then another and another. Still he licked and nibbled and sucked, unwilling to relinquish her mountainous peaks even in the throes of what he now knew to be his death. At last he was stilled, face frozen yet in a rictus of pleasure and pain. Æsarella rose, closed his eyes, and smoothed back his hair, then went to the wash basin in the corner of the room and cleansed her nipples of the remaining poison. Task complete, she dressed and slipped silently into the night, to meet her ship and sail away forever from this dark and terrible place. No one could ever say she was unkind.

Elilia laughed until her eyes welled with tears. "What utter rubbish!" she cried. "Maker's breath, who comes up with this rot? 'Poisoned nipples'? Apart from the very real danger of the poisoner becoming the poisoned, I suppose any man would be quite willing and happy to die that way."

Seanna giggled, musical notes tinkling away in the air. "I like the reference to 'mountainous peaks.' Do you think they were like unto the Frostbacks, or more akin to the Anderfels?"

"Well they were poisoned, so I suppose that makes them Anders Tits," Elilia said, and both women burst out laughing. "For a moment there I couldn't tell whether it was meant to be a sex scene or the story of a woman breaking an ill-trained saddle horse."

Seanna opened her mouth to make some other commentary on the passage when she was forestalled by a knock at the outer door. She flung the book onto the settee, dropped down on top of it, grabbed up her needlework and began sewing as though the world were in desperate need of embroidered handkerchiefs. A pretty rose blush colored her porcelain cheeks.

Elilia composed herself with difficulty. "Come in."

The door opened and a dainty dark-haired elven woman curtseyed her way inside. Elilia recognized her at once. Erlina. Anora's personal handmaiden and, Elilia was quite certain, personal spy -- or worse, if worse was called for. That much didn't bother her, for it was only sensible that the queen employ agents who could walk in the shadows. The fact that the woman was even more certainly an unabashed Orlesian bard did, however, and her eyes narrowed. Anora had brains, undoubtedly, but her attachment to this woman smacked somewhat of a finger wave in the face of her father -- "I-do-what-I-want-the-way-I-want" -- and quite a risky one at that. Who knew how much information had passed from Ferelden to Orlais through this unassuming little wench?

"Yes?" she said in a voice calculated to freeze.

Erlina curtseyed again, the soul of deference. "My Lady the Queen sent me to help Your Grace
"I can help Elilia dress," Seanna spoke up defensively. Erlina curtseyed again.

"If it please Your Grace, Her Majesty wishes me to make available to you my skills with ladies' tresses and cosmetics."

Elilia sighed. She needed help, that was certain. Seanna wore her red hair in a becomingly boyish fashion, one that would not suit Elilia's oversized noggin at all. Seanna had no idea how to style up long hair, and Elilia herself could manage nothing more complicated for herself than a simple plait. About cosmetics, beyond the heavy, dramatic colors she used to make herself more warlike, Elilia knew nothing and Seanna had never even encountered so much as a pot of lip balm in the Circle tower. "Very well. Thank you, Erlina."

Seanna gave the bard a mistrustful glare but pretended to return to her needlework.

Erlina stepped more fully into the room and stood aside to allow a fleet of servants to bring in trays of Things Unknown. Elilia's heart sank in cold dismay at the array of pots, powders, and things she couldn't even begin to guess at -- any one of which could be a far more effective means of poisoning someone than a nipple -- curling tongs and papers, hair ribbons, hair pins, and even a box of jewelry, possibly the Queen's own. They arranged these trays upon the sideboard table and ran back out again when Erlina ordered them to fetch hot water for "Her Grace's bath."

"That isn't the correct form of address," Elilia said blandly.

"Pardon, Your Grace?"

"'Your Grace.' I'm nobody's Grace. That title is reserved for Teyrns and Teyrnas, Erlina, not the younger sisters of Teyrns." It was true, though it had not escaped her attention that Arl Eamon of Redcliffe had been called by that honorific, at least during the upheaval of the Blight. She had found it faintly enraging that it should be so, and it did occur to her to wonder if perhaps the man hadn't been lining his nest for an appointment she was most gratified he'd never gotten. She'd never told Loghain about the papers she'd found when they'd made the long, dismal trek back to Ostagar, papers that showed the Arl in collusion with Orlesian sympathizers who wanted Cailan to dispose of Anora in favor of a most horrifying marriage to Empress Celene of Orlais, a plan the foolish young King had seemed to be in favor of. It seemed to Elilia unlikely in the extreme that the Queen could be set aside without enraging her father, so they had probably been planning some form of "disposal" for Loghain as well, of perhaps a more permanent nature, and she also doubted very much that anyone involved other than perhaps the Idiot King himself thought that Anora could
simply be divorced. Eamon might have expected to swap out his Arling for a Teyrnir had his plans not been thwarted. Even after so many years she still kept those documents with her, ready and willing to use them the moment the pompous fool stepped out of line again.

Erlina's mouth drew up in a strange smile, a smile that mocked with secret knowledge. "My Lady the Queen instructed me that it was the proper form of address in this case, Your Grace, and I cannot go against My Lady's wishes."

The servants came back then, lugging pails of steaming water which they carried into the bath chamber to fill the carved-stone basin deep enough for full immersion. Erlina clapped her hands sharply and they scurried away, task complete.

"Undress, Your Grace, and have your bath. My Lady the Queen wishes you to look your absolute finest when you are presented to the nobles and take your rightful place as a Cousland heir. While you do this I will choose the proper style and colors for your hair and makeup." She shoved a bar of lavender-scented soap and a jar of something that smelled like apple blossoms into Elilia's hands. After an embarrassingly long moment, she realized it was an expensive lady's hair wash. For years she had simply made do with soap, despite how scummy it left her hair. Meekly, she sidled into the bath chamber and divested herself of the simple, comfortable jerkin and trousers she wore.

Her hot soak would have been lovely had she the leisure to enjoy it. As it was she scrubbed her skin clean with the flowery soap and then gave her hair a good lathering from the jar of hair wash. After she rinsed it out she hesitated, decided that if one was a help then two must be better, and washed her hair all over again. Then she climbed up out of the deep tub, assisted by Seanna, and gratefully allowed her to drape a velvet dressing gown over her bare shoulders. She tucked herself into it and belted it tightly. Erlina gestured her to take a seat on a low stool and began working the tangles from her hair with a fine comb.

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More bloody pomp and circumstance. It was all well and good that Elilia should have her proper birthright again, it was less than her due, but after a week of foolishness it was past time to stop with the parties and make with the planning. They'd given the Orlesians something to think about, hopefully, but they weren't going to quit just because they lost a legion. They had more.

He surveyed his appearance in the floor-length looking glass. Bloody awful, but Maker knows it could be worse. The black doublet was as unadorned as it was possible to get a tailor to make it and if the black leather trousers were a bit…fey…then at least they were not the ridiculous poofy striped satin things rich merchants and noblemen wore. Anora had insisted he dress formally rather than wear armor and presented to his eyes a hideous spectacle of the worst fashion had to offer men these days, and he argued her down to this. The smile of triumph that lit her face and eyes
once they'd reached an accord could mean only that she'd gotten exactly what she'd wanted from him. Oh well, he didn't mind so much being manipulated as long as his daughter was the puppet master. It was, as he'd told Elilia long ago, "the peculiar joy of parents to be terrorized by their children."

At one of the many ceremonies he'd been presented with a silver sash and a ceremonial sword, and Anora made him wear both now. He adjusted the fabric so that it lay smooth across his chest and belted on the mostly useless but nicely ornamental side arm. He didn't much care to wear a sword at his belt, given the choice, but he could always use the scabbard to trip somebody up, as long as it wasn't himself. Thus outfitted, he made for the Landsmeet chambers after a quick peek in at the children, who regarded this strange incarnation of their grandfather with a mixture of alarm and skepticism.

He took his position before the dais a bit to the left of the Queen's throne and stood at stern attention, one arm behind his back and the other hand resting lightly on the pommel of his sword. Most of the nobility was already packed into the galleries, talking loudly. He saw Cauthrien up there, speaking seriously to Fergus Cousland. She'd come in for the Landsmeet, leaving her soldiers at the border under the command of a trusted man, but she hadn't come back empty handed -- a caravan of supply wagons had come along with her, heaped high with armor and weapons taken from the Orlesian dead, and the outfit was followed by a number of fine horses that had been recovered, as well. It was a nice boon for the Fereldan army, and Cauthrien had told him that the mages who'd slipped away before the army left had returned, seeking employment and safety within their ranks. Evidently they had wanted to keep out of the Revered Mother's gaze, which was only sensible of them. It made him glad to know their forces could still count on magic to assist them.

"They really sped things up for us with burning the dead," Cauthrien told him. "I've got them scrying for scouts and troops on the other side of the Frostbacks, best they can. I've sent the ashes along to Val Royeaux with some dwarven merchants who seemed trustworthy enough to keep the promise they made in exchange for the sovereigns I paid them. They also seemed to understand the overall message we wanted to send, and liked the idea of being in on showing the Empress what all her cozening has reaped for her. They weren't even afraid to suffer for bearing bad news. I don't think they were born surfacers, and the way their eyes glittered when they spoke of 'getting into a little scrap' led me to believe they may once have been Warrior Caste."

The great doors opened, horns sounded, and a puffed-up herald announced "Their Royal Majesties King Alistair and Queen Anora." Alistair wore the golden plate of Kingship and the sight made Loghain growl low in his throat -- Why does he get to be comfortable? -- and Anora wore a regal gown of gold brocade. Arm in arm they swept toward the front of the room and Loghain took a knee as was proper. He marveled at the ease of movement in joints that had grown quite stiff and complaining in recent years, the pain still in abeyance. Those ashes were a wonder indeed.

Her Grace the Grand Cleric was announced after the King and Queen took their places, as the Chantry needed to be represented at such things. Loghain watched her curiously, wondering if
she'd received orders from the Divine yet, wondering what she would do about them when she did. The bloody Chantry had no right whatsoever to interfere in matters of Ferelden sovereignty but that was something the Old Bag in Val Royeaux -- and many Old Bags gone before -- never did seem to grasp. Ferelden should make like Tevinter and create its own bloody Chantry, separate from the Old Bag. For that matter, Ferelden should have its own independent Grey Wardens, too, because no tin-plated hypocrite a thousand miles away ought to have any power over anything necessary for Ferelden's protection, and the foreign Wardens proved they didn't give a damn during the Blight. There'd been time for scores of Wardens to come in from the Free Marches but all they got was one Orlesian who snuck in to spy.

Ah, in a perfect world. If they had the strength of arms and magic that Tevinter had, they could do whatever they bloody well wanted to.

The Grand Cleric droned on at some length about the momentous occasion of restoring a member of a fine, ancient lineage. Loghain let his mind wander freely and struggled mightily against the urge to yawn. Finally Elilia was called to the Landsmeet Chamber to present herself before the lords and ladies of Ferelden. The doors opened to admit her.

Loghain stared, stunned. The woman who walked with uncertain steps into the great chamber could not be Elilia Cousland. Puffed and powdered and painted, her hair curled and pinned so that it framed her face and fell in ringlets to her shoulders, she looked uncomfortable, unsure, and even a little bit frightened. The gown she wore was a blatant advertisement, from the way it exposed her fine breast to the way the tight corselet cinched in her figure and the velvet overskirt draped her hips, her womanliness was deliberately emphasized, her powerful physique altered as much as possible to make her appear demure and feminine. She looked beautiful, yes, but he thought she looked more beautiful still when she was clad in dragonbone mail and charging pell-mell at her foes.

She drew near, and he could hear her panting. At first he thought it was fright but then he realized by the way only her bosoms seemed able to move, and that upward instead of out, that the damned boning was preventing her from breathing properly. He hoped they'd wrap the ceremony quickly so she could get her girl to untie her and let her take a few good breaths before the ball began. She was already looking a little bit purple underneath the paint and powder.

But the Grand Cleric seemed to be in a verbose mood. She droned away about honor and dignity and noblesse oblige -- odd that such a concept would be in Orlesian words, given that they seemed not to know the first thing about it -- and Elilia suffered in proper silence. He saw it the moment her eyes rolled and moved to grab her before she could strike the hard stone floor.

"Maker's Breath -- Eli!" Alistair cried out. From the corner of his eye Loghain saw Fergus Cousland vault out of the gallery box to run to his sister's side. Loghain did the only thing that could help the poor woman and unceremoniously ripped the lacings right out of the back of her
ridiculous gown. With her lungs no longer constricted by the high demands of fashion she breathed easily, and in a moment opened her eyes.

Coming to with her corselet unbound, in the arms of Loghain and with the anxious faces of brother and King peering down at her, Elilia was more than justified in the deep scarlet blush that shone through her heavy cosmetics. "I'm fine -- I'm sorry, it was just so hard to breathe."

They helped her to her feet, and all the men were careful not to notice the way the cut-away front of the bodice sagged and threatened to allow a bosom to escape. The dress would need to be repaired but the ceremony wasn't over. There was a brief moment of impasse before Loghain cursed under his breath and stripped off his doublet. The Presentation continued with the Lady receiving her just honors wearing an oversized jacket over her fine gown and with the Queen's father in his appointed position, bare-chested and glowering with more ferocity than usual. The Grand Cleric evidently had the wind knocked out of her sails and wrapped things up quickly. It was a fiasco, but it was sure to give the nobility something to talk about for a good long while. As soon as it was over Seanna appeared from the shadows and whisked Elilia away for the needed repairs, and the rest of the assembled went to the Grand Hall for the ball. Loghain wouldn't blame Elilia if she didn't come out of her rooms the rest of the night.

A servant restored his doublet to him and he put it on, ignoring the nudges, winks, and whispers of the idiots who saw and repeated to each other the juicy gossip that had grown in the days since the world found out he and Elilia had slept together. Once. They hadn't even discussed that night again since that moment behind the supply wagons, he'd tried to bring it up but Elilia was dodging. Soon she'd be married off to some fat fool of a nobleman and there'd be no chance of a repeat performance, which was a pity. He had allowed himself to hope…well, never mind what he'd allowed himself to hope. It was a vainglorious thought indeed, the woman was less than half his age.

Anora had taken the debacle with customary aplomb, and acted now as though nothing could have gone more perfectly. As the guests grazed off the great tables set out with dainty treats and began what would undoubtedly be a night of heavy drinking she mingled and chatted brightly, briskly, and wittily with everyone, the perfect hostess. The minstrels were tuning up in their gallery. Elilia arrived, looking embarrassed but undaunted, gown repaired and her waist no longer so tightly laced into an unnatural shape. Arl Wulffe elbowed Loghain in the ribs.

"There she is. Looks a sight better not trussed up like a Harvestmere turkey, don't she? You're a lucky bastard, Loghain, and I hope you know it."

The minstrels gave the cue for dancers to partner. Anora swept up to him and hissed "Dance with her" at him in a harsh undertone.
"Anora, I don't dance."

"You know how. Elilia is taller than every other man here and would look ridiculous towering over her partner when all eyes will be upon her for the first dance. *Dance with her.*"

Loghain sighed and obediently went to offer the Lady of the Hour his arm.

The steps were slow and simple, and the formations not much different to some of the more ridiculous precision drills done for parades. There was grave dignity in the way man and woman circled each other, hands touching, curtsey and bow and back again, but Loghain wasn't feeling any of it. He disliked this sort of foolishness, and essentially the whole thing was ritualized courtship. Given what notions the assembled had in their heads about him and Elilia, this was the last thing they needed to see.

She smiled at him as they went through the motions. "Thank you for the loan of your doublet, Good Ser."

"Pray don't mention it, Milady," he said.

"I am most aggrieved that you were forced to finish out the Presentation thus unclad. I do hope it did not cause you too much degradation. If it is any comfort your chest is so well-furred that it very much appeared as though you were wearing a blouse."

"Thank you, Milady. In future I shall take care to always wear a blouse 'neath my doublet, in case of swooning damsels. Seriously, are you all right? I didn't know bloody corsets were so damned dangerous."

"Men never fully appreciate the torment women endure for their sake. I'm fine, really, thank you for your concern. If I were accustomed to cinching the way most women are I wouldn't have fainted."

"On the other hand, if you were most women you'd be dead a hundred times over by this point in your life. Chin up -- "

"-- and plod on. Yes, I shall."
They danced in silence for awhile, until Loghain said, "You do look lovely, even though the dress is evidently a weapon of self-destruction."

She colored prettily. "Thank you," she mumbled.

The dance ended, and new partners were chosen. Loghain disappeared into the shadows at the back of the hall to watch the dancers. Elilia danced with her brother and then her cousin Leonas Bryland, and then the music changed into a sprightly tempo and old Wulffe claimed her hand and lead her on a merry romp across the floor with a complete lack of dignity for one so aged. But Elilia seemed quite happy as she capered, so that was something.

Seanna sidled up to him. She had not yet completely gotten over her shyness around him. "You looked very well together," she said. "Her steps match better to yours than to any of the other men she's danced with."

"If she keeps dancing with her older relatives that's sure to remain the case," Loghain said. "How have you found the festivities, young lady, and life at the palace?"

"It is all very grand, Ser, and something I could never grow accustomed to, I think. Though I have enjoyed the experience very much, I shall be glad when we move on from this place."

Loghain sighed. "As will I, my dear. As will I."
A Future Unsettled and Undefined

Except for horseback lessons, which continued despite Alistair’s successful mounted charge at the battle, he and Loghain spent little time together, so it was unusual in the extreme for the young King to call the old warrior to his throne room late one night when he ought to have been sleeping.

“What do you need, Your Majesty?” Loghain asked, brow furrowed in worry.

Alistair looked worried, too. He paced back and forth on the dias. “I’ve been hearing many… rumors. They have me… upset.”

“Rumors about the Orlesians?”

“No. About my father.”

Loghain was confused. “What do you mean? What kind of rumors?”

Alistair stopped dead in the middle of the floor and stared hard at Loghain, something deep and disturbed in his hazel-greens. “Rumors that he’s alive out there somewhere.”

“My King, those rumors have always existed. People want him to be alive. People will repeat anything they hear from any dubious source simply because they do not wish to accept the truth. Alistair, your father is dead. Believe me, I know.”

“But how do you know?”

Loghain took a step back and drew himself up. “I… I went in search of him, of course. I spent two years at sea, looking for any trace of him. I found nothing. Nothing at all.”

“But how do you know?” Alistair was fairly pleading now.

“I… suppose I really can’t, but you can’t hold forever to hope that simply doesn’t exist,” Loghain said. “He was lost at sea. Finding someone whose ship sank is nearly impossible. You can’t hold
forever to hope that simply doesn’t exist.”

“He may have cast me off, but he was still my father.”

“I know. And he was the closest I ever had to a brother. If I truly believed he was out there somewhere, anywhere, I would go to him. You know I would.”

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Prince Duncan was now the proud master of a fine specimen of mabari pup, one of the stable master's litter. Mustard, he'd named her. Her coat was yellow. They were inseparable, as was only right, and it gave Loghain some small comfort in troubled times to know the boy would have a stout hound to watch over him. Elilia first met the pup on a visit to the nursery accompanied by Loghain and Seanna, and she expressed due appreciation for the creature, to its young master's delight.

"You are a lucky young man, to have so fine a hound," she said to the prince, while rubbing Mustard's oversized ears. "My Kiveal was my finest and most faithful companion for many years."

"What happened to him, Lady Cousland?" Duncan asked, with interest.

"He lived to a ripe old doggy age, at least for a mabari that had tasted Darkspawn blood. He passed away some time ago, however."

The boy's arms tightened around Mustard's neck protectively. "You must miss him."

"I do. I think of him often."

The boy pondered deeply for a time, while scratching the itchy places he already knew Mustard liked best to be scratched. "The stable master's bitch had a very large litter," he said at last. "Several of the pups haven't imprinted on anyone yet. Perhaps one of them would choose you."

She smiled sadly. "It is a nice thought. I miss very much having a good hound at my side, though I could never replace my dear old Kiveal."
"He can't be replaced," Seanna pointed out, "but he can be succeeded."

"Seanna's right," Loghain said, though he felt something of a hypocrite even as he said it. He'd never been able to contemplate another mabari in all the many years since Adalla died, though he'd certainly enjoyed being part of Kiveal's pack while it lasted. "You should have a look at them. Seems to me someone like you would have a better-than-average chance of being chosen."

"I would love to see the mother," Seanna said. "I'd never seen a mabari until I was with the army, and I was too afraid to get near. They're so big, they looked like they could swallow me entire. I should like to meet a full-grown hound up close, as long as I'm not alone."

"Well, I suppose we could take a peek, if you really want to see," Elilia said, as she tried and failed to hide her excitement at the thought of possibly having another mabari companion. "We can go down to the stables after tea."

Interested to see what would happen, Loghain went with them. He stayed well back, however, to avoid the possibility that one of the pups might accidentally imprint to him. There were four fine pups remaining from the very large litter of seven, two of them yellow like Mustard. The other two were quite unusual creatures, however. One, a male, was pure white with brilliantly blue eyes. The other, female, was black as midnight in the Deep Roads with a white blaze upon her snout and another upon her chest. All the pups clambered over each other in excitement to greet their distinguished visitor and sniff her hands and lick her face. Seanna made a valiant effort to approach the mother of the pups but an incurious glance in her direction from the great hound sent her slinking back to stand behind Loghain.

Eventually the yellow pups returned to their own amusements and the black female wandered off. The white male, however, clearly thought Elilia quite a satisfactory individual. He had chosen her. Loghain smiled despite himself. The black female was the biggest and most impressive of the pups but the white one had Elilia written all over him from the start and looked like he would grow to be quite the hound. White mabari were very rare. Elilia looked over at him, grinning, face covered in dog slobber and radiantly happy. Her gaze caught on something and she laughed. "Don't look now, but I think you've got an admirer."

He felt something heavy press against his leg. He looked down and saw the black female looking up at him, leaning hard against his shin, tongue lolling and stumpy tail wagging vigorously. "Go on, get back to your mother, now, you," he said.

The pup whined, urged forward slightly, then subsided, sat down on her haunches, and looked at him with dark amber eyes that implored.
"Does that mean she's imprinted?" Seanna asked, excitedly. "She's chosen you, hasn't she?"

"No, she just wants the wedge of cheese I've got in my pocket," Loghain growled. He took it out and tossed it in the direction of the stables and the puppy's mother. The pup paid no attention to the treat whatsoever, and the yellow pups got into a brief squabble over it.

Limpid puppy eyes waged battle with ice-blue eyes, and the blue eyes were the first to falter. Elilia laughed merrily. "Yield, Loghain, and have done with it. She's chosen you, and that's all there is to say about that. This is hardly the first time you've been defeated in single combat by a young bitch."

"Is she your chosen Champion, then?" Loghain mocked lightly, though he felt far from jocular. He knelt down and the pup put a paw on his knee. "You have atrocious taste in humans, youngling," he muttered as he scratched her ears. Ecstatic to receive attention from her chosen master, the pup closed her eyes and leaned into his hand, panting.

"What will you name him?" Seanna asked Elilia as she and her new pup joined them.

"He's white as snow, so I think I shall call him Haakon, after old Haakon Wintersbreath."

"Heathen," Loghain muttered under his breath, though with the half of a smile.

Elilia fisted her hands on her hips. "All right, Devout Andrastian, what shall your new friend's name be?"

He thought for a moment, and then realized he'd already found the proper name for such a fine dog. "Champion."

"But it's a girl!" Seanna blurted. Loghain cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Champions cannot be female?" he asked. "Elilia is Champion of Redcliffe, though of all her honors I'd call that the very merest. A few years back the city of Kirkwall declared itself a Champion that was also a woman, if I heard the news correctly."
"Right, you're right. Forget I said anything. It just sounded rather boyish to me at first. Champion -- it's a good name."

Loghain stood and found the stable master. He presented him with a handful of gold coins. In Ferelden only the unscrupulous sold mabari puppies, but when one was fortunate enough to be chosen by a pup bred by another, and one could afford to pay, a kind of gratuity was only proper. It showed that you were aware of the honor you'd received in being chosen, and expressed thanks for the care the dog had been given before it imprinted.

Duncan and Mustard watched all of this with great interest from the far side of the yard. The boy's keen eyes saw that not only had the Lady been chosen, but so too had Grandfather. And by the finest pups in the litter. Excited, he raced his pup back inside, eager to share the news with mother and father.

As the trio -- quintet now, with the dogs -- left the stables the stable master dropped to his knees before his own mabari, took her face in both hands, and roughed her up lovingly. "Pups gone to the young Prince, the Lady Cousland, and Teyrn Loghain himself! Mirani, my lass, you've done well by your babies, you have! You're the Queen of Mabaris!"

The dog barked her complete agreement to this sentiment.

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He woke with a start and reached for the blade he kept on the bedside table, but in a heartbeat he registered the sound of snuffling and his memory returned. He lifted the sleeping fur and peered beneath it to see a pair of shining eyes staring back at him from somewhere near his knees. Champion had nosed her way under the covers at the foot of the bed and started burrowing her way up to the head of it.

"This will not stand, young lady," he said as severely as he could manage, "if it should happen that there is a human lady in this bed with me some night." The dog's stump of a tail wagged briskly and she whined her understanding. "Come on up, then, if such is your intention."

She bellied up and stuck her head out from under the blankets. She licked his face to show her gratitude and stretched out beside him with her head resting on his chest. He scratched her ears and that itchy spot on the side of her neck -- her human had smart hands, such a blessing! -- and petted her a bit before falling asleep again, his hand still at rest upon her back. Champion missed her
mother, and her brothers and sisters, but the sound of her human's steady heartbeat was soothing and soon she was asleep herself. She was not homesick, for the part of her that knew this was her proper master knew also that where he was she was home.

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Good King Alistair didn't want to hear Loghain's opinions on the matter of the likelihood of another Orlesian attack, but to his credit he did not close his mind and refuse to see and hear, as his brother almost surely would have done, at least the Cailan who was so eager to open Ferelden's borders to the Chevaliers in the first place. The worn, haggard look in his face seemed to say that he'd known all along it was too much to hope they were free and clear.

"What do you think they'll do?" he asked, dully.

"For now I believe they'll think. We took them by surprise, and they'll be wondering just how strong we are in our allies, how much support we can mount against them from dwarves and werewolves and mages. We need to use this time, My King, to strengthen our borders the best we can. Our biggest weakness is our coastline -- we're shit for sailors and our 'navy' is a joke. We have a large population of unemployed, put every man jack of them with a strong back to work strengthening harbor fortifications. These are the main priorities here, here, and here," he said, pointing out Denerim, Amaranthine, and Highever ports. "If you still have resources you should do what you can here at West Hills and Gwaren. Is Old Ironsides afloat?"

The King looked momentarily puzzled, then sheepish. "She's in dry dock."

"Well get her out of dry dock and get her seaworthy. She's the only real for-the-purpose warship we've got, and while it's nowhere near enough it is at least a start. Hire mercenary vessels to patrol our waters if you can find any that seem reasonably trustworthy. Send other vessels again to Kirkwall and all the other seaports that took in Ferelden refugees and do whatever you can to bring more of them back -- reinstatement of rank, full salary, whatever you can to get more soldiers on the field. Offer jobs and citizenship, too, and see if you can't lure a few of the poorer Marchers over with opportunities. There's going to be plenty of work for everyone, and we need all hands. Start courting allies, too, in the Free Marches, yes, but I suggest sending emissaries to Nevarra, far as it is. They hate the Orlesians as much as we do and have better resources to fight them. Perhaps they can't be persuaded to send us direct assistance but if they could be convinced that this would be an opportune time to strike at Orlais' western border that could only be a help to us. And Alistair…?"

"Yes?"
"It's time to stop accepting the excuses of the Banns who've shown reluctance thus far to honor their obligations to the Crown. If any of them still wish to hem and haw about sending their forces to aid their country, you need to show them what they risk by disobeying their rightful King and Queen."

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Anora sipped her tea and spoke of inconsequential things, and that worried Elilia. If the Queen didn't want to get right to the point then the Queen had something up her capacious sleeve. Eventually she set her delicate cup aside and spoke more directly, though Elilia was sure she was still not getting the full story.

"I spoke to Ser Cauthrien recently. She's been in charge of my father's former Teyrnir for some time now, you are aware, protecting my daughter's interests for the day when she may take her rightful place as Teyrna. It is rather difficult to get word to and from the village with the Imperial Highway running through the Blight Lands and the Brecilian Passage often beset by werewolves, so I was eager to hear her account of how things are going there. She is rather frazzled, poor soul, by the demands of rule, though she's done admirably well. Are you aware of the changes that have come over my little home village since the Blight?"

"I've never been there, Your Majesty, but I understand that many inhabitants of the worst-hit areas fled there hoping to make passage to the Free Marches."

"And many found they could not afford it. And later many found there were no ships to be had, for once the captains left Ferelden behind they did not choose to return. The Darkspawn, for whatever reason, never turned their aggression much toward the village, and so many chose to remain there, feeling it was safer than trying to leave. They live there still. Gwaren has become rather a large town -- almost a city."

"So I've heard."

"After hearing Cauthrien's report on the situation there, I have concluded, and the King agrees, that Gwaren may now require the services of a Bann to oversee the town, and take pressure off the one in charge of overseeing the wider scope of the teyrnir. It was never large enough to require more than its mayor in the past, but we must accept that times have changed."

"Bann of Gwaren," Elilia stated, tasting the words. It would be better to be Bann of a town far isolated from the rest of the nation than to be the wife of some pompous blowhard here in the center of it all.
"Cauthrien is quite keen on the idea. She is very hopeful that it comes to pass."

Elilia felt a small twinge of prickled pride at being the underling of a woman of no noble birth or official station, but swallowed it. She hadn't been a Cousland again for long enough to get uppity about such things. "Provided I'm given the time to complete the mission your father and I are planning, I suppose I would not be adverse to the idea, if Your Majesty wishes it. Am I then to be Bann of Gwaren?"

Anora's perfectly-plucked blonde eyebrows rose into her hairline. "Maker, no. Cauthrien is to be Bann, Lady Cousland, not you. It is a far better reward for her service than the position she has now. The conferment of noble status, her own vote in the Landsmeet. Right now she has the power only to advise my vote on behalf of Gwaren. She will also not be spread so thin trying to juggle the demands of city and teyrnir. Even my father had his difficulties, and he had not the burden of a large town at his doorstep to bother over."

Elilia was confused, and told the Queen as much. "Who then is to be King's Protector of Gwaren?"

Anora waved a hand over her teacup as though she waved off steam. "The position will be dissolved. My intention is to install a proper Teyrna, provided I have that Teyrna's assurance that my daughter will be her lawful heir."

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The Grand Cleric at last came before the King and Queen with word from the Divine. The old priest looked ill-pleased by the news she had to convey.

"Her Grace the Divine implores me to reason with Your Majesties," the woman said. "She does not wish to see more bloodshed. Surely the rulers of Ferelden can see they are better off to surrender than to engage in endless battle?"

Anora’s lips compressed into a tight white line. Alistair jumped up out of his throne and swore. “So we’re supposed to lay down arms and give up our nation just because we’re fucking smaller than Orlais?”

Instead of taking affront, the Grand Cleric looked only as though she would like to add a few choice words of her own. "I fear for too long has the hierarchy of our Chantry been tied to the
fortunes of the Empire. They have forgotten their just place above the petty tyrants who seek to grab power and wealth for themselves at the cost of those who are weaker than they. I cannot in good faith counsel appeasement with Orlais, no matter that my duty calls me to stand behind the word of the Divine. All of Thedas should take alarm at this precedent of the Chantry deciding the fate of free nations. The Empress and her knights and nobility believe themselves the chosen of the Maker, and set themselves to be greater than those beneath them, demigods who are free to take what they will from those less than they, as if the lower classes were less even than animals. To my way of thinking, if the Maker were truly to look down upon Thedas and decide to take a hand in the way things are run here, He would smite Orlais with both fists."

Too bad we didn't call Loghain in to hear this, Alistair thought. I think he'd jump up and kiss this woman full on the mouth.

But the Grand Cleric had more to say. "I do not wish to precipitate war, you understand. I'm sure you are as painfully aware as I of Orlais' strength of arms and resources. If they truly wish to retake Ferelden for their own then I fear greatly for the nation. I have sent a messenger to the Divine, imploring her to reconsider her position. I do not think I have much chance of changing her mind, but hopefully I can buy Ferelden a bit of extra time. I will hold her off as long as I can. If I might be so bold as to suggest, Your Majesties, it would seem to me a fine idea to seek all the allies you can muster against this impending danger. Perhaps if our armies are fortified strongly enough, Orlais will decide it is simply not worth the effort."

That seemed to be the end of it, but a strange half-smile curved one corner of the Grand Cleric's mouth. "The phylacteries of the mages of the Ferelden Circle are here in Denerim, in a locked storeroom under the Chantry. If they were destroyed it would be a small disaster, at least if the Circle were to be reestablished, so I do hope Your Majesties will say nothing of this to any but your most trusted advisors, for fear of the unscrupulous. But that's as may be. Given that the untrained eye might have believed us to be aided by magic in our defeat of their first assault, I believe it very likely that the Empire will find whatever magical aid they can to fight against us. If Your Majesties were able to find more of those clever souls who were able to mimic magical talent so very closely, I believe that would be most wise."

"You are not afraid of the consequences of using…mimicked magic?" Alistair asked, cautiously.

The Grand Cleric's smile was tight and hard. "I remember the Occupation, Your Majesty, quite vividly. Not all of my Revered Mothers will agree, but for myself I'd sooner risk billeting ten maleficarum than one sodding Chevalier."

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She slipped through the darkened streets of the lower market in a black woolen cloak, hood drawn
up to shroud her face. She'd left Seanna behind, not wanting to risk her in this insane venture, and Haakon as well. The pup had begged and pleaded to follow but his white fur was a beacon. She commanded him to stay and guard Seanna.

The front doors of the Chantry were unbarred, and she slipped inside. A quick peek around the interior showed the place was eerily silent and utterly deserted, which should never be true of a place of worship the size of this. Either she was walking into a trap or the Grand Cleric had sent the priests and the old bat of a Revered Mother off on nighttime errands. If the former turned out to be the case she had her sword in harness on her back under the cloak. If it was the latter she would stand in the palace square in full light of day and declare the Grand Cleric Ferelden's own White Divine. She slipped into the vestry and down the narrow stairs into the underbelly of the house where dwelt the Brides of the Maker.

She found the locked door, wished vainly for a moment that her training had included the fine art of lock picking or that she had thought to ask Loghain along -- he probably knew a few of the more "practical" arts of survival, even though he would just scoff and tell her that breaking into locked rooms was "not my area of expertise." Leliana would have been a useful companion on this mission but she had gone back to her beloved Chantry and once more renounced her bardic training. Zevran was off somewhere waging war against the Antivan Crows. Nathaniel and Sigrun were busy in Amaranthine. With a sigh for the good old days, Elilia brought her fist down hard on the lock. The wood of the door splintered and it popped open. Messy, but perfectly adequate to the purpose. Her hand hurt, though, even through the dragonbone gauntlet.

Note to self: make friends with a trusty cloak-and-dagger type keen on adventure. A good lock-picker and trap-snapper was a must on any well-organized expedition.

She more than half expected to be beset by enraged templars the moment the door was open, but the room proved as empty as the rest of the building. She crept inside and found the racks of crystal vials containing the blood of scores of mages. She carefully loaded them into the pack she’d brought along. She would destroy them someplace more private, and wash the blood away. She would not leave it to pool and possibly be collected again by resourceful priests. Finally she found the most important name -- Seanna Surana.

"They still have you caged, Little Bird," she whispered, "but that ends tonight."

With a brief prayer of thanksgiving for clerics who knew the difference between what was law and what was right, she hurried back out of the house of worship and into the night.

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It was much as it had been in days long past, countless hours planning and drafting blueprints for defensive structures, setting up training programs, hearing reports on military activity. Part of him
wished to be dead and not have to see this, not have to deal with all of this again. During the Rebellion he'd been a young man who could not honestly conceive of failure, and with few ties to worry him. Now it was different, he'd tasted the bitterness of defeat and knew it could be his again, and the stakes seemed so very much higher.

Every spare moment found him with the children, either enjoying their company or standing guard over them while they slept. He very seldom slept at all these days, even when he felt he needed it. There was so much to do, and so very little time. At his side always was Champion, already as dignified and stalwart a hound even with her puppyish awkwardness as a dog of many years and campaigns. Such a fine animal, a worthy successor to beloved Adalla. Their bond grew stronger daily.

Even in the face of bustling preparations, Elilia seemed perfectly optimistic. He wondered at that. Was it a brave face she wore, to keep those around her from despair? Or did she truly believe that they'd managed to land a blow powerful enough to shake the foundation of the Empire? He had to bear in mind that no matter how hard she'd toiled to prepare for the defeat of the Blight, essentially it had all come down to one grand battle -- cut the head off the demon and save the world. Leaderless, the Darkspawn were no longer a threat. All of her battles, right down to the one she fought against him to end the civil war, were very much the same: prove your might to the adversary and accept its surrender. Real wars, against ordinary enemies, were a bit different. If he sent an assassin to Val Royeaux tonight to stab Celene in the heart then tomorrow there would be a new head on the snake, probably all the more eager for Ferelden blood because of it. It might slow them down, and if he had a worthy assassin on hand he might think to attempt it, but the only way to be sure and dissuade the invaders was to catch them each time they made a sortie, and crush them into the dirt. Ferelden…didn't have the strength to keep that up for long, not as they stood now. The little pouch of ashes he carried always at his belt seemed to carry also a small weight of hope. If it worked, if he could restore even a portion of the once-rich Ferelden breadbasket, if they could feed their soldiers…

They had to leave soon, no matter how dire the situation here at the capital. He took out his map once more and added a lighter outline defining the many hundreds of acres of land that could be worked but which now produced no more than stunted, withered crops that tasted bad and were likely poisoning the poor people who depended on them for their daily provender. If the ashes worked, the crops growing there now might by harvest grow strong and fruitful. If they recovered no more than that it would be a bountiful miracle indeed. If they could save the truly Blighted lands where nothing would grow, then if the nation still stood in the spring they could sow crops and pasture animals enough to feed the country and every ally they could draw into it. He still hated to leave with things so up in the air, but between the two of them he believed Alistair and Anora were equal to the task of carrying out and even improving his plans for defense.

Well, tell the truth and spurn the Black Divine, he was counting on Anora perhaps a bit more than Alistair. He was a good lad and far better as King than Loghain had ever expected he'd be, but he was still…Alistair.
He moved in darkness to Baby Anora's crib side. The little girl wrestled with demons in her sleep, and by the triumphant smile on her face she was getting the better of them. Dear little thing, she had the makings of a legendary warrior. He smoothed back her unruly curls and kissed her, and the nightmare loosed its grip upon her slumber. He covered her little, cold feet with the blankets and moved on to Duncan's bed. The boy slept peacefully, his dreams untroubled, the dark spirits of the Fade perhaps held at bay by the talisman of the fine silverite dagger that lay beside the pillow, carefully sheathed, and the mustard-yellow pup that sprawled across the foot of the bed. The boy was thoughtful and knew the value of both caution and boldness, which many of his elders had yet to learn so well. He was well on the way to becoming a just and wise King.

But no child's future was set, and there would be no future for them at all if they did not live. He remembered what the Orlesians did to the Theirin family the last time they felt Ferelden needed to be made an example of. Unspeakable tortures would be visited upon the children, and their deaths would be public spectacle. He could not bear such a cruel fate. He would not leave them to the "mercy" of Orlais. If the kingdom looked to be overthrown and there was no escape he would take his father's blade and slit their throats himself.
Loghain entered the ladies' room fully intent on having his say, but when he saw Elilia sitting primly in the big wingback armchair with her legs drawn up beneath her, working daintily with a lap-sized shuttle, he completely forgot what he wanted to have out with her. Unperturbed, Champion padded into the room and flopped down on the floor next to her brother after a friendly sniff of greeting.

"What are you doing?" he asked in some dismay. Somehow the idea that Elilia would be making lace seemed to him the death knell of any last shred of hope he had that she would ever be his again. Probably had something to do with a trousseau. She was preparing herself for her new noble household and her new noble husband, Maker curse his name whoever he was.

"Tatting," she answered, with a prim set to her mouth.

"Tatting," he repeated, unable to think of one further word to say.

"Yes, tatting. It is a fine pursuit for an accomplished lady. I shall also take up spinning, and will practice while we are on the road. Then I shall always have a ready supply of fine handmade thread with which to tat."

"Spinning. We're not hauling a bloody spinning wheel across the breadth of Ferelden." He was fairly certain now that she was having him on, but he could not be sure how far.

"I shall carry a distaff and spin by hand, like the old women who spin by the side of the road in small villages with a gimlet eye for passers by," she said archly, and then her expression crumbled and she laughed. "Actually, Seanna finished working the loveliest embroidered handkerchief and I rather rashly promised to make her a border of lace in my mother's old family pattern, before I remembered that I haven't tatted lace in ages. It's coming back to me in littles. 'Did you want something? I suppose I have a moment.'"

"I wanted something, but you quite broke my chain of thought, and it shall be difficult to pick it up again if you persist in mocking me," he said. He scratched his head thoughtfully. Elilia espied the book in his other hand.

"What are you reading?" she asked, further distracting him from the point of his visit and not caring a whit.
He was startled by the question. "What? Oh..." Sheepishly he showed her the book. "It's... Duncan's primer on Natural Philosophy, actually. With things so unsettled my mind has been a whirl, and now and then it crops up some ridiculous question and I've no peace until I've found an answer. But so far the answer only compounds the question. I thought that a book meant for young schoolchildren would be easier for me to comprehend but I suppose I'm further behind than I thought."

"What question were you trying to answer?" Elilia asked.

He grimaced. "Where does the sun go when it sets?"

She blinked. "You asked yourself this question? Duncan didn't ask you?"

He shrugged. "It just occurred to me that I hadn't a clue. It just doesn't look that far away, yet it certainly doesn't set in Ferelden. It crosses the whole of our nation and Orlais, and Nevarra too, and Maker knows how much further beyond, which means that it must be unbelievably far away, and fucking enormous since the whole of Thedas can see the damned thing. The book doesn't say anything about that. It talks about the edges of the earth but it doesn't make a claim as to where exactly they might be, just that they're somewhere beyond the place where our maps end. It makes it sound like the world just stops, in a nice straight line, which makes no sense to me. What keeps the water from just draining right over the edge? Is there a wall to stop it?"

Elilia was looking at him as if at a madman, but he plowed on relentlessly, on a roll. "The book says the sun circles us, but is that true? Perhaps the sun is perfectly still and we're the ones in motion, too used to it even to notice! And was the world truly made like a piece of parchment, forests and mountain ranges and towns all laid out on the flat by the Maker or whomever, or is it more like a stone upon which moss has grown? If I could stride across the earth and water at the same speed as the sun would I eventually come to the edge and fall off as the scholars claim or would I find myself back where I started from in a single day as the sun seems to? And how is it the sun and moon and stars seem just to hang there in the sky? Surely there is something holding them, just as something must be holding us. Could we be like frogspawn, safe and oblivious in a bubble of air we cannot think beyond as the stone to which we are attached tumbles about in a stream surrounded by all these other bright, shiny stones?"

Elilia shook her head. "Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown," she said, sounding as if she quoted - probably that Bard fellow everybody was talking about these days. "You need a change of scenery, I think. I'll be glad when we leave this place."

Seanna spoke up from the next room. "I think he has some good questions, if he lacks a bit in
background information." She came to the doorway. "Seeking answers to questions like those are how we further our knowledge, not by simply accepting what we are told at face value. Loghain has the makings of a fine philosopher."

Elilia laughed heartily at that. "Oh, what a capital joke it would be to retool the Great Pragmatist into an airy-fairy philosopher! He might actually manage to cut through much of the foolishness of that breed and find some actual truth, too. It would keep him occupied between wars, at any rate."

Seanna smiled crookedly. "Pragmatism is a philosophy of its own," she pointed out. To Loghain she continued, "I believe that you have spent much of your life absorbing whatever you could learn about the arts of warfare and military strategy and did not bother with much else, and it is clear from your knowledge of these things that you have a fine mind, but I should think it wants more than that. The brain needs nourishment and exercise the same as any other muscle, and yours is crying out for better food and more complex work. I dare say Elilia is right, a man like you could have the dedication and even the genius to answer some of the unanswered questions of this world, if you chose to pursue them. Read your primer, even if the questions vex you. Feed your head."

"But I would recommend getting your own copy, or else the Prince will be called to task for it with his tutors," Elilia said, and she would smile and make a joke of it, the harpy. "Get a book written for grownup minds and not for children, too. My old tutor Aldous always said that the printing houses foist the worst nonsense on young scholars and that it was misery itself to reteach them properly."

"It's true," Seanna said, rather darkly. "The Chantry has them print schoolbooks a certain way so that young minds don't get 'dangerous ideas,' whatever that means."

Loghain laughed harshly. "Perhaps I'll warn Anora that her son is being taught to be a vacuous fool of the sort the Chantry is so fond of," he said. "I'll look into the matter of a better book. It would be something to keep me occupied between wars, though perhaps my mind is exactly the sort that should not be trusted with information that leads to 'dangerous ideas.'"

Seanna smiled, a bit of her old shyness evident in it. "While we are traveling I would be glad to help you as much as I can -- in the Circle life was nothing but study, so I'm quite used to it."

"So what is it you came here to talk about, Loghain?" Elilia asked, a bit sharply. Was that a note of jealousy he heard in her voice? He smirked at it, but the truth was that he could not speak of the matter he had wanted to broach in front of Seanna, though she seemed aware of his interest in Elilia. Asking her to bed him tonight, even if never again, was just too personal a request to be made in public, no matter how close the friendship might be. He grabbed for a topic that had been much on his mind of late, when not consumed with foolish questions about the mysterious workings of the sun and stars.
"I was wondering if you had anything to contribute to my plans for foiling potential assassination attempts," he said. "I've spoken to Their Majesties about increasing their personal guard, but we both know a clever Bard would have no trouble infiltrating the palace regardless." Like that bloody fool of a Bard everyone, Elilia included it seems, was quoting these days. He claimed to be Fereldan but who could know for sure? Just because he was balding and rather paunchy didn't mean he was harmless.

Elilia huffed. "First thing I'd do is get rid of that Erlina," she growled, in a fair imitation of Loghain. He sighed.

"I know. Believe me, I know. But Anora says she knew from the first that Erlina was sent here by the Empress to spy on our court, and that she won the girl over. She is now, according to Anora, completely loyal to Ferelden. Or to Anora, more likely. I'd still prefer to kill her regardless, but Anora won't hear of it. And if she is loyal then I suppose she's quite valuable. She has at least agreed, for the present, not to let the woman out of her personal sight during the day, and to lock her in her rooms at night. Not that this calms me much." A thundercloud descended upon his countenance.

"Some of the mages who returned with the army are working for the King and Queen now, correct?" Seanna said. "There are a few simple spells that can test food and drink for poison, and you could put a couple of them to scrying in shifts for assassins. It's not foolproof, but it would certainly be a grand help."

Loghain slapped his thigh. "Seanna, you're a godsend, truly. A fine idea. I'll relay it to the King and Queen at once."

Elilia sniffed. "Yes, do. I've nothing for you myself, and if Seanna has no further suggestions then I'll thank you to leave -- I'm expecting a gentleman caller at any moment and your presence would be most inconvenient."

Loghain stared at her, horrorstruck. A gentleman caller? She would fling it in his face like that? He had known her to be a foul harpy, yes, but he had never thought her cruel. Much deflated, he bowed himself out. With a dubious glance at Elilia, Champion followed.

Seanna put a hand on Elilia's shoulder. "That was rather heartless of you, really," she said gently.

Elilia laughed. "He had it coming. Besides, I don't want him to know about my plans. There are
good reasons why I don't like to bring up Alienages, particularly this one, with Loghain. Perhaps he'd like to be given a chance to make some sort of restitution there but he's hardly someone who could casually begin buying up property without it being called to Vaughan's attention."

Seanna shook her head. "I don't believe he came here to speak of assassination attempts or philosophy, Elilia, and neither do you. You've been blocking his every attempt to speak to you privately since we returned to Denerim. If you want him you should tell him so, for I believe he wants you. If you do not want him then you should not be jealous if another woman speaks kindly to him. And it is cruel to leave him hanging onto hope if there is none."

Haakon picked himself up off the floor and stuck his head in Elilia's lap, nudging aside the shuttle. He'd smelled the mating-smell on the male human and could hardly blame him for wanting the Mistress for his own, and Haakon was hopeful that she would relent because then he and his sister would be proper packmates again, which would be wonderful. And the Mistress would have a litter, and Haakon would like very much to be guardian of her pretty furless human pups. The Mistress scratched his ears.

"I'm not jealous," Elilia said defensively, "and I'm not hanging him out to dry, I'm just...ugh, it's complicated. I'd rather he just...grabbed me and bent me over a barrel than to actually have to...talk about it."

"You would not," Seanna said firmly but kindly, "want him to rape you. Trust me, I know whereof I speak." And she did, too, Elilia realized with a pang of regret at her careless words. "You don't want to talk? Fine, don't talk -- but you'd better act quickly, or he's simply going to assume you don't want him and he won't spend a great deal of time pining for what he believes he cannot have. Get him alone somewhere tonight and give him a kiss, or a caress, or a good hard fondle if you've the privacy and he's not wearing an armored codpiece. I'll be safe enough alone for one night," she added, with a sly smile.

"Seanna, you clever witch! You just want the bed to yourself!" Elilia cried, grinning.

Seanna laughed. "Well I confess, it would be nice to have one night to myself. You're such a blanket thief!"

The ladies laughed together and chatted a bit until an uncertain-looking servant came to announce "That dwarven-bloke Your Ladyship was expectin'."

"Ah, yes. Send him in, please," Elilia said, not even noticing the servant's odd looks or how inappropriate it might be considered to be receiving a guest -- a male guest, and a dwarf -- in her
bedroom, even if she didn't have the luxury of a receiving parlor. The stout man entered, red-haired and bearded. He reminded her a bit of Oghren in look, but with more dignity and less drunkenness, which admittedly was not a high bar. "Ser Gorim, so good of you to come. I had it from our mutual acquaintance...when we first encountered one another that you were once Second to a prince of Orzammar, and Warrior Caste. Pursuing inquiries of my own in recent days I have heard nothing but that you are a man of excellent faith and fair-handedness."

Undwarvenly fair-handedness, by account of most of the people she'd talked to, but he certainly didn't need to hear that.

He inclined his head slightly. "My Lady does me too much honor. I am but a simple merchant now, but I make an effort to live by the code of conduct insisted upon by the good Prince I served, Ancestors bless and keep him."

"I need a man I can trust to carry out a work of good faith for me. A commission, if you will, though dwarven smithing has no part in it."

She told him her plan, and though he seemed a bit confused by her intentions. The Alienage was, to him, just another Dust Town and he did not know why the nobility should be so interested in purchasing space there, but he understood the instructions well enough. She had him repeat them, to be sure.

"Make inquiries about the Hahren's house of its owner and secure its purchase. Wait a month, then send another whom I trust but who cannot be easily linked to me to purchase another property. Repeat, varying the cooling-off interval and never sending the same agent twice, until the Alienage is fully in your hands."

"Exactly. I give you five sovereigns to give in payment to each agent, and twenty for you yourself at the outset. There will be an additional ten sovereigns to you when the task is successfully completed."

"It will be done, My Lady. Er..."

"Yes?"

"What am I to do if the city..."
If the city falls to the Orlesians. Elilia smiled grimly. "What everyone else must do if that unfortunate event happens -- flee and save your own skin, and good luck to you. But it won't happen. The King and Queen are preparing against the worst, and Loghain is at his brutal best in thinking of all the ways the Orlesians could invade and all the ways to block them. Ferelden will stand."

The dwarf bowed. "As you say, My Lady, and so may it be."

*****

Loghain entered the throne room to find a mild state of pandemonium. His first thought, with the idea of assassins fresh in mind, was that he was too late and an attempt had been made, but when he found King Alistair cradling a fussy Baby Anora and wearing an expression of pure parental overreaction he realized the panic was of a more domestic nature.

"What happened?" he growled, unsettled and pissed off about it.

"Baby Anora swallowed a silver," Alistair groaned. "I've sent for one of the mages we hired."

Loghain felt a grin start up despite himself. "Sent for a mage? Whatever for?"

Alistair goggled at him. "The princess, your granddaughter, swallowed a silver," he repeated, slowly and carefully, as though he spoke to an imbecile.

"And what? Has she crapped out a hundred bits? That would be the time to send for a mage, I think."

The mage arrived then, to Alistair's evident relief, and cast a quick spell on the struggling girl. "Ah, yes, it is a silver. It's already reached the child's stomach," the man said.

"Well…get it out," Alistair said desperately. The mage, silver-haired and probably used to the idiocy of the relatively inexperienced even if he'd not had much opportunity to see the ways in which worried parents fretted over the smallest things, gave him a look of deep pity.
"Your Majesty, there is no spell that can will the coin out of the child. I could give her a dose of ipecacuanha, but that would be most unpleasant for the Princess and is really not necessary at this point. The coin will drop into the intestine in a matter of time, and will pass in the usual way."

"In other words, 'It'll all come out in the end,' so to speak," Loghain said.

"If the child experiences stomach pains, or if in three days' time there has been no sign of the coin then measures should be taken to remove it," the mage said. "But there is little to fear. The coin has nicely rounded edges and is not large. A laxative may be needed if it does not, as my Lord says, 'come out in the end,' but I shouldn't think it likely. Children swallow inappropriate things, Your Majesty. I do not think the Princess will come to harm over this misadventure."

"They also stick inappropriate things up their noses," Loghain pointed out helpfully. "With Anora it was a little wooden chair from the dollhouse her grandfather made her. That hurt, I can assure you. She never stuck anything up her nose again, I'll tell you."

Alistair clapped his hands over his daughter's ears. "Don't give her ideas, I beg you," he implored. Then he sighed. "Duncan wasn't half as difficult at this age. My daughter shall be the death of me."

"Fathers of daughters always believe that," Loghain said. "I believed it manys' the time myself. Let the poor tyke go free and listen to this idea I got from Elilia's mage-friend. It's worth the hearing, I assure you."

He ordered Champion to lead the child back to the nursery, which made the girl very happy. Champion walked with adult gravitas while the child clung to her fur and babbled about the "pitty goggy." Certain of the child's words -- "No!" "Don't!" "Shan't!" -- were very clear and perfectly enunciated, but she had trouble still with anything beyond imperatives. Loghain saw her out of the throne room and then told the King Seanna's plan.

"I know the spells she speaks of," the mage said approvingly. "I could teach the others if they have not learned them. It would be an honor for us to serve Your Majesties so. If I may add, I also know several spells for removing poison from food and drink, just in case."

"The Seneschal gave me these," Alistair said, sheepishly holding up a bauble that appeared to be a plain polished stone set in gold and depended from a golden chain with a heavy fob to weight the end. "I made Anora take one, though she laughed at me. He said that King Maric and Queen Rowan used them to guard against poison in the aftermath of the war with Orlais. They do work, don't they?"
"Bezoar stones? Yes, Your Majesty, they are effective against some poisons -- most notably arsenic -- but not proof against all. Still, it was wisely done."

Loghain left the King and the mage to hammer out the details of bringing in the other mages and setting up shifts to scry for assassins. He wandered without real aim toward the nursery, but a strong hand latched onto his arm before he was halfway there. Elilia pulled him into the empty room and kissed him roughly. "Bar the door," she said, voice husky. He did as bidden.

"What about your 'gentleman caller?" he asked, with a touch of bitterness. Elilia laughed guiltily.

"It was a merchant, from whom I wished to hire a commission," she said, blushing. "I'm sorry I misled you. A demon of pride made me do it."

"I've been battling my own demons lately," he admitted. "Where you're concerned, however, they've been only demons of desire."

Her blush deepened. "I don't want to talk," she said.

"No more do I," Loghain admitted, "but I believe we need to. Elilia, soon Anora will have you married, you know this is so."

"It is her intention, surely, she made that clear, but I don't think she will command it. Alistair is not wholly in step with her on this point, I gather, and she won't press him on it -- for now."

"If she intends you for that bastard Vaughan I don't think I shall be able to stand for it," Loghain said, conversationally despite the fact that the mere thought of her going to the bed of that insufferable creature made his blood boil. "I shall kill him with my two bare hands."

Elilia laughed. "That was what I thought I would do myself," she confessed, "but it isn't Vaughan she's set her warrant on, Loghain. It's you."

"What?"
She nodded. "She wants to make Cauthrien Bann of Gwaren, and give the Teyrnir to me -- provided I'll sign the proper legal documents making the Princess my heir. My own children," she said that with some dripping irony, "will then have the right to claim the Teyrnir if something should happen to Baby Anora, or will be made heirs of Highever if my brother will agree."

He thought about it from his daughter's perspective. "That would give her a strong footing in the Landsmeet, to be sure," he mused. "Cauthrien idolizes Anora, always has. You will feel free to disagree at your whim but you're often of a mind with Anora and hold good sway with the Landsmeet. Fergus would have an heir of his sister's body with strong ties to the Crown. But...me?"

"She wants your title restored to you, of course," Elilia said. "I would be her means to that end, as Alistair would likely never consent any other way. I would be the one with the Vote but I'm sure Anora assumes you'd be the one doing the ruling in Gwaren."

He held her at arm's length. "And what do you say about this?" he asked, looking her in the eye critically.

She squared her shoulders. "I say good luck to you on that, Milord."

He laughed and drew her back into his arms. "I'll toss you for it, Milady," he said, well aware of the double-entendre in his words. She giggled, evidently understanding him quite well.

"I know the way you 'toss,' Milord. You'll have to come up with a better offer and fast."

"Let me show you exactly what it is I'm offering," he said in a throaty voice. He unlaced the front of her blouse and began to kiss his way down her long neck while his hands busied themselves elsewhere. He uncovered the first of her many scars, a short white line on her shoulder where her flesh had been grazed by a poisoned quarrel, and he kissed the knotted tissue. She had given the perfection of her body and the first blush of her youth in service to the nation they both loved, and he loved her for it. Leave the dainty beauties of Court to other men, give him this powerful sword maiden with her fierce, beautiful eyes and her mad, laughing ways. She would tease him unmercifully for the rest of his short, miserable span, but it would be worth every barbed jest she flung at him.

There was no bed in the room but there was a good stout table, the design of which indicated as surely as a guild mark that it came from a craftsman of Gwaren. The irony was not lost on him. It seemed appropriate, as well, even if she deserved more comfort. They could always retire to his bedroom later. That there would be a later was something he would ensure. There was no telling
what the future held, for them or for anyone, no matter what their plans. Tonight he would love her like it was the last night of their lives, for there was always the chance it would prove to be so.

A snuffling and wuffing outside the door heralded the return of Champion. The pup scratched at the panels a couple of times, whined curiously, and then grunted as she flopped down across the entry. She knew from the sounds and smells that her human was mating to the tall female, and Champion considered that a fine thing. Soon she and Haakon would be packmates again, and the female would bear the Master a pup. She scratched her ear with a hind foot and settled in to wait.
The song is "Heaven Don't Deserve Me" by Gordon Lightfoot, no copyright infringement intended.

The morning they left the three companions -- and the dogs -- were called before the King and Queen for a formal, private farewell and a final consultation. On the way into the throne room Loghain stopped and cadged something off of one of the palace guards that looked suspiciously like a cornhusk cigarette and one of those clever Dwarven sulfur-headed matchsticks. The guard didn't even seem to notice the silver he pressed into his hand, awestruck at the idea of sharing a smoke, more or less, with Loghain Mac Tir.

"We've had word from Orzammar," Alistair informed them, once they stood in a neat line before the throne. "Evidently King Bhelen wishes to give Ferelden a gift, something he's apparently been working on since you got him elected, Eli. The message is rather vague as to what that gift might be, exactly, but he promises that it will be 'very appropriate and useful in your nation's current circumstances,' whatever he means by that. He also says that his artisans struggled for some time to find an appropriate subject, but that ultimately they decided to use 'the human Paragons,' whoever they are. He's sending a caravan to Denerim and says they should be here in another month at the latest."

"Don't tell me they're sending us one of those atrocious stone statues they love so much?" Loghain groaned. "Ferelden is already littered with them, wherever there's a Dwarven Merchants' Guild."

"It sounds rather like they're sending more than one," Anora said, with a small smile. "The message indicates plurality."

Elilia laughed. "I flippantly asked Bhelen for my head on one of those big statues," she recalled. "I do hope he hasn't taken me at my word at last!"

"I didn't know there were any human Paragons," Seanna said, thoughtfully. "I confess I'm very curious."

Loghain took his cigarette out of his map pouch and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "I suppose we'll see when we get back," he said out of the other corner. He popped the match alight one-handed with a flick of his hard-callused thumb and held the little flame to the treated cornhusk.
"Father, I thought you quit smoking," Anora said, severely.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I did. Several times, in fact. I suspect I'll quit several times more before I'm dead."

Anora primmed up her mouth and said nothing further, evidently realizing that expressing her displeasure at the filthy habit only encouraged it. They took their leave shortly thereafter, and shouldered their packs on the main road out of the city -- "The Pilgrim's Path," as it was known, leading more or less directly to Amaranthine. They would follow it as far as the Imperial Highway and then turn south, into the Blight lands. They were afoot because, as Loghain pointed out, they would be hard-pressed to feed themselves once they reached the truly poisoned lands. There would be no food there for horses. They made a brief detour to the docks, where Loghain pointed out the vast hulk of an odd-looking vessel being outfitted in the shipyard. It was a mighty craft, with a deep draught and an extraordinarily wide belly, and the whole of its outer hull was clad in thick sheets of hammered metal. The bowsprit was designed with a clear eye to ramming enemy vessels.

"The Fighting Ferelden," he said, indicating the ship. "Most folks call her 'Old Ironsides,' though Maric was devilishly pleased to call her the 'Wallowing Loghain.' Arse. That, ladies, is the Fereldan Navy, such as it is. She can crew a hundred men and has on-deck siege catapults that can hurl fifty-pound bombs at her foes. If I could figure out how the Qunari make their black powder, she'd have cannon, too. Salt peter," he said darkly and cryptically. He looked at the ship for a moment, then sighed. "She's slow and cumbersome, but she'll do a runner on any one ship -- or two, or three -- the Orlesians send against us. She'd not be a match against a Qunari dreadnaught... but then again, she might."

"You sound like a proud papa," Elilia laughed.

He puffed his odious cigarette and looked at the ship. "Should," he said at last. He nodded toward the vessel. "She's my youngest daughter." With that he turned and led them back to the main road.

Loghain took a deep pull off his smoke as they walked through the city gates and let it out in a long, slow plume like a dragon's warning breath. "You bought that cigarette just to annoy your daughter, didn't you?" Elilia accused him. He grinned and offered it to her.

"Want a drag?"

She accepted, put it to her lips, and inhaled. She gagged instantly and passed it back, and spit upon
"Indeed it is," Loghain said, in a melancholy sort of voice, and flicked the butt onto the packed earth and ground it out beneath his heel. Champion barked her approval at the disposal of the smelly-stick.

"We should be singing," Seanna said. Elilia turned in her steps to look at her. "We should," the mage insisted, blushing. "All adventurers should set out with a song. For luck."

"You know, you are absolutely right," Elilia said. "And for double-luck, the leader of our expedition should choose the first song and start us out right." She turned around again and jabbed Loghain in the back with a very hard finger. "That means you, Dragon Breath."

She expected him to protest, so he didn't. Instead, with a wry smile, he said, "You know you just made me the leader and you can't take it back later, right? Seanna will stand as my witness to it, as will Champion and Haakon."

She sighed. "This Sanday Outing of ours was your idea, Milord, so that makes you our figurehead. I, of course, shall be the de facto leader, but I'll choose my battles. Now sing, damn you. If it's bad enough the dogs will howl and drown you out."

He thought deeply for a moment. He knew but a few songs, and fewer still he could do any justice to. Finally he grinned.

"I'm not afraid that when I'm dyin'
There'll be no one to hold my hand.
If there's a God up there He loves me
As much as my old woman can."

He gave Elilia a sidelong glance at those words, grinning, and she cackled and elbowed him in the ribs. She joined him in singing the rest but Seanna was unfamiliar with the song -- not the type one might learn in the Circle, after all -- and she listened and enjoyed it greatly. The two together were not great singers, but the dogs did not howl.

"I don't intend to be a martyr."
I don't give a damn what people say,
And if I never get to heaven,
Heaven don't deserve me anyway.

"I've tasted life, both good and evil.
At times I was cruel and did not pay,
And if I never get to heaven,
Heaven don't deserve me anyway.

"I don't know what it was I came for
But I've enjoyed it up 'til now.
If there's a friend who ever needs me,
I'll do my best to help somehow.

"I don't intend to keep no secrets.
I don't give a damn what people say,
And if I never get to heaven,
Heaven don't deserve me anyway.

"I know, and I'll admit, my failures.
I don't give a damn what people say,
And if I never get to heaven,
Heaven don't deserve me anyway.

"And if I never get to heaven,
Heaven don't deserve me anyway."

When they finished Seanna clapped her hands enthusiastically. "Oh, that was a fine song! Well done!"
"That song is Age-old," Elilia said, "but it sounds as though someone wrote it with our Estimable Leader in the forethought of his mind, doesn't it?"

"Thought you'd like it," Loghain grumbled, good-naturedly. They continued in peaceable silence for a time until Haakon's hackles rose. Champion stopped, sniffed, and growled low in her throat as well.

"Bandits?" Elilia asked. They were common enough on the Pilgrim's Path. Loghain unsheathed his sword, though he left his shield in harness for the time being.

"Like as not. Better be ready for trouble."

Soon enough the sounds of shouting came to their ears, the clink of metal on metal and a dog barking, and a high baying that sounded something like the old Rebel Yell that had often presaged a successful ambush during the Rebellion. There was also an odd sound none of them quite recognized, a metallic rattling followed by an authoritative "POOM-fwoop." The "POOM-fwoop" came every two or three seconds, the rattling in between each.

"Bianca's getting lonely!" someone, a man, cried out.

"Someone's under attack," Elilia said, but Loghain was already moving up the road toward the sound of altercation. Elilia unsheathed her greatsword and motioned Seanna to follow. The mage gripped her burlwood staff tightly and girded herself for battle. She cast a spell of heroic defense upon her friends and spelled their weapons with ice.

Elilia was not far behind Loghain as he rounded a corner and came full on the scene of a group of thugs attacking a pair of dwarves and a half-grown mabari. He let out a terrible war cry and flung himself into the fray, startling the male dwarf rather badly. Fortunately the man quickly seemed to realize this new attack was launched in his defense and didn't put a quarrel between Loghain's eyes. The crossbow he held was enormous and quite magnificent, and was the source of the strange noise. The dwarven woman, for her part, paid no mind to the surprise attack at all but merely kept slashing at the bandits with her dual blades. She was the one howling like a rabid mabari. The dog, a bit older and better grown than Champion and Haakon, fought at her side.

Between the eight of them they quickly put down the remaining bandits. Only then did the dwarven woman wipe the blood from her eyes and acknowledge the assistance. "Sodding stone, dusters, you've got good timing. Thanks a bundle." Her rough speech as much as the black brand
over her right eye marked her as a former Casteless.

The man pulled a powerful lever on his crossbow, which folded up neatly for storage in the harness on his back. He did not have a brand, and his fine leather coat and the quality of the tunic beneath marked him as wealthy even if not highborn. "I second that," he said. "We were tougher than they were expecting, for sure, but your timely arrival was more than welcome. Varric Tethras, at your service," he said, with a grand flourish of a bow. "This is my sister, Laz Brosca."

Elilia looked from one to the other and back again. Except for similar hair color -- strawberry blonde, far redder in her case than his -- there wasn't much relationship in their looks even discounting the brand. Varric had an immensely heavy jaw, though his features were rather well-balanced, and the woman's face was quite delicate by dwarven standards. The woman, Laz, saw her dubious expression and grinned. There was blood in her teeth.

"Varric's pap used to be a noble in Orzammar before he got himself and his house booted," she said gaily. "He said his ma used to bitch about the 'drunk noble hunter' his daddy bagged that didn't even give him a son. My ma is a drunk noble hunter who always bitched at me for not being the son that would have pulled her out of the slums. Not exactly proof-positive, but sometimes you gotta take family where you can get it, eh?"

The part-grown mabari barked, and Laz slung an arm across its back. "Oh yeah, sorry. This is my dog, Paragon. We haven't been together that long, so sometimes I forget to introduce her."

"Paragon?" Seanna said. Laz's grin widened.

"Figured she deserved to be one. And if it offends those nug-humpers back in Orzammar, so much the better. Never thought I'd have a mabari, of all people in the world, but I ran across this nasty lady who was beating the poor pup, trying to make it imprint to her. Dumb bitch. Anyway, I sliced her up a bit and Paragon decided she was better off with me. True story. Lady was one of your Priests, too, which kinda made me madder about it. I thought they were supposed to be nice."

Elilia's face became a curious study, dead white and drawn. Varric saw and misinterpreted her offense. "When my sister says she 'sliced her up a bit,' I assure you she's exaggerating completely. She would never hurt a member of the Chantry. Much."

Elilia shook her head. "No, no, it's not that. I just have this horrible feeling I know who it is you're talking about. Did you happen to find out the Priest's name?"
"I did. Thought maybe I could rat on her, but couldn't figure out who I was supposed to talk to about dog-abuse. Sister Habren," Laz said. Elilia sighed gustily.

"My idiot cousin. Poor Cousin Leonas, he thought the Chantry would be some sort of miracle cure for her. The whole final straw for him was when he found out she'd bought and killed fifteen mabari puppies trying to get one to imprint to her. She doesn't even like dogs, she just wanted the status."

Haakon whined and pawed at her feet, then sat down on top of them and looked up at her winningly. She reached down and scratched his ears, soothed by his presence and his silent assertion that he knew she was not to be blamed for her poor relations.

"Excuse me," Seanna said shyly, "but are you the Varric Tethras who wrote…?"

"Hard in Hightown. Hard in Hightown: Siege Harder. Hard in Hightown: Hard to Kill. And the only authorized biography of the Champion of Kirkwall. The very same, Milady," he said, with another sweeping bow.

Seanna put a hand to her mouth to stifle a fit of the giggles, then dropped her pack and dug out the already much-worn copy of Hard in Hightown: Siege Harder. She held it out cover-first for him to see.

"I'm honored. I don't see too many of my works since the Chantry banned them. Too heretical. Ha. C'est la vie."

Loghain growled. Elilia smacked him upside the head, not terribly hard. "Sorry. My friend gets a little grumpy when he hears spoken Orlesian."

The dwarf just smiled and shrugged. "To be perfectly honest with you, its been known to set my teeth on edge from time to time, too. And given what's going on here lately, I can hardly blame him. To set your mind at rest, Messer, I'm no Orlesian but a proud son of the Free Marches, though I confess to not taking much pride in the old hometown at the moment. Kirkwall can be a hell of a nasty place, but it's the only home I've ever known. If its not too bold of me to ask, your names are…?"

Elilia and Loghain shared a glance at one another. Neither of them particularly wanted to answer. Finally Elilia took the bit in her teeth and had out with it. "I'm Elilia Cousland. These are my
Formally introduced, the pups broke ranks and went to sniff their new acquaintances with interest, particularly the larger Paragon. Laz Brosca's attention was on them, but Varric Tethras was standing stock still, staring first at Elilia, then at Loghain, mouth agape. Finally he recovered his aplomb, if not his suavity. "Well, this is...an unexpected honor. The Hero of Ferelden, and the Hero of the River Dane, slayers of the Archdemon. And, I suppose, rescuers of two lowly dwarves. What brings such august personages out on the Pilgrim's Path so early in the morning, if I might ask?"


"Oo, royal intrigue. My curiosity is piqued, but I'll be respectful of the very big man and the very large swords and not inquire further."

"If you're going to Denerim, the road we just passed was quite clear," Seanna said helpfully.

"Alas, Milady, we are leaving Denerim. I thought perhaps we might feel a bit...safer...further inland. No offense and all, but your navy sucks. One ship, in the dockyards for repairs."

"A sodding big ship, though," Laz supplied.

"True. And the metal plating has a certain panache to it, though I find it hard to believe it'll float."

"She floats," Loghain said, with a tremendous scowl. "I wish we had a hundred more of her, but one was all I could ever talk the bloody bannorn into funding -- and that only because I agreed to pay for her cladding out of my own damned pocket. I thought in time I'd be able to get more support for the idea, but then Maric..." He shook off the bad memory. "Let's just say I lost much of my backing for a proper Fereldan navy, and most of my enthusiasm as well."

"I defer to your greater knowledge, Messer. In any event, apart from the threat of seaborne annihilation from the grasping West, I decided that I don't care to spend any too much time in large cities just now. The Chantry currently isn't my biggest fan, and I'd prefer to keep my distance from large religious structures, for the time being."
He looked from Loghain to Elilia to Seanna and back again at each of them. "If we're headed in the same general direction," he began hopefully, "perhaps we could travel part of the way together? Danger is a lot less dangerous in a large, heavily-armed group."

Loghain and Elilia looked at each other. Loghain grimaced and shrugged. *Your call.* Elilia turned to the dwarves and dog with a hopeful lift to her brows. "I don't suppose either of you knows anything about picking locks or disarming traps?"

Laz and Varric looked at each other and then back at Elilia. "We're the best," they said simultaneously.

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Loghain was not well pleased with their two new tagalongs, even though the woman's fine hound and the story of how she acquired it -- if true -- spoke well of her. It was not that he expected their presence, however long it lasted, would be any impediment to their ultimate mission. He wanted it kept from Chantry ears for as long as possible, but who less likely to run tattling to a Priest than a pair of surfacer dwarves who hadn't even managed to report on a dog-beater? They were even somewhat welcome additions, as long as they pulled their weight. The woman, Laz, was a fierce warrior with her dual waraxes, and the man Varric's fine crossbow was enough to compensate quite a bit for his slick character. Loghain wanted very much to figure out the engineering of that weapon. There was no bowstring, so presumably the bolts were loosed by a powerful spring mechanism. But setting up camp at the end of their first long day showed exactly why he was unhappy with the sudden growth of their party.

Laz and Varric had their own supplies, including tents and a few light provisions, so that was to the good, but when the tents were set up around their nicely crackling campfire that night, it was clear there was a slight discrepancy. Five people, four tents, one a little larger than the others. Loghain scowled and whispered harshly in Elilia's ear before the camp was fully laid out.

"You and Seanna should take the large tent. I'll sleep in Seanna's." Elilia gave him a cool look, grabbed his bedroll from the pile of their packs, and took it into the large tent to lay out beside her own. The dwarf Varric watched with amusement and interest and smirked at Loghain's forbidding glare.

"Hey, I'm not going to criticize the sleeping arrangements," the dwarf said, a laugh in his voice. "Kind of puts a nice new spin on the story of how she faced you down before the ruling class of the entire nation, usurped your power, spared your life, and won you to follow her against the Tainted god Urthemiel. Would make a bigger seller if one of you'd died in the slaying, but the payoff is all this winter romance in the face of an Orlesian invasion and the chance that it will all end with one of you mortally and nobly wounded and dying in your lover's arms, bathed in tears."
People gobble that shit up."

"I will not be the subject of one of your vulgar romances, Dwarf," Loghain growled warningly. "Nor will Elilia."

"Vulgar! You wound me, Ser."

"Don't tempt me."

Elilia ducked back out of the tent. "Now now, gentlemen, let's not be discourteous," she said, more to Loghain than Varric. To the dwarf she said, "Ser Varric, I do hope we can rely on your discretion, of course. This man and I are to be married, if all goes as hoped, but there has not been any formal announcement to that effect -- and in our position, there are those who would use any hint of unbecoming conduct against us."

Loghain snorted. "The man is a writer of trashy codswallop and sensational literature. He has no discretion." And he's a foreigner, he thought, but didn't say. He was trying mightily to set aside knee-jerk reactions to foreign accents in favor of strengthening his country. It had cost him a lot to suggest King Alistair call for the dissatisfied legions of other nations make a play for life in Ferelden, but the extra hands would be welcome provided they made good effort to live as citizens of their adoptive homeland. They'd get a lot of trash, doubtless, but even refuse had its uses, and bullshit could fertilize many crops.

Varric drew himself up to his full and, for a dwarf, quite impressive height. "I, Messer, am a gentleman, and like any true gentleman I am moved by the plea of a lovely lady. My good woman, I shall be the soul and beating heart of discretion and repeat nothing that I see or hear while we travel together." Then, eyes avid and speculating, he muttered under his breath, "Not without permission, anyway."

Loghain turned his attention back to the setting up of camp, resigned for the moment to the interested scrutiny of one of the wolves of the literary world. Mentally, he cursed their meeting with the dwarves. Not only did it put a significant damper on the possibility of any real..."activities" between himself and his intended while on the road, but there was no way in heaven he was going to allow Seanna to tutor him from the book of natural philosophy he'd brought along in front of this inquisitive crow and his so-called sister. He'd actually been looking forward to that, a little, but he wouldn't expose his ignorance in front of a supercilious foreigner, particularly one who styled himself as a man of letters.

The three of them had agreed between themselves to take turns with the cooking, and drew straws
to see who would go first. The lot had fallen to Elilia, who grimaced and made a joke about her
campfire cuisine, but Laz Brosca cheerily preempted their plans and offered to cook this first meal
herself. Loghain hoped that did not mean they would be treated to the sort of recipes favored in
Orzammar -- nug pancakes and deepstalker steak -- but evidently Laz had been a surfaerer long
enough to pick up something of Fereldan cookery for she combined her ingredients in the cookpot
to end up with quite a competent lamb and pea stew. She even dished up portions for the mabaris,
and Paragon dove into her meal with good doggy gusto. Champion and Haakon sniffed the dish
suspiciously for a moment, unsure whether green things were really edible, but eventually they ate
and seemed to enjoy it. Haakon finished his and went to beg more from his mistress, whining
shamelessly until she gave in and shared some bits of lamb from her own bowl. Champion came to
sit beside Loghain but did not deign to beg. She pretended full satisfaction and rested her head upon
his knee. The results were the same; he sacrificed a couple of nice-sized chunks of tender meat
from his own supper and she ate them from his hand with dignity and due appreciation. Puppies
needed lots of food to grow big and stay healthy. He was not entirely happy to have them along on
this journey as they were too young to pitch into battles as they'd done today, but they'd acquitted
themselves well and he was proud. If they encountered more trouble along the way -- which was a
blue-blooded certainty -- he'd remember to order Champion to stay back, and would tell Elilia to do
the same for Haakon. Pups ought not to fight like dogs any more than boys ought to fight like men,
and he remembered with bitterness his own very youthful introduction to the art of killing people.
There had simply been no choice at the time.

He regarded the new mabari in their midst. Paragon was probably a bit more than a year old, and
so it wasn't entirely too early for her to be trained to fight. She had that rangy, loose-limbed look
adolescent hounds bore until they reached full maturity, but would undoubtedly be a fine dog when
she had her growth. Her coat was a deep russet color, tinged at the edges with a hint of black that
depthened into an outright splotch over her left eye and ear, and another on her back. She looked
well-fed and well-loved, which was good, but it was equally clear to Loghain that she was training
her people more than her people were training her. That was actually probably for the best as well.
There were a lot of mabari in other lands these days, he'd heard, and it rankled him because there
could be no question in his mind that those poor creatures were not being given their due respect.
Paragon was smart enough to insist upon hers.

After the cleaning up was done, Loghain expected Seanna to beg a story of their new companion.
She and Elilia made utter fools of themselves over that ridiculous book of theirs. Loghain had
opened it up once, curious, and closed it again as the first thing his eye landed upon was a passage
about breasts that "strained like wild horses to escape the corral of her bodice." He did not know
what "lady" the passage referred to, but the mental image created by the phrasing was, to him, less
titillating than disturbing. Other men might find it an attractive picture, but he preferred breasts that
behaved as a cohesive unit with the lady they were attached to rather than as independent entities
with will -- and evidently movement -- of their own.

But to his surprise, the gentle little elf-mage instead asked about their presence in Ferelden. "So
why did you come to Ferelden in the first place?" she asked.

The dwarf sighed. "Kireani Hawke," he said, a bit sadly. "Otherwise known as the Champion of
Kirkwall. Circumstances beyond our control forced us to go our separate ways, but I know she means to come here, sooner or later. Her maternal line was Kirkwall nobility, but Kireani herself is an unrepentant Fereldan girl. I thought maybe she might be here already, but small though the country is it is a bit like a good old needle-hunt through a very large haystack. Still, I met two Fereldan Heroes, so it seems to me a good omen. Maybe I'll run across Hawke yet."

Loghain rather hoped he did. He'd heard something of the exploits of the Champion of Kirkwall, and it seemed to him a crime and a shame that such a person was not in Ferelden where she belonged, properly respected and rewarded for her services instead of set on the run like a common thief for saving the Kirkwall Circle from Annulment. Of course, some said she was involved in the plot that destroyed the Chantry and killed the Grand Cleric and her Priests, but with the way Loghain felt about that particular institution at the moment he could almost applaud that as well. Kireani Hawke should return to her native land and make her skills useful to the King and Queen. She should never have left in the first place, but under the circumstances -- threat of imminent destruction and all -- he was willing to be forgiving. He was in a position to know all too much about unfortunate lapses in judgment.

Elilia asked the more burning question, which was how exactly two dwarves from different lands happened to find each other and decide they were siblings. Laz laughed and storyteller Varric allowed her to take the lead.

"I was knocking heads for this mercenary company in Highever when Varric came in on the boat from Kirkwall. I guess we noticed each other because of our hair -- redheads ain't too unusual among dwarves but red-blonds just ain't seen all that much. We talked, found out there was at least a nug's chance in a deepstalker nest that we were related, and the idea was so funny -- me so bass ackward and Varric so fine and dandy -- that we decided that even if it wasn't true it oughta be, and that's that." She laughed again. "Varric was born on the Surface, so I guess he don't know he should kick dirt in my face and walk on my hands instead of bringing me into the family."

"I always wanted a sister," Varric said, comfortably enough. "I had an older brother, and that didn't work out too well -- long story -- so I thought I'd give a female sibling a chance to stab me in the back and strand me in the Deep Roads to die."

The storyteller turned his gaze upon Loghain, who blandly ate his stew and said nothing. "Your turn to ask a question, I believe, or aren't you playing?" Varric said.

Loghain affected surprise. "Is this a game? I was under the impression that the ladies were simply satisfying their curiosity. However it is, I have no questions."

"Well I have one. How did you manage to get out of Orlais alive?"
"I walked, for the most part. Occasionally I bartered rides. How else should I have done? I'm not particularly fond of sea travel these days."

Varric chuckled, a rumble in his chest. "Come on, there's a story here and my gut says it's a good one. A lone Fereldan adrift in the middle of a nation that would have wanted your head anyway, and charged with 'sowing seeds of sedition in the lower classes?' You should be a particularly ugly decoration on the battlements of Val Royeaux right now, or at the very least rotting on a wheel. Instead you're here in native heather, nice and cozy with a woman who's probably going to have a hell of a lot of power in this country pretty soon, and you even led the Fereldan army against the Chevaliers in what can only be described as a stunning victory, even if I doubt it was a definitive one. Come on -- I won't write it down or anything but you can't leave me wondering, it's bad for my constitution."

Elilia and Seanna both were looking at him now. "Sowing seeds of sedition?" Elilia asked. He sighed and shrugged.

"What did you expect of me? Orlais was plotting invasion and I hoped to distract them. I had no further place with the Wardens, felt I had no place at home…most people in Orlais are perfectly decent, lacking only the backbone to stand up and tell the greedy bastards ruling their lives that they won't take it anymore. But they've been under the yoke so long that many of them seem almost to like it." He shook his head sadly. "I'd be there still, trying to foment something, threat of execution or no, but when I fell ill it suddenly occurred to me that dying in Orlais was the worst possible fate I could imagine for myself. I took the bloody Chantry's bloody expensive cure so I'd be sure not to spread my disease here at home, and I walked. Out. Of bloody Orlais."

"Just that easily?" Varric persisted. "I mean come on, they surely had a decent description of you. Seeing you for myself now, I have to say you're pretty damned distinct."

"I didn't say that I didn't leave Bloody Orlais a little bit bloodier than I found it," Loghain said, voice as dark as his lowering brow.

"For what reason on this good green earth," Elilia said, exasperated, "were you 'sowing seeds of sedition' in a quarantined Alienage? For I know you must surely have ventured to such a place, to catch Bloody Lung of all the damned diseases in Thedas."

He shifted uncomfortably and his pale face reddened. "I wasn't trying to foment revolution there," he mumbled. Elilia regarded him sharply for a time, then her face softened as she realized the truth he didn't want to talk about. He had tried, in his own clumsy way, to make some restitution and penance with the City Elves for what he'd done to the Alienage of Denerim, and had accidentally
taken sick along with them. Like so many things that had happened during the Fifth Blight, his
callous selling of Fereldan citizens, elven or not, into slavery was perplexing to her, to say the least.
He'd had a reputation, before then, of being quite high-minded about elves, and fair-handed in his
dealings with them. Elves living directly under his offices in Gwaren had been considered
uncommonly lucky, given a latitude they simply did not enjoy in other places in Ferelden and even
allowed to bear arms.

Even Loghain did not know precisely what had possessed him to sign that thrice-damned contract
with that oily Tevinter, Caladrius. Howe had said it was only wise, of course, but when had he
started accepting Howe's recommendations over his own reservations? Even thinking about that
consultation was difficult. In fact, memories from most of that year were oddly fuzzy and
indistinct. Then there was the matter of the apostate sent by someone to kill Arl Eamon. That
apostate had claimed his employer was Loghain himself, and Elilia seemed to have believed him,
but Loghain…did not remember any such thing at all. Killing Eamon would have been something
he was quite happy to do, but while he rather reluctantly accepted the value of a good assassin it
was a dodgy practice at best, prone to messy failure -- as the resulting consequences of that
assassination attempt had proven. He was morally certain that if he had set someone to kill the Arl
he would have at the very least hired a proper professional and not trusted to the good faith of a
runaway mage. It made no bloody sense, tactically. If he hadn't come to trust Elilia he could easily
believe that she'd made the entire episode up just to bolster her claims against him -- and, he had to
admit, if he hadn't felt the effects of the ashes of Andraste himself he might still believe she'd made
up much of it. He still suffered no pain in his joints, and felt younger and stronger than he had in
many a moon.

Elilia clapped him on the back, companionably, and surreptitiously rubbed the back of his neck in
more loverish fashion. He should be glad -- and was, truly -- that she had such capacity for
forgiveness. He could only make an effort to be deserving of it. He favored her with a small smile,
but from the corner of his eye he caught Varric's knowing smirk and much of his good feeling
evaporated. Blasted interlopers. Cock-blocking interlopers. He gave the dwarf his best scowl.
Evidently it was pretty good.

"Hot damn, if you could distill that look and put it in a bottle it would be the deadliest poison in
Thedas," Varric said, mightily impressed.

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Loghain lay awake late into the night, listening to the night sounds of wind rustling the leaves of a
nearby stand of birches and the endless chirp of night peepers and crickets. Beside him, laying
close but not nearly close enough, Elilia slept deeply, untroubled by the frightful dreams that
Wardens had, even when there was no Blight. Thank the Maker the ashes had worked to cure her.
He'd done it because Ferelden needed her, not because she'd wanted to be free of her burden, but he
was glad that she'd set aside her anger and allowed herself to be glad of her freedom. She would
not suffer the gruesome fate of the Wardens when the Taint overpowered them, she would not go
to the Deep Roads for her Calling only, perhaps, to be forced into the service of the Darkspawn as
a mindless abomination of womankind to produce innumerable filthy offspring to bolster their wretched numbers. Best of all, he thought it quite likely that any infertility the Taint had given her must be expunged. If she could refrain from pushing her body to such extremes of physical exertion that she could not have her natural monthly courses, then she might yet bear a child. The thought of starting a new family at the age of sixty-plus was daunting in the extreme, but he was not a man to back down from a challenge. Perhaps he might, in his dotage, have at last the wisdom to avoid a few of the many mistakes he'd made the first time around. If Arl Wulffe, of all people, could manage then so could he.

His fingers twitched and he wished absently for a cigarette. He'd picked up the habit during the Restoration, for him a far more trying time than the rebellion itself, and it had gotten rather severe during his early days as Teyrn of Gwaren, but the gentle disapproval of his wife Celia, and later the sharper admonitions of Anora, had forced him to lay the vice by. The cigarette that morning had been his first in a good long while, and he still wasn't exactly sure why he'd felt compelled to cadge a smoke when he saw the tobacco pouch on the guardsman's belt. Too much worry, he supposed. Too much strain. He had a lot invested in this little expedition, not coin of the realm but the more valuable coin of hope, and that was a money he did not often allow himself to spend.

Oh, but there was a far better cure for his stress than a pinch of the best Highever Broadleaf, if he could but take advantage of it, a cure that sprang also from the fine soil of Highever near the high Cliffs of Conobar. He turned onto his side and watched her for a time in silence. Her face was naked of cosmetics and looked to his eyes almost painfully young with its few lines smoothed out by dreamless sleep. She looked very much like that willful sixteen year-old who first tattooed her face in a bold if misguided move to avoid an unpleasant marriage contract. Sometimes it was hard to believe she was the daughter of an ancient line of Fereldan nobility. She had the guts, constitution, and attitude of a particularly gritty breed of freeholder -- of the type of which Loghain himself was a proud scion.

He reached out and ran a light hand down her outflung arm. The strong muscles tensed under his fingers, reflexively, but she did not waken. He wondered at the strange twists fate held for hapless mortals. His first love, Rowan Guerrin, betrothed of Maric and intended Queen, had been a powerful warrior woman. His wife had been as unlike her as it was possible to find, small and soft and undemanding, a starstruck peasant girl who never dreamed of challenging him on anything, though in time she found ways of working him around to her will -- a will far stronger than her meek ways suggested. She had been offered to him in marriage during the latter days of the Rebellion, after the Battle of River Dane, when Maric had at last the full support of all his rightful subjects and the nobles who were newest on the field looked with alarm upon the brash farmer's son who appeared to be making a bold move for the power they considered theirs by Divine Right. Maric begged the proposal to Loghain himself, to allay the qualms of those who feared he would marry into their families and so seize noble title for himself. The joke was on them, however, as it was only a handful of years before Maric raised him above all of them with the exception of Bryce Cousland. Very few of them found it remotely funny.

He hadn't known Celia two hours before they were married by the Revered Mother in the Gwaren Chantry, but he set himself to love her the best he could regardless. He'd found her faintly
alarming, actually, so pretty and pale, like a flower. He wasn't particularly adept with flowers. It was some years until Anora was born, and the addition of a tiny and utterly helpless little female infant nearly frightened him away completely. He'd missed out on a lot of her earliest years, even the ones he spent in Gwaren. He regretted that very much. He'd loved them both, too strongly, perhaps, to feel that he should inflict his awkward and unworthy presence on them. Time lost that he could never recover. No use sighing over it now.

And now here he was, in the winter of his days, snow on the mountain, and life's wheel had rolled around to the place where he'd begun, with a high-born woman beautiful in her strength and how much of herself she was willing to sacrifice for her ideals, a woman unafraid to meet him toe-to-toe and stand him down on the battlefield he'd had mastery of for the better part of his life. She was Rowan and she was more than Rowan, she was Elilia and her like had never been seen before in Thedas. He was still shocked and somewhat appalled that she would waste herself on him, but he certainly wasn't going to look a gift Warden in the mouth, even though he found that mouth quite appealing.

He felt his blood stirring restlessly and shifted position. Dislodged from a springy curl of hair, the amulet he wore slid across his chest to his shoulder. He'd never been one for jewelry, even of the enchanted sort most warriors throughout Thedas made part of their basic equipment. It was an irritant, always in the way. But the little silverite mirror was different somehow. He was perfectly aware that the spirit he saw in the temple that day was not his mother, but it had aped her so well he wasn't sure that it made a difference. He didn't know if the amulet had any enchantments upon it, though it seemed reasonable to suppose it did, but whether there was any tangible benefit to wearing it or not, he felt protected by it. Shielded from his own darker nature, if only by the reminder it gave him of the spirit's kind words to him. So he would attempt to set aside some of his burden of guilt, enough so that he could do his job effectively at least, and he would not consider himself a failure if he could not fix everything that was wrong in Ferelden. He would be damned if he would not try, however.

It had not escaped his attention that Elilia wore an identical amulet. She had taken off the little crystal vial of blood that was her Warden's Oath and laid it in an ornately-carved box of fine greenstone with a sentimental sigh, but snapped the lid shut with great finality. The silverite mirror rested on her clavicle above the longer chain and larger pendant that had been her gift from Seanna back in Denerim. Loghain wondered what the Gauntlet had shown her, what truths about herself she'd had to face. He would never ask, though. Some things were too intimate even for lovers to speak of.

Careful not to wake her, he gathered her into his arms and close to his body. Her heat and scent were both tantalizing and intoxicating, as was her firm, solid flesh. She was soft in only one place, but Maker how soft she was. He'd once overheard a pair of Antivan diplomats discussing the various merits and flaws of Ferelden in their native tongue, unaware that he understood enough of their greasy talk to know the gist of their words, and one of them had said to the other how nowhere else in Thedas were the women blessed with such fine breasts. They seemed to feel this was the major selling point for the country. Elilia certainly had a beautiful bust, neither too large nor too small but perfectly balanced to her broad square shoulders and powerful physique. He
groaned softly into her hair, cursing again the fate that had saddled them with a pair of unknown companions who could not be trusted to be discrete. It was ludicrous, the effect she had on him. He was no longer a headstrong boy but a man of advanced years, and the fire in his gut ought by now to be mere embers, capable of warming but not much more. She had a way of stoking them back into a merry blaze without effort.

Perhaps she sensed his increasing ardor, or perhaps she was being poked too roughly in too sensitive a place, but she stirred and opened sleepy eyes. She blinked at him several times, then smiled and snuggled closer. "This is a nice way to sleep," she said.

"I wouldn't know," Loghain said, feelingly. She laughed at him.

"Poor man. Are you absolutely sure we can't…?" She waggled her eyebrows at him. "We could be very quiet about it."

"Not quiet enough," he groaned. "The last thing we need is that bawdy dwarf telling tales out of school - and embellishing them, like as not, with his purple prose."

"It is quite the coincidence that we should meet up with the author of the book Seanna and I have been reading," Elilia said.

"I don't believe in coincidence," Loghain replied, glowering.

"Oh come, you don't mean to say you think this meeting was planned? No one knew of our intentions but the King and Queen."

"Others knew. You can't keep secrets in a palace, servants see and hear everything and their tongues are easily loosened with coin. I certainly find it interesting that he was aware I was a wanted man in Orlais. No one in Ferelden seemed to know about it."

Elilia laughed. "Everyone in Ferelden would simply take it as a matter of course, so it wouldn't be considered news. He's not an Orlesian spy, Loghain. I truly do not think they employ dwarven bards."

"He's obviously a bard, Elilia. Whether he is an enemy bard or merely an opportunist remains to be seen, and I shall be keeping a very close eye on him. Him and that 'sister' of his. She looks like the
type who is quite familiar with the art of cutting throats."

"Loghain, if she stood on Varric's shoulders she still couldn't reach to cut your throat. Or mine."

"She could while we're lying here asleep. Don't laugh, Elilia. Careless trust is the greatest danger of them all."

She sighed. "Fine, fine. You worry about the big bad dwarves and I'll worry about something a little closer to home."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask what it was she intended to worry about when her hand suddenly slipped down his body and showed him, and his jaws snapped shut with a painful click of teeth on teeth. Clever fingers did for him what he'd been too uptight to do for her, and his resistance melted beneath her ministrations. Be damned to the dwarves. If the blasted fool put one word to paper Loghain would have his tongue for a blotter before the ink could dry.

He slept at last, and it was Elilia's turn to lay wakeful, watching. Even asleep, Loghain's face bore always that sharp, suspicious nature. Perhaps it was only the way his features were arranged, with a sloping brow over quite an heroic nose (or beak, if one were to draw the obvious parallels between his appearance and that of a large bird of prey) but rather thin cheeks and a relatively narrow jaw. But no, even his sharp pointed face could not explain all the bristling aura he retained even in his sleep. Likely enough the Fade demons sent him dreams of assassins and invasion.

He was a skilled lover. That did not mean he was an uninhibited one of course, in fact he was easily taken off-guard by a bold move. If she'd known that in years gone by it would have made her dual at the Landsmeet a thousand times easier -- although she granted that it would have been difficult to grab his manhood through plate armor. In any event he was quite adept at wringing a few shrieks of his name out of her, which was very new to her. She came to him on the eve of battle that night not a virgin but certainly lacking experience, particularly of the pleasurable kind. She had not, as was rumored, had relations with any of the companions who followed her as she gathered allies against the Blight, but there had been others, experiments all. There'd even been a woman, a shrewd Rivaini sea captain who'd traded sex for secrets. Her first had been Bann Loren's son, Dairren.

Poor Dairren, so eager to please. He'd had less interest in her than in her status, by quite a stretch, but he'd labored gamely. Curiosity and lack of better opportunity drove her to invite him to her rooms. Treachery and ill-fortune had made it the very night her home was raided, and Dairren was killed even before she'd known what was going on. That certainly wasn't something she was likely to talk about with Loghain, perhaps less so even than the incident of the lady pirate.
She snuggled into his shoulder and toyed with the silverite amulet at his throat. Another experience they had in common, one that she thought he might well agree with her was more difficult than many of the battles they'd faced. That vision had staggered him, in a way she'd never expected to see him knocked off-balance. She hoped he'd managed to find a bit of peace in it as well as the pain.

She caught herself in a gaping yawn, stretched languidly, and draped herself across his body to sleep. The warmth of his body had a deliciously soporific effect, and despite the fact that he'd been tromping around all day in heavy leather armor and hadn't been able to properly bathe he didn't smell all that unpleasant, either. Of course, the love they'd made had its own unique scent and that overlay much. Cozy and satisfied, Elilia slept.
In the morning Seanna made porridge and coffee on the breakfast fire and she and the dwarves spoke of inconsequentials while Loghain and Elilia went about their own morning business carefully uncommunicative. Elilia steeped several flowers of Andraste's Grace in her tin mug without comment, secure in the knowledge that few were aware of the contraceptive properties of the little white flower. She had no idea whether she was able to become pregnant or not, but she was taking no chances on a child born out of wedlock or scandalously early. In truth she didn't particularly like the idea of becoming a mother at all, but with Fergus seemingly resolved to remain in mourning for the rest of his life she knew that it might now be her duty to provide an heir to the Highever teyrnir if she could.

Loghain came back from washing up at the nearby brook and accepted with muttered thanks the mug of tea Seanna handed him. He sat down cross-legged next to Elilia and briefly touched the careless tail of her hair, far more affection than she would have expected him to demonstrate in the open, or even just in front of Seanna. Varric saw and smirked knowingly.

"It's odd, how close Ferelden is to Kirkwall and yet how very different everything is here," he said, innocently. "Even the animals are different. I heard some odd bird calls last night, and I was wondering if you could help me identify them. They sounded like this: " And he replicated rather too convincingly the cries of a woman in orgasm. Elilia's face reddened and Laz elbowed Varric in the ribs hard enough to knock him over.

She said, "So they had a tumble, so what? I'd roll the big guy myself if he wasn't spoken for." Loghain choked on his tea and Seanna had to slap him hard on the back. Varric picked himself up off the ground and dusted off his coat with no apparent rancor.

"Hey, I'm sorry -- I'm just a born tease, is all. Actually I think the two of 'em make kind of a cute couple, and evidently something they're doing is working. They've got that whole matched-opposites thing going on, like night and day or beauty and the beast."

Elilia made a face at him. "Are you calling me ugly?" Varric burst out laughing.

"My lady, a man would have to be stone-blind as well as stupid to imply anything of the kind." He gestured to Laz. "Let's clean up, Spunky, and get our gear packed away. I'm sure they'll want to get underway soon, and I don't want to hold them up seeing as how they've been so kind as to let us join them." The dwarves sprang into action and began to strike their part of camp. Varric whispered an aside to Laz pitched just loud enough for everyone else to hear.
"Besides, I need to start making good before the *Bull charges.*"

Elilia shot a look at Loghain and he did actually seem to be just short of snorting and pawing the earth.

Loghain tossed a handful of dried beef bits to Champion and said, tightly, "Let's get moving."

Elilia began packing and Seanna choked out the fire with an icy blast of winter's grasp. As the strongest of them, Loghain was the one with the dubious honor of being weighted down heaviest with cookpot and tent poles. At least Elilia *claimed* he was the strongest. As he shifted the straps of his pack until the small cast-iron pot didn't dig quite so painfully into his kidneys he sized her up and thought she had to be at *least* as strong as he was, but when he pointed that fact out to her she batted her eyelashes and played female, which made him grin despite himself. As long as he still had easy access to his sword and shield he supposed he didn't honestly mind if she made him carry the whole camp outfit.

"I'll take point and keep an eye out for traps in our path," Laz offered. Paragon barked. "Me and Paragon will, I mean."

"Me and Bianca will hang back with Birdie and keep an eye rearward," Varric said, with an affectionate pat for the stock of his crossbow. Loghain didn't actually like the idea of keeping his back to the man, but at the rear was where he would usually put archers and mages so it was hard to argue the point. Seanna -- "Birdie," evidently, since the man seemed unable to call anyone but his weapon by their proper name -- would be there to keep an eye on him and Loghain whispered to her a warning that she accepted with a nod. She didn't believe for a moment that the funny dwarf meant them any harm, but if he tried anything foolish she knew a few spells that would change his mind pretty quickly, naturally resistant or not. A crushing prison of telekinetic magic would knock the blocks out from under him in a heartbeat.

*MEANWHILE, IN DENERIM*

The ship *Our Lady Grace* pulled into port after a round-trip journey of a month and four days. She sailed in from Kirkwall, where she'd stopped to gather Ferelden repatriates and new immigrants alike. Grateful to leave the cramped and odoriferous interior of the ship, the exhausted and in many cases dreadfully seasick passengers pushed and shoved through the gangway with a complete and utter disregard for order. The last two passengers were more decorous, and disembarked with the straight spines and stalwart pride of soldiers or well-disciplined city guards. The woman eyed the quays with interest, noting the changes since the last time she'd been in Ferelden's capital. The rickety and rather random docks of days past were long gone, replaced by solid construction and a good sense of organization. She wondered if the rest of the city had benefited similarly in its reconstruction.
She looked at her husband, who was eyeing his new home with some reservation. "Having second thoughts?" she asked. He looked back at her and smiled.

"As long as my mother and sisters live in the Free Marches I'll always have thoughts of them and Kirkwall as well, but my home is with you, my love."

Her green eyes laughed at him as she smiled back with every ounce of the love he beamed at her. "I'm glad. Ferelden isn't what you're used to, but it is a fine land. I spend a good long time kicking myself for leaving it, but I can't regret it any longer. I am glad to be back, though. A chance to help protect her now as penance for deserting her during the Blight."

Donnic squeezed her hand. "It will be well, love. The criers all say that with the Hero of Ferelden bringing in allies and Loghain himself leading the army the Orlesians got their asses handed to them at Sulcher."

Aveline's smile faltered and she shook her head. "I hope it was enough, but though I'm happy for the victory I can hardly believe they'd ever trust Loghain Mac Tir with Ferelden's well-being again."

Donnic brushed back a stray lock of her carrot-orange hair. "Maybe this is his penance, love. Whatever he did and whatever his reasons, he followed the Warden into battle against the Archdemon. I don't think he must have meant to turn against his own country."

She tried for a smile but failed. "It wasn't the horror of the Darkspawn that drove me to desert, you know. It was that abandonment, knowing that our own general turned his back on us and left us to die. I was cut adrift completely, like I'd imagine someone would feel at the end of the bloody world. If Loghain wouldn't stand for us and see us through, it seemed to me Ferelden was doomed. Perhaps it was foolish and weak of me to succumb to such feelings, but once Wesley was gone I had nothing else at all to cling to."

"This is a different situation, love. The Darkspawn were an Enemy Unknown, and it is unfortunate but your strategies simply weren't effective against them. Loghain must have hoped to save what he could, not knowing that a Blight truly could not be defeated without Grey Wardens. Once he understood that, he stood with them. If they had been more forthcoming with him from the beginning, instead of pandering to the late King, perhaps much would have been altered. Now the enemy are not monsters but men, and I'm sure Loghain is well prepared to defend the nation against them. And our blades will play their part as well. We'll settle the Orlesians, and then we'll make this place our home."
Loghain didn't know who had asked, but Laz Brosca was detailing the story of her escape from Orzammar, which he was somewhat surprised to realize actually had been an escape, and rather a narrow one.

"So Leske says to me, 'You've been telling me for years that you're the baddest thing with a blade...well, Everd's armor is right over there, and you're just about the same size.' Oh, I was tempted. You can't believe how tempted I was -- and not for bloody Beraht, neither, but just to see the look on all their noble nug-humping faces when a brand took down their best men. But I was too scared for what might happen to Rica -- that's my sister, my I-can-prove-it sister -- so I scarpered. I figured the best way to make sure we were all safe was to slice Beraht into little tiny pieces, so I broke into his house and killed him. Rica turned out okay, I guess -- she ended up in the Royal Palace, with a bellyful of King Bhelen's son, so she and ma are well taken care of. Leske though, I don't know what happened to that poor duster. Before I slipped out the front gates for good I found out that he got his pal Darran to stand as Everd, and they got caught. If the guards didn't kill him, I guess Jarvia probably did."

"I found a dwarf in Jarvia's dungeons when I was cleaning out the Carta," Elilia said. "Two of them, actually, though only one was still alive. I let him out. He said something about being locked up because of a bet, but I don't know if he was your friend or not."

Laz sighed, then smiled brightly. "I would say it was too much to hope for, but I'm an optimistic duster so I choose to believe that it was. And I also choose to believe that he ran straight to the Diamond Quarter and Rica smuggled him into the palace as her 'cousin.' So now Leske's livin' the good life and drinkin' the good stuff."

"Excuse me, but do I understand you to say that you broke into this man Beraht's house and summarily murdered him?" Loghain asked.

"Damn straight, salroka. You surfacers have a phrase to describe it, I think you call it 'doing the world a favor.'"

"This Beraht, he was a smuggler, then?"

"More than that. If there was something dirty going on in Dust Town, Beraht was at the bottom of it. He was the Carta's boss before Jarvia. She was his right-hand woman, the hand that was down
his pants. I'd a' been glad to kill her, too, but she wasn't there. You ever been to Orzammar?"

"Some years ago, on Wardens' business with Elilia. We didn't stay long, however. We had a Blight to attend to."

"And I suppose you never went to Dust Town?"

"No."

"Then maybe you don't know that the only 'honest' work for a duster like me is cleaning trash middens or panhandling, and those jobs pay absolutely dick. Your other options are to work as some type of whore or bust heads for the Carta -- those jobs also pay absolutely dick, but you're less likely to starve to death or have your throat slit. My big sis was a high-end hooker -- a noble hunter, same diff, 'cept the lucky ones end up moved to a caste if they manage to give some asswagon a son -- and I was one of Beraht's meat-head muscleman."

"And your mother, I take it, was one of the 'unlucky' noble hunters?"

"That's what she says, but its actually pretty hard for me to imagine that she ever had the looks or the class to make it working the Diamond Quarter. But what do I know? Rica's looks had to come from somewhere, and ma could maybe be really classy when she's sober. I wouldn't know."

Loghain shook his head. "I oughtn't to say this, but I actually do feel rather badly for y - "

A sudden, sharp pain in his neck, a quick fading of consciousness. He heard Champion bark urgently and just had time for a single thought before he crumpled to the ground. I knew we shouldn't have trusted these damned dwarves.

*****

Champion could have kicked herself, if she were capable of doing so. The Bad People were upon them before she knew they were even there, wielding blowguns that shot darts of smelly sleep-juice with unerring aim into the necks of her Master and his people. They'd covered their Human scent with the thick aroma of doe urine, and if she'd been half as smart as she'd thought herself she would have alerted to the unnatural level of deer smell in the air. There was no time to launch a counter-offensive. She had to think on her paws.
With a brief doggy prayer that her Master would understand what she was doing and forgive her, she barked a command at the others. Paragon, older, believing herself wiser than a pup like Champion, did not want to obey, but one of the Bad People kicked her very hard in the face, making her yelp. Dazed, she sat back on her haunches for a moment and Champion took the opportunity to bite her sharply on the shoulder. No longer in a position to hold out, Paragon followed the pups into the tree cover. Abandoning their Masters went against every instinct in their nature, but Champion hoped she was being Clever. Clever was good.

They watched from the bushes as the Bad People stripped their Humans of the weapons they carried and bound them up hand and foot. They also put a gag in the mouth of the little one with the Fade smell about her. Champion had to sit on Haakon and put her front legs across his muzzle to keep him from whining and barking and chasing after when the Bad People loaded his mistress into the back of a horse-drawn cart another group of them brought up from further down the road. She felt very much like doing those things herself when her own Man was piled in next to her, with much grunting and swearing from the Bad People who had to wrangle his bulk.

"Sacre merde," she heard one of the Bad People say. "This is a big son of a bitch, no?"

"The Queen's pere," another said. "Be careful with him, the Empress wants him alive -- for now."

A third broke in. "You're not paid to talk! Allonz y!"

"What do we do with the dwarves and the elf girl?" one of them asked.

"Bring them along. As soft-hearted as the King is known to be, they may be of some value alive -- and even if not, they would fetch a fine price from the Tevinters, the apostate especially."

"Should we track down the dogs?" a Bad Man said, sounding worried. "They might sound an alarm."

The loud-voiced leader laughed. "They ran. Mabari do not run from a fight. Evidently they were not properly bonded. We have what we came for. Let us depart. I cannot shake the dirt of this place off my boots soon enough."

They finished piling up the fallen people and spread the hay that filled the cart over them carefully, so that it appeared to be just another farm wagon.
"We must hurry now, so that we can make camp before they awaken," the loud-voiced leader said. "We cannot be too cautious."

The dogs watched anxiously as the Bad People gave the order and the horse plodded on. Champion whined to Haakon, faster and stealthier than she or Paragon, and her brother wagged his stump of a tail in understanding. He raced off through the woods, keeping the cart in sight and making no noise, while Champion and Paragon followed at a more cautious distance. Eventually the Bad People turned off the well-traveled road for a rutted and overgrown track that saw little use. Some time later they stopped.

"Make camp. The drugs will wear off soon so they must be securely bound. Lash them to poles and make sure they're out of reach of each other. Give the mage another dose. We don't want her waking up and causing havoc."

Champion nearly forgot herself when her Master, looking so pale and lifeless that it frightened her, was unloaded from the wagon and tied to a sturdy wooden stake set into the earth. As one of the Bad People finished binding him he awoke, a scarce heartbeat between lolling dead and violently alive, and he strained against his bonds with some little effect. Startled, the Bad Man leapt back. If he had not been drugged he might have broken free, but the traces still in his system weakened him and the Master slumped back, exhausted. The Bad People laughed uproariously and Champion growled quietly to herself.

The dogs watched impatiently as the Bad People went about their business. Eventually they had their tents up and their fires lit, and Champion saw them break out several bottles. Her tail began to wag at the sight. She knew that when men drank deeply of such bottles they became slow and stupid. Luck was with them. The Bad People cooked themselves a heavy dinner, offering not so much as a scrap to the Master and his people as Champion was outraged to see, and drank a great deal of wine, and went to their bedrolls posting only a single guard already more than half asleep. Champion gave silent orders to the other pups and after Haakon had rolled in enough mud to hide his pale coat they bellied into the camp, keeping to the shadows as best they could. Haakon and Paragon crept to the wagon and burrowed through the hay to the cache of their people's weapons. Champion trusted in her dark coat to hide her well and stalked cautiously up behind the pole to which her Master was staked. She put her cold, wet nose in the palm of his hand momentarily and she felt his surprise, but he was Clever and made no sound. She applied her sharp teeth to his tough bonds and in a few moments his hands were free. Then she went to the wagon herself and returned to him with his sword clamped in her strong jaws. He did not take the time to praise her -- he took the blade and sliced through the ropes at his ankles, then rolled quickly to his feet and cut the throat of the one sleepy guard before he could react. In moments he had the rest of his People freed, except for the little Fade-smelling one who was still heavily drugged and asleep. With their weapons and the element of surprise, Champion's pack rapidly overtook their foolishly complacent captors.
"Take one alive," the Master growled to his pack. "I want to know their plans."

"This one's alive," the Short Man said. "Out cold, but alive."

"Bind him, and someone see if you can find some sort of antidote for poor Seanna."

Haakon's mistress knelt down beside her dog and pointed out the mud caking his white fur. "I've never heard of anything like this. Do you think our mabari actually…formulated a strategy?" The Short Woman gave Paragon pats and much praise, but the Master knew who to thank for his rescue. He knelt down and scratched Champion's ears.

"Good girl, Champion," he said. "Clever dog."

Champion panted modestly, but she knew she deserved his praise. She was indeed a very Clever Dog.
"I think I found something -- maybe it's a counter to the drugs they used?"

"Put that down, woman, that's a bottle of deer piss."

"Ew. Why in the name of the great sodding ancestors would they have a bottle of deer piss in their supplies?"

"I suspect they used it to keep the dogs from smelling them. Hunters douse themselves with it, sometimes, to keep their prey from noticing their presence and to attract bucks."

"Ugh. That's...really gross. Glad we never had to do things like that to catch nugs or deepstalkers."

"I think this is the stuff they used on Birdie," Varric said. He tossed Loghain a small vial. "They've sure got plenty of it. There's ten more bottles here. Bet they planned on keeping us drugged all the way to Val Royeaux. I don't think there's an antidote. We're just going to have to wait for it to wear off I guess."

"Hey, our 'new friend' seems to be waking up," Elilia said.

"Good. Let's see what he has to say for himself."

The surviving attacker was clearly frightened to come to bound hand and foot, face-to-face with his former prey, but he made a brave show of defiance.

Loghain knelt down before him. "So what was the plan, eh? Some sort of ransom situation, or was the Empress thinking more along the lines of a public execution? That's probably what I would do, in her situation. Having the Hero of Ferelden drawn and quartered before a crowd of thousands in Val Royeaux would demoralize our men pretty badly."

The Orlesian snarled in his native tongue, the gist of which was a demand that Loghain perform an impossible and highly unnatural act upon himself, and spit in his face. Loghain calmly wiped away the spittle, drew back and punched the man. The dull crunch of breaking cartilage made Varric
"Don't think for a moment that your continued existence is something I consider necessary," Loghain said, still perfectly calm. "You were sent here by the bloody Empress, that's all I really need to know. But your death could be a lot less painful and prolonged if you'd cooperate just enough to clarify a few non-essential details."

Blood streamed from the man's broken nose. Still he snarled curses in Orlesian.

Loghain nodded at Elilia. "Loose one of his arms for me, won't you please?"

She untied one of the man's wrists and Loghain took the man's arm in both hands and held it out straight. "Tell me what your plans were."

"Go fuck yourself, Fereldan Dog Lord."

"Believe it or not, I understood you well enough when you said it in Orlesian," Loghain said. "Let's see if we can't get you to say something a little more useful now."

Almost gently, he rotated the man's arm to its furthest range and then paused a moment, just long enough to hold the man's gaze with his own steady, icy blue eyes. Then he ratcheted the arm quite sharply, yanking the shoulder joint out of socket. The Orlesian screamed in agony. Varric paled noticeably.

"Hey, not to tell you your business or anything, but you do know you catch more flies with honey, right?" the dwarf said uncomfortably.

"Ferelden has been using honey-coated diplomacy with the damned Orlesians since we kicked them out of here forty-odd years ago. They've shown they prefer the taste of blood." Loghain returned his attention to their captive. "Ready to talk, yet?"

White-faced, sweating, trembling with fear and pain, the Orlesian was still defiant. "Fuck you, Ferelden."
"Pity." Loghain slammed a hard hand into the man's elbow, shattering it, and Varric turned away from the sight, pale and nauseated. Once he could speak without being drowned out by the Orlesian's howls of pain Loghain continued, in that same perfectly calm, reasonable tone he'd used throughout. "You're rather a slim-built man. I daresay it wouldn't be terribly difficult for me to rip your arm clean off at the shoulder, and I could then use it to beat you to death. I confess its an attractive idea. But I'm a patient man, and you've got three limbs remaining. I can keep dislocating your joints and breaking your bones until you say something sensible or expire from the violation, whichever comes first. I have some experience with this so believe me when I tell you, Ser, that it takes a long time to die this way. Be a smart lad, and just tell me what I want to know. I won't make you suffer one moment longer than you make me make you suffer."

"I…I'll tell you," the Orlesian sobbed out. "I'll tell you everything -- please."

"Good man. On your time."

It took a bit for the man to choke down his pain enough to speak. "We were…to take you to Jader. There we were to send word to your King that we were holding the Queen's father and the Hero of Ferelden hostage."

"And what, exactly, was that meant to accomplish?"

The man shook his head. "We were to demand that your King allow our legions within your borders for pacification. Ferelden would become a protectorate of the Empire but could keep its government, with limitations. We were told not to expect our demands to be met, however."

"So then the plan was to…?"

"Kill you both, defile the bodies, and return them to Denerim to illustrate the wages of Ferelden's arrogance in defying your rightful sovereign."

"Hmph. A decent plan, as far as it goes. Do you know anything more about the Empress' plans?"

The man shook his head again. "We were given a target and a rough idea of what to do when we had you, nothing more. We didn't even know how we were going to get our hands on you until we discovered that you were leaving Denerim unaccompanied by guards. We were after you. The Hero of Ferelden was an unexpected bonus."
"Very well." Loghain reached for the knife he had replaced in his boot.

"Wait! Wait! I know something more! A rumor only, but something you would do well to hear!" Loghain's hand stopped on its way and hovered in the air near the boot strapping expectantly. "What I have to say will be of great value to you, if it is true. When I tell you, will you let me go?"

"You will go in peace."

The man licked his bloodless lips and eyed the hand that still hovered near the hilt of the half-hidden blade. His eyes flicked back and forth from hand to face several times as he spoke. "The Empress, she secretly employs many agents. Bards, you would call them, although many are not truly of that ilk. Many of these agents, in fact, are apostates. Some years back, even before your Blight, the Empress supposedly installed a good number of her apostates in your capital to work a certain, shall we say, chaos amongst your nobility. They used blood magic to do it."

Elilia spoke up. "We wiped out rather a large nest of blood mages in the back alleys of Denerim, Loghain, if you recall."

The Orlesian nodded. "It is rumored those were they. The Empress was quite distressed when they were reported dead, mostly because she still had to pay the mercenary companies from which she hired their guards, it is said."

"That was long ago, and those mages are dead," Loghain said. "How is it you think this information is of value to me now?"

"Ah but you see, before the Blight, and even during, it was very difficult or even impossible, they say, to get any significant amount of blood from the targeted nobles, so the magic the mages could work secretly was quite limited. But there was one Ferelden nobleman who bled frequently for his country, and it was simplicity itself to pay unscrupulous Healers to fill a vial or two in exchange for a few gold sovereigns. It is rumored that even before the Blight the Empress kept a vial of his blood in a golden stand upon her vanity table, as a trophy."

Elilia's blanched face and terrified eyes gave testament to the fact she fully understood what their informant was implying. Loghain understood, as well, but kept his reaction carefully schooled.

"And this nobleman was…?"
"It was you, Lord Loghain," the Orlesian said. "It was you. I do not know how much influence the
maleficarum exerted upon you, but it is sure they had much. Killing the mages put a halt upon the
Empress' immediate plans, but it is rumored that there are still phylacteries of your blood kept safe
in many places around the Empire -- and further still. Some say she made quite a profit selling a
vial or two to interested parties in other lands, but I am not so sure of that myself. I believe she
would keep you as her own prize, for the rumors were that she was very happy in her ownership.
Now…will you let me go?"

"Yes." Loghain took his boot knife and plunged it into the Orlesian's throat. Varric, who had turned
back to absorb this fresh horror with a storyteller's interest, protested weakly.

"You said you'd let him go in peace," he muttered.

"So I did. I did not tell him that he would go alive. In fact from the very first I warned him that the
best he could hope for was to die quickly. I believe I delivered upon that promise."

Laz socked Varric on the shoulder. "Come on, salroka, you know we couldn't let the duster go free.
Sure, busted up as he was he'd probably have left, but where would he go? Straight to his sodding
Empress to tell her what happened -- and how bloody close their plans came to working. I say let
the bitch sit and stew in her juices as long as possible."

"I know, I know. I just…I guess I don't have the stomach for this kind of thing," the storyteller said
miserably. "Andraste's ass, I need a drink. I hope these bastards left some of that wine they were
sucking down."

He moved off through the shambles of the camp, checking discarded bottles for an elusive sip or
two of alcohol. Elilia was still staring, horror-struck, at Loghain.

"This…changes everything," she said at last.

"It changes nothing," Loghain said brusquely. "Nothing that is past, in any event. It does perhaps
illustrate that you would have been wiser by far had you slain me at the Landsmeet, or allowed me
to die of the Bloody Lung. If the Orlesian's story had any truth in it, then I'm rather a grave
liability."

She shook her head. "It all fits now. There was so much I didn't completely understand…I could
see you doing those things, if there were no other recourse, but I didn't understand why you felt
"Don't," he told her, quite firmly. Almost angrily. "Don't make excuses for me. It doesn't matter if every bloody maleficar in Thedas had a finger in my head. It changes nothing. What's done is done, and I've done plenty to deserve every ounce of opprobrium I've received. I do Ferelden's dirty work, and some of it has been bloody dirty indeed. You can't keep a King on his throne if you're afraid to suffer the Maker's wrath."

Any response she might have made was abruptly cut off by Varric's cry of triumph as he came up with several unopened bottles of chardonnay that had lain hidden beneath the canvas of a half-trampled tent. "Not bad stuff, either," he said happily. "If we had some fish or fowl to eat along with it we could have a fine dinner, but I'm not particular. Beef and mutton go just as well with white wine as red when you're thirsty enough."

He came back and handed Loghain and Elilia each a bottle, carefully not looking at the dead man with the gaping wound in his throat. "I say we scrounge up everything salvageable from these guys' camp outfit, load it and poor Birdie in the wagon, and head back to the road to make our own camp. I don't really feel like sleeping here tonight, but we can't go too far with the poor little girl still out cold."

"Sounds like a plan to me. Elilia, could you and Laz see to that, please? I'm rather thirsty myself, and I think Master Varric and I should share a drink and have a little private discussion. Give Elilia your bottle, Ser, and you can have it later. For now you'll drink from mine."

The dwarf looked downright frightened at this turn of events, but he seized upon the word "later" like a lifeline, and handed over his bottle of chardonnay. That there would be a "later" held the promise that he was not being taken to his death. Large hand upon the man's shoulder, Loghain led him off some little way into the trees. Champion rose and followed along, and he watched the dog more than his captive as they walked. There was a new strut in the animal's gait that verified his suspicions quite as much as the way the other dogs ceded ground to her when she passed. She'd won herself the position of Alpha. In all his life he'd never heard of a mabari smart enough to come up with a complex strategy on its own. They were highly intelligent, yes, capable of executing complicated orders, but they were not known for their ability to formulate tactics for themselves. Champion was obviously an exceptional animal, and he was gladder than ever that he'd followed Elilia to the stables that day.

When they were out of sight of camp he stopped and leaned against the bole of a large tree, took his knife and dug the cork out of the bottle. Varric watched the operation with a certain mien of distaste. Loghain had wiped it clean, but it was still the blade he'd used to dirk the Orlesian. "Sorry, only knife I've got slender enough to do the job. Don't be hair-shirted, booze drowns blood every time, I find."
He offered the dwarf first taste. Varric shrugged as he accepted the bottle. "Never been one for abnegation, particularly where fine Orlesian wine is concerned." He took a deep swallow and handed the bottle back. Loghain took a swig without even wiping off the rim of the bottle's mouth.

"So," he said as he handed off the bottle again. "Our late lamented friend back there was sent by the Empress of Orlais. Who sent you, Master Dwarf?"

Varric hesitated, then downed another pull of wine and handed the bottle back. "I'm here entirely of my own volition, messer. But you are correct in your assumption that our meeting was not entirely accidental."

He sighed, determined to make a clean breast of it and trust in the truth to set him free. "I, serrah, am a Merchant Prince, by inheritance the head of a family business deeply entrenched in the politics of the Dwarven Merchants' Guild. We are sellers of fine goods throughout the Free Marches, but my own personal line of work leads me to be more a purveyor of information. In Kirkwall I was an institution. I knew everyone, from the Viscount to the panhandlers of Darktown, and everyone knew me -- and trusted me. It's exactly the kind of notoriety someone like me needs in order to function. But I'm not in Kirkwall anymore, I'm in Ferelden, where I know no one and am likewise unknown. Don't get me wrong, I like it here, and hope to make this place my new center of operations. People just don't seem to be as uppity here as they are in other places, and that's a good thing. But until I have an entrée into the higher levels of society I'll never be comfortable or useful. If I were still with Hawke I could probably use her name to get an audience with your King and Queen and so offer my services, but Hawke's not here -- yet. When I heard that you and the Hero of Ferelden were leaving Denerim on a secret mission it seemed like the perfect opportunity to insinuate myself into the upper echelons and start building those needed contacts. The plan was to get ahead of you and set up somewhere, friendly travelers willing to share a bite of lunch or something like that, and then offer to join forces. Being waylaid by bandits wasn't on the itinerary, but when you rushed to our defense it did make me feel a lot easier in my mind about asking to link up."

"To whom do you sell your information, oh Merchant Prince of Spies?" Loghain asked, and kept the bottle passing back and forth from himself to the dwarf as they spoke, like a solemn ritual.

Varric drew himself up to his full height. "To the worthiest bidder, serrah, and not the highest. And oftentimes the only coinage I ask in payment is that of security and friendship."

"I see. And you would extend the hand of friendship to Ferelden?"

"I came here to see if Ferelden was worth it. I have come to believe that she is."
"And what makes you think that?"

Varric gestured expansively. "You do. And she does -- the Hero, that is. And Hawke made me believe it before ever I set foot on your shores. There's something about Ferelden. Like any place else it has its shortcomings, but somehow it seems to breed more of the Extraordinarys, the people who have the strength and the stones to fly in the face of everybody screaming at them about what is Right and what is Acceptable and defy them all and get shit done. Orlais can't stop singing the praises of Ser Aveline, because someone willing to step out of line and shake a fist in the face of convention is so damned unheard of there they just can't get over it. But Ferelden… By the ancestors, man! You've got Dane and Hafter and Loghain and Maric and Elilia Cousland and Kireani Hawke…you've got bloody boiling Andraste herself! Something in the dirt here or the water or maybe even the bloody air seems almost to breed heroes. With the mess the world is in, heroes are something we're in dire need of. So if I can help even a little, I feel I should offer Ferelden my services. Besides, the rest of the world may have conveniently overlooked the fact but I am well aware that all Thedas owes you a debt of gratitude for stopping the Blight before it could spread."

He took a last swallow and passed the bottle, now more than two-thirds empty, back to Loghain. The big man contemplated the liquid through the thick green glass for a time, then threw his long neck back and drained it in a single gulping swallow. He threw the empty bottle down and smashed the glass beneath his boot. If there was symbolism in the act, Varric was uncertain of its meaning.

"Well enough. Let's get back and pitch in before the ladies think we ran off and left them to do all the packing like typical menfolk."

*****

"I think Seanna's starting to come round."

She felt herself lifted by hands that seemed to her swimming mind the size of kite shields. She opened her eyes and gazed upon a world clouded and hazy and for a moment she believed she was actually under water. Perspective had taken a holiday, and the big man who helped her sit up appeared one minute to be miles away and the next to be right in her face. She squeezed her eyes shut with a heartfelt groan and felt rather than saw the tin mug of clear water that was pressed to her cracked lips. She drank it down and felt some of the fog inside her head lift.

She opened her eyes again. The world was not quite where it should be -- Loghain's eyes seemed to burn like pockets of raw lyrium, and many other colors were too vibrant as well, including the strawberry of Laz' hair -- but at least her depth perception was back, more or less.
"Are you all right?" Loghain asked in his gruff way. His eyes met hers quite frankly and with open concern, and with a shock she realized -- really realized, for the first time -- exactly what it was about this man that Elilia found so attractive. He was overwhelming, intense, and when he turned his full attention upon her Seanna felt as if she must be the only other creature in the world at that moment. A shiver rippled down her spine, not at all unpleasant but certainly a guilty sort of feeling, and she tore her gaze away from him.

"I'm okay, I think. A little woozy. What happened?"

"We got bushwhacked, Birdie," Varric said. "Orlesians."

"They knocked us all out with sleep darts and took us prisoner," Loghain said. "They must have given you an extra dose before the rest of us waked. Probably afraid you'd unleash a demon on them if you came round. Would've given much to have seen that, actually."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"A few hours longer than the rest of us."

She looked around in confusion at the neatly laid fire and the tents. "We're...in camp? Are we free?"

"Thanks to the dogs," Elilia said. "They broke us out and we put paid to the Orlesians before they knew what was happening. Damnedest thing you ever saw."

"Here, salroka, settle your stomach with some food," Laz said, coming up with a bowl of something that steamed invitingly. "Been a long time since breakfast."

"There's wine, also, but I don't recommend it until the effects of the sleeping draught have thoroughly worn off," Loghain said.

Seanna took the bowl and dug in ravenously. The fuzzy caterpillar that seemed to have replaced her tongue could discern no flavor in the gloppy mixture of what appeared to be beef and beans and melted cheese in stock but she was far too hungry to care. Elilia laughed at her.
"Go easy, Little Bird," she cautioned. "You'll make yourself sick. There's plenty more when that's
gone."

It was difficult, but she managed to moderate her pacing slightly.

"Are we going to have to worry about surprise attacks from now on?" she asked once the edge was off her hunger.

"We should have been more worried from the start," Loghain said ruefully. "We'll take extra precautions from now on, but I don't think we'll find another ambush awaiting us any time soon. It will take some time before the Empress realizes this first attempt has failed. I'm more worried about the King and Queen for the nonce -- who knows what that bitch Celene had planned for Denerim? -- but for now I'll trust to our preparations there. It's all I can do right now."

"I'm more worried about those phylacteries," Elilia said darkly, and Loghain glowered at her.

"What phylacteries?" Seanna asked.

"The ones the Orlesians claim are full of the Big Bull's blood, Birdie," Varric said. "Rumor has it there may be a few gallons of it floating around out there somewhere, just awaiting a talented blood mage to start pulling the strings long-distance."

Seanna's spoon dropped into her bowl with a wet plop. Her green eyes took up half her face. "Blood magic?"

"Not every blood mage is bad, Birdie," Varric said. "I knew the sweetest little Dalish girl back in Kirkwall, just as gentle as a lamb, but she could blow your brains out your ear-holes in a heartbeat if you managed to piss her off. Thankfully it wasn't easy to do."

Seanna looked at Loghain with wide, horror-stricken eyes. "But you… you're a Thrall?"

"Could be," Loghain said grimly. "To what extent is difficult to say."
Varric shook his head. "I'm not going to say there isn't something in this rumor, but it seems to me that if the Empress still had your blood sitting on a shelf somewhere, and it was viable for working magics on, then you wouldn't be standing here now, Big Bull. She could have had some blood mage force you to walk right up the steps of the Grand Cathedral and put your neck right on the headsman's block. I sure can't see what benefit its been to her to leave you *alive.*"

"If you have a strong resistance to magic," Seanna ventured, "then distance from the source would somewhat lessen the effects even though they're working directly upon your own shed blood. But all they would have to do is bring the blood mage and your phylactery in *closer to you,* and resistance would be futile. And with a phylactery they could always find you, using the same rites that Templars use to find Circle escapees."

"The Taint," Elilia said suddenly, with a snap of her fingers. "When you became a Warden your blood became useless to them, because you were Tainted, changing the nature of your blood. Oh shit-weasels -- if I'd thought of that years ago, Anders would never have had to worry about the Circle still holding his leash, and maybe he…"

"Anders?" Varric said in surprise. "You knew Anders?"

"Er…tall, skinny blond guy with sparkly fingers? Yes, I'm the one who conscripted him into the Grey Wardens, to save him from a rather nasty templar bitch who would have seen him executed for murders committed by Darkspawn. But he didn't stick around very long, thanks to the fact that I was obliged to loan him out to some Orlesian Wardens making a trek through the Deep Roads to investigate the source of the Blight. I heard later that they made him get rid of the cat I gave him, and he ran away from them. Daft bastards. If we'd realized that the templars couldn't track him he might have come back to Amaranthine, but I heard…when the 'trouble' happened in Kirkwall…" She trailed off uncertainly. "Was it really Anders? Did he really blow up the Kirkwall Chantry? I heard it was so, but I didn't want to believe it."

Varric sighed. "It *was* Anders and it *wasn't* Anders. I'll tell you the whole story some other time if you really want to hear it, but I don't think it will make you feel any better."

Elilia shook her head sadly. "Poor Anders. I could have predicted *Velanna* might do something of the kind, but not him."

Seanna held up a hand. "Pardon me, but while I concede the concept that the Warden's Taint could render a phylactery obtained prior to the Joining ineffectual, you did tell me that Loghain is no longer Tainted, correct? So, assuming they did not pour out all their old vials of blood upon discovering they no longer worked, then he is still very much in danger -- as, by extension, are *we.* Since the blood could still be used in other rituals, I see no reason to suppose there are no phylacteries left, particularly if they had many."
"Shit."

Elilia sat down upon the packed earth and thought deeply for a moment. "I see no recourse. We have to go to Kinloch Hold. Even if the place was looted, the Circle may still have the Litany of Adralla -- the only thing known to protect against blood magic. It's all on the way, I can go in and grab it and we'll be back on track without losing schedule. We need that Litany. Otherwise we'll always be worried that Loghain is going to slaughter us in our sleep."

"Seanna shouldn't be taken anywhere too near Kinloch," Loghain said. "There may still be templars."

"How about this: the three of you stay back and protect Birdie, and Laz and I will go to the Circle and I'll put my considerable powers of persuasion to use charming this Litany thing out of whomever may still be there?" Varric said. Paragon barked. "And we'll take Paragon with us, of course, since she'll have to do most of the talking I'm sure."

"Do you really think they'd give it up to a couple of dwarves?" Elilia asked incredulously.

"Madam, I assure you there is no one better at the fine art of bullshitting," Varric said grandly. "I'll have the Litany, a hundred kilos of lyrium, and three leftover mages thrown in by the time I'm done bargaining."

"Well, you'd better. Otherwise I'm storming the hold and cleaning the place out entirely," Elilia said. "We'll be there in another couple of days. In the meanwhile, you remember those skills I taught you, don't you, Loghain?"

He nodded. "I'm not in particularly good practice but yes, I do."

"Brush up on them, somewhere they won't come into conflict with Seanna. They could only help."

"What skills are those?" Seanna asked.

"Templar skills, ones I learned from King Alistair and passed along to Loghain. A Holy Smite might not be of much use against long-distance blood magic but the occasional Cleansing might
dispel any niggling effects."

Seanna shuddered. "Yes, 'Cleanse' might well be put to good use in this situation, but please, far away from me. Your best bet is still the Litany, though. Templars aren't immune to blood magic, as I know from personal experience."

Laz yawned, gaping widely. "Damn. Considering I slept pretty much all day, it's kind of funny I'm so flippin' tired."

"We should all get some sleep, while we may," Loghain said. "It's late, and we'll need to make an early start."

He pulled Elilia aside. "You should stay with Seanna," he began, but she cut him off with a kiss.

"I'm not afraid," she said boldly, ignoring the coughs, whistles, and snickers of their lookers-on. She took his hand and led him to their tent. In thralldom of a more common and occasionally more innocent blood magic, Loghain followed meekly. In short order the muted and not-so-muted sounds of their passion came from within.

"It's nice for them, of course," Varric said, with a philosophical shrug, "but the rest of us won't get any sleep for hours, listening to that racket."
"Do you really think Varric can find the Litany? The place may be completely devoid of people," Seanna said. From where she sat with her knees drawn up to her chest she could see the pinnacle of the Aavaar-built tower that had been her home for the whole of her remembered life, rising above the treetops below the hill on which they waited. Just looking at the place made her fearful, and she had to keep reminding herself that Elilia would not let the templars take her back to that gilded prison.

Nor, she thought now, would Loghain. The big warrior would not sit, and strode back and forth across the crest of the hill with his sword unsheathed, as if daring trouble to find him. "He does seem to deal a fine line in bullshit," he said, with a slight sigh. "Not that I know anything about the Knight-Commander's susceptibility, if he remains within."

"It doesn't matter. If he can't get them to hand it over, we'll take it. Ferelden's national security may depend on it," Elilia said fiercely. She sat on the grass beside Seanna with Haakon almost in her lap. She scratched the dog's neck without really seeming to notice him.

Loghain snorted derisively. "Don't expect the Circle of Magi to be particularly concerned with Ferelden national security."

Seanna glared reproachfully at him. "How can you say that? This is our home too, you know, even if we weren't allowed to live freely in it."

He shook his head. "Wasn't speaking of the mages themselves, dear heart, although would it surprise you very much to hear that the First Enchanter before Irving was part of a plot to abduct King Maric? The templars, on the other hand…hmph. They're the strong arm of the Chantry, and the Chantry is an Orlesian institution."

"Whoa wait -- abduct King Maric? What are you talking about?" Elilia asked.

"Long story. Let's just say that if the Circle is ever reinstituted, we won’t be allowing ours to choose an Orlesian First Enchanter, ever again." A pause, and then a derisive snort. "Actually, thinking back, I suppose I was the original target, but I don't think they were at all unhappy that I was too suspicious and Maric too confoundedly guileless. So I pulled his chestnuts out of the fire -- again -- and there's an end to it."
"You were…fond of King Maric?" Seanna ventured doubtfully.

"Ha. It is an odd truth about life, little one, but the people we are fondest of are often the very same people who are best and quickest able to piss us off. Has something to do with being family, even if there's no blood kin involved."

Seanna toyed with the grass a bit and plucked a few blades. "There won't be any grass where we're going, will there? The Darkspawn left the land barren."

"Even here, things don't grow quite as they ought," Loghain said. "This grass should be almost knee-deep and green as your eyes. Now its only a couple of inches and there's just barely any green in it at all. There was plenty of rain this season. The land is just…tainted. We're on the verge of the true Blightlands, here."

"Do you think perhaps we ought to try the ashes here?" Elilia asked. "After all, if they don't work here, there's no particular reason to go any further."

He sighed. "I've been trying to sort that very question myself. The problem as I see it is, how will we know they've worked on land that isn't obviously corrupted? I don't want to waste ashes on land that's still productive when there are so many hundreds of acres that are stunted or poisoned."

"I see your point," Elilia said. "But I still think we should try it now. Just a little tiny pinch, to see what we're looking at. If it doesn't seem like anything happened then we'll continue into the Blightlands and give it a go in a real test, but if there is some obvious change, it could give us an idea how much we need to use per acre. And since you seem reluctant to let our dwarven comrades in on our little project, we might not have a better time for a private test."

Loghain looked down at Champion, keeping pace with him every step. "What do you think?" he asked her. She sat down on her haunches and panted. "Looks like an agreement to me. Help me with my armor, won't you?"

Ever since the ambush, Loghain had taken to carrying the little pouch of ashes secured inside the chest piece of his armor. The Orlesians had evidently taken the little pouch of ashes to be some sort of weapon, perhaps sand to be flung in the eyes of an opponent, and had tossed the precious bag into the pile of weapons they confiscated from their prisoners. Elilia helped him with the strapping of his leathers and he untied the pouch from where it was fastened on the underside.
"Just toss it aside for now," Loghain said, and Elilia set the armor down on the ground. He opened the pouch and took a deep breath. "This is probably the most insane thing I have ever done, and I've done some crazy shit in my time."

Elilia ran a hand across the expanse of his chest, riffling through the hair that covered it, and kissed his cheek. "It's not all that crazy to hope, you know."

"I hope you're right about that."

They knelt down together and Seanna joined them, eager to see what would happen. "With my bloody luck, even if it works we'll get about half an inch of untainted ground. Empty the whole bag and get about two square feet of tillable soil."

Elilia socked him on the shoulder. "Stop being so damned pessimistic about everything. You suck all the joy out of life."

"What joy?"

She socked him again, a bit harder. "Just give me the bloody pouch."

He did so, along with a penitent kiss. He dug a shallow hole in the earth and she sprinkled in just the tiniest amount of ashes. For a moment it seemed nothing in particular happened. Then Seanna gave a quiet gasp. "I think -- I think its working," she said.

It took a moment longer for the humans to see what she’d seen. The grass…was greener, and greening up more by the second. And it was growing, slowly at first, but then so quickly they could almost hear it. And not just where they’d placed the ashes, but as far around them as they could see. The pines and firs, too, shed their dowdy colors and stood resplendent in proper evergreen dignity. It was difficult to determine, from their vantage point surrounded by such trees, exactly how far the ashes’ influence spread, but there was a decided greenness to all the visible world now that had not been there before, and suggested the miracle worked for a decent distance. The dogs barked joyously and rolled in the rich green grass. Seanna fell backward with her arms outstretched and did much the same. Loghain and Elilia looked at each other.

"Tie that bag up well, Elilia," Loghain said, and there was a noticeable quaver in his voice. "That little pile of dust is worth more than all the gold in Nevarra."
She knotted the drawstring, a strange smile that was half-ecstatic, half-stunned played about her lips. When she had it securely tied she slowly placed both hands on Loghain's shoulders, never letting go her white-knuckle grip on the leather pouch.

"Never. Crazy. To hope," she said.

"I'm not in any position to argue," he said fervently.

She grinned at him, then planted an enormous kiss directly upon his lips, with her arms tightening around his neck. He held her close and wished her chest was as bare as his was, but even in her heavy mail she felt wonderful against his body. Seanna was utterly forgotten and even Elilia's heavy armor might not have proven a lasting impediment but for a sudden interruption that reminded him rather cruelly that they were not alone.

"Maker's breath, you can't even wait to pitch a tent before you...you know, pitch a tent?"

Laz at least didn't seem to be paying attention to the lovers. She looked around in rapt wonder. "What happened here?" she asked. "It's like someone dumped a big bucket of green all over this place."

"That was quick," Loghain growled. "Gave up so soon?"

"Serrah, we barely had but to walk in the front door," Varric said grandly, and pulled from an inner coat pocket a sheaf of parchment. "One Litany of Adralla, as promised."

"How on earth did you manage to convince them to give it to you so easily?" Seanna asked. She took it from him and examined the pages as if she didn't believe it could be the real thing.

He snickered. "Easy as pie, Birdie. Before we even had time to explain who we were and what we wanted we were fobbed off on a dwarven mage, who was only too happy to give us what we were after."

"A dwarven mage?" Loghain asked, incredulous, but Elilia and Seanna said in perfect unison, "Dagna!"
"That was her name, all right," Varric confirmed. "She sent her regards along with the Litany, both for you, My Lady, and you, Birdie. I have to say she seemed a bit unhappy with you for leaving, and doesn't seem to understand why anyone would ever want to."

"Well, I daresay the Circle looks a bit different when you're there by choice," Seanna said.

"Someone please explain what the hell a *dwarven mage* is," Loghain insisted.

Elilia laughed. "Dagna is a scholar, Loghain, not a mage, but she has a boundless enthusiasm for magic undampened, apparently, by a good solid decade living with mages. I relayed her request to First Enchanter Irving myself. Part of the reason we returned to Orzammar was so that I could tell her he was happy to offer her a chance to study at the Circle. Nice to see she remembers me."

"Most of our time was spent listening to her *talk* about you," Laz said. "Girl's got a mouth that moves more than a waterwheel."

Varric flicked a hand at the greenery all around them. "So, uh…what *did* happen here?" he asked. "I gotta say, it was a hell of a shock when everything just suddenly turned *green*. I thought my eyes were going. Or my mind."

"Might as well tell them," Elilia said. "There's not much chance of keeping it a deep, dark secret now."

Loghain grunted noncommittally, but rose to his feet and pulled Elilia up with him. "That's what we're out here in the backwoods to do," he said. "Make everything green again."

"Ah. Succinct and to the point, I'll grant you, but not exactly *clarification*," Varric said.

"We've found a cure for the corruption the Blight left on the land," Elilia supplied. She held out the unassuming leather pouch. "The Ashes of Andraste."

Varric stared for a long breath, then blinked twice, slowly. "The…*actual* ashes? I mean, I'd heard rumors about what cured your Arl Eamon…and for awhile there Kirkwall was overrun with mountebanks pawning off bags of chimney sweepings…but I never really thought for a minute…"
"You saw what happened to the trees and grasses," Loghain growled. "What more do you need?"

Varric held out his hands in supplication. "Hey, I'm not saying I doubt you. I've seen enough to know that you can't put anything past a Fereldan, even a miracle."

"I hope you understand this needs to be kept quiet," Elilia said. "The Chantry would probably call this a blasphemy rather than a miracle, and we're already running the risk of an Exalted March these days. People are going to notice there's a difference, but they don't really need to know how it came about."

"Don't worry, I'm not in the Chantry's good graces these days, either. I won't breathe a word of this."

"Much obliged," Loghain said dryly. "Now we're wasting daylight. Let's get moving."

*MEANWHILE, IN DENERIM*

The dwarves arrived a little more than two weeks after Loghain and Elilia's party left Denerim. They were led by none other than Vartag Gavorn himself, King Bhelen's trusted -- albeit slightly greasy -- Second. The usual courtesies were paid at the Palace, but then the King and Queen were made rather an unusual request: to join the dwarven delegation on the quays for their presentation.

Kings and Queens are not comfortable in such seedy areas as harbor frontage, even Kings and Queens "of the people" as Alistair and Anora were considered. Royal bodyguards are even less comfortable in such places, and tend to hover rather annoyingly close to their charges. But they lifted up their skirts -- metaphorically but for Anora who did so literally -- and followed the dwarven procession to the docks, where they were met by quite a sight: A dozen enormous steel-built wagons, each pulled by an eight-bronto hitch. The contents of these vehicles were covered with plain canvas tarpaulins, but it was clear the loads were tremendous.

"King Bhelen understands what it is to rule, what it is to have enemies. Since your Warden not only assisted my King in attaining his rightful throne, but also assisted us in regaining the lost technology that has enabled us to defend our borders and reclaim territory from the scourge of the Darkspawn, King Bhelen wishes to offer your nation a taste of the victory the dwarves have had in recent days. The restoration of Kal-Hirol has given us the means to produce wonders that we haven't had the manpower or resources to do for generations. Because of this windfall our King felt that a generous gesture with our near neighbors and great allies was more than appropriate. He wishes me to convey his sincerest hope that you will crush your enemies, and also to inform you that if you would consider bolstering your own armies with a core of a few golems, we would be
happy to deal with you. We learned from our mistakes of years past, and do not intend to open up trade of these precious constructs, so Ferelden is the only nation that may choose to benefit from our Paragon's researches."

Alistair, who knew the dreadful secret behind the creation of golems, attempted valiantly to hide his discomfiture at being offered a sales pitch. "That is certainly a generous offer, Ser Vartag, and one we will most definitely keep in mind, but at the moment we've invested our national treasury pretty heavily in shoring up fortifications in our major harbors. I don't think we could afford golems at the present."

"We understand. Indeed, harbor defenses is entirely why we are here, Your Majesty," Vartag said. "Dwarves are not seafarers by nature, so we certainly understand a culture that looks upon the sea with justifiable suspicion, but you are Surfacers, and coastlines are a terrible weak spot in your national defenses. We can help you with that. We have built for you a pair of Guardian Statues to flank the entrance to Denerim Harbor, enchanted with barrier spells to prevent seaborne assault on the city."

"Statues? Is that what's in the carts?" Alistair asked. "They're in pieces, I assume? They must be huge."

Vartag chuckled. "Your Majesty, the statues are still en route from Orzammar. The carts contain the pieces of their bases, and my craftsmen and enchanters will begin construction of them immediately. This is the part that will take longest, for we must set up barrier wards to keep the ocean back while we work, but it will not take many days, and we will not be an impediment to shipping."

"You're putting them in the water?" Alistair asked. "How do you manage that?"

"Enchantment. Believe me when I say, Your Majesty, that our statues will defend your city capably for millennia."

"Give King Bhelen our sincerest gratitude for this generous gift and his gracious offer of further assistance," Anora said. An exchange of nods and bows were made, and the King and Queen were able to make a dignified exit while dwarven supervisors began barking orders at their laborers. Anora whispered an aside to her husband when they were out of Vartag's earshot. "Of course you realized what this really is, don't you?"

Alistair chuckled. "A bribe. If these 'Guardian Statues,' whatever they are, are as grand as they seem to be claiming, we'll be beholden to 'Good King Bhelen,' and likely that's a marker he'll call in
"If they keep Denerim from falling to Orlesian warships, then when we've settled matters with the Empire I'll gladly send any aid we can afford to Orzammar."

"I agree. Good to know we're on the same page. I just hope that whatever these statues are, they're not as blocky and...dwarven as their Paragon statues. They're impressive, surely, but as a representation of Ferelden they would be bloody god-awful." He lengthened his stride abruptly as they neared the dockyards. "Hey -- while we're here, let's check in on Old Ironsides. Last report said she was about ready to launch."

Anora suppressed a wry grin at the eagerness in her husband's voice. Men were all such little boys about big boats.

The big ironclad was indeed prepared for launch, in fact it was already in position for the big moment, awaiting only its crew. The master shipwright informed the eager King about the repairs and improvements made with pride of ownership in his voice.

They were not unobserved. Not a hundred feet away a ship rested at anchor, awaiting its turn to declare at the Harbormaster's dock. It was a long wait even on a good day, and all was quiet aboard The Siren's Call II as the sleepy crew lounged below decks mostly, waiting. One figure leaned indolently against the mast, as casually possessive of the vessel as only a captain or a cabin boy could ever be. It was a woman, scantily clad and Rivaini-colored, who watched the Royal goings-on with sharp caramel-brown eyes. After a time she walked over to a hatch and knocked on it with the heel of her boot.

"Hey, come on out and see this."

She moved away, crossing her arms over her ample bosom, and the hatch opened. Another woman climbed out, followed closely by yet a third and a large, dusty-grey hound. The second woman was slim, and her careless hair was prematurely white. Her face, however, was unlined, and if it was rather plain it had a look of honesty to it. It also had a bold tattoo, done relatively lightly in red ink, of a stylized bird of prey that spanned both cheeks and stretched from forehead to chin, a mark that went well with her far-seeing amber-gold eyes. The third woman was even more slender, almost birdlike, and her face too was tattooed, but the dark brown marks were the traditional vallaslin of the Dalish.

"What is it, Isabella?" the white-haired woman asked. "Trouble?"
"No, just thought you'd want a chance to ogle your King and Queen before suing for audience, is all," Isabella said. She tossed her chin in the direction of the dockyards. "There they are, if you can see them through the crowd of armed attendants. The Queen I am unfamiliar with, though she looks a bit of an iceberg, don't she? The King I met some time ago, though he wasn't a king at the time. Funny how things work out for some people."

The Dalish woman cocked her head to one side questioningly, a birdlike motion, and asked, "He wasn't a King? What was he, then?"

Isabella laughed. "Well, I assume he was a prince, Kitten, if only by a technicality. My understanding is that Good King Alistair was a Royal Bastard."

"Why would they call him Good King Alistair if he were a bastard?" Merrill asked. Her companions only chuckled and shook their heads at each other.

"Don't worry, Kitten," Isabella said, "'Tis in the contrary nature of humanity that some bastards are actually very nice people. My impression of His Majesty at the time was that he was rather a sweet little lad, all flustered and uncomfortable to be tagging along behind his Big Sister Warden at a brothel, of all places. Speaking of which, I hope the Pearl is still in business. I suppose the Lay Warden isn't working anymore, but there's bound to be someone interesting there."

Hawke laughed. "Not to worry, Isabela. I'm sure the prostitutes were the first people in Denerim to be restored to prosperity."

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Looking back, Loghain had to say the dragonlings were the least of their worries. They ran into a small nest of them, unguarded, three days into the heavily Blighted lands. It was a rough skirmish but despite their lack of experience fighting alongside each other the party worked seamlessly as one, and the only injuries were minor and easy for Seanna's powerful healing spells to deal with. But that was three days in. By the seventh day, the team learned well that there were far worse things making their home in the Blightlands than baby dragons.

Giant spiders were common, alarmingly so. Loghain had never seen such enormous spiders outside of the Deep Roads, and he didn't like to think about them spreading throughout Ferelden, but they were at least relatively easy to kill. The bad part was numbers, much more so even than their venom, and several times they were nearly overwhelmed. Elilia and Laz ripped them apart as
quickly as they could while Varric and Seanna pounded away with bolts and spells from behind Loghain's defending shield. The dogs pitched in, as well, for it was impossible to tell Champion to stay back now that she was Alpha. Loghain wasn't particularly happy about that, but he had to admit they were a tremendous asset even as young as they were.

The mature dragon they encountered on the seventh day, however, was a terrible battle even though it stood alone. It was not as large as a High Dragon by any means, but it was the next worst thing, and it took them by ambush. Fortunately, Varric at least seemed to have had some experience in slaying dragons, which was a tremendous boon. Laz was completely unprepared and took massive injuries, but the end of the battle found her riding high on the dragon's neck, gleefully driving the blade of her main-hand waraxe into the top of the beast's skull while Loghain's blade drew life's blood from the creature's armored throat. The burns Laz suffered kept Seanna awake all night, and the poor mage had to swallow enough lyrium potions to get quite drunk on the stuff. All told, they got off rather easily.

In camp that night there was little talk. Everyone was weary, Seanna worked feverishly to heal Laz' wounds, and despite the victory they all felt rather hollow in the aftermath. To boost morale, Loghain decided that it was a good time to try another dose of ashes on the Blight-corrupted ground. He briefly considered using a small pinch on Laz, but discarded the idea after a moment's thought. The wounds had to be utterly excruciating but the woman gave no sign of it, and her life was in no danger. By the time Seanna was done she probably wouldn't even have any major scars, not that he thought losing her "cute" would bother the dwarf in the slightest. He would save the ashes against the possibility that someone could take Blightsick from so much exposure to corrupted land.

The results of that first test were encouraging, to say the least. Miles of Fereldan countryside showed the effects, and although it was late summer the land bloomed like spring. But that had been a test on earth but lightly poisoned, and there was no telling how effective the ashes would prove on ground burnt black by the tainted legions that soured it. Loghain had wanted to be well and fully in the middle of the Blightlands when they made this second experiment, to see how far the effect would spread.

He gestured to Elilia to join him at the edge of camp. She trudged with heavy steps, thoroughly disheartened by the fight and the blackness all around, and he gave her a tender, lingering kiss before explaining what he wanted. She only nodded half-heartedly and helped him retrieve the ashes from the inside of his chest piece. Once again he dug a slight hole in the earth and Elilia sprinkled in a small pinch of time-powdered remains.

As before, the effect was not immediately visible, but once it started it spread like wildfire. The barren black earth was transformed, turning the rich black of fine, fertile soil, the kind of soil that grows tall prairie grasses and wildflowers, the kind of soil that grows tall corn and golden wheat, the kind of soil that could pasture sheep and cattle. And then a true wonder occurred, *grasses* began to sprout from that rich black earth, from seeds that had lain dormant and tainted beneath the barren lands but remained viable. Within a very few minutes all that was black turned beautifully
With a deep sigh and a huge smile, Elilia fell back into the budding grasses with her arms outstretched. "This…is good for the soul," she said. "I needed this."

Loghain felt rather a lot better himself, and smiled as he tied up the bag and stowed it away again inside his armor. He stood and took a three hundred and sixty-degree survey of the plain, and saw everything greening up all the way to the far horizon. The sight buoyed his spirits and it was a fit of rare optimism that made him think this venture would conclude much sooner and with better results than he'd ever anticipated. They could cure all the Blightlands, he was sure of it, and while they'd probably miss Harvestmere he was certain they'd be home by Satinalia. That was something to look forward to, his first grand holiday with his grandchildren.

The dogs played in the new grass, barking, chasing each other, and rolling ecstatically. Elilia still lay with her arms outstretched, smiling up at the clear near-dusk sky. He thought they had the right idea. Abandoning dignity, he simply dropped to the ground like a felled tree and lay there for a long time, listening to the grass crackle and snap like popped corn. Sometimes, it seemed, the ashes didn't even have to make contact with someone in order to heal them.
"Look there. What do you suppose is going on in there?"

The second man grumbled something from behind his plague mask, but turned the awkward thing to look. Underneath the canvas covering the two large objects they'd seen from the ship were visible the silhouettes of small, stocky figures, laboring up and down a lighted scaffolding. "Dwarven work," he said at last. "None of our business, so long as none of them look out and see us."

"But what in the Maker's name do you suppose they are building?" the first man, also wearing a long-beaked plague mask underneath his black hooded cloak, asked. "I've never seen anyone build something in the middle of a harbor before."

"It's no concern of ours what they're building, and its probably just lighthouses."

"Two lighthouses?" the first man asked, but received no response. The oarsmen brought the longboat close to the dock and another man jumped out and tied the little vessel fast to the piles. The six occupants of the boat all wore the grim, beaky plague masks, the long nosepieces stuffed with dried spindleweed, elfroot, and salubrious embrium, and all six wore long, hooded black cloaks. The seventh occupant of the longboat was contained within a large wooden crate resting upon a bier, and each of the six men found a handhold and hoisted the box and its inhabitant out of the craft.

"The Alienage is this way. Quickly now," the leader of the "plague doctors" said, and the six men moved off through the docks, keeping to the shadows, making their best effort to avoid detection. When guards were spotted they were quick to take cover, and they carried their grim and bulky burden with professional stealth and practiced grace. When they finally made the walls of the Alienage they dropped their load inside the gate without concern for the welfare of its occupant.

Two of the plague doctors pulled from within their cloaks long steel pry bars, and with but a moment's work they broke the box apart. A sickly, fragile-looking young man, underfed, pale, and covered in his own waste and the remains of what little food had been pushed in to him through a narrow flap on the side of the box, lay helpless upon the bier, too weak to move. Whether this weakness came from the advanced condition of his illness or his long confinement in the tiny box would be impossible to determine. The young man was an elf, and he was very sick indeed.

"Quickly now, back to the boat," the leader of the plague doctors said, and the men abandoned their strange burden and fled back to the docks and the waiting longboat. They did not care now
whether the young man survived until morning, for it no longer mattered. His illness would do the work it was intended for whether he was alive to see it or not.

*****

The *Fighting Ferelden* stood at anchor in the deep waters off Denerim bay, rocking gently in the calm waters. Launched just days ago, she remained at home port while nervous shipwrights observed her behavior in the water -- like unto a broad-backed sea turtle, riding low and lazy on the surface, calmly oblivious to the waves despite the jitters of the tiny organisms that hitched a ride on her back or in her belly -- and to bring her almost entirely green crew up to speed.

Among the crew were almost a dozen apostates, recruited through the Crown's surreptitious maneuvering to bring in as many mages as possible. They dressed in the same rough manner as the regular sailors, but their purpose on board the ship was very specific. These mages claimed to be masters of the difficult art of conjuring favorable winds, spells of haste, and spells to make the heavy, bulky ship move as lightly in the water as any clipper. Training maneuvers were difficult to arrange, due to fears of templar troubles and Chantry witnesses, and no one knew yet just how well these bonuses would help the vessel in an actual sea battle.

A sailor approached the Second Mate, who was acting as the evening Watch Commander. "Ser… there's a vessel been spotted at anchor about a league to starboard. She's not burning any lights."

"Colors?"

"None to be seen, Ser. Reckon they're raiders or slavers, or just generally up to no good."

"Well, we should put a stop to that." And the Second Mate left the deck to rouse the Captain. In short order the man was up and barking orders, and the *Fighting Ferelden*'s anchor was raised and her sails were set. Since it was dark and they were well offshore it seemed a good time to test the mages' claims, so the apostates were set to fill the sails with favorable winds and make the wallowing vessel sail smoothly. The speed with which the big ship managed to close the distance surprised every man aboard, and when bare eyes could see the activity on deck of the strange vessel, it was clear they'd taken their prey by surprise, as well.

The First Mate bellowed across the distance an edict for the darkened vessel to identify itself and its business. There was no response for a good long while, and the Second Mate pointed out to the Captain that the crew of the other ship appeared to be hauling a longboat out of the sea, loaded with six dark figures. The First Mate repeated his command, along with a warning that if the other ship failed to comply, the *Fighting Ferelden* was ready and willing to live up to its name. The
silence held, and then a response came at last -- in the form of a ballista bolt roughly the size of an harpoon that bounced harmlessly off the ironclad's side. The captain chuckled grimly.

"That wasn't very friendly of them, was it?" he said. "Load the forecastle catapult, and send them a message that manners are important to Fereldans."

A crew of men ran below and reemerged from the hold carrying an enormous tar bomb, which they loaded into the catapult and sent flying at the enemy ship. An apostate cast a fireball at the bomb as it sailed across the waters, so that when it struck the wooden mast and rigging it was flaming brilliantly. In moments the main of the two-masted vessel's sails were ablaze. The sounds of screams and flurried, panicked commands were heard from the burning ship. Commands given in Orlesian.

"Sink her," the Captain of the *Fighting Ferelden* commanded. "We'll pluck what prisoners we can take from the water once she's down."

The ship's reinforced steel bowsprit, and the sharp metal "figurehead" that was nothing more or less than a gigantic axe bit, were pointed directly at the other vessel's broadside. Mages summoned wind into her sails, and the *Fighting Ferelden* zoomed toward the Orlesian ship with unnatural speed. The smaller ship was sheared in half by the force of the collision, wooden construction splintering and breaking with an almighty thunder. The *Fighting Ferelden* took only minor damage -- some of her rigging caught fire when it came too close to the blazing wreckage of the other boat. One of the apostates doused the flames with a simple ice spell, and they didn't even lose a sail.

The Orlesian ship sank out of sight in swift order, leaving only scattered remnants floating on the surface to mark that it was ever there at all. Lanterns at the end of long poles were strung out to search the dark waters for survivors. They found only three. A longboat was shipped out to take prisoners, and the *Fighting Ferelden* made for Denerim harbor, to remand the Orleans to the custody of the guards of Fort Drakon. The men were cheerful and sang victorious shanties as they worked. The Captain was less pleased than the men, wondering exactly what sort of devilry the longboat full of Orleans got up to before they were found out. But at least the perpetrators had been brought to justice, the ship and her crew had acquitted themselves admirably, and the three prisoners currently cooling their heels in the hold would tell the talented interrogators in Fort Drakon everything they knew about the Orleans' mission - eventually.

*****

A hooded figure slipped through the back streets behind the Palace District in the dead of night, followed closely by a large dog. At one point hound and figure stopped, listening, as a great crash far out at sea resounded through the night, but eventually, undaunted, they continued on. Whatever was going on out on the ocean was out of their hands.
They finally stopped before the servants' entrance to the palace cellars, where a burly guard leaned against the wall with a studied show of indifference. "What do you want?" the man asked.

"King Alistair sent me."

"Did 'e now? All right, you lot -- go on in, then." And the guard was kind enough to hold the door.

There ought to have been bare corridor inside, or stacks of root vegetables. Instead there was an ornate desk and a well-dressed man sitting at it with his head in his hands. The man heard them approach and looked up. Dark circles shadowed bright hazel-green eyes, but no amount of weariness or care could change the perpetual affability of that face.

"King Alistair!" Hawke gasped, surprised.

"Hello. Are you an apostate? Don't be afraid, there's no ambush. The Crown really and truly is hiring, so to speak."

"I…I am no apostate, Your Majesty, I wished only to investigate the offer of work for mages. On behalf of…friends."

"You're not another Chantry fanatic, are you?" Alistair asked, with a moue of distaste. "There've been three thus far, and I was most aggrieved to have to kill them. They were, after all, only doing what they thought was right. I'm sure my father-in-law would have been proud of me, at least."

"No, Your Majesty, I am certainly no Chantry fanatic," Hawke said, with a smile evident in her voice. "Actually I am currently wanted by the Chantry, for questioning regarding the incidents in Kirkwall." She pushed back her hood and revealed her face.

"Champion Hawke!" King Alistair said. It was clearly his turn to be surprised. "I had not heard you were in Ferelden."

Hawke blushed. "Yes, Your Majesty, and for that I apologize. I meant to announce my presence and offer my services, but after so long away, and everything that happened here, I found I barely knew the city. Then, too, it was hard to know just how…visible I could afford to make myself."
"I suppose I understand that," Alistair said, "but I wouldn't be too surprised to find myself on the Chantry's Most Wanted list these days. Fortunately Ferelden's Grand Cleric is sympathetic to the Crown and is not only doing her best to keep the Divine out of our hair, but she's also gracious enough to look the other way while I bring in as many apostates as we can gather to help us out. You are here on behalf of a mage, then? I had heard you had dealings with apostates in Kirkwall. You understand that I can't offer any more help than Ferelden already has to the Free Mages -- not yet, at any rate. Once things are settled with the Empire, I'm hoping that will change."

"But it is a genuine offer? The Crown will provide protection in exchange for service?"

"It is, and we shall. Not that we feel particularly secure in the current climate ourselves. But the more mages we have on our side, the safer we feel -- that much I can swear to. Er...if I may ask, what mage is it you're here to represent?"

Hawke considered lying, or prevaricating at the very least, but she was a straightforward individual and even her very brief previous contact with this man suggested to her that he was the sort to appreciate that kind of honesty, and the sort who could be trusted with it. "My sister," she said at last. "And also my lover, as well. They and a few of my companions came with me when we left Kirkwall after the incident with Knight-Commander Meredith."

"I see," Alistair said. "Well, I'll gladly offer any and all security that I am able, to you and all your companions. We would certainly welcome your aid."

Hawke bowed. "You shall have it. One of my friends is captain of a fine vessel. If it will aid Ferelden in any way, I will do my utmost to convince her to offer her service to the Crown."

"We could definitely use another ship. We've managed to secure a few mercenary warships, but of Ferelden's own navy? That gigantic hulk of metal offshore is it. A fast ship, capable of outstripping pursuit, would be most welcome at this point. We've been sending out for allies but the most distant ones -- Nevarra, for example -- have had to wait. And Nevarra would be our best asset at this point, even if all they did was renew their assault on Orlais' western border."

"Isabela's ship is the fastest in the Waking Sea. And she's well-armed."

"Well send her my felicitations, and tell her that Ferelden is quite willing to pay handsomely. Plus she and her crew may keep any spoils they happen to 'liberate' in the pursuit of duty."
Hawke chuckled. "I'm sure she'll like that idea."

"Listen, why don't you bring your friends 'round the palace proper in the morning? It would be good to convey my offer properly and in person, and I'd rather like to meet them. And there's someone here I believe you're familiar with, who'd probably like to see you again."

"Someone I'm familiar with? Wouldn't by any chance be a funny little dwarf named Varric, would it?"

Alistair chuckled. "No, more of a…strong-willed ginger with an Orlesian name."

Hawke grinned. "Aveline! So she came back to Ferelden after all! She's in your service?"

He nodded. "She and her husband both. In fact, they're part of the Queen's retinue now, personal bodyguard. I remembered her from the time we spoke in Kirkwall. Seemed exactly the sort we wanted on our side."

"She is. I shall be very happy to see her again. And Donnic, as well."

"I suspect they will feel likewise. The first thing Aveline asked after joining our service was whether or not we'd had any word from you."

"I hope she'll be happy to see me. She didn't exactly like the fact that I sided against the templars after what happened to the Chantry, but she stood by me."

"She doesn't seem bent on revenge, if that's what you're worried about. Given what we've heard about what happened in Kirkwall, I think justice was on your side, even if the Chantry wasn't."

"As far as that goes, the templars stood aside and let us escape after they saw what had happened to their Knight-Commander. She was out of her mind, I fear, driven mad by a cursed relic from the Deep Roads."
"Things have improved for Kirkwall. Knight Commander Cullen was mostly responsible for that, as I understand it -- took it upon himself to rebuild the city and aid the citizens. He’s currently one of the most outspoken opponents of the way the templars are behaving. I was part of the party that rooted out the blood mages who took over the Fereldan Circle, and we found Cullen held prisoner within a cage of magic the likes of which I’d never seen before. With all he suffered its no wonder if he thinks mages are to be carefully supervised, but its good to see he's not so…radical as Knight-Commander Greagoir once feared he would become."

"He had his moments, believe me. After I spoke out to him against the templars' treatment of mages, and he took my sister from our home in lowtown, he wasn't exactly my biggest fan. But I believe he is a good man, and a stiff dose of the kind of crazy Meredith was could cure anybody of being too radical." Hawke paused a moment, then asked, "If I may, Your Majesty, does it really pay you to stay up all night, waiting for apostates to happen by?"

Alistair chuckled wearily. "I'm up all night, regardless, so I might as well do something useful with my time. Most nights I just sit here and go over old trade agreements and all the umpteen-million complaints authored by the pernickety bannorn, but some nights I get a score of apostates willing to help out. It seems worthwhile, somehow."

"I feel I should tell you, in case you didn't hear. There was a god-awful crashing sound out on the sea. I expect something big and bad happened, though whether 'twas to our benefit or not I do not know."

Alistair sighed. "If we're lucky then it was the Fighting Ferelden proving its value. If we're unlucky it was the Fighting Ferelden sinking. I'll know soon enough, I expect. Loghain will kill me if I lose his ship."

"Do you…really trust him?" Hawke asked tentatively. "I mean, I heard about the Battle of Sulcher, but…I can't quite forget seeing the beacon at Ishal burning brightly…and not seeing our general charging to defend us."

"You were with the army at Ostagar, then?" Alistair asked. "It is…difficult to trust Loghain, in the wake of everything that happened during the Blight, but I have rather reluctantly come to the opinion that he is a better man than I gave him credit for. I cannot forgive him or even fully understand everything he did, but I believe he will do nothing further to harm Ferelden…at least not intentionally. And right now he and the Lady Elilia Cousland are on a very important mission to save our land, quite literally. Reports from the bannorn indicate they've met with considerable success. With her to keep watch over him, I suppose I have no fears… although I could wish I didn't think she were watching him just a little bit too closely."

"Lady Elilia Cousland? The Hero of Ferelden?"
"The same. She has recently been restored to the nobility, and I believe that if the Queen has her way -- and she *always* has her way -- then Elilia will be made Teyrna of Gwaren, and Loghain will be her Teyrn-Consort."

"Teyrn-Consort?" Hawke asked, in some confusion.

"A title we do not use in Ferelden, or rather haven't since the Black Age, before ever we even were a nation. But I expect the nobility will insist upon it, and I can't say myself but that I won't feel a trifle better about things if that diminution is in place. Not that I expect it to make the slightest real difference. If Elilia wants to let him have a say in the way things are run in Gwaren, I expect she'll do it no matter how nervous it makes the bannorn."

"They are…lovers, then?"

"So it would seem. No accounting for taste, I guess."

The guard poked his head in then, interrupting further discussion.

"Beggin' yer pardon, m'Liege, but I've just 'ad a report that the *Fighting Ferelden* has put into dock with a trio of Orlesian prisoners aboard. Evidently they sunk a' Orlesian ship in Denerim 'arbor, which accounts for that a'mighty ruckus a time ago. F'ought ye'd like to know, Yer Majesty. They've sent th' prisoners to Drakon for questionin'."

"Hmm, good news. At least if Old Ironsides caught them before they did any damage. I suppose I should go to Fort Drakon and oversee the interrogation. Ah… if anyone should happen by…?"

"Not to worry, Yer Majesty. I'll tell 'em you've gone a-visitin' and send 'em to the kitchens for a hot meal an' a place t' doss down 'til ye can see 'em."

"Good man. Champion Hawke…until tomorrow, then?"

She bowed. "Until tomorrow, Your Majesty."
After three weeks in the Blighted Ferelden Valley, trudging days through soul-sucking blackness, then experiencing the life-affirming lift of watching it live and breathe again, and between times battling hordes of giant spiders and the occasional (thankfully immature) dragon, the little hot spring came as a welcome relief to all of them. Loghain in particular was happy to see it because it meant they were well into the Hinterlands and the Southron Hills, which meant they were nearing the end of the Blightlands. They'd used rather little of the precious store of ashes, and the bag appeared completely undepleted. In celebration, he allowed the party to rest and recuperate in this salubrious spot an extra day.

Thanks to the return of the grasses and the slaughter of the spiders and dragons, animals also were slowly creeping back into the formerly corrupted lands. Rabbits came first, tentative, hungry for green, followed by deer. It kept the party eating quite well, and Loghain wished they'd ridden horses after all. They would have cut down on travel time nicely, could have eaten their fill of the fresh-grown grass, and he and Elilia could have been back in Denerim by Harvestmere after all. Oh well, if wishes were horses then dwarves would ride.

Very much to his surprise, he found that he rather liked the dwarves. Laz was pleased to call herself a "gritty little bitch," and he couldn't help but agree with her assessment -- and her opinion that a "gritty little bitch" was a good thing to be. Varric was…well, he was as tricky and slick as a Wicked Grace dealer but he was also deeply pragmatic, which went a long way toward making up for other deficiencies in his character, such as the continual jesting, gabbing, and storytelling. And he did make the evening campfire a lively affair with his wild yarns.

And they were both good to have at your back in a fight. While not as swift as other masters of stealth and dual-weapons fighting, Laz was still a diminutive whirlwind and utterly without fear. Her strength was far greater than that of most dexterity-and-cunning experts, and her two waraxes sliced through most foes as easily as a knife sliced bread. The scars of her encounter with the mature dragon were mostly faded and her eyebrows had even begun to grow back, and she was actually rather unhappy about that. "I hoped I'd have a bitchin' gnarly scar to show off, but what the hell." Varric wasn't as forward in battle, but he and Bianca were a force to be reckoned with. In all, Loghain was rather glad they'd "accidentally" joined forces. Not that he wasn't still going to keep a particularly close eye on the "purveyor of information."

Two days before they found the hot spring, the party happened upon a particularly vicious nest of spiders. After slaughtering the first wave it seemed they were home free, but then the earth began to shake. A great hole opened up in the ground and there arose from it a monster, a spider larger than a dray horse, followed by a couple of genlocks of unusually ragged appearance even for darkspawn. And Loghain, who had faced down an Archdemon without blinking, was so revolted by the enormous arachnid that he actually hesitated. The spider lunged for him and its gigantic fangs might well have ended him then and there had Seanna not cast a quick spell of horrific despair over the creature, paralyzing it in a paroxysm of terror. This was not actually much of a help, since the creature's quivering legs, rigid mandibles, and ear-splitting shriek of horror was
altogether more hideous than its usual aspect, but Loghain swallowed his reaction and plunged his blade into one of the largest of the creature's eight eyes. Elilia's greatsword ended the creature, while Laz and Varric swiftly brought down the genlocks. It was a fast victory, and no one was injured, but it was a disgusting upset all the same.

"You're scared of spiders," Varric pointed out wonderingly, as Loghain did his best to clean the filth off his sword.

"I most certainly am not," Loghain retorted indignantly.

"You most certainly are." The dwarf chuckled. "It's a good thing for you that you weren't with Hawke and me back in Kirkwall. Some of the spiders we killed in the caves around Sundermount or in the Deep Roads were big enough to make that little guy shit himself."

"I am not scared of spiders," Loghain insisted. "I happen to find them utterly repugnant, but that's not the same thing. For instance, I happen to find you utterly repugnant as well. But I am most definitely not afraid of you."

Champion chose that moment to bound over to him, tail wagging so vigorously that her entire rump swayed back and forth, carrying in her jaws a gnawed-off leg of the spider. She crouched down on her front legs in her "play with me" gesture, and Loghain blanched at the sight of the hairy appendage, still oozing dark green ichor. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and managed to speak sternly.

"Absolutely not. No, don't give me that look. If you want to play fetch, then you go and find yourself a proper stick. I am not throwing that thing."

Varric chuffed a deep, chesty rumble of laughter, and made it a point from then on to throw many sticks for Champion, with a leer at Loghain each time. Loghain ignored the jibes as best he could. The dwarf could think what he wanted: he was not afraid of spiders, he was only disgusted by them, and the size of the thing had taken him off-guard. If he should happen upon another so-outsized arachnid, Maker forefend, he wouldn't hesitate.

Still, he was probably more grateful than any of them to happen upon the hot spring. In its steaming mineral waters he could soak away the long, hard road and more importantly still, wash away the deep shuddering revulsion that gripped him every time he thought about that enormous spider. While the heat eased tense muscles his tense mind relaxed at last well, and the memory was washed away until it was finally faded enough to be viewed in its proper perspective. Revolting or not, those spiders were a menace, and could not be allowed to thrive as they were
doing. He would recommend patrols of soldiers on extermination missions, once matters with Orlais were settled.

They all took their turns soaking in the hot spring over the day and a half they spent lounging there, and it did them all a great service. Late on the second night, when the others were lazing off their dinner in the warmth of the fire, Loghain took the opportunity for a private bath.

Submerged to his shoulders in the steam-obscured waters, he allowed himself to doze lightly. In the morning they would set off again, and leave this pleasant spot behind for the marshes of the Wilds, never particularly pleasant even when they weren't Blighted. They could leave the great southern forest to rot, and the rest of Ferelden would never care, but he knew he couldn't leave the taint to fester and perhaps spread again. He would follow it into the Wilds -- all the way to Ostagar, if it came to that -- and expunge the corruption from Ferelden's soil once and for all. It would hardly be the first time he'd braved the land other more "civilized" Fereldans feared to tread without an army at their backs.

His mind sank deeper into sleep than he'd intended, and he was startled awake by the sound of someone slipping gently into the water. His eyes flew open, and he was relieved to see that it was Elilia. He'd feared it might be Varric, and he had never been one for the concept of male bonding in a communal bath. That was an Orlesian thing.

"Don't mind if I join you, do you?" she asked, with a slight smile.

"Not in the least," he said. He held out his arm to her and she moved in close to let him embrace her. She rested her head on his shoulder and slipped an arm around his neck while the other hand toyed with his chest hair and the deliciously warm water worked its magic on their aching muscles. In all, it was the sort of luxury he thought he ought to have felt guilty about indulging.

"We're on the edge of the Wilds here, aren't we?" she asked after a moment.

"Pretty much. I reckon we should be out of the hinterlands and fully into Korcari by mid-day tomorrow."

"You know, each time we've planted the ashes, the effect seems to have spread further than the last time."

"So I've noticed."
"Don't you think, perhaps, that we've done enough, then? Surely this last dose has carried far into the Wilds, much further than we would ever go. Why don't we go back to Denerim now?"

He shook his head slowly. "I have to be sure, Elilia."

She pulled back a bit and looked him in the eye, her brow slightly furrowed. "I don't...want to go...back there," she said.

"The witch is dead, dearest."

She shook her head. "No no, although I seriously doubt that. I meant...Ostagar."

His arm tightened around her shoulders. "Was it that bad?"

"I don't know, but...it's in the past, and I'd prefer it stayed there." She could not tell him the things she'd seen when she returned, the hideous mockery the darkspawn had made of King Cailan's eerily preserved corpse. And she did not want him to find out she'd taken the documents from Cailan's personal lockbox. It was hard to say how much evidence remained after so many years, but it was better to stay away, if possible. Alistair had his father's sword, and someday perhaps she could tell Loghain it was safely cached in the Royal Armory, but for now...no, therein dwelt monsters she did not care to confront at present. The reasons for staying away from the ill-fated battleground were as much practical as personal.

"I...suppose I could continue on alone," he said slowly. "At least, I could if any of you were any good at hunting. Laz has never held a bow in her life, and Bianca makes a hellacious amount of noise. Not sure you'd be able to feed yourselves. But you could go to Gwaren and supply yourself there. It's only about a three days' trudge away, give or take, and I could leave you with a buck and a brace of rabbits."

She smacked his chest, hard, with an open hand. "You are not going off into the Wilds alone, Ser."

"It wouldn't be the first time," he said. "Well technically I had Maric with me, but at that point in his life there wasn't exactly a lot of difference between traveling with him and traveling alone, except for the utter lack of peace and quiet."
"Absolutely not. Either we all go to Gwaren, or we all continue on. I don't mind going a bit further into the Wilds if we must, but surely we needn't go all the way to Ostagar?" She traced an outline around the muscles in his chest with a deliberately tantalizing finger. "Surely?"

"You minx, are you trying to seduce me into letting you have your own way?"

"Mm, I'm simply employing my powers of persuasion upon the man I intend to marry. If it leads to seduction, so be it."

"Well keep it up, it might be working."

She chuckled and moved to straddle him, which brought much of her body out of the water. A near-full moon hung high overhead, illuminating her pale white skin, glistening wet and lovely. He reached up to her and she leaned into his hands and kissed him deeply. He rubbed lazy circles around her nipples with his thumbs while their tongues exchanged wordless pleasantries. The tension in his groin became a throbbing ache and he reached down and pressed a finger against her clitoris. Her body arched back spasmodically and she gasped, pushed almost to the point of orgasm just by that simple act. This put him in excellent position to use his mouth on her breasts, which opportunity he did not squander. He kept his fingers active, stroking and teasing, always just on the surface, and she knotted up her fists in his hair, almost completely out of control herself and urging him on.

"Dear Sweet Flaming Andraste, just take me now, dammit!" she gasped out at last.

It was his turn to chuckle then, deep and throaty, and he removed his hand from between her legs and reached up to take her by the wrist. He guided her hand from his hair to below his waist. "At your whim, my lady," he said.

She hesitated a moment, a bit surprised that he would leave the proceedings in her hands, so to speak. Then she blushed, stroked his penis with tenderness in her touch, and guided him into position. She settled herself on him, a smooth motion, a smooth sensation of sudden fullness. Her breath caught, and she sat stock still for a long heartbeat.

Loghain smiled up at her, reading her feelings in her face, perfectly content to let her take all the time she needed to adjust, to enjoy. He could easily lay here all night, admiring the curves of her breasts, the muscles in her arms and stomach, the way she felt from the inside out. Then she shuddered, her head dropped down below the line of her strong shoulders, and her hips began to move; a long, slow motion at first, then with increasing speed and urgency as her need built up inside of her. When in command of the pacing, perhaps because he was too old or just possibly just
old enough, Loghain tended to take it slow and steady and draw things out. Elilia, this once at least, was destined to plow straight through to climax in short order. He watched her closely, waiting for that moment, and when he saw the rush overtake her he allowed himself release as well. She collapsed against him, panting and trembling, and he held her.

"I've been thinking," he said at last, slowly, and with a wry grin she could not see as it was hidden in her hair. "I don't think we need to go all the way to Ostagar…"

She burst out laughing and kissed his throat. "Came up with that idea all on your own, did you?"

"Someone or something may have exerted undue influence over me at some point, it's hard to recall precisely."

"Probably blood mages."

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "Lovely as it is to lay here with you, boiled crab is a great favorite in Gwaren and I'd much rather not be on the menu. I think it's time to get out."

She sighed. "And I suppose we have to be fully attired when we walk back into camp."

"Ha! Unless you really want to give them all such an intimate peek at our personal business."

"They're probably asleep."

"They're never asleep."

"Oh, very well, then." She sighed, laughed, and stretched up to kiss his cheek. Then she pulled back, stared at him fixedly for a moment, and her lips split in a strange grin. She kissed his cheek again, with one hand stroking the other side of his face, and laughed a bit more.

"What?"

"I simply occurred to me, not for the first time, how very odd it is that despite being rather a
ruggedly masculine, hirsute man, I have never once felt so much as the faintest prickle of stubble on your face. I used to think you must shave twice a day, but I've never seen you shave at all."

She riffled the hair on his chest once, playfully, and climbed out of the hot spring to dry herself and dress, the incident momentary and already very nearly forgotten, but Loghain stayed where he was awhile longer, thinking dark thoughts. He didn't know why his physiology gave him chest hair but no beard, and few people had ever noticed that he remained perfectly clean-shaven despite the fact that he did not, in truth, own a razor, and the possible reason, if reason it was, was something no one needed to know about or speak of. But Elilia -- she'd stood right by his shoulder in the Gauntlet, and she'd seen the spirit ape his mother...hadn't she?

She was already out of sight by the time he finally climbed out of the hot spring, and he dressed slowly, lost in thought and unbidden memories. Even if he were not distracted he might still never have noticed the ambush before it was too late. He found himself surrounded by a dozen Dalish elves, bows drawn and pointed directly at his chest.

"Hold, Shemlen," one of them, an older man with graying hair braided back tightly, said. "We mean no harm to you, but our Keeper would speak with you. Come."

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The Dalish hunters took him quite a distance, several miles at least, to an encampment where he was paraded like a prisoner on the way to the gallows past lines of hard, suspicious tattooed faces with glittering night-eyes. They took him to an aravel set in the middle of the camp, before which stood a rather tall elven male dressed in fine robes, his silver hair streaked with vague memories of the brown it had once been. He looked somewhat familiar, and Loghain racked his memory to place the face.

"Aneth ara, human," this man said, with a slight inclination of his head. "My apologies for waylaying you, but I was tasked with delivering to you a message -- and a gift."

"I know you," Loghain said slowly. "You were the one that took Maric and me to the old marsh witch, ages ago."

The elf inclined his head again, a bit further this time. "I am surprised you remembered me. I am Verrithal. At the time of our first meeting I was Keeper of the small scouting party that found you and your friend, First to the Keeper of the larger clan. Now I am myself its Keeper." He gestured to a campfire set about with low bench seats. "Please, sit."
Loghain crossed his arms over his chest and made a point of towering tall. "Thank you, I prefer to stand."

The Keeper seemed amused rather than offended. "Very well. I will not delay you more than necessary. The message I am to give you is from the Woman of Many Years, and it is not wise to act against her wishes. I am to offer you her congratulations on discovering a way to defeat the corruption of the land, and to convey to you the information that the Wilds are cleansed clear to the fortress of Ostagar and beyond. You need not travel any further south. She also wanted you to know that the township of Gwaren has had a particularly prosperous year, and are planning a grand Harvestmere celebration -- which you and your companions will be in time to partake of if you leave for the east in the morning's first light."

Loghain was incredulous. "The Woman of Many Years? The same Woman of Many Years you handed me to before? I killed her, more than a decade ago."

The Keeper smiled, rather sadly. "Such as she is may very well never die. Sometimes I think her true name is that of the Dread Wolf himself, Fen'Harel, but that is something the likes of me shall never know. I know only that like that Lord of Tricksters, she treads the Beyond and whispers her words from the shadows. Suffice to say that her tricks and magics are doubtless great enough even to overcome death itself -- if it is so that she was ever truly dead at all."

He held out his hand. Upon his palm rested a ring intricately carved of shining white wood from an ancient sylvan. "She bade me give you this, and warn you to wear it always. Your enemy, she says, has learned that the blood is functional again, and so has set her pets to track you. This will keep them from finding you no matter what arts they employ, but she also said that you must be careful and continue to use your templar talents and your mage friend's litany to keep them from regaining some control of your mind. You know what to watch for -- that sensation in your brain as of a hive of angry wasps."

Loghain shuddered, involuntarily. He'd felt that quite often in the past days, faintly, and drove it off with Cleanse or for a longer respite when Seanna read from the Litany of Adralla. He didn't want anything to do with the old marsh witch, alive or dead, but given this choice between possibly placing himself under the control of an agent whose motives were unclear, or leaving himself at the mercy of an agent whose motives were only too clear, he supposed it was a case of damned if you don't, damned if you do. He took the ring.

"Thank you for the warning," he said. His mouth felt a bit dry.

"Asha belannar also wished for me to convey to you her regrets that she could not, at this time,
speak with you personally," the Keeper continued. "Urgent business in Orlais has delayed her return to Ferelden. But she wanted me to tell you that she will seek audience with you soon. It seems she has further business with you that must be handled personally. Something to do with the recent increase of the earth tremors."

"Wonderful," Loghain said, voice dripping sarcasm. "I look forward to seeing her."

The Keeper actually chuckled slightly, with another of those slight bows. "She seems to favor you in some way, though that of course is difficult for me to say with certainty. I cannot say that you are not justified to be wisely suspicious of anything she has to offer you, even information, but in the spirit of frankness I would recommend you do whatever you can not to arouse her ire. Asha belannar is friend to no one, but it does not necessarily follow that she must be enemy to all."

The Keeper spread his hands. "That is all the business I have with you, human, and I will not detain you longer. Dareth shiral -- safe travels."

"Wait, Keeper." An elderly woman stepped into the light of the campfire, white hair pulled back in a tight bun, face lined with age and sternness beneath her vallaslin. "I would speak to the shemlen myself. Privately, if I may."

The Keeper's eyebrows registered a certain degree of surprise, but he made the aged woman a deeper and more formal bow than he had given Loghain and said, "If it is your wish, Hahren." He then retired behind the aravel and out of sight.

Loghain, for his part, gazed at the elven woman with a heartsick dread. The face he saw was cruelly twisted by age and by hate, but recognizable all the same. He knew before ever she spoke that he had no wish to hear anything she had to say, but he was helpless to forestall the ways fate had of laughing at him.

"Yours is a face I recognize," the woman said, her voice scornful. "Many years ago this clan passed through this part of Ferelden, and sent our hunters out to find food. They found instead a shemlen of enormous size, badly wounded from some great battle his kind waged against themselves. He was torn and bleeding dry, but still he carried upon his back two of his fellows, more gravely wounded still. Our hunters admired his strength and his dedication to the lives of his friends, and they foolishly brought all three to our Keeper for healing. Despite her best efforts, the two humans he'd tried to save perished of their wounds."

She shook her head, as if her denial could negate the past. "The giant did not die, more's the pity. With time and care and the Keeper's magic, his wounds healed. Many in the clan were suspicious
and afraid, and the da'len -- children, before the marking of the vallaslin, such as I was myself -- were kept well away. But others were fascinated by the shemlen, who lied to them with false gratitude and words of fellowship. One of those taken in by his lies was my elder sister, Nerissia."

Dimly, Loghain heard a commotion at the edge of the encampment, the loud barking of a dog and a woman's angry words. Elilia and Champion, he surmised, come to rescue him. But the old woman's story held him captive in a dreadful fascination, and he could not bestir himself. This was a story he'd known existed but which he himself had never heard.

The old woman, too, seemed unable to stop herself, decades of hate and anger that had poisoned her life spilled forth as though at the bursting of a dam.

"Nerissia was a young hunter, with the marks of Mythal drawn upon her pretty face but newly. She wanted to know more about the shemlen, she believed that the Dalish could come to some sort of understanding with them. She saw the giant as a means to begin bartering some sort of peace." She scoffed bitterly and continued. "He plied her with smiles and pretty words, and she fell under his spell. When at last he was mended the clan made him return from whence he came, but the damage was already done. He did not leave alone, you see. My sister went with him, forsaking her clan, her family, her people, everything she once held dear, to be with the cunning trickster who'd deceived her."

She eyed him with undisguised distaste. "Nerissia's name was never to be spoken again, nor the name of the foul shemlen who took her from us, but as Hahren it is given to me to say the hard words when they must be remembered. The shemlen's name was Gareth Mac Tir, may the Dread Wolf take him."

Loghain's own voice came to his ears as if from elsewhere, perhaps the Fade. "My father, though I suppose you already knew that. And Nerissia was my mother. Would it pain you to learn that she was murdered?"

"My fool of a sister has been dead to me since she left us. Any fate she met with after that was no more than her due."

A white-hot rage surged up in his heart at those words. He struggled against it, recognizing in some small piece of his brain that much of this woman's coldness was inspired by the pain of her own loss, a coldness he understood as he had embraced it for much of his life. He heard behind him the steady, reasoning voice of the Keeper, attempting to calm the ire of Elilia and the still-snarling Champion, and the sound of another snarling dog which was no doubt Haakon. They sounded much closer than before, either because he was hearing them better or because they were bashing their way into the Dalish camp. That wouldn't go over well, he supposed.
"Please, good woman -- your man is unharmed," he heard the Keeper saying. "He would have been returned to you before now, except our venerable Hahren wished to speak to him herself, in private. I am sure their palaver will be concluded soon, and then you may all return to your people. There is no need for violence."

"So you keep saying," Elilia said, "but I won't know that until I see Loghain for myself."

Loghain knew he had to say something to this old woman, the aunt who resented his very existence, and he knew he needed to speak quickly before Elilia pushed her way into the conversation. He tried to school his temper, to speak dispassionately, but it was impossible. The subject was one that had lost none of its power to tear at his very soul.

"My mother sacrificed everything for her family," he began, and the elf burst out angrily.

"She betrayed her family."

"She sacrificed one family for sake of the other," Loghain corrected. "Not by her preference, I'm certain, but simply by the way the world -- the 'shemlen' world and the Dalish world -- forced her to choose. She gave up every shred of her former identity and remade herself into wife and mother. Everything she said, everything she did, everything she was reinforced how important that identity was to her. She loved my father, even though the world made that so very difficult for her, and she loved me. She did everything she could to protect me from the way the world would look upon me as a half-blood. And the people who killed her -- who raped her and slit her throat, before my very eyes? They killed her not because she was an elf or because she was a Dalish, but just because she was the wife of a peasant who had the audacity to stand up to them. And my father -- who never uttered a false word to anyone in his life, who was a gentle man who strove to live in peace when he could -- hunted the bastards down and slew them all. Because he loved her, better than he loved anyone else on this earth. Better even than he loved me. And all the rest of his days he mourned her, and hated himself for his inability to protect her. And in the end he gave his life to save a half-baked royal outcast because Maric was Ferelden's last hope of casting out the bastards whose arrogance and sense of entitlement made them feel they were justified in what they did when they murdered my beautiful Dalish mother, and he essentially sold me into his service to ensure that Maric succeeded."

He sensed rather than saw Elilia at his back, and knew she must have heard most of his words. Oh well, too late to stop himself now, and he couldn't even if he wanted to.

"You say that my mother was dead to you from the moment she chose my father over her clan. You clearly find my very existence an affront to everything you hold dear in this world. So be it. But I'll
tell you now, my *unworthy shemlen self* is all that remains of your sister, for my own daughter
knows nothing of her antecedents and never shall -- not because I am ashamed of my mother, but to
carry on her own work of keeping my child safe from the world that would hate her for something
beyond her control. But if there were some way that I could bring my mother back from wherever
she has gone, just for a moment, so that she could meet her granddaughter and her great-
grandchildren face-to-face one time, I would trade you and every other bigoted bitch or bastard the
world over, human or elf or dwarf or bloody qunari, for that chance."

The old woman's face registered some shock at his tirade, but then slid into an expression of
derision. "You have your mother's temper, I see," she said.

"So I've been told," Loghain said with some force, "by no less an authority than my father. I
wouldn't know for myself, for she never showed it to me. But it's a temper that has helped one
King overthrow the very tyranny that took my mother's life, and it's a temper that helped this
woman behind me slay an Archdemon and defeat a Blight. It is also a temper that is helping
another King beat back the wolves who seek to reclaim our homeland for their own nefarious uses
today. If more Dalish had *my mother's temper*, and but a fraction of her courage, perhaps you'd
have your own homeland now."

He spun quickly on his heels then, turning to a very startled-looking Elilia and a pair of somewhat
bewildered mabari. "Come, my love -- let us leave this place. Champion, to heel." On the way out
of the camp at a very fast stride he spared a moment's notice for the shell-shocked Keeper. "You
seem a decent man, Varrithal, though your habit of setting out ambushes instead of invitations is
wearing to say the least. Safe travels to you."

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Over the following hours Elilia's attitude toward Loghain was…different. Distant. Almost
dismissive. When camp was made they still shared the single large tent to sleep, but she left space
between their bodies she'd never allowed before. Funny, but he'd never considered for a moment
that his blood status would bother *her*, of all people. But she was born to the nobility, and as
egalitarian as she seemed, perhaps a few old prejudices remained. Or perhaps she was angry with
him for not disclosing that information to her.

It seemed obvious now that whatever it was she'd seen in the Gauntlet of Trials, it hadn't been his
mother. He wondered mightily what she *had* seen, but couldn't quite bring himself to ask. He
grieved the loss of her camaraderie as much as the loss of her affections, and he was a quiet man
indeed on the long walk to Gwaren, for whether the witch's message was true or not, he could no
longer bring himself to venture further into the Wilds when his company no longer seemed to
Elilia’s taste.
Champion plodded close on his heels the whole way, ears and stumpy tail a-droop. She sensed that her master and his mate were growing apart, though she could not for the life of her understand why. Evidently there was something badly wrong with Haakon's mistress, for Champion's master, of course, was perfect in every way, though Haakon didn't seem to agree and it created a schism between the siblings. It was regrettable, but if it was necessary then she would take it upon herself to find the Master a more satisfactory female. She would choose her Master over her brother any day.

Their other companions were eerily silent as they hiked that first day, sensing the discord, but even though no one said a word to anyone about the sudden tension in the air clear loyalties were being drawn. Standing alongside Elilia and Haakon were the dog Paragon and the women Laz and Seanna, the dwarf was evidently positive that whenever anything bad happened in a relationship it was obviously the man's fault, and Seanna looked unsure of anything except her status as Elilia's best friend and supporter, and Paragon simply followed her mistress' lead. Varric seemed to take Loghain's side, perhaps not because he believed that he was not to blame for the thoughtful frown on Elilia's face but rather because no one else would stand with him except his dog.

They found the road leading to Gwaren, and camped alongside it before nightfall. They ate a quiet dinner of rabbit stew, of which they were all growing rather tired, and sat around the campfire with nothing to say. It was an uncomfortable evening.

Finally Elilia spoke, for the first time since the Dalish camp. "Loghain, we need to talk…about what you said."

He sighed. "I knew this was coming, but I was rather beginning to think you'd leave me gasping 'til we reached Gwaren. Speak."

"Did you…" She trailed off, her expression one of uncertainty, and started over. "Did you…mean it? Or were you just upset and lashing out?"

This was very much not in the realm of things he had expected her to say, and for the life of him he couldn't figure out what she must be referring to. Was she angry with him for saying that he would trade his aunt for a moment again with his mother?

"I…think I may require clarification," he said carefully. "I'm not sure which part of the things I said is what you mean."

"I'm talking about…what you called me."
He had called her something? He racked his brain. Was she really upset because he'd called her…?

"I called you 'my love,' didn't I?" he asked, in some confusion.

She blushed brilliantly and studied the heels of her boots for a minute before she spoke again, in a shy, quiet voice that was very unlike her. "Yes. Did you mean it?"

He briefly considered lying, not wanting to hurt her any more than he already had, but finally said, "You are my love, Elilia. Even if I am not yours."

He would not have thought her cheeks could grow any redder, but she proved him wrong. "I never…I never thought you would…or that you would ever actually say it."

Varric let out a noisy breath. "Ancestors' asses, that's what this gathering storm was all about? A love confession? I would have guessed by the noises you two make at night that you were both pretty well apprised of your feelings for each other by this point."

"Sex and love don't always go together," Elilia shot back, with some of her old self in her voice. She looked at Loghain, with something of an apology in her eyes. "I thought…well, I knew we were friends, and I guess I knew you found me attractive enough, but I figured that this whole business of you and I marrying…well, I supposed that was just a means to an end."

"The end being that I would get my Teyrnir back?" Loghain said, with a slight twist to his lips that might have been the beginnings of a smile or a scowl. He shook his head and the forelock of his hair fell in front of his eyes. "Maker's breath, Elilia, if you want Gwaren you can damned well keep it. I never wanted it in the first place."

"I don't want it," Elilia said. "Not alone, at any rate. You're familiar with the way the teyrnir works, and I'm not. The idea, in my mind at any rate, was to share the work."

Loghain looked at her, brow furrowed, blue eyes piercing. "How much of my argument with the Dalish Hahren did you overhear, Elilia?"

She blushed again, and looked away. "Enough. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone what I heard."
"Did you know before?"

She laughed, a brief sound without a great deal of humor in it. "Not an inkling. It's not like you look the part or anything."

"Now that you do know, do you still want to share anything with me?"

Finally she met his eyes again, the blue of hers nearly identical in intensity. "I want to share everything."

He held her gaze for a long moment, scrutinizing her expression, the pitch of her voice, the shallow, rapid rate of her breathing. She was flushed, her lips slightly parted. His own mouth curved up in a slow smile and he rose to his feet and crossed to her side of the campfire. He held out a hand to her and when she placed her own within it he pulled her up and into his arms, whereupon he kissed her. Champion picked her head up off her paws and panted happily, tail wagging, and Haakon immediately rose and crossed to where she lay, sniffed noses with her in conciliatory fashion, and flopped down to sleep beside her with his muzzle resting on her shoulder.

"By the stone, I'll never understand love," Laz said. "All day she spends giving the man the silent treatment so bad I'm just looking for an excuse to cut the big guy's balls off, and it was all just womanly megrims. I am never tying my chassis to any man permanent-like. Ain't worth it, not if it turns tough women into twitter-pated idiots."

"Love makes fools of us all, Spunky. Some seem to think it's worth it." Varric's tone suggested he didn't quite agree.

"I bet she's up the spout," Laz said knowledgeably. "Hormonal. What do you think, Seanna? You mages can tell that kind of stuff, right?"

Seanna protested weakly. "Laz..."

The lovers, of course, noticed none of this. Loghain broke the kiss at last and drew away from Elilia slightly, his fingers still resting lightly on the upturned line of her jaw. "Autumn is short and typically rather cold and damp and miserable in these parts," he said, in a low voice. "Our luck has held so far, but it was quite chilly last night."
"I think we'll be warm enough tonight," Elilia said, her own voice husky and a trifle vague, as if she wasn't paying the slightest attention to the words of her own mouth. She left no space between their bodies that night, no space at all.
Harvestmere

Two mornings later, the smells of cooking wafted to their appreciative noses. It was a heady mixture, a conglomeration of a hundred different chefs preparing a thousand different foods, but after so long living on what little they'd brought with them (hardtack, mostly, after the first few days) and what meat and greens were to be had, even the not-too-harmonious combination of boiling seafood and baking fowl and whatever else was being prepared struck upon their senses as something devoutly glorious.

They crested a small hill and came upon a pretty picture, the village of Gwaren and its sturdy, practical Keep nestled between the trees that were one-half of its livelihood and the sea that made up most of the other half. It was a homely little town, really, but the way it sat its little hollow was picturesque.

Varric took a deep breath, and sighed it out happily at the same time his stomach gave an audible rumble. "Is this heaven?" he asked, with a touch of whimsy.

"No, it's Gwaren," Loghain said, quite seriously. "It really has grown, I see. A lot of new buildings have sprung up. Glad to see they've kept some sense of organization, at least, but those stacks look a bit like death traps, don't they?"

The "stacks" to which he referred were a long double line of tall wooden buildings, well-built but a bit grim in their sturdy plainness. Elilia understood what he meant. The buildings were large enough to contain a score of families each, and their height, coupled with the wooden construction, meant cookfires and careless smokers would pose a grave danger.

"I bet that's where the people who live in them have to go to cook," Elilia said, and pointed out a long, low building set some distance away from the others as well as from the crowding forest. Numerous chimneys protruded from the sloped shake roof, all smoking merrily, adding to the general light haze of good wood smoke rising from the chimneys of every other proper house in town.

"Inconvenient," Laz said. "Why didn't they just make the buildings out of stone if they're so worried about fire?"

Loghain laughed. "Spoken like a true dwarf. Gwaren boasts plenty of rocks, Laz. Many of the houses down there are built of them, and all of the local fencing. But the people are not stonemasons and there is no quarry. Gwaren is a wood-built town, predominantly, both structurally and economically. Even the Keep is mostly wooden. Only thing they mine down there is salt."
"Well, you'd think they could at least clear out a bit more space from the forest," Varric said. "Spread the buildings out instead of piling them to the sky."

"Oo, bad idea -- at least if I know anything about the Brecilian Forest," Elilia said.

"True enough. The woodcutters who ply their trade here are the bravest men I know, even more courageous than those who risk the sea for crab and lobster and squid. No one, no matter how stout-hearted, would dare incur the forest's wrath by taking one stick more than she's willing to give. Gwaren has to exist within the space she's offered, and that's an end to it."

"Why did they bloody well build it here, then?" Varric demanded.

"Ask your ancestors," Loghain said. "Gwaren started out as one of their surface trading posts, though who they were trading with I've no idea. Alamarri, I suppose, or maybe Clayne. The Avvar don't seem to have made much of an impact here, at least."

"Might have been elves," Elilia said. "There's a very strange set of ruins not all that far from here."

"I remember," Loghain said. "I suppose it's possible."

He warned the group of the isolationist attitude of the locals. "Unless there's been enough outsiders come in to change things, the true native Gwarener always looks down a bit on those poor fools from 'Away.' In all the years I was Teyrn, I never managed to completely live down the stigma of being a 'foreigner.' And I'll tell you also, to Gwareners it is always 'the Queen,' and 'twas even so during the reign of Cailan. I can't imagine they've had enough contact with Alistair to conceive a love for him great enough to overpower their loyalty to Anora. She's 'theirs.' But they're not exactly unkind, just a bit suspicious."

"As long as they feed us," Varric said, reverently.

"I'm sure there's no fear they won't," Loghain said. "Gwareners are good at feeding people, they seem to be able to do it even when they have no food."

They went down into the town, and the streets thronged with people preparing for the holiday
celebration, cooking right out in the open in some cases, offering food and good tidings to passers by. It was easy enough to tell the true natives from the new settlers, even without Loghain's muttered commentary on "local" and "not local." The refugees mostly didn't recognize anyone of the party, and if they had any hospitality to offer it was of the honest sort openly offered to anyone on so festive an occasion, but they tended to be a bit more open and generous with the humans and the dogs than the elf and the dwarves. The ones that did recognize either the former Teyrn of Gwaren or the fabled Hero of Ferelden made themselves ridiculous, falling over themselves to offer anything and everything they had.

The true natives, on the other hand, were not exactly hospitable toward anyone though their generosity on this day at least was great and divided equally among the races. None of them seemed to know Elilia when they laid eyes on her, but all of them knew Loghain -- and he knew them, and greeted them by name. None of them seemed particularly surprised at his return. It was difficult to tell, but they seemed pleased to see him.

"Harvestmere is my new favorite holiday," Varric said, munching the drumstick of a roast turkey he held in one hand while the other gripped the handle of an enormous mug of Gwaren ale. "It was never taken as a very big deal in Kirkwall. In fact, I don't remember ever actually celebrating it before. Just another day for making deals, in the Merchants' Guild. Ancestors' asses, this ale is good."

"Strong, too, so proceed with caution," Loghain advised.

"What's this?" Seanna asked of a woman tending a coal-burning brazier on which were roasting long strips of flesh.

"Wilds Crawler," the woman said crisply, and turned the meat with a fork. With the other side revealed, it was easy to see that she was cooking nothing more nor less than an unskinned snake, sliced in half lengthwise. Seanna jerked away in shock.

Loghain snorted a laugh at her reaction. He'd eaten snake and worse before ever coming to this place. The woman took a sharp knife and cut away a good-sized chunk of meat, skewered it upon a sharpened wooden rod, and offered it to him. He accepted with a nod of thanks and bit into the crunchy flesh and chewed, enjoying more the blanching faces of his companions than the meat.

"Tastes like chicken," he explained, once he'd swallowed. "Really crunchy chicken, with a bit of a kick to it."

"I think I'll pass," Varric said, weakly, but Laz stepped up to the challenge.
"Hey, not bad," she said. "Kind of like deepstalker."

The next station was boiling chicken feet, the taloned digits curling gruesomely in the pot, the one after that dishing out great steaming bowls of fish chowder. Clams and oysters were fried up to order by the next streetside chef, and beside him stood a man nearly identical in appearance who dipped abalone in a batter and fried them up in a deep pan of boiling oil. Varric went back for seconds, thirds, and fourths from him.

"Let's stop in here," Loghain said, pointing out a large house with a wide-open front door, through which people poured in and out. The ones coming out had a distinct look of repletion to them.

"A native?" Elilia asked.

"A longtime-resident," Loghain corrected. "Beldam Prima is from somewhere around Tevinter, originally, but she's lived in Gwaren for decades."

"A Tevinter? In Gwaren?" Elilia was surprised.

"She wanted to get as far away from the Qunari as was possible, or that's the local legend. I think she may have actually been from Seheron."

They went inside. A gigantic steaming cauldron was set over an open fire in the middle of the dirt floor, and a short little woman wider than she was tall presided over it like a witch in a fable. People came to her and held out large bowls carved out of great loaves of round bread, and she ladled into them a thick, gloppy...something.

"What is that?" Elilia whispered to Loghain.

"Her accent is so thick it would be easier to understand her if she'd just speak Tevinter," he whispered back, "but whatever it is, it's delicious."

They each took a bread bowl and queued up. The beldam broke into a toothless grin when she saw Loghain, and a flurry of words that were almost utterly incomprehensible. She dished out her glop and sent a little elf girl scurrying with a gesture, to return moments later with a bowl of something
white and cold from the icebox outside. The beldam spooned up a dollop of that for each of them, and Elilia was surprised to see that it was sour cream.

"Er...that's a lot of sour cream..." she ventured tentatively, but Loghain was unperturbed. He mixed his own blot into the gloop with a fork.

"It's good, Elilia, trust me."

She shrugged and mixed the glop into her gloop. Up close, the stuff appeared to be a heavy stew of ground-up meat and something that looked like soft oyster shells. "That's not what they are, I hope?" she asked.

Loghain shook his head. "They're made out of wheat flour. Just eat."

She obeyed, not without hesitation. That first small bite exploded in her mouth like First Day fireworks. She recognized the taste of tomato, a dozen different herbs and spices, and the rich surprise of several varieties of cheese melted into the sauce. Instead of overpowering her as she'd expected it to, the sour cream blended perfectly and smoothed out the whole concoction.

"Mmmmmmm. Seanna closed her eyes and enjoyed the mouthful of flavor. "That is heavenly."

"This definitely makes up for the chicken feet and roasted wharf rat," Varric said.

"I liked the chicken feet," Laz said, but she tucked into her bowl with gusto. The dogs, too, were given small plates of heavenly gloop, and ate as happily as the people did.

As they were eating the last of their sauce-soaked bread bowls, a man walked in to the beldam's house, distinguished from the others who entered and left at will by the fine clothes he wore. He begged off the old woman's offer of food and came straight for their party, though he seemed not to notice any of them except Loghain. When he was still a few steps away, he dropped to one knee with his head bowed.

"My Lord, at your service."
"Hello, Cort," Loghain said, sounding as if he were not terribly happy to see the man, but resigned. "How flies the Teyrnir?"

"All is well, my Lord, for now. The Queen has sent workers and resources for the fortification of the harbor, and the improvements are well under way. Your idea, I presume?"

"My suggestion," Loghain corrected.

"Word has come from the outlying freeholds that border the Blight lands. They're saying that they've become fertile again. I cannot believe that your sudden arrival in town close on the heels of this miracle is a mere coincidence."

"Believe whatever makes you feel comfortable, Cort."

The man laughed slightly and bowed forward from the waist a few degrees. "You will be staying with us, I hope, my Lord? I have taken the liberty of having your rooms made up, the moment I heard you were here."

"I and my companions will be staying tonight, Cort, but on the morrow we must move on," Loghain said. "I trust you can see to ensuring their comfort as well as my own?"

The man blinked at the others in some surprise, as if he'd only just noticed them. "Oh. Yes, my Lord, of course. I will make arrangements at once." The man turned sharply on his heel and strode briskly from the house, evidently intent upon his task.

"My former Seneschal," Loghain explained. "Wondered whether he got to keep his job in the aftermath."

"You know, for someone who 'never overcame the stigma of being foreign,' people around here really seem to like you," Varric pointed out.

"Cort hails from Redcliffe," Loghain said. "I would've preferred a local man, someone a bit less…zealous…but few of the natives have any education at all. And they resist efforts to introduce the concept of schooling, too."
"I'm not talking about just Messer Worshipful," Varric said. All the natives seem to look at you like you belong to them."

"To them perhaps," Loghain said, with a bit of a laugh, "but never of them."

Elilia finished the last scrap of her bread bowl and yawned. "I'm stuffed, and all I can think about is taking a nap. Why don't we head to the Keep for a good old Antivan siesta? I'd…like a chance to speak with you in private, anyway, Loghain." Her eyes communicated something profound, and Loghain knew that at last he'd hear the truth of her opinions on his elven ancestry. With a faint, rueful smile, he nodded. It certainly didn't take her a full day of silence to come to terms with his offhanded "my love."

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"Oh what beautiful gardens," Seanna said, as they stepped through the gates into the courtyard of the Keep proper and found themselves surrounded by late-blooming autumn roses. "I was expecting more Gwaren austerity here. Who planted them all?"

"Teyrna Celia," Loghain said, a bit curtly. He ushered them through the courtyard at speed, as if it were a place he didn't care to linger long, though the dogs particularly seemed inclined to dawdle. A guardsman opened the main doors for them and gave a smart salute. Elilia wondered if he was always so well-disciplined, particularly on a holiday, or only when in view of his former Teyrn.

Seneschal Cort met them inside and favored them with a bow, and said that rooms were available for all of them. He led them to the living quarters and Loghain found with little surprise that he was installed in the same suite of rooms he had occupied as Teyrn, not noticeably altered from those bygone days. Indeed, when he opened the door of the wardrobe curiously, he found his own clothes still hanging inside, smelling strongly of camphor.

A bit unnerved by the discovery, Loghain turned to the window and stood looking out of it for a long time, restlessly fiddling with the sylvanwood ring on his finger. Since he first put it on he felt different, as if a scarcely-noticed tickle in his blood had been soothed, and the buzzing in his head had faded considerably as well, but he worried. Maybe the Orlesians couldn't track him any longer, but what could the witch do to him? He supposed it didn't matter much in the end. It seemed he'd underestimated that particular opponent considerably.

She seems to favor you, the Dalish Keeper had said, but he'd seen no sign of that himself in meeting her, even before he'd killed her -- or whatever it was he'd done when he drove his sword into the skull of the high dragon whose form she had assumed. Granted, he'd never exactly attempted to
speak civilly to the witch, either on that first long-ago meeting when he was but a stubborn boy with a chip on his shoulder larger than his head, or that final time when he'd been brought to the little hut for the sole purpose of ending the witch's life. In his experience, when he killed things they *stayed dead*, and the fact that the witch had *not* bothered him a great deal. What sort of magic granted that kind of immortality?

He heard Champion grunt from her chosen space on the braided rug at the foot of the bed and it made him smile despite himself. The dog had eaten so many handouts that her belly was distended to twice its size and she actually waddled when she walked. She was sound asleep but somewhat disturbed thanks to the efforts her digestive system was being put through to process so much food. He hadn't eaten all that much himself but it was still quite a bit more than he'd been eating lately, and it made him a little tired and lazy.

There was a knock from the corridor. "Enter," he said. The door opened just enough to allow Elilia to slip through the gap.

She'd taken off her armor, and stood there in her loose blouse and leather breeches with her hair down and a thoughtful frown on her face.

"You want to talk," Loghain said unnecessarily. He gestured to a chair. "Have a seat."

She ignored the chair in favor of the bed, and perched herself on the edge of it. She patted the mattress next to her invitingly and he sat down, a bit warily.

"I expect you already realized that it didn't take me all that day to wrap my head around what you called me," she said softly.

"I know."

"I always thought myself so high-minded. My initial reaction…shamed me."

He didn't have any ready response to that, and she didn't seem to expect him to speak. She sat for a minute with her head lowered. When she spoke again she did so in a rush. "My cousin, Arl Bryland…*he's* half-blood, too. It's not exactly uncommon, after all, particularly for the nobility. I shouldn't have been shocked by the idea."
He snorted. "That's probably exactly why you were shocked," he said. "Elf blood mixed with *noble* isn't terribly rare, though Leonas' appointment to the arling was one of the major affronts to the Landsmeet when Maric began setting the nation to rights during the Restoration, even though the rest of the Brylands were dead. But my blood *isn't* noble. My blood is as common as clay. And if the bannorn had known it wasn't just common but half-*elfen*, they'd have raised arms against their king rather than let him make a Teyrn of me. But in fairness, Maric didn't know it, either. Perhaps I ought to have told him, but I doubt it would have made a difference in his decision. He could be remarkably stubborn once he had an idea in his head, and he had dreams of making Ferelden a land where elves could live among humans as equals."

"Your parents…they loved each other?"

"Yes."

"Were they…*married?*"

The doubt in her voice made him laugh, a harsh bark of sound. "You know, I asked my father that very question once when I was a lad. I believe my exact phrasing was, 'Father, am I a bastard?' His response was to pat me on the head very kindly and say, 'Only every now and then, Pup.' So I don't know whether or not my parents were married in the eyes of the law and the Maker or by some heathen ritual or merely mutual consent, but *they* considered it a bonded marriage and so shall I."

She was silent for a moment, thoughtful and considering. "Has Anora really no idea?"

"I daresay that girl has *plenty* of ideas, she always has, but no, she doesn't know she's quarter-blood."

"I'd say it's past time you told her, don't you?"

"And what purpose would that serve, except to upset and endanger her?" he demanded. "The more people who know the more trouble it is to keep it quiet, and if word got out that the queen's blood was common and impure the Chantry would have her marriage annulled and the banns would have her ousted from the throne faster than you can blink. 'Two can keep a secret if one of them is dead.'"

"It's not like she's going to tell anyone," Elilia said. "And if you think I can't be trusted to stay quiet then you're quite welcome to kill me. She deserves to know."
"Why do you think this is so important?" he asked. "She can never know who my mother was, she died ages ago. All she can really know now is that she was an elf."

"You can tell her who your mother was. It's important to know where you come from. It's the only way to know where you're going. Tell her what kind of woman she was, what sacrifices she made for you and your father, how much they loved each other and what they had to overcome to be together. Tell her the little things that you remember, even if you think she'll consider them unimportant, and tell her the big things, too -- even tell her how your mother died, because she needs to remember now more than ever why Ferelden doesn't want to bear the yoke of Orlesian occupation ever again. Tell her about your father, too, and your grandparents, and any other family you had. Andraste's ass, tell her about your dog."

That startled him a bit, and then he grimaced. "I didn't know you were listening."

"Kiveal couldn't keep a secret to save his life," she said, primly. "I had to drag every bloody word out of you with a chain fall, so it figures that the only time you'd unburden yourself to tell an actual unprompted story about your past it would be to the hound. If I know anything about you at all then it's a dead surety that Anora knows nothing about any of this."

"I…don't actually have any other family that I know of," he said haltingly. "If mother ever mentioned anything even remotely Dalish she'd clam up instantaneously, and father never spoke -- of anything, really. I don't even know where he came from originally. I know he wasn't native to Oswin, where our freehold was, but only because the men in town said as much."

"A tradition of silence it's high time you broke," she said. "Anora needs to know everything you can tell her, so she can know herself and where she comes from. I…would like to know these things, because I would like to know you. I've always felt that I understood you, the way you think and why you act, but I'll never be able to understand completely until I understand what made you who you are. But I won't press you. I know you're adverse to storytelling."

"I…suppose I ought to tell you," he said, slowly. "It's not like you don't already know the only dangerous secret of my family that I am aware of."

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "You can take your time, I won't push. I just want to know one thing right now, and I'll leave you be until another time."

"What's that?" he asked.
"Were you really raised on a farm? Anora seems to have her doubts, and frankly so do I. You don't learn to fight like you do by driving a plough or reaping wheat."

"Oh really? A scythe can be a formidable weapon. Perhaps one day I'll tell you about the little farm girl who attacked an entire gang of highwaymen that had waylaid me on the road to Denerim."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Cauthrien?"

"Indeed."

"Did she actually save your life that day, or…?"

"I may have killed the last of the bandits before she made it all the way across the field, but her charge was quite impressive regardless. The reaper she wielded was larger than she was, by quite a lot."

Elilia chuckled. "Hard to picture. But you sidestepped the original question. Farmer or not?"

"I was born on a farm, and was raised there until the Orlesians took it away from us. I don't think my father was a born farmer, however. He was a soldier in King Vanedrin's army before it was defeated, which is evidently what led him to meet my mother. I suppose he lost heart when the King was killed, or perhaps just his taste for bloodshed, but he put down his sword for a time and picked up a plow instead. I can't say that our harvests were ever any too impressive, but he had a fine way with horses. Raising Fereldan Cob was how we kept the farm a going concern, up until the lords imposed their killing taxes."

"And he taught you to fight."

He shook his head. "My father had a head for strategy, and I learned much by watching him. But he favored the greatsword, as you do, and wasn't exactly skilled with anything smaller. No, my mother taught me most of my fighting skills -- dagger, longsword, and bow -- and I picked up the shield for the first time during the Rebellion. Maric said I needed it, since I seemed bound and determined to use myself as a shield. Wilhelm was so tired of fixing up cracked ribs and punctured lungs that he threatened to refuse me healing the next time I cleverly blocked a war hammer with my chest."
Elilia snorted laughter. "Yet still they never forced a helmet upon you?"

"Maric claimed we'd never face an enemy that would be able to reach so high, and Wilhelm said it would make no difference if I did take a blow, as my head was made of harder stuff than that of his golem. Truth is I flatly refuse to wear a helmet. I can't see or hear for shit inside a tin can, and I start feeling too closed in. Plate armor is confining enough."

"You wore that helmet I took off the Hurlock General at the Battle of Denerim," Elilia pointed out.

"Only during the fight against the Archdemon, in case you didn't notice. It bore some enchantment that rendered the creature's breath relatively ineffectual against me."

"I wondered how you managed to plow right through that miasma while the rest of us were twitching in pain," she said. "Thanks for sharing."

"Difficult to share one helmet, isn't it?" he pointed out. "And the reason you gave it to me, as I recall, is because it was too big for you and too small for the qunari. I figured it meant that the rest of you were free to use up those balms the marsh witch made for you."

"Fair point. So what, then? Your mother took you out behind the barn and taught you to spar?"

"More or less. Mostly, though, we went into the woods out back of the house, and she taught me woodlore -- I suppose you could say that was my one inheritance from my Dalish ancestry. She taught me how to shape and string my own bow, and how to chip out stone arrowheads and fletch my own arrows. She said it would be useful to know in case things ever got so bad that I had to live off the land. I guess that means she had something of a gift for prophecy. Sometimes out there she started to forget that I was human, and she'd almost let slip something that was very decidedly Dalish. When she taught me how to skin a buck she put my hands on the hilt of the knife and said, 'And now we say...' and then shut her mouth so tight her lips disappeared, and just showed me how to make the cut. I think she was on the verge of teaching me some Dalish prayer to their gods, or something."

"Why didn't she want you to know such things?" Elilia asked.

"I can't rightly say for sure," he said. "I do know, however, that she went very far out of her way to ensure that no one in Oswin knew that I was the son of an elf. I suppose she didn't want me to
know anything that might slip out someday in front of the wrong person, like one of the sisters from the local Chantry. I was already a favorite target of theirs since our family never went to mass."

"So you learned nothing whatsoever about the Dalish from her, other than basic arrowcraft?"

He shook his head. "In fact, the first time I encountered Dalish I couldn't be sure whether or not I'd heard they ate people. I couldn't exactly imagine that of my mother, but she always looked wild enough, to me. Those tattoos she wore set her apart from the women of Oswin more than her pointy ears ever did. I was absolutely fascinated by those tattoos, when I was a pup. I always wanted to know what they meant, but she never would tell me. And when I was eight or nine years old and declared I wanted to have my face tattooed she sat me down and explained to me in no uncertain terms that I was never again to entertain the thought."

Elilia smiled ruefully. "I wonder what she would have thought of me," she said.

"If you mean your tattoo, I'm not sure. I don't think she'd have minded any, since you've no reason to fear that anyone will take you for an elf."

She looked at him, close unto six and a half feet tall and nearly as broad across the shoulders, and burst into laughter. He knew exactly what had made her mirthful, and smiled thinly himself.

"I wasn't very big when I was a child," he explained. "Rather spindly, actually."

She composed herself. "So your father was a great fighter, and your mother was a great fighter. Why did they not fight the Orleans?"

"They did," he said grimly. "The year father couldn't make the taxes. The first time the lord came to collect and father couldn't pay, he took Adalla. Wanted to breed her to one of his brainless Orlesian game hounds. I tried to stop him but father held me back, said it was better that he take the dog rather than something else. I understand that now, but at the time I was furious with him for doing nothing while the bastards took Adalla away. Six months later the lord was back, tossed Adalla out of the back of his wagon, and said she had proven 'unsatisfactory' -- by which I assume she refused to submit to his whims regardless of how he beat or tortured her. He said father still owed his taxes and left with a promise to return for payment. Adalla died before that happened, but the ponce was back in due course, and since there was nothing left for the bastard to take he decided to take the farm -- and arrest father, for tax evasion. I think he would have let them take him, too, but one of the louts laid hands on me and asked the lord what to do with the 'whelp.' 'I don't care -- kill him,' the lord says, just as easy as you please, and then father fought back. I'd
never seen my father lash out in anger before that day, hadn't thought him capable of it. There were
at least fifteen men there that day, guards of the lord, and it was almost more than they could
manage to subdue him, even though he held no weapon. While the men were fighting father, the
lord grabbed hold of me and made to kill me himself, I think, when mother came flying out of the
house with her bow drawn and arrows flying. Once they'd finally knocked my father unconscious
the surviving guards had their hands full getting control of her, but when they did, the lord told
them to hold her down. 'Make sure the boy sees,' he said, all the while unlacing his trousers…"

A muscle in his jaw twitched spasmodically as he clenched his teeth tight. "She pleaded with him
then, I remember that. Not to spare her, not to let her go, but just not to make me watch it happen.
The bastard just laughed at her." He shook his head vigorously, as if to dislodge the memory.
"Other lords had always wondered why when I set out laws for Gwaren I penalized rape so very
much higher than it is punished in other parts of Ferelden, higher than the penalties I set for theft
of teyrnir property, even. Do you have any questions on that score?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't."

"It is the worst crime any man can commit," he said, vehemently, "short of outright murder. And
I'm not always too sure that murder isn't kinder, at times. Some of the women I've seen -- it's like
they were dead. They just didn't have the strength to continue on after what they were put through." He was so passionate about it that he fairly quaked with barely-repressed rage.

Elilia placed a calming hand on the middle of his chest, kissed him, and put her head down on his
shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her almost too tightly.

"I never cried," he said. "Not a tear. It was too big for tears, I think. When it was over and she was
dead they put the house and outbuildings to the torch and left. Just left, almost as if they'd forgotten
all about me. I remember thinking that mother looked cold laying there with her dress all torn, so I
went into the house and got the big quilt off my parents' bed and covered her with it. I didn't even
notice until much later that the fire in the roof singed off some of my hair. The horses were
screaming in the stables as they burned. After awhile my father came to and saw me there, sitting
by my mother's body looking like a mage made Tranquil, I suppose, and he took a sword from one
of the men mother's arrows had killed and he left. He just left. I sat there for three days, and I
couldn't tell you today whether I moved or slept or even breathed. Finally father returned, grabbed
mother's bow and tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and we were on the run from
that day forward. He'd killed them, you see, every damned one of them. Tracked them down one
by one and gutted them all, the lord last. I think he came to regret it, because his rage that day fed
my anger later on, and he worried I'd come to a sorry pass if I didn't learn forgiveness. One more
thing I suppose I can say he was right about."

"Does it feel any better," Elilia asked after a long period of silence, "having out with it at last?"
"I don't know," he said. "Maybe. A little."

She coaxed him into lying down beside her, and they lay in silence. The sounds of Harvestmere revelry continued to drift through the unshuttered window but that was all outside; inside all was silence and the pain of an old wound reopened in order to bleed out infection. After some time they slept, and that, too, was part of healing.

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That evening, with the festivities only heating up outside and Varric in particular ready and raring for round two, the party repaired to the village square again for food and drink. Minstrels tuned up in a rough-built pavilion while men with sharp axes entered a small windowless building and began hacking away at something inside.

"What are they doing?" Laz asked, gesturing toward the men with a toss of her head as both hands were occupied with skewers of meat.

"That's the ice house," Loghain said. "I expect they're planning to make ice cream."

"Ice cream?" Varric said. "What's that?"

In response Loghain merely smiled thinly and said, "Give it a couple of hours and you'll see."

Elilia wandered away from the others, not more than a few steps, to patronize a stand handing out fresh-baked cookies. As she took the first heavenly bite she overheard a couple of natives gossiping nearby.

"Whose that tall bird hanging around him?" one asked. "Camp-follower, you think? She's not much to look at."

The other snorted a derisive laugh. "I heard from one of the Newtakes that she's that Hero of Ferelden everyone's so thrilled about. They think she's the right shit, sure enough."
It was the other's turn to make noises of derision. "It's like they ain't even realized she couldn't face down that Archdemon without making Loghain stand with her."

"A right dirty trick, too, making him a Warden and taking away his proper title like that."

Disturbed, Elilia went back to stand with the others while the musicians prepared to play.

The minstrels were all natives, and once they had an audience they announced they were going to play "a song from the Exodus," which was what the locals called the mass emigration during the Blight. A drummer beat a steady rhythm while the lutenist plucked out a melody.

"Boldly brave Ser Robin rode forth from Denerim.

He was not afraid to die, O brave Ser Robin!

He was not at all afraid to be killed in nasty ways,

Brave brave brave brave Ser Robin!

Boldly brave Ser Robin rode forth to Ostagar,

There to face the darkspawn horde, O brave Ser Robin!

He would face the Archdemon at King Cailan's side,

Brave brave brave brave Ser Robin!

For he had faced the greatest men who sparred at Tantervale,

And at tourneys in Orlais and in Nevarr...AH!

And widely was his skill and strength betouted here at home,

Though none did see his name upon the rolls...O!

He stood there in a line of men,

With shield and sword and hound, and then

The darkspawn howled and swarmed the line

And all around, good men were 'dyne'...SO!
Brave Ser Robin ran away!
He bravely ran away, away!
When danger reared its ugly head,
He bravely turned his tail and fled!
Yes, brave Ser Robin turned about,
And gallantly he chickened out!
Bravely taking to his feet,
He beat a very brave retreat.
Bravest of the brave, Ser Robin!

And then the horde, it did advance.
Ser Robin shitted in his pants.
He lit out straight for Gwaren town
And hailed the first ship that came down,
And that is why we sing to you
This story which we swear is true...FOR!

Brave Ser Robin ran away!
He bravely ran away, away!
When danger reared its ugly head,
He bravely turned his tail and fled!
Yes, brave Ser Robin turned about,
And gallantly he chickened out!
Bravely taking to his feet,
He beat a very brave retreat.
Bravest of the brave, Ser Robin!

Ser Robin...'O SHIT!'"
"Who's Ser Robin?" Seanna asked.

"He was a knight in the service of Arl Urien of Denerim, a bit of a boaster who claimed to have won every tourney in the Free Marches, though no one seemed to be able to confirm it," Elilia explained. "He is listed as a casualty of Ostagar, but evidently the people of Gwaren feel he met a different fate."

"Hard to say for sure," Loghain said. "I doubt anyone here would know the man if they clapped eyes on him, and they always looked upon him as a sort of miles gloriosus. If they wanted to make up a song about a cowardly braggart fleeing the Blight, he's the one they'd choose."

"Tis god's honest truth, it is, m'lord," a nearby local called out. He was sloppy drunk and waved a gigantic tankard as he spoke. "Seen 'im meself with me own eyes, all fancy done up in 'is shiny silver plate with the gold inlay an' the mark a' the arlin' on 'is shield, not an 'air out a' place on 'is pretty 'ead. 'Is eyes was a' buggin' out a' 'is face like that." He described a gesture of pop-eyed horror with both hands, a good trick as he never let go of his ale. "I ain't a' sayin' 'e ain't dead, no serrah…man was in such an ass-bustin' 'arry t' get aboard ship 'e knocked a little grey-'aired lady off the docks an' inta the drink, 'e did. Clam-divers was out, thankfully, an' they pulled 'er out afore she drowned or friz, but the look on that lady's daughter's face, an' the big tough-lookin' red-'eaded gal they was travelin' with…wouldn't doubt a mite they done for Brave Ser Robin afore the ship was fairly to sea."

"A grey-haired lady and a red-headed gal?" Varric said wonderingly. "Was the daughter perchance white-haired also, with a dark-haired sister?"

The man sloshed his ale happily in Varric's direction and nodded. "Aye, Ser Dwarf, that they was."

"Then Brave Ser Robin is dead, indeed," Varric said, with a chuckle. "That white-haired daughter was Kireani Hawke, Champion of Kirkwall, and the red-haired gal was Aveline Vallen, best Captain of the Guard Kirkwall ever had."

"There was an officer of that name in Varel's company," Loghain said.

"That was Aveline. Tough lady. Hawke was at Ostagar, too, along with a brother that didn't make it out of Lothering, but I don't think she was in the army long."

"Carver Hawke," Loghain said, grim, and said no more.
"I'm impressed," Varric whispered to Elilia as Loghain stalked off to talk to another native. "I got the idea from Hawke that Carver didn't really get a chance to distinguish himself in the army, but…"

"There was a mage in our company as we were fighting the Blight," Elilia said. "Wynne, a Senior Enchanter of the Circle of Magi. She fought at Ostagar herself and never missed an opportunity to snipe at Loghain for quitting the field that day. It was hard not to overhear. She said the lives of the men he abandoned meant nothing to him. He said that they were his men, that he knew their names, their families. I used to think he was exaggerating, or that he meant just those who wore his heraldry, but I don't think that anymore. Remembering their names is, I think, one more penance he set himself."

"Why did he retreat, do you know?" Varric asked. "He doesn't seem like the retreating type to me. Was it blood mages, you think?"

"He called it a 'tactical error' when I asked. I don't know whether it was influenced by blood magic or not, but I remember something I was thinking that day, while Alistair and I fought our way to the top of the Tower of Ishal. I was thinking that if I were waiting for a signal to charge, and it was as late as ours was bound to be, that I would assume the opportunity to do any actual good had come and gone." She snorted a bitter laugh. "I also remember thinking that I might very well assume whoever had lit the signal late was committing an act of treachery against the King, and that I might well be leading a charge directly into a trap."

"So you think he thought you were a traitor?"

"I think he thought the Grey Wardens were traitors," Elilia said. "He may have had some justice on his side. I don't believe for an instant, after all, that the Orlesian 'support troops' that were going to come along with the Orlesian Wardens were really meant just to protect us from darkspawn. Then, too, it occurred to me once I actually knew a little something about Wardens that it was very odd indeed that none of them checked out the Tower of Ishal for themselves. Loghain's men checked it, not Duncan's. It was dwarven architecture, any Grey Warden ought to have known that it connected to the Deep Roads somewhere along the line, and the Grey Wardens were always supposed to be the only people who knew anything at all about the Deep Roads, other than the dwarves themselves. Now Loghain traveled the Deep Roads with Maric and Queen Rowan all the way from West Hill to Gwaren during the worst days of the Rebellion, but even so the Wardens should have insisted on checking the structure out for themselves. They were the only ones who could have sensed whether the darkspawn were massing there for a sneak attack."

"Wait -- do you think the Grey Wardens were traitors?" Varric asked.
She sighed. "I've asked myself that very question a dozen times. No, I don't think they betrayed Cailan deliberately, they stood to gain nothing by it as far as I can see. He favored them, he fully intended to allow as many Orlesian chevaliers to billet in Ferelden as we could hold...hell, I've seen evidence that shows he intended to hand the bloody country over to Celene as a fucking wedding present --" she broke off and took a few deep, calming breaths. "Duncan wasn't at Ostagar while all this was going on, he was busy elsewhere, recruiting me. We only got back the day before the battle. Why he didn't immediately insist upon sending Wardens to investigate Ishal I'll never know, but I do know that he was close to his Calling -- a Warden's death, essentially, the madness that eventually overtakes anyone infected by the Taint -- and perhaps not as sharp as he ought to have been. Why the other Wardens never insisted themselves may be because Duncan left them with orders not to interfere with the army, or perhaps none of them had any initiative, or maybe it was all just pure hateful spite. Watching Loghain in action is inspiring, actually talking to the man tends to bring out the worst in people."

"He doesn't seem all that bad to me," Varric said. "A bit testy, maybe, but kind of...nice...ish, actually."

Elilia shook her head. "If you could go back and meet him as he was, you'd never recognize him. I don't know if age has mellowed him, or shame, or being a grandfather, or ten years in Orlais, or finally being out of Orlais, or the fact that we're sleeping together...or all of the above...but this Loghain did not exist at the Battle of Ostagar."

"Huh. Well, the love of a good woman does work wonders for a man. You should have seen me before I met Bianca," Varric said, with an affectionate pat for the stock of his crossbow.

Loghain, meanwhile, sought out a relatively sober native and grilled him with questions. "How badly did the town suffer from darkspawn attacks?"

"Not bad, milord. We saw a few stragglers, nothing much to speak of, killed 'em all and burned the bodies real careful like, like you're supposed to."

"I heard there was a riot, I believe?"

The man scoffed. "Pshaw, milord, 'twas more of a stampede than a riot, if'n you ask me. The New takes -- the people what spilled in from elsewhere -- they raised a bit of a ruction when they found out that there wouldn't be no more ships leaving port and tried to take some of the fishing boats that were at dock. Didn't go over well with the fishermen, you can imagine. Some heads were knocked pretty keenly, but eventually the Newtakes figured out the way things work in Gwaren Town. 'Fit were up to me, I'd say let 'em leave. Ferelden don't need the yellow-bellied."
The festival only became more...festive...as evening drew on and the torches were lit. The minstrels played "Green Broom" and an extremely colloquial version of Elilia's childhood favorite, "The Three Ravens," the dialect so thick that she could barely understand the words, and as it got later they turned to tunes so bawdy they made "The Ballad of Brave Ser Robin" seem like something the Chanters might sing at mass. Powerful Gwaren ale flowed like water, children and hounds gamboled about in merry chaos, and eventually a barrel race was organized. Two great empty kegs were laid on their sides and the goal was to balance on top of the barrel and run it from one side of the square to the other faster than the man next to you, without falling off. The Gwaren timber jacks, drunk as they were, were exceptionally skilled at this, and made it look so easy that Varric -- by that point quite deeply into his cups himself -- declared he could do it, and set himself to try.

"Hold Bianca," he said, and pressed the crossbow into Loghain's hands, a dwarf on a mission.

The barrel slid out from under him as he moved to step up onto it and he fell on his ass in the dirt, and lay there laughing until a couple of burly lumbermen hoisted him back onto his feet, with some good-natured ribbing and congratulations for at least having the stones to try.

It was shortly thereafter that a tall, severe-looking woman announced that the ice cream was nearly ready. As if by orders everyone still in enough command of their senses to stand upright crowded around an enormous container that looked something like a huge butter churn, with a crank handle instead of a pole. The top was lifted off and a large bag of white powder was emptied into it, along with several bushels of tiny purple berries - elderberries, Loghain identified for his companions, only just recently ripened.

"Is that white stuff sugar?" Varric asked. "You can't tell me you folks grow sugar cane around here."

"No, sugar beets," Loghain said. "Only one local farmer grows them -- Waltir Fitzgideon, he was bloody ancient when I first came to live here and the old fart is still alive, I see -- but they're very popular. Thanks to his beets and maple sugaring time, Gwaren has the worst teeth in Ferelden," he added, sourly.

The lid was replaced on top of the ice cream grinder and a man with arms like tree trunks climbed up to turn the crank about a hundred fast rounds. It looked like tough going, and his face was a brilliant shade of crimson by the time the lid was once again removed and the stern-faced lady declared the ice cream ready. There was a general rush, and when at last the stampede subsided everyone had a bowl full of frozen purple cream, with the exception of Loghain, who abstained from sweets on general principles.

"I've never had ice cream before," Elilia said, as she glommed into the treat with a will. "I've heard
of it, but I never had it. In Highever when there was a fresh powder snow we'd go out and grab up platefuls and Nan would pour maple syrup over top of it, and we'd eat it that way."

"They do that here, too," Loghain said. "They make a festival out of maple sugar season, with candy-making and all sorts of nonsense. Gwareners will grab any excuse to throw a party and get drunk. Life is tough here, so I suppose they've got to grab any fun they can latch onto."

"Only a Fereldan," Varric remarked, and sucked his spoon clean, "could take snow and ice and turn it into an asset."

After the ice cream came dancing, a score of young ladies in their finest clothes -- the rough, heavy fabric clearly of home weave, but sewn with care and attention to flatter the figure and swish and whirl becomingly as the steps twirled and bounced. They had white flowers in their hair, Andraste's Grace, and their legs flew gracefully and they seemed almost to float as they pranced, flashing shy smiles and tipping pretty winks at the burly young men in the appreciative audience. Elilia suspected that more than a few of them would put those little white flowers to more practical use in the morning.

"Why do they dance like that?" Laz asked. "They don't move their arms."

"The Orlesians outlawed folk dancing, during the Occupation," Elilia explained. "They said it was obscene."

"It was just another way to squeeze the peasantry as hard as possible, trying to subdue us," Loghain added. "We just took our dances indoors, and kept our arms still so that someone looking in through a window couldn't tell what we were doing. Now we dance out in the open, thumbing our noses at the bastard Orlesians, showing them that eighty years of tyranny wasn't enough to break Ferelden."

"Well, whatever the reason for it, I like it," Varric said. "Fereldan girls are cute as hell." Loghain snorted but didn't argue.

About an hour or so later, a commotion at the edge of town captured everyone's attention. The festivities ground to a wary halt as a group of Dalish elves walked boldly right into the torchlit square. Gwaren was on relatively friendly terms with the Dalish, with whom they traded on occasion, but this had the appearance of an invasion, and no one knew quite how to react.
"Peace, good people," the tall Keeper said, holding up an open hand. "We apologize for interrupting your celebrations, but our Elder wishes to speak to the one called Loghain."

Loghain stepped up and crossed his arms over his chest. "Hello again, Verrithal. So your Elder wishes to speak to me. What you should ask is do I wish to speak to her?"

"Peace, Loghain," the old woman said, stepping out from behind the line of hunters. The look on her face expressed the fact that what she had to say cost her a great deal. "I have thought long on what you said, and spoken long on it with my clan. The ones who killed her…they threaten this land again?"

No need to ask whom she meant, and he appreciated her circumspection. "They do."

"And you can stop them?"

"I can."

She nodded then, as if in decision. "Our clan would stand with you in this endeavor, if you have need of us."

There were gasps of astonishment from those onlookers sober enough to grasp what was being offered. The Dalish would stand alongside Ferelden against the Orlesians? It was unfathomable, a miracle that every native son of Gwaren felt could only have been wrought by Loghain. "The man's a canny devil," they would say to each other later, and toast the occasion with many cups of ale and whiskey, "even if he is a foreigner."

"No assistance would ever be turned aside," Loghain said slowly, "but why would you offer that?"

"She was mine, once," the Hahren said. "She was ours."

He nodded understanding, and the Hahren spoke again. "We have sent runners to the last-known locations of other clans that ought to be in this area at this time of year. We cannot promise that they will join, but we will see what they have to say. It is time, I think, that the Dalish made a stand for their people, even if we must do so by standing for yours. Some evils are inflicted upon all the races, and should not be permitted. We will make camp to the north, below the mountain upon which sits the great shemlen city, to avoid the worst of the approaching winter, but when you have
need of us, we will answer the call."

The Dalish made to leave, then, but Loghain stopped them with a word. "Hahren…might I know your name?" he asked.

She smiled a bit at that, her green-grey eyes sad. "Neriah, Loghain. My name is Neriah."

"Hahren Neriah. I am more pleased on this occasion to meet you than I was on the last. I believe your words for farewell and safe journey are 'dareth shiral'?"

She bowed slightly, her smile now touched with something that might have been pride. "Dareth hashamval, da'len…walk with courage."

The elves disappeared then, melting back into the shadows of the forest as quietly as they'd stepped out of them. Loghain turned to his people.

"Let's go back to the Keep and get some sleep," he said. "Tomorrow comes early, and we need to be on our way."

"Aw, dad, can't we stay?" Varric said. "This is the best party I've had since the time I passed out at the Hanged Man and woke up tied to the rafters ass-naked and painted with kaddis."

"You and yours are welcome to do whatever you'd like," Loghain said, "but Elilia and I must get back to Denerim, and I assume, Seanna, that you want to stay with us?"

The mage nodded. "I've heard about Gwaren winters, and I don't think I'm ready to experience one just yet. Although it is really very nice here, I wasn't expecting that."

"Ah, me and Laz and Paragon have got to get back to the city, too," Varric said. "I never have done well at country living, and I probably shouldn't make my first Fereldan winter a Gwaren winter. It has a rather ominous ring to it. Besides, Hawke might be in Denerim by now."

"Do we really have to tramp all that way back to Denerim?" Laz asked. "Isn't there a shortcut we could take, like a boat or something?"
Loghain nodded. "We'll take the Brecilian Passage. It cuts the trek down from weeks to just days."

"They say its overrun by werewolves," Elilia warned.

"Then we'll clear it out," Loghain said simply.
Cauthrien wiped the sweat from her brow with a thin, brown arm, bare almost to the shoulder beneath the ragged cuffs of her plain peasant's blouse. She was tired and hungry and damnedly thirsty, her throat seemingly coated with chaff, but there was no stopping until the wheat was all cut. Even this brief moment to catch her breath and rest her tired arms from the weight of the scythe ran the risk of retribution later, particularly if Da' was drunk. And Da' was always drunk.

The bruises from the last such "lesson" her father had imparted to her when deep in his cups were livid purple and tender, painful. The one over her eye made it hard to see what she was doing, the ones on her arms made it all the harder to wield the heavy reaper. But it was better to be out here than in the little ramshackle hovel, even if she was exhausted.

Her ears perked to the raucous sounds of men talking, some distance away. She looked up. Uh-oh, highwaymen, the same band of thugs that had been using the bend in the road at the end of her field as an ambush for unwary travelers. She turned her attention back to her work, praying to the Maker that they would not notice her. She counted on her ragged clothes, originally made for her older brother who was dead now, run over by a lumber wagon when he staggered drunk into its path outside the local tavern, and her skinny, under-nourished frame, to disguise her gender and render her both harmless and uninteresting to the men. They'd been there every day for nearly a week, now, and thus far it had worked.

She didn't know how long she worked. With the chaff in her throat and the pain in her bruises and the hot sun beating down, every minute she labored felt like an eternity, but eventually her ears caught the clop of hooves on the hard-beaten track. And if she heard the approaching unfortunate, then it was a dead surety that the bandits heard, too.

She didn't want to see. She'd witnessed two such ambushes, and the highwaymen left their victims dead in the ditch, and the rotting, fly-blown corpses of such unlucky sods were an all-too-common sight along Fereldan roads, but she was compelled by human nature to look up and watch disaster unfold. She wanted to shout a warning, but that would only turn the thugs' attention to her. Helpless and miserable, she stood there with her scythe hanging almost forgotten in her hands.

It was a lone rider, which was odd enough -- few were so foolish as to travel the bannorn without backup, so this man was either sublimely arrogant or dead stupid, which perhaps worked out to the same thing in the end -- and the look of him was as nothing she'd ever seen before. She realized by his shining silverite plate and the fine heavy-bodied and stout-legged warhorse he mounted that he must be a knight, in service to one of the local lords or perhaps the King himself. Strangely he wore no helmet, and his long black hair flew in the stiff north wind. Fine as his armor was, it fitted
oddly, as if badly remade to his measurements. He rounded the bend and the thugs were upon him.

Perhaps it was the protection of the plate he wore that made him foolhardy, but there were more than enough bandits to put paid to one armored knight, and the bulging saddlebags he carried, marked with the seal of the Royal Treasury, were an irresistible target. Evidently he was making a run from the offices of the local tax collector, carrying the gold back to Denerim. Usually such a task fell to an entire company of soldiers, not one lone knight. She realized that her money was in that bag, money she'd sweated and labored to earn while her father drank, and the idea that these wretched murderers would have it made her furious. It wasn't right that they killed, that they took what others had struggled and bled for, and it was time somebody stopped them. Blinded by her rage, she charged the bandits, scythe swinging, bellowing out the first war cry she had ever uttered.

The cry and her momentum both faltered before she reached the melee. The thugs were dead, slaughtered with brutal efficiency, almost too quickly to fathom. The knight wiped the blood from his sword, returned it to the sheath he carried in harness on his back, and remounted his patient steed. The horse whickered softly as if to say "all in a day's work."

Cauthrien had never seen anything like it: death done beautifully, almost like a dance. She stopped and stared, bug-eyed, as the knight made ready to travel on. She had to speak, had to say something, just to make the memory indelible in her mind.

"Oy, Ser, that was bloody fantastic! You must be as tough as the sodding Hero of River Dane!" she cried out.

The knight chuckled quietly and looked at her for the first time. He had eyes the color and temperature of winter skies. "Not quite," he said, "but almost. I thank you for your assistance."

Cauthrien shrugged. "I didn't do nothing, Ser. You left nothing for me to do."

"On the contrary, you assisted me greatly. You provided a very effective distraction, otherwise things might have gone rather harder for me."

He looked her up and down, and his mount stepped off the roadway and into the field toward her, urged on by a gentle twitch of the reins. "Maker's breath, that's a young lady under all those bruises and dirt, isn't it? Tell me, pup, who is it has been pummeling you, eh?"
She blushed and dropped her eyes to the dirt and her bare toes. "It's nothing, Ser. Everybody's Da' beats on 'em a little, 'specially when they drink."

"Not everybody's father beats his children," he said. He set his mouth in a hard, grim line as he surveyed the damage, the puffy black bruises around one dark brown eye, the marks of hard hands and harder fists all up and down both arms. His own father had been firm with him but had never raised a hand to him in anger -- and perhaps there were those who would say he would be a better man now if he had been knocked around a little once or twice as a child, but this? This was cruelty, plain and simple. And cowardice, a weak man taking out his anger at the world on the one handy creature weaker than he. Though not, he suspected, for very much longer. This little bundle of twigs and straw was going to grow into a mighty oak tree one day, unless he missed his guess.

"What's your name, pup?" he asked.

"Cauthrien Landsman, Ser." She vaguely remembered something her mother had once told her about good manners, and sketched a rough and awkward mock-curtsey. "At your service."

It made him smile a bit, at any rate. "Loghain Mac Tir, at yours."

Maker's Breath! Loghain Mac Tir, the sodding Hero of River Dane himself! Cauthrien was boggled at the notion that such as he would even deign to notice someone as lowly as herself, and now what was he doing? Was he handing her a flask?

"You look about done in, Cauthrien Landsman. Water?"

Cauthrien was completely numb, but her dehydrated body cried out for fluid and she took the flask from his hand and drank down the contents greedily. She remembered just in time not to drink it all, and handed it back with mumbled thanks, shame-faced.

"You were thirsty, weren't you? Shouldn't be working out here in this sun without water, it's like to kill you." And he drank down the remainder of the water himself. That utterly dumbfounded Cauthrien. That the Hero of River Dane would speak to her was one impossibility, that he would actually drink after her was another even more incredible impossibility. He didn't even wipe off the mouth of the flask, first!

"Have you got a mother, Cauthrien Landsman, or just a drunken Da'?" he asked, and it took her some time to recover enough wit to respond.
"My Mam drowned herself in the river when I was small, Ser," she said. "It's just me and Da' now that Brother is dead."

"How old are you, pup?"

"Fifteen, Ser."

"Thirteen. Too young for soldiering…but just about right for squiring. I don't have a squire, and damned if I haven't found its almost impossible to get on without one. How about it, Cauthrien Landsman? It's three hots and a cot, at the very least, and if you do well at it then eventually you'll be a knight, if you care about that sort of thing."

Thunderstruck, she could only gape at him dumbly for a long moment, until finally she managed to gasp out, "But Ser…I'm a girl!"

"And of what consequence is that?" he countered. "Some of the best knights and soldiers I've had the honor to fight alongside were 'girls,' Cauthrien Landsman. You've got pluck, and I think you've got grit; a bit of training and you'll suit well enough, I imagine. It's honorable work, and while I can't guarantee you'll not come away every bit as bruised and sore as you are now, at least they'll be bruises you earned, bruises that show the effort you've put into making something of yourself, not marks left by a ham-handed fool who can't control his fists or his vices. I'm offering you a hand up out of the nameless, faceless masses, Cauthrien Landsman; not something I do often and not an offer I'll ever repeat. It's your choice."

To make it official he extended a literal hand to her, and after a moment she placed her own much smaller hand in it. "I'm…supposed to finish the reaping," she said.

He jerked his chin in the direction of the tiny hovel on the far edge of the field. "That your house, Cauthrien Landsman?"

"Yes, Ser."

He pulled her up onto the horse's back and deposited her in the saddle before him, as easily as if she weighed nothing at all, and turned the animal in the direction of her miserable little home. "Then let's go tell dear old Da' he'll have to find someone else to sweat the harvest this year." Cauthrien clung awkwardly to the pommel and sat there, unable to believe the strange turn the
road of her life had taken, and not too young to feel an odd little thrill at sitting there with the Hero of River Dane all around her, it seemed, massive at her back and his enormous arms reaching past her to the reins.

Da' staggered out of the shack as they rode up, hands balled into belligerent fists. "Cauthrien! What are you doing lollygagging about like this? I still see standing wheat in that field, you useless whelp!"

She hid her face in both hands, humiliated by him and for him, and the Hero of the River Dane did the talking.

"Your daughter is coming with me, Ser, as I have need of a squire. She'll be provided for out of my pocket, and here p-" he flung a small shower of silver at the drunk -- "is enough coin to hire someone to finish out the farmwork for you, although it looks to me as if you could do it easily enough yourself if you'd put down the bottle long enough to pick up the scythe."

The man blinked stupidly at the coins, and then at his daughter and the man she rode with, then finally broke into a leering grin.

"I see how it is," he said. "I reckon she'd be pretty enough if you could keep her from wallowing in filth long enough to bugger her. A man needs a little bellywarmer, don't he? And I'll be honest with you, Ser, this is more coin than the little bitch is worth. Mind you keep a close eye on her, though -- she's a little fucking whore, just like her mother."

And just like that, the sword was in the big man's hand again and laid crosswise against her father's jutting adam's apple. "Granted, if a man rode up with my daughter in his saddle, I'd have him strung up by his hams and gutted before he could say ought. But you, Ser, disgust me on general principles, and I'm well aware of the habit of such base and depraved individuals to ascribe their own sins and vices onto everyone they meet. Know this: if I ever learn that you used more than just your hands on your daughter, I will kill you, if I must come from the ends of the bloody Void to do it. You can set your warrant on it."

He sheathed his sword again, turned the horse, and that was the last Cauthrien Landsman ever saw of her dear old Da'. She never felt the loss of him, not once.
All things considered, Anora was pleased. There had been no assassination attempts, harbor fortifications were progressing well in Amaranthine, Highhever, West Hill, and Gwaren, and Captain Isabela had sped off in her ship immediately upon receiving commission with the appointed ambassador to Nevarra and had returned in a record-shattering two months and twelve days, bearing a hold full of lavish gifts from the King of that distant land that were offloaded at the docks with the King and Queen in attendance to see and receive word.

"Don't read too much into it, Your Majesties," the Captain...a rather oily character, but evidently an accomplished seafarer...had said upon that occasion. "Nevarran aristocracy love to give gifts, the more extravagant the better. Their generosity goes to prove just how much more than you they have, and how much they can afford to toss away to the lowly. It doesn't mean they'll actually send aid. But they might, because they hate the Orlesians almost as much as you do."

She chuckled then, and brought out a great ironwood chest from her own cabin. "Your father, Queen Anora, is a great hero to the Nevarrans, did you know? Now more than ever, apparently, since he evidently left quite a trail of dead chevaliers behind when he left Orlais. His Majesty informed me that this is for him, and for him alone, and bade me take exceedingly good care of it."

Champion Hawke was with them to greet the return of the ship and her Captain, as the Crown's liaison with the mercenaries, and she asked, "What is it?"

"Well how should I know?" Captain Isabela said, rather petulantly. "It's in a locked box, isn't it?"

"Isabela..."

The Captain sighed in annoyance. "It's nothing to get all in a tizzy over, it's just a moldy old fur."

"You've had it open, then?" Anora asked the woman, with her sternest glare fixed in place.

"I have, Your Majesty. Well I had to, didn't I? It could have been something dangerous, like a load of Qunari saar-qumeck that would kill all of you when the lid was off. I was only performing a vital service to the Crown."

"Sure you were," Champion Hawke said, with an expressive roll of the eyes.
"Have it open again, I want to see," Anora said.

Alistair touched her on the arm then. "My dear, perhaps it would be better to…"

"To wait for father?" Anora said. "What the devil for? I know exactly what he'll say, 'What the deuce am I supposed to do with that bloody thing?' I'll have a look for myself; if it is serviceable, I may be able to put it to use."

"My kind of lady," Isabela said, and knelt down with her handful of picklocks. In a trice she had the lock jimmed and the lid open.

"The King of Nevarra didn't give you a key along with this locked chest?" Hawke asked incredulously.

"Well, no -- didn't seem to trust me with it. I suppose he figured the Royal Locksmith or who the hell ever would have it open, but I figured why put such an august personage to such mean usage? I can force a lock just as easy as he could."

Anora, meanwhile, lifted the folded pelt out of the box and allowed it to fall open naturally. It was not at all moldy. The tawny fur was as clean and soft and perfect as if just cleaned and brushed. The creature outlined by the stretched hide was enormous, with razor sharp meat hook claws and gargantuan fangs still intact.

"I know what that is," Alistair said wonderingly. "That's a lion. They live in Nevarra and parts of the Anderfels. They're fierce predators."

"I know exactly what to do with this," Anora said. She let the pelt fall back into the box and gestured to one of the laborers. "Take this chest to Pramin el Sulabar's shop in the high market square and tell him I'll be there shortly to inform him of my wishes for it."

So in all, Anora considered things were well in hand, and the best news of all was contained in the back rooms of Pramin el Sulabar's, Madame Mellaris's, and Master Wade's. All she needed now was for father and the Hero of Ferelden to return to Denerim, and by the joyous news filtering in from the bannorn that would happen soon. Bann Ceorlic III, who had inherited non-existent holdings upon the death of his father four years ago, had already left the city to see for himself the truth of what the criers were touting, and Anora had little doubt but that the man would begin
rebuilding Lothering in the spring. And it appeared that the dwarves were at last done with their mysterious building project in the harbor, for no more great wagons came streaming in from Orzammar, the scaffolding beneath the monumental expanses of plain canvas had been torn down, and King Bhelen had arrived yesterday, looking a bit shaken by the vast sky overhead but rallying valiantly to appear perfectly regal and composed. It was a bit of a wonder to her that the dwarves could be so put off by all the nothing up above and have no apparent difficulty whatsoever in laboring so very high above the earth under their canvas ceiling. The statues, silent and enigmatic beneath their shrouds, towered over the shipyards as high as the tower of Fort Drakon well up on the mountainside. Nothing of that scale had ever been seen in Ferelden. Even the Circle Tower did not stand so tall. She quite looked forward to seeing them at last.

There was discord in her symphony of progress, however. An alarming rumor had come to town a few days past from Amaranthine with a group of terrified traders, who claimed that the *Fighting Ferelden* had been sunk by an armada of Orlesian ships. No official messenger had yet come to refute or confirm this rumor, however, and that in and of itself was alarming. Could the arling already be overtaken by chevaliers? It was a chilling thought, but nothing else had come from that quarter, so surely it could not be more than foolish hearsay.

Less frightening, perhaps, but no less unfortunate, was the fate of the Denerim Alienage. Bloody Lung had struck the elves, its source unknown. Many elves had immigrated to Ferelden from the Free Marches, taking advantage of free passage and the promise of work and opportunity, and the disease was not unknown there, but rumor had it that the Orlesians from the ship the *Fighting Ferelden* had sunk off Denerim harbor had brought an infected elf to the city. The last surviving crewman of that ship was still stubbornly silent in the dungeons of Fort Drakon. Fortunately it seemed that the Alienage had been quarantined in time and the fast-spreading disease was not running rampant through the streets of Denerim, but there were more than a thousand elves locked away in that tiny space behind the walls to suffer and die for lack of treatment. It was a great pity, and a terrible loss of manpower as well. The elves of Denerim had frankly suffered enough in recent years. It seemed as if the Maker really ought to reach down and help the poor bastards for once.

So no, not *all* was sunshine and buttercups. But when was it ever?

"My lady, can I not entreat you to wear something more becoming?" Erlina asked for the fifth or sixth time. "Your Majesty looks like a pretty boy in those clothes."

"I may not be putting out to sea, Erlina," Anora said, amused despite the tickle of annoyance she felt, "but I am going out on a ship where deck space is limited and I will not be tripping over skirts while rigging and yardarms or whatever they're called are flying everywhere about." She adjusted the high collar of her sleeveless leather doublet and gave a final twitch to the cuffs of her blouse. It was not a Queenly ensemble, perhaps, but it was practical, and she fancied she looked well enough in it. Judging from the cheeky way Alistair pinched her behind when he saw her in it, he thought so, too.
He was looking very tired these days, she thought, and no wonder since he allowed himself so little sleep. She was rather proud of the way he'd knuckled down to the challenge, inane quips at least temporarily set aside, but she worried that he was using himself up. He'd aged a score of years in the past few months, it seemed. He wore it well, but it did make his resemblance to King Maric -- at least as she remembered the former monarch -- almost eerie. She would have to exert her wiles to make him rest a bit now and then, much the way her own mother had often cajoled her father into laying aside his burdens for a few hours when they began to tell too heavily upon him. Men were so damnnably stubborn about doing their duty instead of doing what was good for them that enabled them to perform their duty more efficiently. Fortunately women were more sensible. She had high hopes that Elilia Cousland would be able to manage her father nicely. He, of all people, needed a keeper. He would beat himself to death against a stone wall if he took it into his head that it would in some way benefit Ferelden to do so.

Their party -- composed of herself, King Alistair, King Bhelen, Arls Vaughan and Eamon and Bann Franderel, the latter two with wives in tow, Champion Hawke and her pretty sister Bethany and her Dalish lover Merrill (Anora had nothing personally against either elves or same-sex love affairs, but did they have to be so open about theirs?), the Champion's fine hound Spirit, Guardsman Aveline and Donnic and a dozen dozen attendants and guards, including that unnerving white-haired elf the Champion had in her company, the Tevinter with the odd tattoos who was now part of King Alistair's personal guard -- climbed on board The Siren's Call II and Captain Isabela gave the call to make sail.

"Haul ass, you louts!" she shouted at her men, who stepped lively enough. The woman ran her ship the way father ran his armies, Anora thought, and he would probably like her, provided he didn't like her too much, as she had noticed the way the good captain gave the eye to seemingly every man she encountered, and every woman as well. And she was unseemly familiar with His Majesty, whom she evidently knew from years past. Just how well she knew Alistair remained an open question, but for his part the King just seemed uncomfortable with her innuendo-laden attempts at conversation, so Anora allowed the matter to rest. For now.

The ship made anchor just far enough from shore that the full height of the covered statues in the harbor could be seen. Two teams of brontos waited on the wharves, tethered to great hooks in the back of the canvas, their drovers waiting orders to pull sheets. "I wonder what they're going to do with all that canvas?" Alistair whispered to her. "We could do a lot with that amount of canvas."

She shushed him, although privately she coveted the many hundreds of square feet of cloth herself. Their soldiers would never lack for tents...but the dwarves had already gifted them extravagantly with the statues, it would be impolite and impolitic to ask for more.
"Your Majesties, Lords and Ladies, gentle people of Ferelden," King Bhelen began grandly.

"Gentle people? He hasn't met many Fereldans, has he?" Alistair said, with a chuckle. Anora elbowed him sharply in the ribs. The inane quips hadn't fallen entirely by the wayside, she was chagrined to see.

King Bhelen ignored him, which was always the best policy, Anora had found. "It is my great honor as King of Orzammar to present to you…your Paragons."

A dwarf high in the crow's nest flashed a signal to shore, and the canvases slowly, majestically rose over the backs of the twin statues. They were not identical, something that was easy to see before the cloth uncovered more than two pairs of monumental feet. A bit further and it was clear that while one great stone image depicted a man, the other was obviously female. They were carved realistically rather than with geometric precision as the statues of dwarven Paragons were, but certainly in fine heroic posture.

When the cloth covered only the last portion of each body it was revealed that the male statue, on the northwestern end of the harbor, had its arms crossed over its chest, legs spread in a strong stance, a sword and shield resting easily on the ground at its feet. The female statue, on the southeastern end of the harbor, stood with one foot slightly forward and one arm outstretched as if to clasp the hand of the weary traveler, but the other hand rested lightly on the hilt of a gigantic greatsword partly concealed behind her legs. That outstretched and completely unsupported arm was a wonder, more so than the rest of the statues put together, not just because so much negative space in statuary was difficult to achieve but because the statues were pieced together of interlocking stones, joined so perfectly that the seams were utterly invisible. Anora wondered greatly how the dwarves had managed it.

But she didn't have time to wonder long. The sheets rose a bit higher…

"Oh dear Maker," she groaned, when she realized what she saw and what it portended.

"What is it, dearest?" Alistair asked, and in response she could only point at the shoulders of the male statue. A pair of narrow braids rested on the stone figure's armored chest. "I don't see what…"

The last portion of canvas fell away in a rush, pulled by gravity, and Alistair smacked himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand.
"Maker's breath," he said reverently, "the Landsmeet is going to have kittens, and I can't imagine your father will be terribly thrilled about this, either."

King Bhelen utterly missed their reaction, perhaps because he didn't know what kittens were. He beamed his benevolence upon the assembled from approximately waist height as the humans slowly assimilated the fact that standing sentinel over Denerim harbor at a height of more than a thousand feet each were Elilia Cousland and Loghain Mac Tir.

"Excuse me, King Bhelen, Ser," Alistair said, with a nervous chuckle, "but where precisely did you get the idea that these were...er...Paragons?"

"The Warden proved herself worthy of the title by what she did for us in Orzammar, of course, and in ending the Blight," Bhelen said. "It would not have been proper to so honor her there, as she is not of our ancestors, but it seemed only fitting to so honor her in her own native lands. As for the Paragon Loghain, it was your father King Maric who told us of his Rise, long ago when he visited during the reign of my father King Endrin. He told of how the casteless criminal Loghain triumphed over all adversity to become champion of all Ferelden, and founded his own noble house. I confess as a child I was much impressed by King Maric's tales of his exploits."

Anora coughed significantly. "That does rather make him sound like the very definition of a Paragon," she muttered to her husband. "And I'm certain your father would have been pleased as punch to capitalize upon the dwarven king's misconception. He would have considered it...a fine lark. A joke intended more upon my father, I suspect, than upon King Endrin and Orzammar."

"I daresay my father would have approved of this, then," Alistair said, as he indicated the statue and sighed. "I confess it's a remarkably good likeness, better than any I've seen done in portrait, and honestly it seems rather fitting that he stand guard over the capital for the rest of eternity, but I really don't look forward to the Landsmeet."

"Your devoted Uncle looks as if he doesn't want to wait for that venue to give vent to his feelings on the matter."

Eamon was quite red in the face and seemed on the verge of apoplexy. Arl Vaughan and Bann Franderel, also no great supporters either of Loghain or indeed of the Crown (but who were invited only because they were the only Ferelden noblemen in Denerim at the time), also looked ready to burst with affront. But the tide of invective they threatened was forestalled by a shout from the crow's nest.

"Ship ahoy!"
Captain Isabela stepped to the rails, pulled a Qunari-made spyglass from the sash at her waist, and sighted along the line of the sailor's pointing arm.

"A warship, and fucking huge," she said. "I think it's sinking, though."

She watched for another few moments and then she laughed. "Oh. It's not sinking. It's that great wallowing tub, the Fighting Ferelden."

"What? Let me see!" Alistair demanded eagerly, and grabbed the spyglass. "Maker's breath, it is! Old Ironsides herself, and none the worse for wear, as far as I can see. What a bloody relief!"

Anora agreed wholeheartedly. It was wonderful that the ship was not sunk, not just because she was their only proper seaborne defense and represented a tremendous investment (mostly of her father's own coin, she well knew) but because her father had always had such great faith in his clumsy ironclad ship and it was heartening to see that it was not unfounded. When King Maric was lost at sea and their plans for a Fereldan navy scrapped, it was hard for her to say whether it was the loss of his friend or the sudden intense disfavor of his ship that hurt Loghain more. Maker only knows what this "Orlesian Armada" the merchants spoke of had actually been, but Anora was very glad that Maric's Wallowing Loghain was still afloat.

For a "tub," the big ship hove into shouting distance with astonishing rapidity, buoyed along by magic. The sounds of merry singing could be heard aboard, and a cry went up from the decks as someone in the rigging recognized the King and Queen aboard The Siren's Call II. A tall, thin, dark-haired man stepped to the rails and shouted an halloo through cupped hands.

"Your Majesties! Grand news from Amaranthine! Your ship fought twelve Orlesian warships and sank them all!"

"Maker's breath! Twelve?" Eamon gasped, and Isolde clutched his arm to keep him from the swoon that seemed inevitable.

"Grand news indeed!" Alistair shouted back. "But you are not my ship's captain…I know you, do I not?"

"Aye, Your Majesty," the man hailed back. "I am Senior Warden Nathaniel Howe -- acting Warden Commander. I have much news I bring to you from the north."
"Ah, I remember you, Warden Howe. At the palace then, in an hour?"

"Aye, Your Majesty. 'Til then."

King Bhelen chuckled. "There is more to see, Your Majesties, but we should wait until your ship clears the breach. We need a clean target."

The *Fighting Ferelden* zipped into port like a clipper, with a resumption of triumphant songs from the men working the decks, and at last the seas were clear. King Bhelen gave a signal, and shortly thereafter gigantic lyrium runes blended into the design of the sculptures flared alight, as did both enormous pairs of lyrium-laced eyes, with an effect eerily like a flash of sudden awareness.

"Oh, Maker…they're even the right color," Alistair groaned, with a halfhearted chuckle. "That is just…creepy, seriously. It was bad enough when it was just a gigantic statue of my father-in-law, but now it looks like he's just standing there, a thousand feet tall, staring down at me with suspicion and judgment."

"One thousand, two hundred and forty-six feet, Your Majesty, to be precise," Bhelen said. "The Paragon Elilia stands just a bit shorter, as she does in life."

"What is the purpose of the lyrium-glowing eyes?" Alistair asked. "Other than skeeving me out, that is."

"They're not just decorative, Your Majesty," Bhelen said, with a grim sort of chuckle in his voice. "Bring on the derelict," he called. A decrepit old ship, barely floating, was hauled in by a line attached to a sturdy tugboat. "Watch this."

A catapult on the derelict's deck suddenly hurled a gigantic flaming tar bomb directly at Denerim harbor. Alistair shrieked in terror, but before he could even blush at the girlishness of the sound, Statue Loghain's eyes shot cold blue bursts of enchantment power, scoring a direct hit upon the tar bomb which simply seemed to cease to exist, and Statue Elilia's eyes did the same to the derelict vessel. It was just…not…*there* anymore, and the sea rushed in to fill the suddenly empty void where it had been with an authoritative thwapping sound.

"*King Bhelen!*" Anora said, in dismay, "Were there men aboard that ship?"
"Of course not, Your Majesty. The catapult was rigged to loose by remote trigger, from the tug. But just imagine what would happen to an *Orlesian* vessel that attempted to do the same to your fair city?"

It was monstrous, diabolical…and yet, once the first shock wore off, quite an attractive idea. "If I may, Your Highness, why do the dwarves not use such things against the darkspawn?" Alistair asked.

"We once did," Bhelen replied. "But it requires an immense amount of lyrium to create such enchantments, which in turn means an immense amount of stone and the space to put it. We didn't make these statues this big *merely* to impress you. The places where our great sentinel statues stood are no longer held by us, though one hopes that will not remain true forever. But the truth is, such things are less effective against darkspawn then they are against siege weapons, which the darkspawn generally don't use. But they seemed well-suited to answer a few of your current concerns, and Ferelden is and hopefully shall remain our greatest ally."

"When we go back to the harbor," Arl Vaughan ventured, eyeing the grand statues nervously, "they *won't* take us for an enemy warship, will they?"

"Not unless we used some weapon upon the city," King Bhelen said. "So don't."

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"I think Bianca's gotten scratched."

Thus were Varric's glum words as at long last they exited the eternal twilight of the deep Brecilian Forest for the bright sunlight at the base of the city.

"Put that away before we reach the gates, or the guards will shoot you," Loghain said, not entirely truthfully.

Varric gave the crossbow's shiny mahogany stock a final pat and a fond kiss and returned Bianca to her harness on his back. "Somewhere in this town there's some fine-grit sandpaper with your name on it, Bee, but matching your stain might be tough."
"Would have been easier in Gwaren," Loghain said, "but someone in the industrial district should be able to set you up."

"If I find the right stuff I'll lay in a stock. Somehow I suspect that if I continue to hang out with you, I'll need a steady supply. Four days fighting werewolves in the dark forest would strip the varnish off of anyone."

"You should think about equipping yourself with a decent blade, even just a hunting knife -- something you can grab quickly and fight with one-handed. Bianca is a fine weapon, but she's entirely too good to waste on close combat."

"You are a wise man, Big Bull," Varric said. "Hawke did that very thing herself, and her bows were never as splendid and fierce as my Bianca. Maybe I'll hit the marketplace and look for a decent dagger."

"I am…glad to be back," Seanna said, timidly but with a tremor of fervency in her voice. Being back meant being at risk from the local templars, but it also meant no more sleeping rough, no giant spiders, and no werewolves.

"Look there. What the bloody hell do you think that is?" Elilia asked. She pointed at the horizon beyond the city wall, where the back of her own head, done in gleaming white stone a thousand feet high, could be glimpsed among the buildings strewn over the mountainside.

Loghain grunted. "I reckon we'll see once we're in the city proper."

"Must we go straight to the palace, or may we enjoy a cool drink and a moment's peace before we start dealing with…being back?" Elilia asked.

It was on Loghain's lips to say that they had to go to the palace, of course they did, business must always be taken care of first and duty was paramount, but another thought stayed him. Even though he looked forward to seeing his daughter and her children again (and yes, even to seeing his son-in-law, a little) he did not at all relish the sort of duties the King and Queen would foist upon him, first and foremost among them the business of the upcoming holiday and the Landsmeet that would take place shortly thereafter. Frankly, the issue of succession in Gwaren didn't interest him much nor did he feel it was of any great importance compared to the larger issues of national defense.
"Let's go for that drink," he said. "Anywhere but the Gnawed Noble. I can't stand that pretentious scummy hole, or the people that drink there."

"Ah, the Gnawed Noble," Varric said fondly. "Just when I thought the Hanged Man had a rotten name. There's a decent pub down by the docks. A bit of a dive, true, but the ale is good and the place doesn't smell all that bad."

"The Fishwife's Cloister?" Loghain asked.

"You know the place."

"Only place in town where a man can get a drink without being hounded by petitioners or thugs."

"Ha! So you've had dealings with the Dwarven Merchants' Guild, too?" Varric said, laughing.

"Worse. Fereldan nobility."

The guardsman in the box before the gates saluted smartly as they approached. "Lord Loghain, Ser. I shall send to the palace word of your return."

"If you might be so kind as to delay that word even just a few moments, that would be much appreciated," Loghain said. "My companions and I would like a moment to catch our breath before we have to dive back into the river."

The guard grinned. "Understood, Ser. The young lads are damned unreliable, always stopping to chat with their mates or getting lost in the markets."

"Good man."

Once through the great gates they turned east towards the seafront, wending down the streets through the well-built and organized buildings that had replaced the ramshackle sprawl destroyed by the Archdemon's armies. Not every part of Denerim was New and Improved, but so much had been lost that had to be rebuilt. Elilia had funded much of it, boldly hording the Archdemon Urthemiel's corrupted blood to herself and forcing the Warden Order to pony up gold in order to
replenish supplies made scarce by the intervening centuries, calling it "duties of the defenders of Thedas for the reconstruction of Blight-ridden Ferelden." It had only been the first time she'd deliberately acted to piss off the First Warden, though it was probably her finest hour as a renegade of the Order, and it had been prompted solely by the conspicuous lack of assistance the Order provided to the defenders of the Fifth Blight. The bulk of that blood still resided in casks beneath the Denerim Warden's Compound, but she'd brought in an absolute fortune for the barrels she'd sold. Needless to say, Loghain approved wholeheartedly. Admission to the Order hadn't made him any less suspicious of it or its agenda. Four hundred years was a long time to simply "remain vigilant," and the First Warden seemed more adept than he or Elilia at breaking the "non-interference" rule.

Suddenly he stopped short, causing Laz to walk directly into his back. "Maker's breath…"

The corner he'd just rounded revealed the grand sentinel statues in all their glory, although both faces -- and both identities -- were concealed by their orientation. "I've never seen anything like that before," Elilia said, awestruck. "Even the magisters never made statues like that."

"There's supposed to be something like this at the Merdaine, in the Anderfels," Varric said. "A tremendous statue of Andraste carved right out of the mountain's face. But this…this is…a whole different degree of 'holy shit.'"

"By all that is good and holy, it's Loghain and Elilia!" Seanna said, equal parts horrified and amused.

"I'm sure you're mistaken," Loghain said, with the uncomfortable sensation that she was not.

"Trust me, I've spent a goodly amount of time recently staring at your backs, and I speak now as an expert."

"What in the Maker's holy name would possess Alistair and Anora to erect gigantic statues of us in Denerim harbor?" Elilia said.

"It was the dwarves," Loghain said, through clenched teeth.

"Hey, you can't pin this on us!" Varric said, raising his hands defensively.
"Not you, the dwarves of Orzammar. Their King…Boolan, or whatever the hell his name is."

"Bhelen," Elilia supplied.

"Man can remember the name of a short-time grunt soldier who died a decade ago but not the name of a foreign Head of State," Varric muttered.

Loghain turned on Elilia accusingly. "You told the bastard you wanted your head on a bloody Paragon statue."

"Hey, I never thought he'd take me seriously," she said. "And I certainly never told him to stick a big statue of you up somewhere."

"Let's get to the damned bar," Loghain said, miserably. "I really need a fucking drink, now."

"Well I knew Anora would have a statue of you up sooner or later, but I thought she'd wait 'til you were dead," Elilia said, with a snigger. "And I always kind of thought she'd put it up by the Orlesian Embassy, so that it can stand glaring down at them for all eternity."

"It should be made to stand where the Orlesian Embassy used to be," Loghain growled. He ushered them into the tavern. "Just get inside and get a drink, I don't want to talk on it further."

He gestured to the bartender for ale and whiskey and chivvied his group towards a dark corner but a loud, beery burst of laughter halted them.

"Haw haw haw! If it ain't the former Warden Commander her own self. Knew I'd find ya if I just kept lookin'." A short, red-headed and red-bearded bull of a man staggered out of a side booth.

"That," Varric said, sounding impressed, "is the drunkest dwarf I've ever seen, up to and including myself. And that's saying a lot."

"Oghren, you didn't look, you sat and drank until I just happened to stumble in," Elilia said, and clapped hands with the disreputable dwarf.
"Haw haw haw! Worked just as well, didn't it?" The dwarf raised an enormous tankard of ale and downed its contents at a gulp, then leered at Laz. "Hey, cutie -- like what you see?"

"Not even a little bit," she said, with an offended sniff. "You smell like the ass end of a bronto, steeped in cheap ale."

The dwarf gave out with an obscene giggle. "That's just the smell of marinating in manliness, cutie."

"Ugh," Seanna said.

"I suppose you're going to make us sit with this clod?" Loghain asked. "Oh, very well."

"Hee hee haw haw. Knew you liked me, Loghain."

"Just sit well away from me, Dwarf. Preferably downwind."

"Aw, and here I thought that was your special pet name for me," Varric said. "I feel like a cuckold."

"I'd recommend the House Specialty," Oghren said, a bit uncertainly. "Them cuckolds don't taste any too good after the first one or two."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

They sat down and Oghren ordered another king-sized mug of ale. "When did you get to the city, Oghren?" Elilia asked. "And why?"

"Come in three days past with the Little Blight on the RMS Sitz Bath," Oghren said. "Had business with the Little Pike-Twirler."
"Anyone care to translate?" Laz asked.

"'Little Blighter' -- Nathaniel Howe, my second-in-command when I was with the Wardens," Elilia explained. "'Little Pike-Twirler' -- King Alistair. I couldn't begin to hazard a guess what 'RMS Sitz Bath' refers to."

"That sodding tub that took down the Orlesian fleet, that's what."

"What Orlesian fleet?" Loghain asked, sharply.

Oghren chuckled. "Happened just about a week ago. A dozen galleasses come zipping toward Amaranthine Bay with ballistae pwingin' away like mad…this big metal wreck comes zooming out of nowhere and just lays into 'em, I tell ya. It was sodding beautiful. But hitching a ride on the damned thing was probably the worst thing I've ever had to do since I signed on to this sodding outfit. Worse even than that time I -- but, heh heh, you don't want to hear about that."

"What else has happened lately?" Loghain asked. He sipped his whiskey and studied the dwarf shrewdly. "Have there been other attacks?"

"If you want to call 'em that," Oghren said, with a shrug of one shoulder. "'Bout a month or maybe a little better than that ago, a ship snuck into Amaranthine harbor -- or tried to. But the Little Blighter was ready for 'em and we caught 'em before they could get out of their little boat. The big ship sailed off but the little one we put paid to, with her passengers. Orleansians. They had funny masks on."

"Orleansians always do," Loghain pointed out.

"These were funnier. Long beaks on 'em, stuffed with purty-smelling things. Flowers and such."

"Plague masks."

Oghren nodded. "That was what the Little Blighter called 'em, all right. And they had a big wooden crate with 'em. There was a sick elf inside."
"Maker's breath."

"That's about the size of it, I guess. Anyway, the Little Blighter sent everybody away but five of us, and we put on the masks and one of our mages, Bannistre, looked the poor kid over. Figured out he had the Bloody Lung. We took the elf to the Chantry, where the Little Blighter and Twinkle-Fingers proceeded to bully the Revered Mother out of enough powdered lyrium to make a batch of medicine for the little shrimp. He's still pretty damned sick, an' he don't speak a bloody word of Common, but he's sure grateful for the help we've given him -- an' I think he's sweet on Twinkle-Fingers, too."

"Twinkle-Fingers' -- Velanna, another Warden, and a mage. She's a Dalish," Elilia translated.

Loghain shook his head. "They're trying to use bloody germ warfare against us," he said wonderingly. "Tossing poor sick elves around like bombs. Why don't they just heave rotting pig carcasses into our cities? It would be kinder than this."

"I suppose then you hadn't heard what happened here in Denerim?" Oghren said.

"What happened here in Denerim?" Loghain asked tightly.

Oghren shook his head over his ale sadly. "The Little Blighter feels a bit guilty about that, but it wasn't really his fault. When we caught the Orlesians the city Bann got so damned scared he closed the place down tight, and everybody was in such an ass-bustin' flurry we couldn't find any man to send here with word, and the Little Blighter had every man at the Keep trying to keep order in town, Wardens and plain soldiers alike. Like as not there wasn't any difference a warning could have made. The sounds of things, they struck here same night."

"They brought another sick elf to Denerim," Loghain said.

"Fraid so. And there wasn't nobody to stop 'em, here. The Little Pike-Twirler stepped up guard patrols around the docks, but that's one of them cases of shuttin' the barn door after the bronto's been stolen, ain't it? The Alienage is in quarantine. All the elves are dying, so they say."

Loghain slapped the rough wooden table, hard, with both hands, making the glasses jump and rattle. "Son of a -"
He jumped up, and strode angrily toward the door. "Where are you going?" Elilia asked.

"To the Alienage."

"Loghain, you can't go there; it's in quarantine. You were already sick once, isn't that enough?"

"Bugger it."

"Come on, Big Bull, what are you going to do, knock? I don't think they'll let you in," Varric supplied.

"Then I'll climb the fucking wall."

"And what are we supposed to do?" Seanna asked. "Are you asking us to follow you into that malaise?"

"You stay here, dammit -- all of you."

"Whatever you're thinking, Loghain, you're wrong," Elilia called out desperately. "There's no need for this."

"Elilia, I can help. What -- "

"Don't say it," Varric interrupted. "Do not say it. 'What could possibly go wrong?'"

"No, Dwarf -- I never say that." And he turned and was gone.

"I hope he's got some kind of a plan," Seanna said.

"He always does, Little Bird," Elilia said, but she sounded doubtful herself. What she was thinking was, Anora is not going to be happy about this -- and me? I'm a fucking widow before ever I took
Oghren swallowed down his ale. "Bartender! Another round!"

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"He's gone *where*?" Queen Anora fairly shrieked, and started out of her throne.

"To the Alienage, Your Majesty. Once we collected our wits we followed him, but the guard he bullied into letting him through the gate he *also* bullied into keeping us out, even Champion. I'm sorry." Elilia hung her head in shame.

"Hold on now, this might not be such a bad thing," King Alistair said. "Are there any Ashes of Andraste left over?"

"There…*are*, Al, but how many sick elves are there?"

"A lot," he said, darkly. Elilia sighed.

"So even if he plans to use them, could he really expect them to hold out until he saves *all* the elves? Will not the sick ones just make the saved ones ill again?" she asked. "And what then for him? Surrounded by so much illness, he's sure to catch his death. Again."

"The guard will let *me* in," Anora said, fiercely.

"Dearest…if your father has been in the Alienage all this time, it's already too late," Alistair said, as gently as possible. "Don't make things worse by getting sick yourself. Think of the children."

"I am forced to agree, Your Majesty. All we can do now is pray."

"I thought you weren't the praying sort, Eli," Alistair said, with a sick grin.
"I'm not, Al. But the Chantry types would say the Maker already showed Loghain His favor once, and I'm not one to pass up even a faint hope that He might do it again."

Loghain walked through the streets of the Alienage, marveling at how little changed it was from the way it had always been. Sick elves lined the street, falling-down buildings leaned crazily, garbage had obviously not been collected in some time, just as always, in his experience. There were perhaps more sick elves than usual. If his father had been like the bulk of human men with half-blood get, he and his mother would have been forced to live in a place much like this, perhaps worse.

There were small improvements, he saw. The streets had been repaved and leveled out, a convenient byproduct, for the Crown, of the new sewers that drained the area. Elilia had some plans for this place, he knew, even though she had not seen fit to divulge them to him. He suspected it was her idealism at play, that nothing would ever truly change for these poor bastards, but he hoped whatever she was plotting would bear fruit. Of course, if his plot didn't bear fruit, there would be no point in working to improve this place. The elves would be dead.

And so would he, no doubt. Funny how little the idea of that had ever really bothered him. Not that he particularly looked forward to what, if anything, came after.

He found an elf who was healthy enough to walk. "Gather your people," he told the young man. "Everyone who has any strength left must help those who haven't. Children and mothers of small children will receive medicine first. Tell your folks to be orderly about it or no one may be treated at all."

The hopeless dullness of the man's face held for a brief instant, then was gradually supplanted by the terror that was a corollary to sudden dawning hope in one who barely knew such a thing existed. He raced off. Loghain moved to the center of the alienage and positioned himself beneath the vhenadahl, where he began unstrapping his leather chest piece. He pulled it off and began to work the tight knots that held the little pouch of ashes safely inside it. How dismally small it looked, especially with how jam-packed the alienage seemed to be. He would save who he could.

Someone walked up on his blind side. "My mother had that same tattoo on her arm," a male voice said, wonderingly. He turned his head and saw a pair of elves, similar enough in appearance to be relatives. They were hale enough to walk, but that was about all that could be said for them. The one who'd spoken was a man with long black hair pulled back tightly in a single braid, while the other was a redhead woman who wore her knotted hair short. He recognized that one from the Battle of Denerim. She was looking suspiciously at him. The man was staring fixedly at the small tattoo on his left bicep, the only "ink" he'd ever marked himself with. Words in the Common
alphabet but in the Dalish tongue said what one of his men had assured him was "Night Elves watch the line," though he'd always suspected they actually said something along the lines of "Filthy Shemlen rooked us good."

"Then your mother was with the Night Elves," he said. He searched his memory for a face that matched his. "Adaia Imura, right? One of my later recruits."

The elf's black eyes went wide. "You…remember my mother?"

"What is this 'treatment' you've promised?" the redhead burst out angrily. "As I recall it, the last treatment you brought to the alienage saw half our people sold to the sodding Tevinters."

"Well there's no Tevinters this time. There's just me and this little bag of medicine, and we'll do this all out in the open where you can watch me close. Do you have small children, Ma'am?"

"No, she doesn't," the man answered for her.

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to wait. Can you help bring the little ones and their mothers to me?"

"We can." The man grabbed the still-glaring redhead by the arm and pulled her away. "Come on, Shianni, if he can help us we need to let him, right?"

Word that help was at hand spread throughout the alienage quickly, and in a matter of moments there was a remarkably orderly queue of mothers with squalling, coughing children, in many cases the mothers themselves supported by someone less sick. Loghain didn't even bother to put his armor back on. He began to cure the elves, using the smallest pinches of ashes he could manage. There was a depressingly long line of patients.

When the first screaming, hacking infant was treated and its coughs and cries were silenced, someone shouted, "He killed it!"

The mother, sick and coughing herself, cuddled her child close to her breast and said, "No! She's fallen asleep! She's well! Oh, thank the Maker!"
Loghain gave her the next pinch of ashes and she took the first deep breath she'd been able to draw in a month. "This is a miracle medicine. Oh, thank you, Ser -- so much!"

There was a momentary scramble after that, everyone wanting to be next in line, but Loghain silenced the outcry with a stern word. "You will all have your turn," he said, though he seriously doubted the truth of that. "Settle."

The line stretched out forever, and even before he reached the last of the children and mothers he began to expect to feel the bottom of the pouch beneath his gloved fingers as he reached in. But against his expectations, the ashes held out until the last mother and child were well. "The sickest of the young men and women next," he commanded.

There were many more of those, as it was mostly young men and women who came to Ferelden from the Free Marches, looking for work, hoping to set aside coin enough to start a new and better life. By the time he was halfway through the throng, Loghain noticed something he probably should have noticed before. The little pouch of ashes…was not getting any emptier. He'd used enough of his tiny sparing pinches to empty a grain sack, he thought, but the small leather poke was still mostly full. Just another miracle? He had to assume so.

The black-haired man, who had not yet had any treatment himself, and the red-headed woman, who hadn't either, half-carried an elderly man up to him, cutting the entire line.

"Please, Ser," the young man said. "This is our Hahren, and he's terribly ill. I know you said you were only treating the young, but he's too important to us to lose him. Can't you please heal him now?"

"Loghain, I told you, I'll not take cure from the young," the old man said. Loghain was momentarily confused as this man had told him nothing. The black-haired elf blanched and then blushed.

"He was speaking to me, Ser," he said. "I expect you've met a lot of people named in your honor."

Oddly, he had not. Scores of Marics, of course, that had been the most popular name for Fereldan boys born during the early days of the Restoration, and either Rowan, Moira, or Maricia for the lasses, but he could not recall ever in his life meeting another Loghain. He digested this surprise and moved past it.
"It's all right, Sergeant," he said to the old man. "I have plenty of cure for everyone. You needn't fear that anyone will suffer on your behalf."

The old man stared at him wide-eyed, then clapped a weak hand on his shrunken bicep. "Night elves... watch the line," he said, voice weak with sickness and wonderment.

"Elder... you were in the Night Elves, too?" the young elven Loghain said in surprise.

"I was."

"Valendrian was one of my earliest recruits," Loghain said. "He was a Night Elf before the Night Elves were a properly recognized company at all."

He gave the old man a pinch of the ashes, and then cured the two younger people as well. They looked quite healthy and fine once the miracle had its way with them, and even Valendrian, old though he was, could stand under his own power once the illness was gone. He was not, after all, quite as old as he looked. In the way elves had of doing he'd stayed youthful-looking for longer than most humans and then he'd aged quite rapidly once the process began, and barely looked any older now than he had ten years or so ago. He was only a very little bit older than Loghain himself.

"Go to your wife and child, by boy," Valendrian said to the young man. "Nesiara and Adaia were healed already, were they not?"

"They were, Hahren," elf-Loghain said. He directed a half-bow at Loghain. "Thank you for that, Ser -- er, milord."

He left then, taking the redhead with him. Valendrian stayed as Loghain continued dealing out cure to the sick elves, no longer worried that he would run out. "Loghain Tabris; a fine young man. I suppose you can guess that there were many in the alienage who tried to convince him to change his name after what happened with the slavers? Myself among them. He said that it was the name his mother gave him, and he would keep it no matter what."

Loghain nodded, but merely continued to dole out the ashes in silence. After a time the old elf spoke again. His voice burst out as if under torture.

"Why did you do it?" he said, and shook his grey head angrily. "Why did you turn on us? Of all the
shems in the world, you were the one we counted most as friend. What did we do to deserve our fate?"

Loghain sighed. "Valendrian. Your people did nothing to deserve it. Why I did it I can't seem to figure, I only know that I did. I'll not waste your time and mine by asking forgiveness for the unforgivable."

Valendrian shuffled uncertainly for a time. "There was...a mage, with the slavers. There were many, but this one was their leader. This one held the documents you signed granting him his right to take us. I saw him using blood magic."

"There is some speculation that I may have been enthralled, to some degree. But I was not completely out of my own head, Valendrian: There is no excuse to be had there. And even if no one held any diabolical influences over me at all...I could still see myself committing that terrible crime. If the need was great enough. If it seemed there was no other recourse."

"How? How could you of all people ever do such a dreadful thing? Freedom is the very ideal you fought so hard for, isn't it? Or was only your freedom important? Were we just tools in your rebellion?"

"We were all the tools of Fereldan freedom," Loghain answered. "Any one, or dozen, or hundred of us was expendable, to me. I made myself cold, Valendrian, long before ever I picked up a sword in the name of my King. When you view people as resources rather than as friends, it doesn't hurt you so badly when you lose them."

"The nation stands upon the brink of war," the old Hahren said quietly. "If you needed gold more than you needed laborers, would you do it again now?"

"I don't know. I'm not...the man I was then."

"In my experience, people don't change that much."

"I didn't change much, I just changed enough. The Warden knocked most of the pride out of me. Maybe that was something that ought to have happened years before, or maybe it was the worst thing that ever happened. Either way, I can't...hide anymore. I can't put on my armor and pretend that's all there is to me. I can't act like I just don't give a damn."
He shook his head. "But I don't know. If things were grim...if I saw no other way...I probably could still sign some devil's contracts. But what I don't understand is why I did. I needed soldiers much more than I needed gold. Why did I not think to create another company like the Night Elves? There was sickness in the alienage but it was nothing like this. Fresh air away from the filth and closeness of the city might have cured a lot of it. Of course...perhaps none of you would have fought for me."

"We would have fought. We would have been glad of the chance to defend our homes against the darkspawn, and glad of the chance to prove ourselves for our Regent and Queen. That young man who just left us is a stellar warrior, skilled both with bow and with blades. Most of the others had never held a weapon, but they would have seized upon the chance regardless."

"Howe, of course, insisted that you were rioting and could not be controlled."

Valendrian snorted derisively. "There is always unrest and discontent in the alienage, Loghain, you know that. But the sum total of our 'revolt' was for two of our young men -- Loghain, and his cousin Soris, as a matter of fact -- to enter the Arl's estate in search of the young women that Vaughan kidnapped. In the process of rescuing the ladies, who included their cousin Shianni and the young men's brides-to-be, they killed a good many guards and two of Vaughan's noble drinking partners. Vaughan himself escaped, which is the only part of the entire ordeal I regret. The bastards had killed one of the poor girls before ever Loghain reached them. Nola, a shy, pious child. Shianni was raped and beaten."

"When they returned to the alienage Loghain's father and I managed to convince the lad it was best if he leave Denerim for a time, and we smuggled him out. He was always very courageous and outspoken, we knew that when the guards came he would stand up and take credit for what he'd done, and then he would be lost to us forever. Soris, on the other hand, was a timid young man, and Cyrion thought he would be able to hide him and keep him safe. We could not bear the thought of sending two of our young men away into uncertainty. We were fools, because the Arl's men came and uncovered Soris' hiding place easily enough, and that was the last we saw of him until the Warden found and set him free a year later. When Vaughan couldn't find Loghain he was incensed, but he assuaged his feelings by stringing up a poor broken-legged beggar he found, and I think in the intervening years he has managed to convince himself that was the man who killed his friends. He doesn't even recognize Loghain when he comes to the alienage these days, or any of the women. Of course, I suppose its easy for such as he not to see us."

"Howe came to Denerim before even you had returned from Ostagar, and I believe his sole intention was to secure the Arling for himself. Vaughan disappeared, Howe claimed we had killed him, and sent in soldiers to 'restore peace.' I'm not entirely certain how killing the residents of a children's orphanage restores harmony or brings justice, but that is only the most horrible of the things they did. The plague, I think, was a direct result of the dead who were left to rot in the streets and buildings for days before anyone came to burn the bodies, and perhaps of a suspiciously-timed outbreak of rabies amongst the dogs, and when the slavers came to 'help' I completely lost all hope for the elves of Denerim."
Loghain was silent for a long time, until he said, "I was a fool. My head was clouded with paranoia and fear."

"If it was clouded by more than that, milord…then I for one am glad to leave the past behind us."

Valendrian stayed by him while he finished handing out ashes to the sick elves. He was left with a leather pouch not noticeably depleted and more than a thousand healthy and exceedingly grateful elves.

"There is one more sick elf," Valendrian said gently. "The young stranger we found whose illness caused this outbreak. Can you cure him, as well? I cannot understand him when he speaks, but I am sure he holds no blame for what happened here. He was obviously carried here inside the crate we found broken open around him, left as so much refuse by those who wished to kill us all."

"Take me to him."

"He is in my house. It is right over here." Valendrian led him to the nearby shack and let him inside. A young blond man lay on a rough straw pallet in the back of the single room, clearly very near death and at least semi-delirious. He rolled his eyes at Loghain as they approached and babbled incoherently in Orlesian.

"Easy, now…" Loghain said, and sprinkled a dose of ashes on the young man's face. A hacking, blood-spattering cough transformed midway into a gasp of surprise and the young man's sapphirine eyes blinked several times before opening with clarity in their depths. His burst of Orlesian gratitude was so fast and continuous that it might as well have been incoherent for all the sense Loghain could make of it. He did hear "Merci messere!" more than a few times, but he didn't know if it was directed at him or the Maker, whom the Orleans often addressed that way.

"Whoa, slow down there, Chatterly," he said. He spoke slowly himself, uncertain whether the man could even understand the King's tongue. "What is your name and from where do you come?"

The man watched his lips with the attentiveness of a deaf man, and seemed to understand at least the gist of his words, but evidently he was too excited to be alive and well to slow his own speech. Loghain thought he caught something that sounded like "Sabine" and "Tremmes" amidst the tangle of phrases.
"Well Sabine of Tremmes, if that is what you said, I don't know if you have anything to say that we haven't already figured out about this mess, but I think it best if you come along with me to the Palace and tell your story to the translators there. I don't know what we can do, if anything, about getting you home, but perhaps that's a place to which you don't even wish to return. I expect you're hungry. We'll feed you up proper. Valendrian, I'll see to it that the quarantine is lifted and the street cleaned and refuse carted away and burned properly. Do your people require anything else? I just got back to the city and I'm not certain what aid is available, but I'll see to it that whatever can be done is."

"We…could use some grain, if there is any surplus," the Hahren said, a bit shyly. "We haven't had fresh supplies of food since the alienage was locked down, and people are running out. No one has had work with which to earn any, and they'll need a decent feeding before they'll have the strength to work now."

Loghain nodded. "Food will be sent. There are an awful lot of elves here these days. Where are you housing them all?"

"Wherever there is room to spare. I have four families sharing my own quarters, in addition to Sabine."

"I'll see if something can't be done about making the living conditions less cramped. I understand why they would not want to be quartered outside the alienage, but perhaps a spot could be found at least temporarily where the overflow can stay and be sheltered from the elements and protected from the humans."

"That…would be welcome, certainly. Thank you."

"Come on then, Chatterly," Loghain said, and Sabine followed him out of the Hahren's tiny house with all the wide-eyed eagerness of a puppy. Loghain collected his armor from beneath the vhenadahl and gave himself a warding sprinkle of ashes, just to be sure. He wasn't going to save the alienage only to bring this illness to the palace.

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For hours Champion stood outside the great barred gate and barked, snarled, and growled imprecations at the bone-headed human who denied her entrance. If she were but full-grown he would not be so foolish; his rusty iron chainmail would not stand as sufficient protection from her teeth once they were powered by adult mabari jaw muscles. She had to get inside the walled-off place where her master had gone, even though he had commanded her to stay out. Her place was to
be at his side through any danger, and danger lurked within. She smelled sickness and despair in there.

Tired and thirsty, she laid off barking for a time and simply whined plaintively. "Look, I know you want in, but you ought to know well's I do that you just don't go against Loghain Mac Tir's express orders," the guard said. "Sure, maybe he wouldn't take it out on you if I let you in, but think of what he'd do to me! I've got a wife and four little ones depending on me, I can't throw my life away like that."

Champion lay down in the street, covered her face with her front paws, and howled mutedly.

"Here, now, don't carry on so. The next watch will be coming on soon. When I'm relieved I'll get you a nice hambone and a bowl of clean water. I'm sure your master will be just fine and he'll be out before nightfall."

He was as good as his word. Champion accepted the food and water with a bitter sort of resignation and gnawed aggressively at the bone, sawing through to the marrow within. It helped a little, but she remained angry and depressed. The guards were only being properly submissive to an Alpha human, it wasn't really their fault she was on the wrong side of the wall. She heaved a great sigh and rested her head on one paw to wait, listless and dejected.

It was nearly evening before the gate shook beneath the blow of a heavy fist. "Open up, damn you," the master's voice bellowed out quite clearly from behind it. The guardsman that had replaced the other nearly fell over himself to obey as swiftly as possible. Champion rose to her feet, tail a-wag. The door swung open and the master ducked out from under the rising portcullis before it was fairly off the ground and the guard made as if to lower it again just as quickly. "Don't close it. The alienage is no longer under quarantine, by my orders."

"Er…yes, Ser," the guard said, a bit doubtfully.

Champion ran to meet her master and crouched. She knew it was a crime to Jump Up On, but her happiness needed outlet, so she gave vent to a high leap in the air and spun around three times quickly and leaped again. She might have continued in that manner for some time if a shocking event hadn't squashed her enthusiasm.

With a gibber of Orlesian that encompassed the phrase "belle chien," a small, skinny human-like being darted out from behind the master and threw itself upon her. She sat back on her haunches, affronted and bemused, too astonished by the liberty even to growl.
"Chatterly, it's not particularly wise to leap out at a strange dog like that," the Master said, "even if that dog is not a mabari war hound. Fair warning."

Champion extricated herself from the small man's embrace with some difficulty and attempted to regain her composure. She knew elves, she didn't particularly mind them, and this one was apparently now an attachment of her master much as the magic-smelling female was an attachment of her master's mate. But if this one flung himself at her again she would take exception to it with her teeth. He clearly needed to learn his proper place. The Master and his woman were at the top of this pack, Champion below them, and all others well below her.

Loghain patted Champion's head and gave her an ear-scratch of reassurance, then led her and Sabine through the market district to the palace. The whole way, Sabine gabbled in rapid-fire Orlesian, exclaiming excitedly over everything from the stalls in the bazaar to the Chantry and the estates of the nobles, the children playing tag or running errands in the streets, the dogs dogs dogs everywhere. He seemed remarkably impressed with Denerim, which made it a bit hard to credit that he was native Orlesian. They were always so denigrating of all things Fereldan, so very primitive and dour compared to their love of luxury and frippery. Loghain knew nothing of Tremmes other than the name, but perhaps it wasn't much of a city. Or maybe this elf was some sort of innocent, in the good old Fereldan sense of being not quite all right between the ears, and was excited by everything from fireworks exploding to corn growing.

That would certainly explain some things about him.

In any event, the boy was thin as a rake and eyed the food stalls with clear covetousness, so Loghain detoured to the servant's entrance of the palace and dropped him off in the kitchens to be fed before being questioned by the translators. Loghain had things to attend to in the meantime anyway, and he might as well get them taken care of now as later. It was not easy to get Sabine to understand that he needed to stay and eat.

"Stay here, I'll be back," he repeated several times in the face of the young man's growing consternation. "The kitchen staff will feed you. You know, food. Erm…mangiare. Wait -- that's Tevinter, isn't it?"

But Sabine's face lit up like an oil lamp and he commenced a rapid-fire dialogue in that language. Loghain groaned and threw up his hands in defeat. Saddled with a simple-minded Orlesian who spoke every language except Common? Unbelievable. "Just…stay here and eat. I'll be back later."

He made his way through the dark stone corridors towards the throne room. When he reached the area near the living quarters he chanced upon a young lady in fine dress who appeared startled out
She rose, a pretty blush suffusing her pale cheeks. "You are a mage?" Loghain asked, and the girl started guiltily like someone caught doing something nasty and shameful. "Never fear, child -- you're safe from templars under this roof, I guarantee it. What is your name?"

She tipped a slighter curtsey. "Bethany Hawke, milord," she mumbled.

"Bethany Hawke? I know someone who was looking forward to seeing your family again. Have you had the chance to meet with the dwarf yet?"

"The… dwarf?" Bethany said doubtfully, then her face cleared and she smiled. "Varric?"

"That's the one."

"He did not come to the palace, milord. He is in town, though?"

"Last I saw him he was at a tavern down the docks."

She laughed lightly. "He's probably still there, then. Pubs are his natural habitat." She curtseyed again. "Thank you for this news, milord. I shall tell my sister. She will be happy to know Varric is here."
He nodded a good day to her and moved on. So that was one of the Hawke girls. Pretty creature, with nice manners to boot. If it hadn't been for her magic she would have undoubtedly been married to some wealthy man by this time, perhaps even a lord. He'd heard that the Hawkes had some claim to noble title through their mother's line, even if that nobility was foreign. Well, perhaps one day Ferelden would be a place at last where mages could be free to lead normal, healthy lives like regular folks. They were dangerous, yes, but any more so than he? He doubted that. He'd killed enough mages in his time, abominations too, and even demons had no great power to frighten him. Even before Elilia passed on to him a few templar secrets he had developed a certain disdain for the platoons of well-armored Chantry soldiers who claimed it was such a tremendous hardship to hunt down maleficarum, who claimed that whole companies had been wiped out by a single abomination. Either they were spreading wild tales to keep people fearful and beholden to them, or they were laughably inept.

Or both.

He entered the throne room and was surprised to see a full court, though it appeared in recess. The King and Queen sat on their thrones in an attitude of waiting, nobles and courtiers lounged in impatient manner in the gallery, guards and attendants stood at full attention. Elilia started up from the edge of the dais where she sat when she saw him.

"Loghain, you rat bastard," she growled out, and ran across the long floor to fly at him in an unseemly public display of relief and affection. She pulled away a bit and looked at him curiously. "You used…?"

"I did."

"The elves?"

"They are well."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

He stepped out of her embrace and addressed the King and Queen. "Your Majesties, the alienage has been saved, but there is much work to be done there. The elves need food, and the streets must be thoroughly cleansed and the garbage burned. They need more housing, for the tight quarters that
exist there now simply breeds disease. And the bodies of the dead must be properly burned. I did not see any, however, and it is my understanding that the disease kills very slowly, so perhaps there are but few."

Arl Vaughan stepped forward. "I will not waste this arling's hard-earned taxes taking care of a bunch of lazy, worthless elves."

Fast as lightning Loghain closed the distance between them, grabbed Vaughan by his hair, and yanked his head back so that they were staring straight into each other's eyes as he loomed over the smaller man. For a long time he said nothing, very ominously, his eyes flashing cold fury, and Vaughan was reminded of the demonstration of the harbor statues and gulped his terror. Finally Loghain spoke.

"I don't require much of an excuse to end you, you miserable bastard." He gave the man a bit of a shake, like a naughty puppy, to emphasize his words.

"You are no noble of this court," Vaughan said, with a tinny note of fear in his bravado. "I could have you killed right now for this, and if you raise a hand to me you'll swing by nightfall."

"Shut your mouth, you little puke," Loghain said, with another, harder shake. "If I had power in this court you'd do worse than swing. I would take a long sharp stake, grease it up nice and slippery, and I'd shove it up your ass so the point came out your mouth, and then I'd set that stake in a posthole inside the alienage and let the elves point and jeer at you. Or perhaps strip you naked and throw you in a pit with a couple of dozen elven women armed with flails and maces, and let them work their own justice upon you. That's what you deserve, you fucking rapist."

Champion growled low and throbbingly at the man her master held by the scruff, ready to attack upon command. The man smelled bad, of lies and vices, and she would welcome an opportunity to rend him to pieces.

"You...have no right...to address me so impudently," Vaughan squeaked out, cringing and shrinking into his clothes. "Your Majesties, I demand satisfaction!"

"Satisfaction?" Alistair said, interestedly. "Are you calling for a duel, then? Because I really don't think you want to do that, Vaughan, now do you?"

"Be a good lad and step back into line, Vaughan," Anora said. She sounded a trifle bored and out of
sorts. "The alienage will be cleaned, and the arling of Denerim will not pay for it -- you will, out of your own private funds. I hardly think it will break you, and it's high time you offered up an act of proper charity towards your elven population, isn't it? The Grand Cleric will be so pleased with you, she will undoubtedly offer your name to the Maker in special prayer. The Crown will send the needed foodstuffs, so you needn't worry your pointy little head about that."

"The issue of housing the elves is a weighty one," Alistair said. "That will require some thought. There is the warehouse back of the alienage, but I know that has some...unpleasant connections with the Denerim elves. The Marchers might not mind, though."

Loghain released Vaughan at last and the man fell back at once, ruffled, sputtering, straightening his doublet and attempting to regain some lost face. "Never in all my life have I been so insulted --"

"Get used to it, then," Loghain broke in. "It's high time somebody called a spade a spade with you, and I can assure you, My Lord, I will be watching you very closely from this point forward. If I get wind that you've resumed your habits with regard to the young ladies of the alienage I assure you, the court may punish me for your death as they see fit. I will consider it a worthy end."

Tense silence held for a goodly moment after that, and then Anora changed the subject briskly. "Father, I would like to introduce you to someone. Champion Hawke; my father, Loghain Mac Tir. Father; Champion Kireani Hawke, late of Kirkwall, returned now to this, her homeland."

A white-haired woman who stood at attention behind the thrones stepped forward and bowed in the manner of a man, appropriate enough as she was wearing armor of odd, foreign design. She was much plainer of feature than Bethany, whom he saw had entered the throne room through a side entrance to stand beside her sister, but there was something of a resemblance about the mouth and chin. "My Lord," she said.

"Champion Hawke," he said, with a return of the bow. "I have heard much of you through your friend Varric."

"Bethany told me you'd seen him. I look forward to catching up with him." She made a proper introduction of her sister and the other companions who stood near her, some of them wearing the uniform of the Royal Guard. "This is Ser Aveline and her husband Ser Donnic, now of the Queen's retinue, and this is Ser Fenris, now guard to the King. And this is my companion, Merrill, formerly of the Dalish."

The elf, rather a tall and exceedingly slender specimen with an astonishingly long, fragile-looking
neck and huge spring green eyes, stepped forward and cocked her head to one side as she considered him.

"Well, he's got a nice, elfy face, doesn't he?" she said after a time. "It's like someone took a Fereldan nose and chin and slapped them on a Dalish head. I thought so when I saw the statue, but it was a bit hard to tell with it being all white and stoney and huge."

"Oh, Kitten...human lords don't generally care to be told they look elfy," a dark-haired woman wearing what appeared to be a white corset with an attached loincloth and essentially nothing more than that said, with a shake of her bandanna-covered head. Hawke introduced her next, deliberately ignoring both her elven friend's inappropriate comment or the sudden lack of blood in Loghain's face upon hearing it. Never in his adult life had anyone accused him of looking "elfy." Someone Up Above was fucking with him, there was no question about it.

"And this is Captain Isabela, who now holds the speed record for the Denerim-to-Cumberland oversea."

The seafarer stepped forward, with a cocky strut in her over-exposed hips. She looked him up and down the way a woman at market might eye a ham haunch or a side of beef. "Not bad at all," she said. She nodded at Elilia. "You've got pretty good taste, even if he is a bit long in the tooth. Care for a nice group rumble? He looks like he could handle us both with ease." Anora put a hand over her eyes in clear despair.

"I...thanks, but...I'm a one-at-a-time girl," Elilia said uncomfortably.

Isabela chuckled. "That's disappointing. When I discovered I'd had sex with someone immortalized in a thousand foot statue I was walking around close to that high myself. I was hoping to be able to drink for life on the story of having done both."

Loghain turned sharp eyes on his intended, and she shrugged back at him. "It's...I'll tell you later," Elilia said.

"I apologize for my friend," Champion Hawke said, and shoved Isabela back behind the glowering Ser Aveline. "We shouldn't let her out of her kennel but she does look so mournful in there at times, we forget she's not housebroken."

From the line of courtiers, Nathaniel Howe cleared his throat and stepped forward. "While
everyone was rushed and worried about the situation in the alienage it did not seem appropriate to deliver this, but now that things have been settled perhaps this is the proper time. Elilia, I bring a message we received a little under a month ago, from the First Warden at Weisshaupt. I thought it might make you laugh to read it."

He handed her a small scroll bound in a blue ribbon, the blue wax seal broken. She unrolled the parchment and read a few lines, then laughed and began to read aloud.

"Wardens of Ferelden:"

“Word has come to my ears of the misconduct of your Warden-Commander. I have tolerated much unusual and outright belligerent behavior from this quarter for too long. Warden Commander Elilia Cousland is hereby relieved of command and ordered to report to me at Weisshaupt Fortress immediately for disciplinary measures. I am sending my own Second, Senior Warden Guillemot du Plesse to assume command and restore order."

She tore up the parchment and tossed the pieces into the air. "I guess this was sent out before I sent my letter of resignation, if he ever received it," she said. "Guillemot du Plesse. Anyone care to take wagers on whether or not that's an Orlesian name? Of course he's a good Warden, all non-interferency and such, but I wonder just how...neutral the Wardens really are in this affair. Orlais has a lot of power and a lot of gold and the Chantry in their back pocket. Maybe they've got the Wardens, too. The First Warden has exerted a lot of influence in the rule of the Anderfels, we're told, and the Anders are such a devout people, after all."

"This is why it was a stupid-ass move to give the arling of Amaranthine to the Wardens," Loghain growled.

"What do we do about this Orlesian Warden?" Alistair asked. "Any suggestions?"

Nathaniel grunted a sardonic laugh. "I say when he arrives we send him right back home to the First Warden. In a box, if need be."

"I like the way you think, lad," Loghain said.

"The Wardens of Ferelden were on their own almost utterly during the Blight," Nathaniel continued. "Your Majesty knows that better than I. And even after, as Elilia made to rebuild the order, she was given little assistance other than a handful of Orleans and a tight-fisted treasurer,
and her only other proper Fereldan Warden on active duty was reassigned to bloody Orlais. Elilia and I spoke of this often through the years, but I think perhaps it's time the Fereldan Wardens declared their independence from the greater Order. Even if they are neutral in this current conflict they've shown they care not about the protection of our people." He turned to look at Elilia and gave her a slightly cheeky wink. "Oghren is behind us on this, as are Sigrun and Velanna and the other Senior Wardens. Even Mistress Woolsey agrees that Ferelden has resources enough, at the present time, to break off, and she's frustrated enough by the First Warden's many barricades to even her work that she supports the idea of being free of him. With the mages breaking free of the Circles, and templars breaking free of the Chantry to hunt or to help them, who is going to be surprised at Wardens cutting ties with their foreign powers?"

"We have enough...Joining potion...in storage to keep our Order strong for a thousand years," Elilia said. "I'm certainly all for this, even if I'm not a Warden anymore."

"This is a very interesting discussion but one I think is best saved for the upcoming Landsmeet," Anora said. "Can you return to us at that time, Warden Nathaniel? I would like very much for you to address them yourself, particularly as you are acting Warden Commander and command the arling's vote."

Nathaniel bowed deeply. "I will be there, Your Majesty, but I must return to Amaranthine as soon as possible. I left good men in charge of the situation there, and the Fighting Ferelden's victory over the Orlesian fleet raised the city's spirits considerably, but fears there are still very high and chaos has been the order of the day."

Loghain grunted. "The dwarf said you've got a sick elf you've been treating with the Chantry's medicine," he said. "Speak to me before you leave and I'll give you a dose of the stuff I used to cure the elves of Denerim. Handle it carefully, and wear gloves. Pre-contact affects efficacy."

"That would be wonderful. I was under the impression there was no cure for this disease."

"There is now, but no telling exactly how much quantity is available, and more cannot be made. Be careful with it."

Elilia whispered to him. "There's some left over?"

"We'll talk later," he muttered back. "About that and other things. You bet your sweet little ass we will."
"Elder, why did you never tell any of us that you were with the army during the rebellion?"

Valendrian sighed. "I went from a latrine-digger to a soldier without ever quite knowing exactly how it came to pass. And then I went from soldier to common citizen of this alienage also without any easy transitional period. It was hard for me to understand how it happened, I thought it might well be impossible for anyone else."

"But you served. You were a hero of the rebellion, one of Loghain's Night Elves -- a sergeant! How many elves ever actually received any sort of rank before, or since? All the tales we heard about the glories of the humans who fought, when we could have been hearing tales of the glory of the elves!"

Valendrian shook his head sadly. "War is not glorious, child, and any human who tells you otherwise is either recruiting or has not seen much of it himself. The best that can be said of it is that it is, at times, an unfortunate necessity. The glory comes not from the war but from the warrior, who serves as faithfully as he can, performs his duty to the best of his ability, and then tries his hardest to put the pieces of his life back together in the aftermath, if he is so lucky as to survive. It is…difficult to speak of one's own experiences with it. Did your mother ever speak of her service?"

"No, but she was…"

"She was lost, of course, when you were still quite young, I know."

"She was murdered, you mean," Loghain said, and his handsome face darkened dangerously.

Valendrian shook his head sadly but did not argue the terminology. "Do not let anger poison your soul, child. It is the worst thing you can do for the world, to live with a heart full of hate and fear. It nearly destroyed your namesake, and Ferelden along with him."

Loghain grimaced. "I…I try not to hate, Hahren, I truly do. It is…difficult."

"I know, my child. But for your sake, your daughter's sake, and the sake of all elves, you must try. The only way we can ever hope to change our stars is by changing the perceptions of those who
"But how do we do that? Haven't we been trying for a thousand years? It was an elf that killed the Archdemon Zazikel, it was an elf who stood by Andraste and aided her in freeing the slaves of Tevinter, it was elves who kept Maric's army from being utterly destroyed in the early days of his rebellion. How much more must we do before they believe we are worth just as much as they?"

"It is not how much, Loghain, but how many. When all elves, rather than just a few, can rise above their oppression to show the strength and courage they have in their hearts, then the world will change. You may feel your contribution to that effort is but a drop in the ocean, but your fortitude will inspire others to follow the example you set. You are a born leader, Loghain, and our people look to you for courage in dark times. Shine a light for them."

"I…think I understand, Hahren. But…I am afraid."

"Of course you are, my child. Only a fool would not be, and you are many things, but never a fool." The old man smiled, a bit wolfishly. "You are oddly like your namesake, you know, as I remember him from the days of the rebellion. Headstrong and hard-driving. We had secret nicknames for him and His Majesty King Maric, you know -- Thunder and Lightning. Maric we called Thunder, Loghain was Lightning."

"Why? Loghain strikes me as the more…thunderous…of the two."

"Ah, but my child, thunder is but a noise. Lightning does the work."

*****

"I have spoken with the elf," the translator said. "It was…difficult. He speaks very quickly, he will not slow down. He seems oddly…simple-minded."

"Oddly?"

"Well, he is quite intelligent and rather well-educated, it seems, just very…childlike in his thinking. And it was quite difficult to get him to focus under questioning. He wanted to speak of everything and anything."
"That sounds about right. What could he tell you of any pertinence?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. He was living in the alienage of Tremmes, manservant to a wealthy merchant of the city, when the disease struck and the alienage was quarantined. Some time ago, he seems a bit vague on when exactly, Men in plague masks came and took him and another elf he knew slightly -- Marsellan, he says his name was. 'These will do, let's get out of here,' is all he can remember hearing them say. They were boarded up in wooden boxes and carried a good, bumpy distance, and he says he believes that they were loaded on a ship because the world began to rock and sway and stayed that way for a long while. He was fed only every now and then, bits of potato or the like and an occasional bowl of tepid water shoved through a narrow slot that was kept covered on the side of the box. It was very unpleasant and he was very sick, and Marsellan did not appear to have been loaded onto the same ship so he had no one to talk to. Then things became very vague indeed for him as his illness worsened, and he remembers very little before opening his eyes today and breathing deeply again."

"Well, I didn't really expect any more than that. Did he happen to mention how he came to speak both Orlesian and Tevinter?"

"He touched upon it. I gathered he was a native Orlesian who was... 'taken into the service' of a Tevinter magister. He spent some years in Minrathous before his master brought him along on a holiday in Tremmes, thinking his command of the native tongue would be of use to him. He escaped, and hid amongst the elves of the alienage. He did not care to speak to any greater depth on the subject. It does seem that his experiences in Tevinter have disposed him quite favorably toward life in Ferelden. He mentioned in passing that while elves may not be equals, they are at least not typically treated as pretty pets, which experience seems to have carried over into his time in service of Orlesians."

"I am aware of how the Orlesians view elves, yes."

"He also spoke -- at great length -- of his gratitude towards you. He says that the Maker told him that he must serve you to the end of his days in exchange for the gift of his life."

"Just what I needed. Well, if you're finished with him, tell Sabine he can go back to the kitchens for more feeding if he's hungry again."

The translator looked puzzled. "Sabine? That was not the name he gave me."
"Well, he was awfully hard to understand. What is his name, then?"

"He said that it was…Chatterly."

Loghain stared at the nonplussed translator for a moment, then burst out laughing.

*****

King Alistair walked into the empty throne room to find Ser Aveline sitting dejectedly on the end of the dais with her chin propped on the heel of her hand.

"Something bothering you, Ser Aveline?" he asked.

Startled, she fairly leapt to her feet. "Your Highness! My apologies, I am off-duty and…"

"Didn't quite feel up for the long walk to your quarters? Something has you down, it's easy to see. What is it?"

She gestured helplessly. "It's…nothing, Your Majesty. It's just…seeing him again, after all these years… In some ways I'm surprised I don't feel worse, actually. Perhaps it was the shock of the statue, and the anger I felt at the reaction of men who weren't even there that horrible night… In any event, it's brought back a lot of memories I would have preferred remain dormant."

"Memories of Ostagar? Believe you me, I experienced something similar myself, seeing him again. I was in the tower that night, fighting through the darkspawn that broke up through the Deep Roads, trying to make it to the signal in time -- at which I fear I failed spectacularly, though I'm not sure whether that made any difference to the way things worked out."

"I was in the vanguard, Your Majesty, and as far as I could tell…the issue was less that the signal was late than that the charge was bloody early. Even if you'd lit the thing on time and Loghain had charged, I don't know if he would have been on time to change the way it all transpired."

"What do you mean?"
She looked uncomfortable. "I was just a lieutenant, certainly not involved in the planning…but it's hard for me to imagine that our strategy that night was a single volley of arrows, release the hounds, and then charge. It just…didn't make sense. There was ample time for our archers to do more damage to the vanguard of the horde, even if the mages didn't have time to set their arrows alight. Flaming arrows are marvelously dramatic, I suppose, but they're really more effective against wooden structures like siege engines and ships anyway. I was…a bit stunned, actually, when the order to charge came so quickly. I remember thinking -- " She blushed and closed her mouth tightly.

"By all means, speak your mind," Alistair prompted.

"Well, you see Your Majesty, I remember thinking that His Majesty King Cailan was in a dreadful rush to get out in front of Loghain, to strike down the horde before the flanking charge could be made. To take all the glory for himself. His Majesty seemed very keen on the idea of glory. He didn't even call up but half the bannorn, because he didn't seem to want to share credit for the victory with his uncles. It seemed to me at the time that he didn't want Loghain there, either, calling the strategies and horning in on his great war against evil. He seemed to me…very like a child playing with a line of tin soldiers, and not wanting to share them with the other lads at school."

Alistair frowned deeply, then sighed and shook his head. "I tried to make myself believe otherwise for a very long time afterward, but I had much the same thoughts myself. Since Cailan was so keen on the Wardens I perhaps had a better vantage point from which to view the lead-up to the battle. He and Loghain got into some knock-down drag-out fights over strategy, among other things. I remember Loghain yelling, screaming, and finally actually almost cajoling Cailan into leading the flanking charge instead of commanding the vanguard. 'Imagine the glory of coming to the rescue, Cailan -- inspiring the men in the main army to greater valor, and taking the darkspawn completely by surprise.' Cailan wouldn't hear of it. He would stand at the vanguard, and he would stand by the Grey Wardens. Loghain didn't want them anywhere near the vanguard, and in that he was right even if he didn't know why. It was…all right, I'll admit it. It was a child playing soldier. Except the consequences were much, much bigger than scraped elbows and skinned knees. Was he at least of any use up there in the front of the line?"

Aveline's green eyes widened and she pressed her lips together momentarily before at last she relented to speak. "He was…formidable, Your Majesty, but not entirely in a good way. It was awfully tight quarters for an armored knight wielding a two-handed sword, and he did not seem particularly…practiced at controlling his swings. I think more than a few of our men took injury from his backswing, and I saw for myself that Warden-Commander Duncan was one of them."

Alistair's eyes fairly popped. "Wh-what?"
She nodded. "It's true, Your Highness. He and King Cailan were fighting very closely, almost back-to-back. Duncan didn't seem to want to let him get too far away, to be honest. I believe he was trying to protect him. But Cailan gave a wild swing, his blade went back almost as high again as he'd swung it, and it sliced right across Warden Duncan's stomach, a dreadful wound. It was while Duncan was staggered from it that the ogre charged. If he hadn't been wounded, I don't think Duncan would have let that thing get a hand on King Cailan. It was terrible, Your Majesty. Duncan slew the beast after, but it was too late for His Majesty, and Duncan had not the strength to battle on after that, I think. It was only at about that time we saw that the signal had been lit. The lack of a responding charge was...disheartening, but I can't honestly say that we weren't already feeling defeated."

"Did Cailan charge too soon?" Alistair pondered. "Did he do it deliberately? I should certainly hate to think so, but...it sounds so very like the King I saw at Ostagar before the battle. And to learn that he was ultimately directly responsible for causing Duncan's death... Maker's breath, so much of the blame I've leveled at Loghain for all this time may not truly rest with him at all."

"Perhaps it is the same for me as well, Your Majesty."

*****

"You require a lady's maid, of course," Anora said, laying out her plans for Elilia's life quite briskly. "Champion Hawke brought with her from Kirkwall quite a nice young woman, an elf named Orana -- very quiet and proper and quite accomplished -- who needed work. I thought she would do well for you, but it happens she has a remarkable facility with children. Oh, very well, I shall admit it, she has a remarkable facility with Princess Anora, and I find I cannot spare her. She is the only nursemaid I have ever found who is able to make the child play quietly and go to bed on time! So I shall have to keep making inquiries. Sooner or later I shall find someone suitable.

"Your brother Teyrn Fergus has of course been invited to the annual Great Boar Hunt that takes place prior to Satinalia. Have you ever participated? It's rather...dicey hunting, to say the least, it always seemed to me that the same thing could be accomplished with much less stress and danger to men and horses if they'd just shoot the bloody things full of arrows instead of riding up on them and poking them with sticks, but men are men, and boars are rather tough animals, and of course they are so very dangerous in the spring if their numbers are not kept down, and the meat provides food for many who might not otherwise eat so well at Satinalia. Father will grumble and curse when he learns we are having it this of all years, but I am counting on you to convince him to participate. The nobles of Ferelden are simply going to have to get used to seeing Loghain Mac Tir among their number once more.

"The Landsmeet will be held after Satinalia, of course, and your appointment to the teyrnir of Gwaren will be brought for a vote at that time. I do not expect much, if any, resistance. Your cachet in this nation is just too high for the dissenters to risk speaking openly if they object. At
worst I expect a few abstentions, mostly from those who will fear your placement puts the Crown in too advantageous a position. We will not announce your engagement until your title is officially ratified. We will not give the objectors ammunition with which to fire until it is too late for them to do so honorably.

"I require your cooperation in that, of course. An embrace in the public eye is one thing," Anora said, affixing Elilia with a severe glare, "but you should take pains that no one sees anything more…romantic than that. I will speak to your brother about the engagement when he arrives for the Hunt, of course, but all the arrangements for the wedding have already been made. I intend for the ceremony to take place on First Day, to tie in with the new year's celebrations. The fireworks over the harbor that night will make everything quite splendid, although I was rather worried about them. I asked King Bhelen if the sentinel statues would consider them an attack, and he grunted and said it would be best to deactivate the enchantments that night, just in case. Thankfully it is easily enough done. Their eyes are rather…bright…in any event, so cutting off the magic will make the display easier to see. We shall simply have the Fighting Ferelden near at hand, and keep a strong guard presence on the docks, to protect us from any attempted attacks.

"Now, that is all I really had for you at the moment. If you would be so kind as to collect my father and bring him to meet with me in the Little Audience Chamber at six o' the clock tomorrow morning, I shall have some things then to show you both."

*****

"So this is the fabled cure for Bloody Lung?" Nathaniel asked. He peered into the little paper packet doubtfully. "It...just looks like dust, actually."

"It is dust, so whatever you do, don't sneeze. It works, and that's all that matters."

"And...all I have to do is sprinkle it in the elf's face?"

"That's all you have to do. But remember to wear gloves. They won't work for your patient if you touch them skin to skin."

"Right. Of course." Nathaniel folded up the packet and stowed it carefully in a pocket of his leathers. He started to leave, and then hesitated and came back. "I...was wondering if perhaps you might help me with something. I was meaning to ask Elilia, but perhaps there's not so much difference in it, and it seems to me somehow that you might rather...get a 'bang' out of it."
"Speak."

"There is a family of surface dwarves who have worked with the Wardens at Vigil's Keep for a good many years now. The Glavonaks. One of them, Dworkin by name, is…I guess you would call him an inventor. He invented a new exploding powder based loosely upon the Qunari black powder. But he made the mistake of touting his invention too widely, as 'the equal to gaatlok.' The substance is not really the same, but you can imagine that the Qunari took exception to this. They sent a Death Squad after him at the Keep, and even though we put it down without serious casualties and there haven't been any attempts since, Dworkin is still paranoid -- and his family, as well. They don't wish to stay at the Keep any longer, and I thought that Dworkin's inventions might help fortify the army. Dworkin's brother, Voldrick, is a master stonemason who could make short work of any such projects here in the city, and Dworkin and his cousin Tammerin are excellent engineers. If you could take them on I know they could be of great service to you, and they would appreciate your protection very much."

"Ha. Well, I've got simple-minded elves and storytelling dwarves and every other sort of strange hangers-on you can imagine. A few more won't make much difference, I suppose, particularly those of the useful sort."

Nathaniel bowed. "I will tell them. They are currently bivouacked in one of the small…er...'inns' by the docks."

"Have them come to the palace, then. Easier to feel safe in a stone fortress than a wooden shack, I expect. I'm sure Their Majesties can be persuaded to find them room."

*****

Elilia walked into the inner courtyard with no particular destination in mind, simply enjoying some of the last of the decent weather before the storm hit -- figuratively and literally, for the sky grew more and more winter like with each passing day, temperatures were dropping, the rain that fell was beginning to ice, even as her life prepared to take her down a new path she had never expected to walk and still wasn't entirely certain she was ready for. She saw a short, stocky blond fellow, back-to, and was startled to recognize the outline.

He turned to her, wide and blameless blue eyes as innocent as a newborn babe's. "Hallo."

"Sandal! How nice to see you! Is your father here with you?"
In response Sandal scratched his ass. She hadn't really expected more. For the longest time it had seemed his only word was, "Enchantment!"

"Ah! Hero!" She turned and saw the old dwarven merchant trotting up to greet her. "May I say how wonderful it is to see you again?" he said. "You have been keeping well, I hope?"

"Well enough, Bodahn. How have you been? I thought you left Ferelden long ago, seeking fortune and adventure."

"Well, I did, actually. Spent years in Kirkwall as the manservant of the Champion herself, as a matter of fact. Not particularly adventurous, I suppose, but then I am getting on in years. My boy and I were prepared to go to Orlais, at the invitation of the Empress, when the trouble broke out there, and the Champion had to leave the city in a hurry. I decided Sandal and I were better off staying with her for the time being, and later on I discovered that the Empress had set a bounty on your friend Loghain's head! That didn't sit quite right by me, so I decided I wanted my boy to have nothing to do with such a lady. And it worked out well enough in the end, for now here we are back home in Ferelden, and my boy is Enchanter to the King!"

"Enchantment?" Sandal inquired hopefully.

"Just so."

"I'm glad," Elilia said with a laugh. "Sandal's special talents are something we don't want the Orlesians to get hold of."

Sandal continued to scratch his ass with one hand, and with the other he reached into his pocket and pulled out a bright runestone. He handed it to Elilia. "Boom," he said simply, and wandered away.

*****

"Elilia. Damned, I thought we'd never get a chance to ourselves tonight."

"I may have been avoiding you, just a little bit," Elilia said shyly. "Some things just don't want to be told, I fear."
He held up a hand. "First things first." He drew out the pouch of ashes and deposited it in her hand. She hefted it experimentally.

"Maker's breath, Loghain -- you said you'd used the ashes to cure the alienage!"

"I did."

"But...that's impossible. It doesn't look like you used any at all!"

"I know."

She stared at the pouch for a long moment, and then slowly handed it back to him. "Keep that very safe, Loghain. It seems you've been handed a very special gift, and I don't think it would be wise to abuse it."

He tucked the ashes away again and gave her a look that clearly said, *What, do you think I'm stupid?*

"If we should ever pass through that region again, I think perhaps I would like to pay another visit to the temple on the mountain. I feel like I ought to, I don't know, ask forgiveness or something. For taking so much more than the allotted pinch."

"If you think you need to do that, then we'll look for an opportunity. It's an awfully long way away, though."

"Ha! If I know you, you'll get wind of a village of apostates in the area and you'll just have to go and check it out."

"Well now that you mention it, I did hear a rumor…"

He grinned, grabbed her by the shoulders, and kissed her. "Now...about this Captain Isabela…"
"Oh Maker…look, it's not what you think, it was just…well, she was a superlative fighter, and I wanted to know the secrets to her technique. She said she'd teach me if I beat her at Wicked Grace, and I'm terrible at card games, so we…came to an 'alternative agreement.'"

"That alternative agreement being that the two of you would do something nasty in the captain's cabin."

"Well when you put it that way it sounds very tawdry, but…yes, essentially."

He sighed and shook his head. "Maker's breath, Elilia, you will be the death of me yet, I guarantee it. Is there anything else about your checkered past I need to know about? I mean, my 'ol fella' isn't going to turn black and drop off or anything, is it?"

"Of course not! You dosed me with the ashes, remember?"

"Ah yes, how could I have forgotten."

She laughed and kissed him. "Don't worry. I tried being a little bit…adventurous, perhaps, but it really never was to my taste. Until you came to my bed, that is."

"Don't try buttering me up."

"Are you certain? Because I think that could be rather interesting, really."

He stared at her, and then laughed. "Harlot."

"You love it."

"I do, Maker save me. Just one thing I think we need to make very clear."

"And that is?"
He held up a warning finger. "I sleep with you. I do not sleep with you-and, I do not sleep with other women, and I most assuredly do not sleep with other men. Just you. I don't care if it is the only thing that can save the bloody world, I will. Not. Sleep with. Anyone. But. You."

"All right, it's a deal."

"Good. Now…" He assumed a pained expression. "What exactly was the draw, if I might be so bold as to ask? Was it the tits? I'm afraid I can't compete with that."

She giggled. "It's not a competition…but if you must know, the simple truth is that women know what women want."

"And I don't know what you want?"

"Hmm, well…"

He grinned wolfishly at her, reached down and unlaced her leather breeches. "Let me know if I'm getting warm," he said, and slipped his hand inside and plunged a finger inside of her. She gasped, cackled, and nodded.

"Warm…yes, I suppose so."

"But still not on par with the raider, I suppose? Well, let's see if we can…raise the bar."

With his other hand at the small of her back to steady her, he lifted her bodily off the ground with the hand that pleasured her.

"Oh dear sweet lady Andraste…yes yes, you're strong, now…oh MAeeAAeeAAker!"

He lowered her and she slumped limply against his chest. "Yes, that was…better than Isabela. By a fair margin," she said.

He picked her up, cradled in his arms like a child or a bride. "The bed's right over yonder -- I want to make sure you're absolutely certain of that."
It was past dark, and no elf who wasn't utterly insane or a well-armed thug would be out of the alienage past dark if he wanted to live to see morning, but he needed to go before he lost his resolve so it simply couldn't wait until daybreak. He slipped through the streets, keeping to the shadows, hoping to avoid detection, and managed to avoid trouble all the way to the army barracks behind Fort Drakon. This wasn't what the Hahren had meant, he supposed, but it was what he felt he needed to do. His mother had given him a set of skills. He would put them to use for his country and his people, if he were allowed to do so.

He pushed back his hood, girded up his courage, and knocked on the door.

A soldier opened the door, and sighed irritably when he saw that it was an elf. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I'm here to enlist."

The soldier ogled him for a moment, then burst out laughing. He opened the door wide and gestured to a man who sat at a nearby table, holding a hand of cards. "Fredricks -- get a load of this knife-ear. He says he's here to enlist!"

The other soldier, older, more worried than derisive, stood up and set down his hand of cards. "Young man, what on earth makes you think you want to be a soldier?" he asked.

"The Orlesians, Ser. They set plague among my people just because we're Fereldan. They would have seen us all dead just to hurt Ferelden's supply of labor. I have a wife, Ser, and a daughter. Adaia. She's seven. I want them to be safe, Ser. I want to fight."

"That is indeed a noble ideal, young man, but I do not think it would be wise to set an elf amongst our men. It would only cause…friction."

"Aw, let him join, Fredricks, why not?" the derisive soldier said, in a surprise turn-around. "The King gave that white-haired knife-ear a bloody knighthood, didn't he? A foreigner, to boot! He'd probably be right chuffed to have a native knife-ear in the soldiery."
"An elf…with a knighthood?"

The older soldier nodded. "It's true, young man. I do not know Ser Fenris, but I understand he is a formidable warrior with skills unlike anything seen in Ferelden before. He also has the voucher of the Champion of Kirkwall. But you…you are no warrior, young man, and there is no one to warrant you. Go home to your wife and child. There is nothing for you here."

"I can fight. My mother taught me."

The derisive soldier burst into another hearty gale of laughter. "Oh, mummy dearest!"

"She did. She was with Loghain's Night Elves." He clapped his bicep twice as he'd seen the Hahren do and said, "Night Elves watch the line."

The derisive soldier grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him into the barracks. "Come on, Fredricks -- if you won't sign the lad then I will. We can always use more cavalry fodder, after all, and who knows? Maybe he's worth more than it will cost to feed him."

The older soldier shook his head sadly. "I fear no good can come of this, but…do as you will."

"Too right. Come on, knife-ear. I'll issue you your first weapon."

"What are you called, young man?" the older soldier asked.

"Call me Lightning, Ser."
He knew that he was different. Perhaps it was the very pains his parents took to ensure that he did not that forced the knowledge upon him. He was...between, neither one nor the other. As if the Maker couldn't quite make up His mind.

He had his mother's quick temper, easily frustrated to the point of rage, particularly by his own failures, and he had but little patience. But he was quiet, thoughtful, and very serious, much like his father. Like both parents, he could be more than a little...willful. And his curiosity and thirst to prove himself, even at this very young age, led him into misadventures to try the patience even of his imperturbable father.

"My little One," his mother would say, always with that emphasis that let him know she gave the endearment proper noun status, while patching up his injuries from some ill-fated adventure. "Always trying to be so much more than what you are, never content simply to be."

And why would he be? Who could ever content themselves with being merely half?

He hated going to town. The people of Oswin always looked at him strangely, as if they couldn't quite figure out what he was. The sisters at the Chantry were worse still, trying to catch him unprotected by his father and lecture him about the Maker and the importance of going to services lest his tiny, unimportant soul be lost to the Void forever. He thought them more likely to snatch him away than the hard-eyed men who leaned against the sides of the buildings in the back alleys that his father worried about. The townie children despised all from the surrounding freeholds, and sometimes threw stones at him if they thought they could get away with it. The fact that, young and skinny as he was, he'd already managed to thrash half of them didn't make them any happier with his occasional presence in their town.

So he led rather a solitary existence even when young, but if you asked him whether he was lonely he might well have looked at you as though you were mad. He had mother and father, and he had Adalla, the mabari pup his father found in their woodshed who never left his side for a moment. He had enough.

But if instead you asked him was he happy, you might have surprised him out of rather a different response. He loved both his parents and he knew they loved him, but he felt the tension his awkward, in-between presence brought to their lives and mistook it for disappointment. His father must surely want a strong, strapping boy that would grow into a giant of a man like himself, and too impatient for natural growth and frustrated by not being as strong and capable as he thought he should be he believed that great size would never be his. His mother must surely want an elf like
herself, and he would never be that, either.

On one occasion, when he was very young and small indeed, an early foray into the fine art of tree climbing left him with a knot on his head and a broken arm. His father set the bone himself, praised him for his stalwart silence through the pain, and then his mother took over. Her relief that he had come to no worse end than this made her a trifle more clingy than she would perhaps have been otherwise, and she held him on her lap and rocked with him in her homemade wicker chair. Though he considered himself far too old at the sage age of five and a half for such babying he lay still in her arms and pretended to sleep so he would not be forced by pride to object.

After awhile she began to hum, a tune he did not recognize. She did not know human songs, so he thought it must be a song of the Dalish, and he wished he could know the words. While she hummed she stroked his hair back from his face and began to trace the shell of his ear with her fingers, round and round again. He wondered if she was trying to stretch it out, make it come to a point. If she could manage it, she was welcome to try. He was tired, already, of being nothing more than half.
"So…are you as frightened as I am to see what fresh horrors your daughter has to show us?" Elilia said as they made their way to the Little Audience Chamber in the early morning.

"I may be more afraid. I know the sort of trouble my girl gets up to when she's left unsupervised for too long."

"She certainly had ample time to plan out the rest of our lives in minute detail."

"Not terribly impressive, actually. I'm not going to live that long."

Elilia snorted. "I don't think you'll ever die."

"Sick of me already, are you?"

"I didn't say that, I just mean you're awfully…vigorous for a man on the wrong side of sixty-five."

"Ha! You should have seen my father at this age. Of course, he didn't get very much older than this, but it's not like he died in his bed of some wasting disease."

"I wouldn't want your father to demonstrate his strength and virility for me in quite the same way you did last night."

They reached the chamber and the Queen's seneschal announced their arrival. Anora stood before the great blazing hearth, hands folded demurely before her. The dais where she typically received petitioners was closed off by a heavy curtain.

"Ah, excellent. I have been quite looking forward to this. With all that is going on, it is good to have a few pleasant projects with which to relieve stress."

"You haven't relieved ours any, yet, so why don't we get this over with, eh?" Loghain said, and crossed his arms over his chest.
Anora merely smiled. "Allow me just a hint of drama, father. I promise not to drag it out too much.

"In any event, as I'm sure you've already surmised, my pet project for the past several months has been the two of you. The finest dressmaker and tailor in Ferelden have been kind enough to donate their time and materials to the task of fully outfitting the both of you with clothes suitable to your standing in this nation."

"A gold-plated gown for Elilia and a gunny sack for me, I take it," Loghain said. Anora ignored him in very pointed fashion.

"Allow me to present Madam Mellaris and Ser Pramin el Sulabar. Their shops are the very cornerstone of the High Market."

The two clothiers stepped out of an alcove at the back of the chamber. The woman, tall, thin, and severe, tipped a graceful curtsey. The man, dark and exotic with a twirled moustache and pointy goatee, bowed low with raised hands. "It was a great honor to serve Her Majesty on behalf of Your Grace," the woman said.

"Likewise for me," el Sulabar said, in his thick Nevarran accent. "The chance to work with amazing materials of such unusual provenance alone was reward enough, but to make clothes that will be worn by so august a personage…'twas the greatest honor of a blessed lifetime."

"What a load of horse - " Loghain began, but Elilia elbowed him hard in the ribs and he was silenced by a wince.

"Now, these good people have made you several fine garments each, but what I am particularly eager to show you are the clothes you will wear for the Royal Ball this Satinalia." Anora clapped her hands together briskly and an elven servant pulled a rope that parted the curtain. A pair of headless mannequins displayed a set of remarkable raiment.

The male dress form displayed a shirt of the finest linen, so white it almost seemed to glow against the dark colors of the rest of the outfit. The sleeves, which were the only parts visible, were quite full down to mid-forearm, where they ended in long, tight cuffs each fastened with three silver cufflinks inlaid with Fereldan opal, dark blue and banded with elusive hints of purples and greens. The gemstone hadn't been mined since the Occupation, thanks to the Orlesians having turned the mines into prison work camps so brutal and unsafe Maric preferred to shut them down rather than send anyone to work there even voluntarily. Buttons of blue-shelled clam, a dark, banded blue that
glimmered with a thousand iridescent hints of colors featured prominently on the sleeveless leather doublet, two lines of grand buttons that held the garment closed in single-breasted fashion. The export of blue-shelled clams was one of the sideline industries of Gwaren, and was surprisingly profitable despite how little product there was to be had. In fact, in Gwaren it was not uncommon to hear the natives refer to gold sovereigns as "clams."

The doublet itself was almost identical in color to the buttons, and it rather dazzled the eye. Deep midnight blue, without banding but with definite shifting hues of iridescent color, some shades that did not seem to exist elsewhere in nature; it had a high, rounded collar and gold inlays in discrete but intricate designs at the collar, buttonholes, and hems. The trousers were essentially armored leggings, of the same remarkable leather but without decoration other than, perhaps, a few more straps than was strictly necessary. The cuffs ended below the tops of a pair of high boots with folded tops and riding heels, the amazing blue leather gave way at the ankle to what appeared to be fine dragonscale of the same astonishing color. Gold or, more likely, volcanic aurum tipped the pointed toes and banded the heels.

Elilia's gown was, if anything, even more remarkable. Orlesian silk dyed with indigo merged with the same deep blue leather in a wide waist cinch which was, perhaps quite deliberately, unboned. Dark blue velvet and silver fox fur trim made up the overskirt, draping a skirt of indigo silk. That much of the dress was designed solely with an eye to loveliness, but the rest was an exultation of the virago. The sleeves were leather armor ending in almost-delicate dragonscale gauntlets, and a pauldron of short-spiked tail scales was softened only by a lining of silver fox fur that peeked out from underneath in a narrow band of trim. The décolletage on this gown was not designed with an eye to hiding unfortunate scars, and the whole of her chest below the shoulders from side to side and collarbones to just above the line of her nipples would be exposed and outlined in silver fox trim. Dancing slippers of dragonscale matched Loghain's boots.

"Maker's breath..." Elilia said. She stared for a long time, then tore her eyes away from the mesmerizing shifting colors contained within the leather and scale and said, "That isn't normal dragonscale...is it?"

"You recall, perhaps, the difficulty we faced in destroying the carcass of the Archdemon in the wake of the Blight," Anora said. "All we succeeded in doing, initially, was to burn away the muscle and organ tissues, leaving us with a tremendous pile of seemingly indestructible bone, scale, and skin. We piled it in storage in the deepest cellars under Fort Drakon for some years, but its mere presence proved to have a profoundly demoralizing effect upon the men, both in the prison and those stationed to guard them. Finally we took it out and made another attempt to destroy it with fire, using more and stronger fuel and for a longer time than we attempted before. We again failed to destroy it, but we did manage to cleanse it at last of the corruption that made it distasteful. It was still difficult to know what to do with such a strange bounty, outfitting common soldiers or even King's knights with such material seemed almost profane. But to use it to garb those who slew Urthemiel seemed a fine statement. People, particularly nobles, have dreadfully short memories. I intend that no man, woman, or child of Ferelden forget what they owe you for as long as I draw breath."
"Well this will certainly serve to remind them -- and me," Loghain growled.

Anora chuckled. "I didn't expect you to like it, father -- or at least not to admit to it. But it is quite beautiful material, don't you agree? I suppose that is why they called him -- or was it a her? Aren't all High Dragons female? -- the 'Dragon of Beauty.' And fortunately so dark a blue is a great color for both of you."

"Who did the metalwork and the armor?" Elilia asked. "It is masterful craftsmanship."

"Ah, I am glad you asked. May I present Master Wade?"

The Master smith stepped out of the alcove, beady eyes alight and of course fixed upon his own handiwork. He clasped his hands together reverently and sighed in rapture. "It is unbelievable, isn't it? Never in all my life did I ever dream I would have the opportunity to work with such... such...glory. Maker, it is no wonder the Tevinters worshipped the creature, is it? What strength! What beauty! It is the pinnacle of my career, the very peak. The world can hold no greater joy, no greater thrill than that which I experienced while creating with this dream of heaven."

He giggled like a twitter-pated schoolgirl. "And the best...oh, the very best...is yet to be revealed."

"In due time, Master Wade," Anora said. She turned to her father. "Father, I cannot have helped but to notice that you are no longer wearing heavy plate."

He shrugged his shoulders. "The thing about heavy plate, my dear, is that it is very...heavy."

"A fact which never bothered you in the least previously. I realize that you were an ill man at the Battle of Sulcher, but I do not think your physical strength has failed in the slightest over the years," Anora said. "I understand precisely why you have set aside your armor. You no longer wish to be seen as the man you were. But you cannot hide from who you are, and the way the people of Ferelden perceive you is still overwhelmingly positive, which I'm not certain you realize. The statues in the harbor will doubtless cause interminable debate at the Landsmeet -- we've already heard several rather heated petitions -- but it is only a handful of the nobles who can't stand to see you receive honors. By and large, they are the same nobles or the heirs thereof who couldn't stand to see you raised above them in the first place. You are a symbol of the strength and courage of this nation, father, whether you like it or not. And you must look the part."

She gestured, and servants pulled aside the dress forms with their astonishing garments. Across the
The dais behind them was another heavy curtain, drawn shut. "I commissioned these pieces from Master Wade, and I intend the both of you to wear them to this year's Landsmeet, a visceral reminder to the hacked off nobility of just exactly whom they are most beholden to in this world."

The second curtain was opened, and the armor revealed. Dragonbone melded with dragonscale, it was armor very likely of a sort no one in the world had ever seen before, if only for the fact that it was deep and gleaming blue in color. Elilia's suit of mail was very different from the King's mail usually seen in Ferelden. It was, in fact, a rather fanciful weave of links that capitalized upon the shifting, enigmatic hues within the scale. Loghain's massive plate featured the largest of the Archdemon's tail spikes upon the pauldrons. Both suits were decorated with inlay of gold. Notably, both featured in their decoration the yellow wyvern rampant of Gwaren, a bold and rather arrogant move on the part of the Queen if she truly intended for it to be seen at the Landsmeet prior to either of them being appointed the Teyrnir. It would also serve to make the secret engagement rather an open secret, which perhaps she didn't mind. She was evidently willing to be a trifle more aggressive with the bannorn than she'd intimated yesterday.

Interestingly, only Loghain's armor came complete with weaponry. A masterpiece kite shield and a wickedly-designed longsword of the same dark blue bone rested alongside. The shield was blank of heraldry, a faint sop to protocol given the advertisement designed into the armor. "The rampant wyvern crest will be inlaid upon it once the appointment is official and the wedding is over," Master Wade explained. "Gold inlay. Such a piece shall not be tainted with common paint!"

"I don't get a new sword?" Elilia asked the armorer, with a slight pout to her lips.

"It is not yet complete, I fear," Master Wade said, with a very definite pout to his. "Even with such superior materials, it is difficult to surpass what I did with the greatsword Vigilance. The new blade is almost perfect, but it requires something more. I'm just...not sure what."

Elilia chuckled. "Well, I'm afraid I don't know either. Here -- is this of any use to you at all?" She took from her pocket the bright runestone Sandal had given her. "I don't know what it's for; I've never seen this particular set of runes before."

"Oo, let me see...my, but this is fine craftsmanship. I'm not...quite...certain what it is myself, but it is obviously quite a powerful enchantment. The feel of it in my hand is like a very small, contained earth tremor. I will make an examination of it, if I may. Perhaps it will be that one last perfect piece that sets this blade apart from all others."

"Have fun."
"Thank you very much, Master Wade, Madam Mellaris, ser el Sulabar," Anora said. "If you would excuse us, please?"

The clothiers bowed themselves out. Master Wade lingered a bit, eyes fixed avariciously upon his creations, before Anora's seneschal was forced to "assist" him in leaving.

Anora turned to Elilia. "Have you spoken with my father about the Hunt?" she asked.

"I…we didn't get a lot of chance to speak, last night."

Loghain sighed. "Don't tell me the nobles are actually going to waste time with pig-sticking. Not that they're any good for anything else, but still…"

"It's an important tradition, even if I do think it rather an odd way to accomplish the necessary," Anora said. "I want you to participate this year, father."

"I don't have time for tomfoolery, Anora."

"Politicking may fit your definition of useless, father, but there is no way to run this country without it. You must reestablish your presence. We need the bannorn on our side. I will not have a repeat of the division we suffered during the Blight. Please, father. I'm counting on you."

Loghain sighed and glanced at Elilia. "What about you? Up for a bit of pig-sticking?"

"I know father rode to the hunt once or twice, but I've never seen it. What does it entail?"

"Riding a horse, carrying a spear, and using it to slay some poor stupid boar the beaters flush out of the bushes."

"Is there something you're leaving out? It sounds not only ridiculously easy but simply… ridiculous."

"Have you ever actually seen a full-grown boar before it has been roasted and had an apple stuffed
"Can't say that I have, no."

"Let it be said here and now then that there is nothing easy about pig-sticking. Fereldan boars are probably more dangerous than bears, and some of them aren't very much smaller. But it's something that would appeal to the Cousland Barbarian, I should think."

"Well, I'm game."

"Given the number of men who've been killed in the Hunt over the ages, let us hope not."

"I shit you not, this thing was only about this shy of being a bleeding High Dragon, and the man just rips into it like a log saw. Didn't hesitate, didn't even blink! And he's not wearing enchanted silverite like the fabled Armor of River Dane, either, just a set of rotting old leathers. I tell you truthfully, Hawke, I thought right then and there that the man knew no fear."

"You sound like you had quite the adventure, Varric," Hawke replied, and called for another ale. "So you and Teyrn -- former Teyrn -- Loghain are…friends?"

Varric shrugged. "I don't know if I'd go so far as to say that, but once you've stood next to him in a scuffle it's hard not to respect the man. And for his part, he occasionally deigns to address me as 'Varric' rather than 'Dwarf,' so I guess that means he doesn't entirely resent my existence, which may be about the best he feels towards anyone other than maybe his daughter and the Hero."

"I thought the Hero was his daughter?" Merrill said.

"No, Daisy, the Queen is his daughter."

"Wait…but the Hero was the tall lady whom we were introduced to before he came from the alienage, right? I thought they were sisters, they look so much alike."
Hawke, Isabela, and Varric shared a look between them. "Kitten…Elilia Cousland and Queen Anora don't look anything alike at all," Isabela said.

"That's not true," Merrill replied. "They're both blonde. Anyway, the Hero certainly seemed to have a daughterly sort of affection for him. She jumped right up and gave him that big hug right in front of everybody. The Queen didn't."

The trio shared another look. "Oh, Kitten," Isabela said. She shook her head and downed her glass.

"Merrill, I think that Loghain and the Hero are…lovers," Hawke said, as delicately as possible.

"Oh that can't be, ma vhenan. He's so much older than she."

"Daisy…you're sleeping with…another woman," Varric pointed out.

"Aye, but we're about the same age."

"Look, it's not important, let's just drop it, okay?" Hawke said. "So you say you respect Loghain, Varric. Fine, I can see that. But tell me, do you trust him?"

"In a fight, or just in general?"

"Either-or. Both."

He gave the question due consideration. "Yes."

"You know what he did."

"Yes, Hawke, I do. But much as he seems to want to believe that was all him out there, deserting kings and selling elves to the Tevinters, personally I think it was mostly the blood mages."
Hawke spit out the sip of ale she'd just taken. "W-what?"

Varric slapped the tabletop. "Oh ho! We didn't get around to telling the Court that particular bit of gossip, did we? It seems the Empress and perhaps a Tevinter magister or three may have been using blood magic to 'influence' certain decisions made before and during the Fifth Blight -- not just of Loghain, but of a lot of Ferelden's high and mighty. Loghain, though, seems to have been the Empress' main prize. The guy we yanked the information out of said she kept a vial of his blood in a golden stand on her vanity table."

"Kinky," Isabela said.

"Dear Maker…the Queen won't be pleased to hear about this," Hawke said.

"I suspect she'll shit bricks," Varric said comfortably. "But she doesn't have to worry so much about it. The Hero's friend Seanna has been keeping him safe with the Litany of Adralla, which disrupts a blood mage's efforts at mind control or some shit like that."

"Is that the little redhead that was with her?" Isabela asked. "She was cute."

"Birdie has lived a gentle, sheltered sort of life, Rivaini," Varric said. "Don't go corrupting her."

"Oo, speaking of corrupting elves," Isabela said excitedly, "have any of you heard the rumor floating about town? They're saying some elf from the local alienage enlisted in the bloody army last night. Care to place bets on how long it will be before the other recruits beat him to death with socks filled with bars of soap?"

"That seems like a nasty sort of thing to bet on," Merrill said. "Why not take wagers on something more cheerful?"

"Chances are that even if the rumor is true, they're not seriously going to put an elf in the regular army. He'll probably be stuck digging ditches or running errands. And that's if he's lucky," Varric said.

"King Alistair gave Fenris a bloody knighthood just based on Hawke's introduction," Isabela
pointed out. "I don't think he's afraid to have an elf in the army. The elf ought to be afraid, I think."

"I hate to agree, but I agree," Hawke said. "Even if the man never sees actual combat, the other soldiers are not going to be easy on him, I should expect."


"So what else did you do out in the wilderness for all that time?" Merrill asked after a bit. "I honestly can't picture you sleeping under the stars, Varric."

"Top secret business for the King and Queen I'm afraid, Daisy," Varric said. "I can't tell you the details -- not just yet at any rate, not without running the risk of being mashed into a gooey dwarven pulp by rather an angry Loghain, but I can tell you a bit more about the side-adventures we had. How would you like to hear about Harvestmere in Gwaren? It was a hell of a party, I've got to say."

Hawke smiled. "I missed Feast Day when we were living in Kirkwall. Marchers -- or at least Kirkwallers -- just don't seem to notice it. Even in Lothering Harvestmere was always as big an occasion as we could make of it, the whole village gathering to swap food and stories and drink as much as they possibly could. It doesn't seem to be quite as popular here in Denerim. Must be that city folk don't quite understand the joy of a good harvest."

"Well let me tell you something, this city slicker understands now, and next Harvestmere will find me somewhere out in the bannorn. Gwaren if I can manage it, because those folks know how to celebrate, even if some of them have odd ideas about what is and is not food, chowing down and partying with the lumberjacks and fishermen."

"Maybe I'll go with you," Hawke said, with a laugh. "Did you exchange pranks and gifts?"

"Er, no. Is that a tradition here?"

"It was in Lothering. We'd each receive two gifts. The first one was something horrible and funny, the second something that was usually not terribly grand but very special and deeply personal. It was a way of showing each other how much we were understood."
"Oo, I like the sound of a tradition like that. Tell me more, ma vhenan," Merrill said.

Hawke laughed. "Well, one year I remember the prank we gave our father was a book written by some Chantry scholar or other that was all about how wonderful and necessary the Circle of Magi was. His gift was a pair of thick woolen socks that Bethany and I knitted for him ourselves, because his feet were always cold. They were terribly mismatched, since we each knitted one, and a bit...lumpy, because mother couldn't knit to save her life and Bethany and I basically taught ourselves, but father loved those socks and wore them constantly. He was wearing them the day he died, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, that's sweet."

"I agree. But I don't think I'd ever quite have the stones to give Loghain Mac Tir a prank, even if I knew him well enough -- although if I did have the stones, I'd give him a toy jumping spider. He'd love that," Varric said, with a smirk.

His three companions all raised questioning brows. "Are you suggesting that the Hero of River Dane, co-slayer of the Archdemon, a man who leaps into battle against mature dragons without compunction...is scared of spiders?" Isabela asked.

"Much as I teased him over it, no, not scared exactly. Skeeved-out would be the better terminology. And in all fairness, he only shows it when they're the size of houses." Varric ordered another mug of ale. "So tell me, Hawke -- what were all of you doing while out from under my watchful eye? Any great adventures that require chronicling?"

Hawke shrugged. "Just keeping away from the Chantry, mostly. Honestly I'm surprised I didn't decide to come home sooner, but even if the Divine is Orlesian there's still a hell of a lot of templars in this country. I figured it wasn't any safer for me here than it was anywhere else."

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Anora quite happily showed them the rest of their new wardrobe -- trousseaus, Loghain was forced to think of them with a fair degree of sourness, though thankfully if his daughter had caused to have made new smallclothes for him she did not choose to show them. She did display rather a fetching nightgown she'd had made up for Elilia, a confection of sheer and very nearly sheer white silk done up in ruffles and flounces and designed with an eye to concealing just barely enough to tantalize. Frankly he couldn't imagine Elilia ever wearing the thing voluntarily, but the thought of what she'd look like if she did was certainly intriguing.
At the very last Anora brought out the new winter cloaks she'd had made by Pramin el Sulabar, who specialized in furs above and beyond his work with men's tailoring. Elilia's was a lovely hooded cape of silver fox fur, trimmed with sable, that would look well over her Satinalia gown especially. Loghain's was…

"Maker's breath…is that a bloody lion?" he asked.

"Just the fur, I'm afraid, and a few claws for fasteners. A gift to you, father, from the King of Nevarra, who is evidently a fan of your work." Anora pulled it down off the dress form. "Try it on: I'm eager to see for myself how it looks on you."

Loghain hated trying on clothes for the benefit of others, whether they be tailors or his daughter. It made him feel like a child, standing before his mother while she critically eyed her latest efforts to keep him clothed. That criticism in her gaze had been reserved solely for the fit of her work on her son's ever-growing frame, but it hadn't felt that way to him at the time, and the way she would laugh and call him her "weed" hadn't helped, no matter how affectionately she said it.

He pulled on the tawny hooded cloak obediently but with a scowl firmly affixed on his face that neither woman took note of. Anora stepped back and eyed the way the garment hung off his shoulders with that same critical eye he remembered from his mother.

"Pull the hood up, father -- let me see it." He rolled his eyes expressively but obeyed without comment. The hood was lined with the same tawny fur that made up the rest of the cloak, but on the outside it was covered with the long, dark mane of the beast. Elilia burst out laughing immediately.

"What?" Anora asked, in the same irritated voice Loghain had been about to use. "I think it looks magnificent. I take it you do not agree?"

"Oh, it looks wonderful," Elilia said. "It just struck me that he doesn't really look a whole lot different with the hood up. It's just Loghain with bed hair."

Anora chose to ignore the comment, and after a moment's thought so did Loghain. There was nothing he could think of to say in response that he would ever say in front of his daughter.

Before allowing them to escape, Anora presented them with a pair of mabari collars made from the
dark blue leather of the Archdemon's hide. Topaz glittered from the middle of the silverite tag that bore Champion's name and tourmaline glittered from Haakon's. "I had them made a bit large, so they've room to grow for a time," she said. "There's plenty of leather leftover when they need bigger collars. In fact, there's still enough bone, hide, and scale to keep a small army outfitted for years to come."

"You've made good use of it so far, Anora," Elilia said. "Our armor is utterly glorious, and I thank you for it."

"I'd have to say that even though the Archdemon was ultimately just a beast, smarter than most perhaps, I feel a bit odd about wearing the skin and bone of a slain foe," Loghain said, "but I will confess it sets an interesting precedent for the Orlesians to ponder."

Anora laughed lightly. "It's not so very different to what you did at the Battle of River Dane, father; stripping the Orlesian commander bare and donning his plate right then and there. At least this suit fits you. As a child I always suspected your near-perpetual scowl was the result of wearing armor designed for a man some inches smaller than you."

"The legend of how I put on the commander's armor 'right then and there,' Anora, is slightly exaggerated," Loghain said. "The man was no less than a foot shorter than me, and I had to have the armor reworked before I could wear it. The enchantments upon it made it difficult for the smith to make adequate adjustments."

"Orlesians are rather a short people, by and large," she said. "I was always rather surprised the armor fit as well as it did."

After a few pleasantries she dismissed them, and on the way back to the living quarters Elilia slipped her arm through his.

"I look forward to seeing you in that beautiful white shirt and Archdemon-hide doublet," she said. "You'll look exceedingly...romantic in it, I think."

He grimaced. "Buttons. I've never worn buttons in my life, fussy stupid things. What's wrong with lacings and buckled straps, I ask you?"

"If you've never worn them, how do you know how fussy they are?"
"Maric had garments with buttons on them," he said grimly. "And he needed a manservant just to help him fasten them, and at least three maids to chase the buttons down when they came flying off his clothes."

"Well, I'll help you fasten them," Elilia said, with a chuckle, "and I'll gladly help them come flying off your clothes when I unfasten them."

It was his turn to chuckle, a deep rumble that didn't quite rise out of his chest into his throat. "I'm looking forward to seeing you in that nightgown."

"That was obviously meant to be saved for the wedding night, Loghain. A flutter of virginal white to inflame the masculine desire to dominate. I shall have to shriek and struggle as you throw me down on the bed to ravage me and rip from me my perfect, unspoiled maidenhead."

"Ha! You've spent too much time around Varric, my dear. You're inventing all sorts of wild fictions. Someone beat me to your perfect, unspoiled maidenhead long before I ever even met you, though I don't begrudge the loss as long as I have the rest of you now. And I can no more see you 'shrieking and struggling' like some helpless little girl before a gang of bandits than I would want to see you do."

"I'll shriek and giggle, then."

"Now that has a certain appeal to it."
"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANDERSTATE'S ASS.  ALL THIS FUSS OVER A BLOODY SPIDER?" LOGHAiN SAiD, AND COLLAPSED INTO THE T W I G-BACk ROCRkER IN AN ATTITUDr EQUAL PARTS RELIEF AND DIsDAiN.

Gareth, too, seemed torn between irritation and amusement at the Sister's reaction to the creature. It was a large spider, true -- a Red-Knee Korcari Crawler, roughly the size of a man's hand, with long, hairy legs and proportionally enormous fangs -- but it was not particularly dangerous to humans. The big man stepped forward and raised his enormous boot over it. The spider reared up and raised its front two pair of legs before it threateningly.

"Gareth, no, stop!" Ailis cried out. He hesitated with his foot in midair and raised a questioning brow at her. "Don't kill it, just... get it out of here."

Gareth sighed. Loghain understood that sigh perfectly. "Pup, could you take care of it, please?" Gareth asked. Loghain got up out of the chair and laid his hand down on the dirt floor in front of the creature, palm-up, and gently persuaded the spider to walk onto it. The spider didn't even realize it was held. He picked it up and Ailis cringed away from the sight.

"Please, be careful, just... get that horrible creature out of here," she pleaded.
Loghain and the spider preceded Gareth out of the hut, and his father put a hand to his face and shook his head, which said all he wanted to say in the wake of the matter.

"What a lot of foolishness over so little a thing," Loghain said, and kept the bewildered spider walking from hand to hand as it thought all the while that it was getting somewhere. "Mother was never scared of spiders."

"Your mother feared nothing," Gareth said. "A trait I'm sorry to say she passed on to her son. Look, I don't really care what you do with that thing, pup, but whatever you do, do it well away from the camp and Ailis. Don't want her going 'weak sister' on us again, and she's already got our people on edge over this. I'll see if I can't calm things down."

Gareth left him then, and Loghain took the spider some little way into the line of trees that marked the start of the Korcari Wilds, a dangerous place of old myths and very real monsters, not that he'd ever seen anything worse than a few snakes and a bear or two. It was said that some of the bears grew to the size of houses, and that ogres stalked the mists in roving hunting bands, but he doubted those tales.

He took a moment to examine the creature, and brought it up close to his face. Evidently just smart enough to recognize him as a threat even if it did not seem able to grasp the full scope of him, the creature reared up again in its threat display. He wondered if he could be so brave in the face of something so very much greater than himself. But then again, was this courage or stupidity? Was there even a difference?

He wondered if he looked half as ugly to the spider as it looked to him. The Maker created all things, according to Sister Ailis and the other Chantry-types, but it was hard to imagine exactly what sort of mindset He was in on the day He created such creatures as this. Suddenly, Loghain didn't particularly feel like touching the disgusting thing anymore. He put the creature down by some leaf litter and watched it scurry for the cover it provided. He wiped his hands off on his leathers and headed back to the camp, glad that spiders didn't come any larger than that.

Dannon met him near the campfire and held Loghain's restrung bow out to him. "Your father told me to take you hunting with me tonight," the big man said.

Loghain stared him down. "You mean my father told you to go hunting with me," Loghain corrected. "You're useless for anything but cartage, Dannon."
Dannon grimaced, but didn't attempt to deny it. The impudent brat was a lot of things, but foremost on the list was dangerous. He held out the bow and Loghain took it from him. "I should tell you. I've heard word that Bann Ceorlic's out tonight with a large troop of his men. We'll have to be careful in avoiding them."

"We'll steer clear," Loghain said. "Come on. Let's hope luck is with us. The camp would benefit if we managed to bring in something bigger than a quail tonight."
Squirrel Assassin

Hawke wasn't about to tell anyone of the "special assignment" King Alistair gave her, it was simply too embarrassing. She didn't even take Bethany along. She crept out in the early morning hours before Merrill was awake in hopes of being back before anyone knew where she'd gone or what she'd had to do. She didn't even waken Spirit, asleep on the rug by the foot of the bed.

She was back inside of half an hour, and burst into her sister's bedchamber white-faced and panting. Bethany shot up and clutched the heavy quilt to her chest. "Kireani? By the Maker, what happened to you?"

"I…need healing," Hawke said.

Bethany leapt out of bed, threw her dressing gown on over top of her nightdress, and came to make an examination of her older sister's wounds. "Holy Andraste, you look like you've been in the wars! Tell me what happened?" she asked, as she set to using her healing spells.

Hawke sighed. "King Alistair made a request of me yesterday. He asked if I might take a team of my people and investigate a…'disturbance' in a little memorial promenade park the Crown caused to be built in the place where an old supply depot stood before the darkspawn attack. King Alistair…he's such a joker, I thought certainly he was jesting, that this was some sort of royal 'hazing', but he's the King so it's not like I could tell him to sod off. I was too proud to ask anyone to come with me."

She gulped a deep breath of air. "It wasn't a joke. There are…nasty things living in the park."

"What sort of nasty things?" Bethany asked.

"Pigeons. And squirrels."

Bethany's glowing hands faltered momentarily. "I expect you're about to tell me that they are giant pigeons and squirrels, with a taste for human flesh, correct?"

Hawke shook her head. "No, they're normal-sized. But they do have a taste for human flesh."
"So they did this to you, then? Did you manage to get rid of them?"

Hawke shook her head again. "Not a one. They were just too damned fast, I couldn't draw a bead on them. I'm going to have to go back out there, and I'm going to have to take a team," she said, with a look of utter terror on her face caused by the fact she would need to admit this humiliating defeat to others. "I figure magic will be best against the pigeons. Maybe some fast blades can take care of the squirrels. Varric might be able to take down a few. He's a faster aim than I."

"Magic? Kireani…do you really mean to take apostate mages out in the middle of Denerim in broad daylight?" Bethany asked. "The King may be well-disposed toward us and the Grand Cleric may be looking the other way, but that doesn't mean the Priests and templars won't be on the lookout."

"The Grand Cleric has most of them out of the city on 'Chantry business,' Bethany, but if it will make you feel safer we'll ask the King for some sort of protection. Maybe he could send someone from his personal guard along, just to make sure nobody bothers you."

"I'm not sure that even Fenris is enough to stop a templar in full charge," Bethany said doubtfully, "but I'm with you if you need me, sister."

"Let's go get Merrill and see who else we can find. Isabela is probably still out at the whorehouse."

"Well, let me get dressed first, please."

"Oh. Right. Yes. But do hurry up."

Bethany donned the lovely crimson robe the Queen had caused to be made for her and grabbed her staff. "All right," she said, as she stepped into her shoes, "I'm ready."

"Let's go, come on."

They left Bethany's rooms and made for the chambers Hawke shared with the Dalish blood mage, Merrill. Before they made it that far, however, their progress was halted by the sight of Loghain, hair mussed and plain rough-weave shirt both untucked and unlaced, exiting the rooms of Elilia Cousland. Embarrassed, the Hawke sisters stopped short.
Loghain nodded to them and grunted something that might have been "Good morning." He seemed thoroughly unconcerned to be seen leaving a lady's bedchambers in the pre-dawn hours. He made to walk past them but when he was close enough to see Hawke's healing wounds in the dim light he stopped and stared. "Maker's breath, woman, what lit into you?"

"Squirrels and pigeons, milord," Bethany said, with a curtsey. "King Alistair asked her to look into the matter of attacks at the memorial park and she didn't take it quite seriously enough."

"Squirrels and pigeons, eh? Well, that's…a new one on me. Are you heading back out to give it another go, then?"

"With magic, this time," Hawke said, through her shamefaced blush. "Little buggers were too fast for me on my own."

"Mind if I tag along? The city always gets me keyed up and restless. Killing something vile will put me in a much better frame of mind, and pigeons are pure vermin even under ordinary circumstances."

The Hawke sisters shared a look. "If anyone could stop a rampaging templar…" Bethany said. "At the very least, he could certainly cow any Chantry stooge that looks to sell us out for unauthorized use of magic."

"I suppose, my lord, if you wish to join us, then you are welcome to," Hawke said, not without some misgivings. "We were a bit afraid that someone might…give us trouble, if we were seen using magic publicly."

"Let them try."

"We were on our way to waken my sister's…er…'mage-friend.'" Bethany said, with a blush. "To help us. I'm sure she will need a few minutes to get ready, milord, if you wish to take the opportunity to prepare yourself."

"And then we were going to the Fishwife's Cloister to find Varric and maybe our friend Isabela as well," Hawke added.
"Shouldn't take me as long as that to get ready," he said. "I just need to get my bow and wake up my hound. Meet you at the front gates, then?"

He strode off down the corridor without waiting for a reply, and the sisters exchanged another look. Once he was around the corner and out of earshot, Bethany allowed herself a giggle. "Well… wonder if the Hero of Ferelden is sleeping peacefully?" she said, with a mischievous twinkle in her black eyes.

"She is now, I suppose," Hawke said, though she didn't sound particularly jocular herself. "He didn't seem especially concerned for her propriety, did he?"

"Kireani, he walked out of her rooms and was seen doing it. What ought he to have done? Lied? Murdered us both in order to maintain her honor? I thought he handled it rather well, actually."

Hawke sighed and then smiled. "I suppose you're right. Perhaps I'm simply looking for reasons not to trust him."

"Varric seems to trust him, and you heard what he said about the possibility of blood mage mind control."

"I know. It's just…hard to let go of a decade of mistrust, I guess."

She led the way to her door. Merrill proved difficult to rouse, but once she was awake she cottoned onto the situation quickly enough. She dressed and grabbed her staff. "Squirrels are so cute, it's a pity we shall have to kill them. Less so if they're trying to kill us, of course."

"We should get going," Bethany said. "I can't help but think that Lord Loghain is a man who does not like to be kept waiting."

"Oh, is he coming along with us?" Merrill asked. "That's nice. Fresh air is very good for someone of his age, and he does look a bit peaked."

"Merrill, darling…do us all a favor and don't mention to him anything about his age or appearance, all right?" Hawke pleaded.
"Oh of course I won't, ma vhenan. It wouldn't be nice for him to be reminded that he's in the twilight of his days, would it?" Merrill gave her belt a twitch to straighten it. "I was very glad King Alistair intervened when that Vaughan character was calling for a duel. You should never fight someone so much older than yourself, it just isn't right or fair."

"Merrill…I don't think His Majesty stepped in to save Lord Loghain," Bethany ventured.

"And I don't think Lord Vaughan was calling for a duel," Hawke said. "He's not brave enough. He expected the Crown to save him from the Big Bad Wolf, which is silly, given the fact that he's the Queen's father."

"The Big Bad Wolf? Is this a nickname for Lord Loghain?"

"No, Merrill. The Big Bad Wolf is part of a Fereldan folktale," Bethany said.

"Oo. Can I hear it?"

"While we walk," Hawke said. "Bethany's right, it's not wise to keep Loghain waiting, I should think."

They started out, and Bethany gave Merrill the bare bones of the old tale, which featured three young brothers who lived in the bannorn not far from the Korcari Wilds, who found themselves beset by a particularly hungry, brutal, and intelligent wolf. The youngest brother called to the local Bann for protection, but it never came and so the wolf killed and ate him. The middle brother called to the King, but again aid never came and the brother was killed and eaten. The oldest brother called to no one, but guarded himself well and forged for himself a great blade of steel. When the wolf came for him, he killed and ate it.

"After it ate his two brothers?" Merrill asked, taken aback. "That's…ew."

"The story is an allegory, Merrill," Hawke said. "You look out for yourself, it tells us; never make yourself wholly dependant upon someone else. Our father used to tell us that Fereldans viewed the Wolf in the story as the Orlesian Empire, but I believe it goes back well before the Occupation."

"There's Lord Loghain," Bethany said, and pointed towards the tall figure that lounged by the front gate with a part-grown hound in silhouette by his side. "Probably should stop talking about wolves"
and Orlesians now."

"Maker's breath, he didn't even bother to lace up his shirt."

"Well, the hairy chest does lessen his resemblance to an elf, now, doesn't it?" Merrill said.

Bethany giggled. "Maybe that's why he left his shirt unlaced -- so Merrill doesn't say anything more about him looking 'elfy.'"

"Shh."

Loghain stepped away from the wall he leaned against and nodded to them as they approached. "Ladies."

Merrill nodded back, eyes shining brightly in the early morning light. "Elder," she greeted in a friendly manner. Hawke sighed helplessly. Loghain took no notice of either the appellation or Hawke's dismay at hearing it, and fell into step behind them, looming large and a bit menacing despite his casual stance. In harness on his back was an absolutely enormous longbow and a quiver full of arrows with eagle feather flights, rifled Dalish-style. A very large, wicked-looking hunting knife rode in his belt.

They found Varric seated at what was already become "his table" in the Fishwife's Cloister on the docks. Isabela was with him, and she eyed the narrow strip of Loghain's chest visible beneath the untied lacings of his shirt with lascivious interest. She elbowed Varric.

"Sorry, Varric, but I'm afraid your Paragon of Manliness status has been revoked. That chest is even hairier than yours."

"It is not," Varric said, and he sounded out of sorts as he tugged the lapels of his open-necked tunic. "His hair is just darker, that's all. It draws more…attention."

"It's certainly drawn mine."

"I didn't expect to find you awake, Varric," Hawke said. "You've become an early riser since
moving to Ferelden?"

Varric chuckled. "Hawke, you should know better. The Rivaini and I haven't even gone to bed yet. Well, I haven't, at least. And Isabela didn't do any sleeping, I assume. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"King Alistair wants me to clean out some pests from the memorial park," Hawke said. "They turned out to be a bit more of a challenge than I was expecting. I could use your help, if you're willing."

"Putting the hurt on some thugs? I'm game. Rivaini?"

"Why not? Isn't much else to do in this town."

"Well…our quarry isn't exactly…thugs," Hawke said.

"They'll see for themselves soon enough," Loghain said.

"True enough, I guess. Just…don't laugh, honestly, because it's no joke. I need you on your toes."

"Oo, color me intrigued. Lead on, Hawke," Varric said, and got up from the table. Isabela followed suit, and together the party left the tavern in the pale light of dawn. When they reached the park, the sun had just peeked its head above the walls of the city at last.

"So these things attacked you in the dark," Loghain said. "You're sure they'll still be here while the sun is up?"

Hawke nodded. "King Alistair said that people have reported attacks day and night."

"Tell me; is there anything that doesn't want to kill us?" Loghain asked. "I have been attacked by any number of wild animals, but this…let's just call this a first."

"Wild animals?" Varric asked. "Shit on a shingle. What kind is it this time? Wolves? Lynxes?"
"Rabid wildebeest?"

"Pigeons," Loghain replied.

"And squirrels," Merrill supplied helpfully.

"Ah. Well. Ah."

"Oh mighty warriors, we," Isabela said, with a roll of the eyes. "At least the dogs should enjoy this 'battle.'"

"I don't see any squirrels or pigeons, Sister," Bethany said. "Are you sure they don't only attack in darkness?"

"They're further in," Hawke said. "Don't worry. They'll find us."

They entered the park. Loghain scowled at the memorial stone honoring "those who perished in the Fifth Blight." He didn't mind there being a memorial, but this one was rather impersonal, somehow. He let his imagination wander momentarily. A great long wall, rising up out of the earth, of black granite polished to a shine so bright the surface would be like unto a mirror, and engraved upon it the names of the lost from every available record. That would move people. That would ensure they remembered.

Not that there was any danger of Denerim forgetting what it had suffered in the near future.

"Er…I think we…I mean, I think they…found us…" Varric said.

Loghain looked up. In the trees ahead of them, birds perched, regarding them intently. Squirrels, too, clung to the boles and branches and watched them with bright, glittering black eyes. More squirrels came running up from other parts of the park. They were eerily silent as they lined up in what appeared to be military formation before the party. It was not the boldness of well-fed, half-tamed park animals accustomed to being fed by children and old folks, but the feral fearlessness of something wild and deadly.
"Lovely. I think they're hungry," Loghain said, and drew his bow. "Let's try to stay out of each other's lines of sight, shall we?"

The animals attacked. A pigeon swooped at Champion and she snapped it up in her lighting-fast jaws. Isabela managed to strike down two leaping squirrels before a third managed to bite her on the arm. Bianca began to sing her strange song - "RattlerattlerattlePOOMfwwpp!" Pigeons dropped out of the sky like hailstones, frozen solid by blasts of ice from the staves of Merrill and Bethany. Spirit leaped and bounded after squirrels and pigeons. Many more birds and squirrels fell with crossbow bolts or elf-flight arrows through their bodies. Hawke tried her best to keep up, but though she was a skilled archer she was not particularly a swift one, and she was stunned at the speed with which Loghain's bow was nocked, loosed, and nocked again. Big was certainly the proper adjective to describe him, lumbering was not.

"I told you time and time again, Hawke," Varric said, even as he continued to pwing away at squirrels and pigeons. "Speed, not power. You're shooting pigeons, not dragons: loosen your stance, girl!"

She tried, but the unfamiliar body language made her awkward and her aim suffered badly. A few shots even went wild. She hoped that none of her arrows struck anyone.

Near the end of the fight, when the creatures' numbers were failing and the mages' mana was running out, a pigeon swooped at Merrill's face. Too exhausted to strike it down herself, she shrieked and ducked, but the bird only corrected course. Just before it would have struck her it fell to the ground as if struck by a bolt of lightning, impaled through the body upon Loghain's hunting knife. Shocked, Merrill glanced over at him, nearly ten feet away from her. He cocked a questioning brow at her. "You all right?" he asked. Numbly, she could only nod. "Good," he said, and took up his bow again.

The last mad, blighted, or possessed creature fell not long after that, and silence again reigned in the little promenade park. Champion grabbed up one of the pigeons she'd killed and chewed it, enjoying the crunchy quills in her teeth. "Leave it, Champion," Loghain commanded. "We don't know what made them act so."

"Ancestors' asses, those birds were crazy!" Varric said. "And the squirrels were totally berserk!"

"Well, you'd be angry, too, if you had to carry your nuts in your mouth," Loghain said. Varric stared at him for a good long moment before he realized it was in the nature of a quip. He laughed, but not with much strength.
Loghain stepped up to Hawke. "This is yours, I believe," he said, and raised his arm. Sticking into the meat at the back of his triceps was an arrow, thankfully not deeply embedded.

"Ow. Uh…sorry," Hawke said, as she flinched. He waited patiently, arm up, so she took the hint and, with a wince, yanked the arrow out. Loghain turned his attention nonchalantly to the retrieval of his hunting knife and as many arrows as could be recovered.

Merrill investigated one of the slain squirrels. "There are demons in the blood," she said after a time. "Weak, perhaps not even whole. The Veil must be thin here."

"There's been a lot of death and blood in Denerim, particularly in recent years," Loghain said. "I'm hardly surprised."

He turned then, and his eyes did widen in surprise. He even recoiled. "Maker's breath," he said.

They all looked, and brought their weapons to the ready. All they saw was a young, blond elf, standing quietly by the memorial stone, smiling from ear to pointy ear. "Chatterly," Loghain said through clenched teeth.

The elf immediately broke into rapid-fire Orlesian. What he was saying was difficult to follow, even for those in his hearing who understood the language well enough, but his wildly gesticulating hands and broad grin seemed to indicate that he was attempting to relate his impressions of the great Battle of the Assassin Squirrels.

"Come on," Loghain said, in a tone of weary resignation. "I need a drink."

He led them back to the tavern and ordered up a round. Chatterly refused to sit or to drink, and merely stood close by the table, smiling. He could keep quiet, it seemed, as energetically as he could speak, and gave the eerie impression of absorbing everything that was said.

"Keep a close watch on your tongues," Loghain cautioned the others, voice pitched so as not to carry far. "The lad hasn't assayed a word of Common, but I believe he can understand it."

"Oo, you think he's a Bard?" Isabela asked, eyes alight with sudden interest.
"I think if he was sent here to spy, they picked a damned dangerous way to introduce him into the country," Loghain said. "He was a catalyst, a sick elf to spread disease amongst our laborers. But people tend to get incautious when they think someone can't understand what they're saying. Believe me, I know that from personal experience, and most of the embassies in this city have suffered for that kind of indiscretion."

"What do you mean?" Varric asked. Loghain grinned wolfishly.

"I mean that, given how most of Thedas so looks down upon Ferelden as a backwards, barbarian land, it seems very difficult for them to believe even after many evidences that anyone who so epitomizes that very backwards barbarism could possibly understand them when they speak their native tongues."

"You speak more than just the King's Tongue?" Hawke asked.

"No."

"But you just said - "

"I speak only one language, but I understand quite a few of them, well enough to get by at least. Never could quite work my tongue around them, though." He reflected upon that for a moment. "Or maybe it's simply a matter of not really caring to."

Isabela chuckled. "So, play up the ambassadors' perceptions of the 'stupid Dog Lord' and listen in on all their private conversations, eh? Loghain Mac Tir -- you're a fox."

"I am hardly to blame for their ridiculous bigoted preconceptions of Ferelden," he said simply. "An ambassador ought to be wiser."

After several rounds, they were joined by a rather sleepy-looking Laz, who sat down, ordered a drink, and asked what they were all doing up so early. No one particularly wanted to cop to killing possessed squirrels and pigeons.

"Oh, just drinking and jawing. Nothing exciting," Varric said.
Ruling wasn't pleasant or at all easy, even ruling only part of a nation. But if you asked Loghain Mac Tir, new by only a handful of years to the trials and tribulations of high nobility, which was the worst of them, he would have answered without hesitation: Servants. Servants to light the fireplaces, servants to wash the floors, servants to shine his bloody armor and servants to lace his sodding boots. He tripped over servants whenever he took a step, or slammed into them if he should stop or turn too quickly. Servants had become the bane of his existence.

He had a manservant now, a valet, though he couldn't bear to use that word at all. What a dreadful word, "manservant," and what a ridiculously Orlesian concept. He was quite capable of dressing himself. What pitiably inept creatures nobles were expected to be. Did they actually like such attentions? He himself spent much of his time devising ways to get the servants out from underfoot. He was becoming very adept at it.

Some of them weren't so bad. They were just poor people, elves mostly, doing their jobs, even if those jobs were ones he would have preferred to do for himself. It was the zealots he couldn't bear, the ones who revered the legend he was surprised and more than a bit dismayed to discover he had become. They were faithful idolaters of a man who did not exist, and he had no way of making them see that he was no more than human.

One among their number particularly irritated him, a young man, scarcely more than a lad, actually, named Imrek. Imrek was technically his squire, although there was slim chance in hell that he would ever become a knight, he simply didn't have the ability or the discipline necessary; he was a sop to those who found it improper for a male knight to have a young female squire. Imrek helped him strap on his armor; Cauthrien was his protégé with all other duties. But whatever the reasons Loghain was saddled with him, the boy was constantly underfoot, a perpetual irritant. If it ended at simple adoration it would have been bad enough, but the lad swaggered, acted as if being nominal squire to the Hero of River Dane bestowed some especial honor and status on his head that made him better than other mere mortals, even those who were in fact far above him both in official rank and personal value.

Loghain had devised a delightful way to rid himself of Imrek; send him to Orzammar with a message for the dwarven King. That message would be something along the lines of, "Please take this young fool and do something with him. I don't care what. He would make an excellent footstool, perhaps." His hand was stayed only because Imrek was simply too young to send off on a cross-country trip like that...and the dwarves had done nothing to deserve being inflicted with him. The Orlesians, perhaps, but then, he would not be seen to give those bastards so much as a dirty sock with a sodding hole in the heel. But it was pleasant to dream.

So a great deal of energy was wasted, daily, in avoiding or misdirecting servants. Sometimes he
just had to get the hell away from them, for the sake of his own sanity, and on those occasions he would go hunting. There were servants who would also prefer to do this for him, in fact he had his own head huntsman, but it was at least something he did not need to invent an excuse to do for himself. But nowadays it was harder than ever to make it out the door for a day alone. It was easy enough to get past the huntsman -- a simple command was usually sufficient. But how exactly did one give the slip to a six year old girl?

Celia was no help at all. She thought it was a "good idea" for he and the girl to spend time together, just the two of them. Maybe she was even right, but, well…

Even though he was still a young man, with many enemies yet to face in life, nothing he had ever encountered, or would ever encounter, frightened him as much as that one creature. Less than three and a half feet tall, with huge blue eyes and long blonde pigtails. His daughter.

So he often had to take her with him when he went out, but even though he worried that he might be a bad influence he had to admit he enjoyed the company. She was quiet, not a chatterbox like most children. Serious. Thoughtful. She paid attention to what he said and followed direction well. And, since he didn't know what else to do with her out there in the woods and his own mother had begun to teach him those things when he was about her age, he taught her what he knew of arrow craft and woodlore. He helped her make her first small shortbow, taught her how to set snares, taught her how to read tracks. She was a quick study.

The first time she killed a rabbit with her bow he saw the way her eyes grew wide and solemn and slightly tearful. She never cried, not ever, and it was a bit of a surprise to him to discover she could feel badly about ending the life of a small, furry creature the same as any other little girl. He had gotten used to thinking of her as something else, something…he didn't know what. Not better, exactly, but harder. He wasn't displeased to note that there was sympathy in her heart, but nothing about her was more terrifying to him than the possibility of tears so he did his best to alleviate the situation. Thinking quickly, he taught her to say a little prayer of thanksgiving for the meat and fur, and a prayer that the spirit of the rabbit would reach the Maker's side. He had no way of knowing it, but the words he felt so silly teaching his daughter were very close to the words of the Dalish ritual his mother had very nearly taught him by mistake so long ago when she first taught him to skin his kill. In any event, the words worked to forestall his daughter's tears, and the warm rabbit fur muff her mother made for her out of the tanned hide kept her in smiles all winter long. A fair trade for the life of one rabbit, he thought. He kept her to target shooting after that, though. At least until she was older.

He just didn't want to damage her, that was the crux of it. She didn't have quite the same advantages he'd had growing up -- her mother was everything a child could ask for, but as a father he felt he left a lot to be desired. He spent a great deal of time away from home even before he went to Denerim to aid Maric's failing rule in the days after Queen Rowan's death, chasing down rumored assassins and bandit gangs, keeping peace in the teyrnir, and that was the best thing he thought he could do for his child. Keep her safe, and keep her away from the worst that was in him. He didn't want her walking in his footsteps.
She went with him, one day that winter, to check on snares he'd set. She followed along behind him, quiet and stoic, with no complaint about the cold or the deep snow. The traveling was easy for her when the snow was heavy enough for Loghain to plow through it; she could walk easily in the track he made. But when the drifts were light enough that he could step through, that made her passage difficult. Her legs were short, his stride was long, and she foundered behind in increasing but silent frustration, cold and growing wet. He noticed, picked her up by the collar of her thick winter coat, and hoisted her into his arms.

She snuggled into his shoulder with a satisfied sigh. "Getting tired?" he asked.

"A little bit, maybe," she said. "Just a little."

"We should be getting home, then," he said. "There's probably a hot meal already waiting for us."

"Okay, Daddy."

Daddy. That was a term he'd never heard before coming to live in Gwaren -- in other parts of Ferelden the term was Da' or Papa or even Dad. Probably any of those would have worked just the same, but the appellation had the effect of a fire bomb on his heart every time she used it instead of the formal "father." It was a reminder of exactly how much responsibility rested upon his shoulders as a primary guardian and teacher of this tiny unformed life, and just how much that really meant to him. Celia had been pregnant four times now: Anora looked more and more like an only child. Just one chance to get it right. He cuddled her closer and carried her back home to the Keep to dry off and warm up.

Late that night, long after everyone else, including most of the damned servants, went to bed, he was up and wandering the halls. He usually did, because it wasn't just the city that made him keyed up and restless -- he was simply pre-keyed, as it were. He stopped into Anora's bedroom just to reassure himself that she was still breathing, something he did fairly often. His night vision was not the same as an elf's but it was keen for a human, so he did not require lights as he made his patrol.

There was enough moonlight filtering in through Anora's window that he could see her eyes were open. She caught his shadow moving against the darkness and gasped slightly. "It's all right, little one," he said quietly. "It's just me. Sorry I woke you."

"Oh. It's okay, Daddy -- I was awake already."
He stepped into the room. "Is something the matter?"

She shrugged her little shoulders. "I'm just not sleepy. Would you tell me a story, Daddy?"

"I…I'm afraid I don't know any stories, little one."

"Everybody knows stories, Daddy," she said, with calm assurance.

"Oh really? Then perhaps you ought to tell me one."

She looked at him consideringly for a moment, then climbed out from under the sleeping furs and held out her arms to him. "All right. Sit down with me and I'll tell you a story, Daddy."

He picked her up and sat down on the edge of the bed with her on his lap. She sat there for a moment lost in thought, then began with the time-honored "Once upon a time…"
Seanna's Big Adventure

Snowfall in the city was very different from the snow that fell over Lake Calenhad. Around the Circle Tower, the constant heavy winds whipped even light flurries into something cruel and frightening, but here, protected by the high city walls and great buildings, the goose feather flakes fell softly. Seanna was enchanted.

For the last two weeks she had enjoyed a freedom she'd never known. She had her own suite of rooms in the palace just a few doors down from Elilia, new clothes provided for her by the Crown, and coin in her purse with no one to tell her how she ought to spend it. Best of all, Elilia had destroyed her phylactery. As long as she met no templar who knew her personally, and was careful to conceal her magic, she had free run of the city. And the honorary title of Royal Attaché to afford her some degree of respect and cooperation from guardsmen and shopkeepers. She decided that today she was going to take full advantage of it. She was going out into the city, and she was going out on her own.

She threw her fine new winter cloak on over her crimson dress robes. She met Elilia in the hall, coming out of her own rooms dressed for the day indoors in one of the fine linen shirts and leather vests the Queen had provided for her. She looked as boyish as ever, but very pretty in Seanna's opinion.

"Hello, Little Bird," Elilia greeted. "My, you look festive. Where are you off to?"

Seanna gestured toward the nearby window. "Its snowing."

Elilia laughed. "Yes, it is, but if you were hoping to get in a snowball fight or make snow spirits I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. It's too warm for this to stick."

"Oh, I don't mind. Its just…I looked outside, I saw the snow falling so prettily, and every face I saw had a smile on it. Smiles! Fereldans don't just smile. I want to go out and enjoy this."

"All by yourself?" Elilia asked. "I'd offer to go with you, but my brother is supposed to be arriving today and I want to be here when he shows."

"All by myself. I've never been out -- anywhere -- on my own before. It'll be an adventure!"
Elilia laughed. "All right. Have fun, but don't get too adventurous. Parts of Denerim I wouldn't go to alone."

"Oh, don't worry. I expect I haven't the courage to wander far. The Palace District, and maybe the High Market Commons; that's enough for me." She went to the window and looked out. "Everyone just seems so happy, and Denerim hasn't exactly been a happy place lately. Is it always like this when it snows?"

"I take it you don't know the old adage."

"What old adage?"

"Orleansians don't fight cold.' Even during the worst of the Rebellion, unless Maric's army forced them into it, the Orlesians wouldn't fight after the first snowfall, and that was with mostly Fereldan foot soldiers. Just refused to face it. They don't have our weather, you know, and I guess they can't deal with real cold. I traveled with an Orlesian during the Blight, and believe me, wintering rough with her was an experience in itself. I daresay that this little flurry wouldn't be enough to stop the chevaliers, but it foretells the onset of real winter. People feel…safe, now. The threat is abated, temporarily at least. The Empress won't risk her ships to the ice and storms, the mountain passes will snow in, and we'll still have to be on our guard but most likely we won't have to worry about any real possibility of further invasion attempts until spring thaw."

"Is that why the King and Queen have gone ahead with so many plans for the holidays?" Seanna asked. "I confess I did wonder about the advisability of having feasts and festivals with an Orlesian sword dangling over our heads."

"They're trying to maintain morale," Elilia said. "Loghain would rather everyone just knuckle down and spend those monies on more practical purposes of national defense, and certainly he has a point, but the Queen does, too -- feasts and festivals help people remember what they have to fight for."

"Spirit is important."

"Right."

"Well, I'll see you later tonight, I suppose, Elilia. I hope your brother arrives safely and you have a happy reunion," Seanna said.
Elilia chuckled. "We will, right up until he finds out that he was invited to the city early so that the Queen can spring the news of my impending nuptials upon him. He *doesn't approve* of the idea of me and Loghain together."

"Could he stand in your way?" Seanna asked, concerned.

"He could try, but though my brother is a courageous man, I don't think he quite has the stones to stand against Queen Anora, Loghain, *and me* all together. He'll just be very upset. Have a good day, dear heart."

*****

Queen Anora entered her sitting room to find it oddly chilled. She glanced at the fireplace and found it blazing properly, so she cast her eyes to the doors that led out to the balcony and found them standing wide open. Her father leaned upon the parapet, one boot kicked out and crossed over the other at the ankle, watching the snow fall silently over the city. Great flakes landed in his hair and stuck there momentarily before melting away. He was not wearing his cloak.

"Father, come in before you make yourself sick," she said crossly. "And do close the doors."

"In a moment, my dear," he said quietly. He stood up and turned to her, crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall heedless of the fact that it was far too low for a man his height to do so safely. He jerked his chin in the general direction of the falling snow. "First snowfall, people are meandering about town looking like they've gotten their Satinalia presents early. It may be a false sense of security, but it's borne out by history. Even *I* feel relieved."

Anora's scowl softened. "I know what you mean. It would be pleasant to believe that we have several months' respite from worry, several months in which to complete our preparations for the worst case scenario."

"We probably do. *I'm* not going to relax. I never do. But it would be a good idea if His Majesty managed to do so. Poor lad has been using himself rather too freely of late, I think."

"I agree. Is that why you're here in my rooms, father? Concern for your son-in-law's health?"
He grimaced. "If only."

He came into the room and closed the balcony doors carefully behind him. He stood before them in an attitude of indecision that worried his daughter greatly. She'd seen her father in a lot of moods, she'd even been just the slightest bit genuinely afraid of him during the last dark days before the Warden faced him at the Landsmeet years ago, but she had never seen him indecisive. It worried her at least as much as the strange deep brooding melancholy that had gripped him during the Blight.

"I…have some things to tell you, and I don't really know how," he said.

Anora swallowed her worries and gestured to the low couch. "Sit with me. I'm listening."

They sat together, Anora primly, with her skirts smooth and her back straight, and Loghain leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his big hands dangling. He sat with his head lowered and a look of consternation on his face for a moment before he smiled and chuckled. "I don't know if you remember that far back, but when you were just a little slip of a girl -- " he held one hand out before him, indicating a height about three feet off the ground -- "I caught you wakeful late one night and you demanded of me a story."

Anora smiled slightly. "I remember. I remember you turned my demand around on me, and made me tell you a story instead."

He laughed. "You should have been a bard. That story has stuck with me through all these years. In the half hour or so it took for you to fall asleep on my lap you slew more dragons and rode more unicorns than any fairy tale princess in history, not that that ilk spends a lot of time slaying dragons typically."

"As I recall my story's 'heroine unknown' rode a few dragons, too," Anora said. "And I also seem to recall that she did so always with her father by her side."

"She did at that. He was quite the legendary figure, as I recall. Never could live up to him."

"All little girls, I think, see their fathers as the biggest, strongest, best men in all the world," she said. "Some learn otherwise all too quickly, others don't find out differently for a long while. I never was completely disillusioned on that score, father, and at risk of sounding immodest I do not believe it is because I am stupid or but poorly attuned to reality."
He shook his head. "You are neither, dear, but still you hold an altogether idealized view of me that simply isn't truthful. But that's as may be. I remember that for all the hard work she did your 'heroine unknown' was rewarded with not gold or jewels but chocolates. That surprised me, I'll confess. I hadn't known you'd ever encountered chocolate before then."

"Blame King Maric. You weren't at home for my Name Day celebration that year -- " she carefully avoided mentioning just how seldom he was home for her Name Day celebrations -- "so you didn't know that His Majesty sent me a gift box of Orlesian chocolates. They were shaped like seashells, and very realistic with their mottled colors of white, milk, and dark chocolate. Filled with praline cream. They were almost too pretty to eat -- almost. Mother let me have one each week, after services at the Chantry. I became quite the model little Andrastian while that box of chocolates held out. Mother made me promise not to tell you about them. You wouldn't have minded that I had sweeties, she said, but you might be angry with the King because they were Orlesian."

"Ha! I probably would have been," he said, a bit shamefacedly. "Anyway, I guess that when I told you, back then, that I didn't know any stories, I wasn't being entirely honest. I do know one, although it certainly isn't anything for a six year old girl to hear at bedtime. I could tell you parts of it now, though…but I warn you, much of it is fairly ugly. And a lot of it you won't like."

"What story is this, father?"

"My story. And yours. The truth behind all the lies and legends."

"That is…a story I have longed to hear my entire life."

He sighed. "It's a damned hard story to tell. But you have a right to it, and maybe it is even something you need to know about." He turned his face to look her in the eye. "Just know that no matter what you think about what you hear, none of it changes you."

"I'm not so certain of that myself, father," Anora said. "History has influence. It might change me quite a little."

"If you take some sort of lesson from it, that's one thing," he said. "But there are things you don't know that are probably going to shock you, maybe make you question yourself. I don't want that."

"Sometimes it's good to question."
He sighed, then put an arm around her shoulders and drew her in close. "Very true, my dear. But I ask your forgiveness in advance: for telling you this story, and for not having told you it before. Now…now I just have to figure out how to begin it."

"Begin at the beginning, work your way through the middle, and when you come to the end, stop," Anora said, lightly despite the strange apprehensive flutter in her stomach. "Sage advice. I shall attempt to follow it." He kissed the top of her head, then smiled. "'Once upon a time…'"

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Seanna made it as far as the royal stables before the progress of her adventure was briefly arrested by the sight of the stablemaster working a beautiful chestnut horse of immense size. The proud creature arched its fine neck and shook its black mane in the falling snow, and she stopped at the edge of the training paddock to watch. She used to look at picture books in the Tower as a little girl, pictures of Fereldan Cob and Antivan Barb and Orlesian Walkers, and dream of one day seeing the beautiful creatures in life rather than colored plates and black and white sketches. But she wasn't sure she'd ever seen a drawing of a horse similar to this. It stood taller at the withers than the total height of the stable master, with long, thickly muscled legs and enormous hooves covered in long white hair that grew on the horse's legs from the knee down. A vague memory stirred.

"Maker's breath, that's an Avvari!" she burst out, then clapped a hand over her mouth as the stablemaster turned to look at her.

"Oh, hello, Miss," he said. "Yes, you're right -- Gladiator here is an Avvari. You're familiar with the breed?"

"Only from books," she said, weakly. "I thought they were extinct."

The stablemaster laughed. "Not quite, though they are awfully rare these days. Once, before we southern barbarians even had war dogs, our ancestors' armored knights terrified their enemies by charging into battle on the backs of steeds just like Gladiator here. But the Tevinters didn't like the Avvari's size, so while they had us in their grasp they bred it down. The Fereldan Cob is one of the results of that, like Georgie-Boy over there," he nodded toward a groom currying a short-legged, stout-bodied horse in the shelter of the stable awning. "The Orlesians did their best to put paid to what was left of the original stock. Scared of heights, I think. But the Queen favors the Avvari, and she's invested in several breeders of the pure strain. Gladiator here is intended as a wedding gift for her Lord father, and I've got to make sure he's well trained before then. This horse won't go
swayback on him, no matter how heavy his armor, and he'll look grand up there, a proper big Fereldan man on a proper big Fereldan horse. She's even had that fey armor smith, Master Wade, make armor for Gladiator to match the stuff she had him make her father. Beautiful work, that. Strange material, though. Looks like dragonbone, but it isn't red like that usually comes out the forge. 'Tis blue. Deep, dark blue."

Seanna knew the secret origins of the blue dragonbone, but she merely said, "It sounds a grand sight indeed. What are you teaching him out here today?"

"Nothing, as it turns out. I wanted to see if he'd been outside in snowfall before. Wedding is on First Day, you know, so the weather is apt to be a bit sloppy at least, though I hope it's fine, but it looks like the big bugger even likes it. He's been trying to eat it as it falls."

Seanna laughed. "Perhaps he thinks it is a sugar snow."

The stablemaster chuckled in response. "Maybe he does at that." He patted the horse affectionately high up on his muscular neck, and gave Seanna a sidelong glance. "I remember you, don't I? You were here with the Lord and Lady when my Mirani's pups imprinted to them."

"Yes, that was me. You have a good memory, Ser."

He chuckled again. "I'm not likely to forget a moment of the day two of my girl's pups went to two of the greatest heroes in Fereldan history. If I may say it, Miss, you look a sight better now than you did then. You seemed a bit…shy and retiring, like. Didn't want to creep out of the shadows and be noticed."

"That…sounds like me," she said. "I guess having good friends changes things for people, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "It does at that. You like horses? If you'd like a tour of the stables I could have one of the lads show you around. I've got to stay with this brute here."

"I…" she started to demur, but stopped herself mid-thought. "I think I'd like that, Ser, if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all. There's a new recruit the army has put to work here, I'm sure he'd be happy to
"An army recruit? Why would he be stationed to the royal stables?"

"Well, Miss, I oversee the army stables as well as the King's, so there's that, and I kind of like to keep the lad close so's I can kind of watch out for him, because...well...I guess you'll see for yourself. *Oy, Lightning!*"

A moment later, a young man in rusty splintmail old enough to qualify as antique stepped out of the shadows of the stable, and he was indeed carrying a scoop shovel. Seanna was startled to realize that he was an elf. "Yes, Ser?"

"Lay aside your weapon, lad. This young lady is a friend of the Lady Cousland, and she'd like to meet some of the King's nags. Why'n't you introduce her around?"

The young elf saluted. "Yes, Ser." He leaned his shovel against the stable wall. "Right this way, Ma'am," he said, and stepped aside to allow Seanna to enter the stable.

"So, what would you like to see? His Majesty has a bit of everything here; chargers, racers, saddlebreds...what's your interest?"

"At the moment, you. You're obviously the alienage elf that I'd heard enlisted in the army. What made you sign up?"

He chuckled and scratched the back of his head. "More and more, I'm beginning to think it was arrogance," he said. "I hope I had better motives than that. I signed up the same night that Lord Loghain saved us all from the Bloody Lung. I thought it was something I could do to help my country and my people both."

"It sounds very noble. Has it been difficult?"

"Not any more so than any other job I've worked. They haven't even started training me, just issued me a shovel and set me to work cleaning the stables. I try and tell myself that all recruits start this way..."
"Recruitment is up, I'm told, but I don't see any other young soldiers mucking stables."

"Not as their sole duty, at least," he said. "I'll work faithfully, whether they use me as a soldier or not. I just hope some day they'll give me a chance to prove myself."

They talked awhile longer and he showed her the horses. They were beautiful animals, but her interest was piqued more by the handsome young man. She was quite a bit older than he, she thought -- he could not have been more than twenty-five -- but the way his friendly black eyes appreciated her delicate features and the plunging neckline of her robes she thought he didn't much mind.

After some time had passed, Seanna reluctantly said her goodbyes. "I should let you get back to your duties."

"It was wonderful to meet you, Seanna," he said. "I hope perhaps you'll visit me again sometime. I…suspect this is where you'll find me."

She smiled. "I think I'd like that, Private Lightning."

He started to walk away, then hesitated and came back. "I know we just met, and this isn't exactly very good manners of me to ask, but I wonder if you could perhaps do a favor for me? If it's not too far out of your way, that is."

"You can certainly ask."

"The paymaster has given me partial wages for the last month, to cover the two weeks I've been with the army. Recruits are given liberty every other week's end, but, well…I haven't received a furlough myself, yet. I worry about my family in the alienage, with no money to sustain them, and I worry about keeping the money with me here. I wonder if you could take it to our Hahren, Valendrian, for me? He would ensure that it went to my family. His home is just across from the vhenadahl, you can't miss it."

"I would do that for you gladly, but would you trust me with your money after having known me for such a short time?"
He shrugged and smiled. "I know it is perhaps unwise of me to trust incautiously, but I've also been
told that it is best to go with your instincts, and my instincts tell me you wouldn't cheat a fellow
elf."

"I hope I wouldn't cheat anyone. But I thank you for your trust."

"And I thank you, Seanna, for this kind service. Hopefully someday I can return the favor." He
reached into his belt pouch and gave her a small coin purse. It wasn't very full, but even a few
silvers was a fortune to an alienage elf, Seanna had heard.

She tipped a brief curtsey and left the stables, headed directly for the alienage in the low market
commons. That was a bit more adventure than she had prepared herself for, and the alienage was
certainly one of those places where even a strong woman might think twice about going alone, but
it was broad daylight, and she was an elf…and if worse came to worst, she had magic at her
command, even if she had left her staff in her rooms.

There were a few gimlet stares for the elf in fine clothing as she entered this poorest enclave of
Denerim's poor, but no one bothered her. She found the Hahren's brave little house easily enough.

A white-haired old man answered her tentative knock. "Yes? May I help you?"

"Hahren Valendrian? Private Lightning Tabris asked me to bring you his army wages, to give to
his family."

"Lightning? He's calling himself Lightning? Oh, where are my manners? Won't you come in?"

She didn't want to stay, but she didn't particularly care to stand in the street either. "Thank you."

"You are a friend of…'Lightning's'?" Valendrian enquired once the door was closed behind her.

"We only just met, actually, but he was worried and decided to trust me with the delivery. I take it
that Lightning is not his real name?"

"No, but I think I understand why he has changed it. His real name would likely cause great offense
to his fellow soldiers, considering he is an elf. Tell me, does he seem happy with the choice he has made?"

"He seems determined, I think. He understands that it is a difficult task he's set for himself, but he wants to help in any way he can. I believe he will be an excellent example for the elven people to follow."

Valendrian's tired face registered relief. "I am glad to hear that. I was surprised and not just a bit dismayed when I discovered he had left the alienage to enlist."

A redheaded woman burst in through the front door. "Hahren, I -- oh. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had company."

"Shianni, this is…I'm sorry, I'm afraid I didn't ask your name."

"Seanna. Seanna Surana."

Both elves gawped at her. "Seanna…Surana? Little Seanna? But you were taken…to the Circle…" Valendrian said.

"I…yes, I am a mage," Seanna said, with a blush. "I would prefer that wasn't bandied about, however, if at all possible. You…know of me?"

"My dear…you were born here," Valendrian said.

"Your parents were my next-door neighbors," said red-headed Shianni. "I grew up playing with your brother and sisters."

"I…have family? Here?"

The alienage elves shared a look. "Not…any longer, I'm afraid, child," Valendrian said heavily. "The Tevinters…"
"Oh. I understand." Seanna swallowed hard. So, Loghain had ripped away her last chance to connect with her family. Or the blood mages who were messing with his mind, either one. "There's no need to speak of it. Please."

"Thank you, child. Shianni, you needed something of me?"

"Oh. Right. Well, its that bastard Kern again, only worse this time. He broke into the stockroom where you're keeping the extra food the Crown sent to support us. He's hoarding again."

"Blast. Seanna, I'm afraid I must deal with this. If it isn't too much trouble, perhaps you could deliver Lightning's wages to his family yourself? I can point their house out to you."

"Thank you, Hahren, I would be happy to do it."

They left his little house and he pointed her up the street to a corner building a little nicer than most of the others, meaning the roof was almost intact. "That is the Tabris residence. You'll find Nesiara inside."

"Thank you, Hahren."

Seanna walked up the street to the little house and knocked on the door. A young woman with long blonde hair answered, very pretty, and also very clearly not related to Lightning in any perceptible way. "May I help you?" she asked uncertainly.

"Hello. My name is Seanna Surana. Private Lightning Tabris asked me to bring his wages to his family…?"

"Lightning? You mean Loghain? Oh, wonderful! I was beginning to worry about him. Tell me, is he well?"

"His name is Loghain? Now I understand why he didn't give the army recruiters his real name. Anyway, he looked quite well and happy to be doing something to help Ferelden, and eager to do more. Here -- this is his pay for his two weeks' service."
"Oh, good. Adaia needs new mittens for the winter, and I was afraid there would be no money to buy the wool to knit them."

"Adaia is…?"

"Our daughter. She's with one of the elders, being taught her letters, or I'd introduce you."

Their daughter. Hers and Lightning's. Seanna ought to have guessed. She had heard that in the alienage, you were not considered an adult until you were married, and the difficulties of life forced many to adulthood very early. "Lightning" had probably been a family man since he was fifteen, or even younger. She felt a little twinge of jealousy and sorrow for all the simple, natural experiences her cursed magic had denied her. She forced a smile to her face.

"I'm sure she's beautiful. Well, I should be getting home. Good day to you, and it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

*****

Anora sat in her chambers for a long time after her father departed, her head reeling. There was too much to process; her father was a half-blood, his mother was a Dalish elf. And on top of that, he told her of how he'd been held down, helpless, his head ratcheted back by strong hands, forced to watch while she was brutalized and viciously slain. It was…almost impossible for her to imagine her father helpless. She couldn't picture the child he must surely have been, it seemed as unlikely a creature as those unicorns she'd imagined long ago.

Wrapping her mind around the concept of her own heart pumping elven blood through her veins was difficult. She had never thought herself prejudiced, she had been raised to treat all equally -- equally **badly**, some said, but the important part was equally. It might be easier to deal with this new information if she could but determine whether it was the knowledge that she was part elven or the fact that she had lived almost forty years not knowing she was part elven that bothered her most.

The information was dangerous, she knew -- to herself and her children. Alistair probably wouldn't care, if he were to learn of it, but the Landsmeet…oh, the Landsmeet would have plenty to say, for certain. Most of them were still affronted by the fact that Maric appointed a half-blood to the arling of South Reach. They would demand an immediate annulment of her marriage, or a divorce if the Chantry made difficulties. But annulments and divorces were rare dispensations indeed. Much more common, throughout the history of Thedas, was either the surreptitious assassination of the offending Crown Matrimonial…or a public execution. Granted there was no history of that in
Ferelden, but Ferelden was a young nation compared to most. But Alistair would never stand for it…provided he had the strength to stand.

She found that she was a trifle angry with her father for telling her this story at all, even though she had asked for it many times in the past. She understood precisely what he'd meant when he'd apologized both for telling her these things so late, and for telling her at all. Moreover, she understood what he'd meant when he kissed her and left, saying, "If you want to see me later, I'll be in my rooms." There was some small part of her that didn't want to see him again. It might take a while for that small part to die away.

Her seneschal entered the sitting room. "Your Majesty, you asked that I inform you when Teyrn Fergus Cousland arrives at the palace - his retinue has just entered the grand hall."

"What? Oh. Yes, that's good. Allow His Grace an hour in which to settle in and speak with Lady Cousland. After that, speak to him and tell him I would like to see him. Make it the Little Audience Chamber."

The seneschal clicked his heels smartly and bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Anora watched the man leave and then sighed and prepared herself. This new…information…changed nothing, just as her father had said before even telling her. Set it aside for now and get on to business. There was always more work to be done.

*****

"Sister!"

"Fergus! Putting on your winter weight already, I see," Elilia teased, as she gave her brother a hug.

"The city is warm, Sister. The wind off the Cliffs of Conobar is bitter and cuts right through to the bone," he said, grinning.

"Ha! How much weight will you recommend I pick up to protect me from the cold of Gwaren's winters?" she asked.
"Sister, I recommend you stay inside during Gwaren's winters. Under a pile of heavy blankets and furs, in a room with several blazing hearths."

"That won't do much for my cachet with the locals," she said. "They face the winters head-on, and I don't think they have much love for those who won't."

"Gwareners are insane, Sister. And very thick-bodied." He stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest. "So it's true, then; the rumor that their Majesties are offering you Gwaren. The Queen's idea, I presume. What are her terms?"

"Only that I make her daughter my legal heir," Elilia said.

"Mm hmm. What about the other half of that rumor?"

"I don't listen to the rumor mill, Brother. Elucidate, please."

"It is rumored, dear Sister, that you are to wed. The Queen's father."

"Rumors are such silly things, don't you think? Sometimes it seems to me that people will say anything just to create a sensation."

"That's not an answer, Sister, that is an evasion."

"It's an accepted strategy."

"Sister, please. No jokes. Just tell me. Are you and Loghain going to marry?"

"That's the plan, Fergus, yes."

"Maker's breath."
"You should be happy, Fergus. I don't have many years left in which to make little Cousland heirs for you, after all."

"Mac Tir heirs, you mean."

"Nonsense. Anora didn't take her husband's last name. Either time. Why should I?"

"Sister, can't you do anything by the book?"

"Brother, the 'book' you speak of was written ages ago -- by men. I don't consider that it has any application in my life."

Fergus sighed deeply. "All right, so perhaps your children will be Cousland in name, Sister, but they will still be Mac Tirs in blood, and - "

"And what? Mac Tir blood is good enough to sit the throne. Isn't it good enough to grace the Keep at Highever? Any child I bear will be sired by Loghain Mac Tir, Brother, and I'm sorry if you don't like that, but the fact of the matter is that no child of mine will be Loghain Mac Tir. If the idea is simply too reprehensible to you, then feel free to remarry and produce your own heirs. I am not particularly sold on the concept of motherhood, anyway."

"Sister, I -- "

"No, Fergus. I love and honor you, and because I do, this conversation is over."

*****

"Lord Loghain, I've been looking over some rough schematics I happened upon…"

"Dworkin. 'Happening upon' things generally implies a certain degree of treachery. From whom did you 'happen upon' these schematics?"

"Er…from you, Ser."
Loghain turned to glare fiercely at the dwarven inventor. "And just how did you 'happen upon' schematics that were in my possession?"

"Don't get your knickers in a knot; I saw them on your writing desk last time we discussed your plans for improvements to the city wall. Since that was more Voldrick's bailiwick, I had time to glance over them. Some good concepts there, to be honest with you. Who engineered them?"

Loghain scratched the back of his head and looked sheepish. "No one. That is to say, they're just… ideas. I'm no engineer."

"I am."

"You…think you could do something with them?"

"Your Lordship…I know I can do something with them."

******

"What exactly are you up to? What plan is my sister fulfilling for you? Is this all just about getting your father's nobility reinstated? Or is there something deeper and more devious under the surface?"

"Teyrn Fergus. Straight to the point, I see. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, I prefer to stand."

"As you will. Well, I see I don't need to debrief you on the basics, at least. Yes, your sister intends to marry my father. Whether you believe it or not, this was not through any office of mine. I merely chose to take advantage of a preexisting condition. Granted, they might not have married legally without my machinations; your sister seems somewhat opposed to the concept, for which I am in no position to blame her. Marriage is often an institution wherein the woman suffers, at the very least, a diminishment. That will not be the case with my father, at least in the way he treats her. How she is viewed by others outside the marriage is, unfortunately, a different matter. But I am certain she will be able to hold her own."
"How my sister is viewed after this is only one of my concerns."

"I understand. Will it help you to learn that the intention is to grant my father only the title of Teyrn-Consort once all is in place? He will have no vote of his own in the Landsmeet, and only as much power to rule over the teyrnir as Elilia allows him."

"That is of very little comfort, Your Majesty. Elilia will allow him a great deal of latitude."

"Do you not trust your sister's judgment? She has proven herself quite a capable leader, I think."

"I -- that's not what I --"

"Fergus, I understand. Elilia is your baby sister, and all the family that remains to you. But she is a grown woman, and by whatever guides such things as this, she is in love. Frankly I would have preferred my father marry a woman more…opposite him, if I am to tell the truth. Someone who could balance out the extremes of his nature. Elilia is rather extreme herself, but I think they could be good for each other."

Fergus seemed to shrink slightly inside his clothes. "I…want my sister to be happy, and I am not…quite of the same opinion held by many of the Landsmeet. My father respected yours, and Elilia respects him, and she seems able to trust him in spite of what happened during the Blight. I… I will support your proposal in the Landsmeet, Your Majesty. For Elilia. Because it is what she wants."

"Thank you, Teyrn Fergus. I appreciate your support, and I know that your sister will, as well."

****

"Hello, Elilia. Did your brother arrive? You look a bit…perturbed."

"He arrived. And we had words. It will be all right, but it's got me perturbed, as you say, for now. What about you, Little Bird, did you have a good adventure? You don't look particularly happy, yourself."
"I…I actually had quite a lovely day, for the most part," Seanna said.

"Uh huh. And for the other part?"

"I…met a young man."

"Well, that can be good or bad, depending on the man. Tell me; do I need to break out the champagne, or do I need to break a skull?"

Seanna smiled, slightly. "Neither. It was just a chance encounter. He was very friendly, and very attractive…and very married."

"Oh. Yeah, that kind of puts a damper on the scale of attraction, at least for most women."

"It just…it brought home to me all that I've missed out on in life, thanks to my magic. I was born in the Denerim alienage. If I hadn't been a mage, I would have lived there all my life, most likely. I would have married young, had children…and possibly I'd be scrubbing floors in some Tevinter's manor house right now, like the rest of my family. So I suppose it's not all bad. Still, I'm not certain I wouldn't have preferred such a life to…what I experienced in the Circle. After…"

"After Jowan."

"Yes."

"How bad was it, Seanna? I mean, you told me some things…"

Seanna sighed. "I spent most of a decade in solitary confinement. That alone was…brutal."

"And then the templars abused you."

"Some of them. There are always…bad apples. Greagoir would have had them hauled out and
flayed, before sending them to Aeonar, if he'd known of it, but…”

"What's Aeonar?"

"The mages' prison, or so they call it. I don't know of any mages who have ever been sent there, though. In fact, the only person I know who was sent there, if it exists, was a Chantry initiate who broke her vows and tried to help a blood mage escape the tower. Jowan, in point of fact. It's a threat, to keep mages and templars alike in line. If it's worse than the Circle, it must be hell on earth."

"Where is this Aeonar?"

"Somewhere in Ferelden, it is said, but I don't know where. In fact, I don't think anyone knows where, outside of the Chantry higher-ups."

"Wonder if Loghain knows of this? Seems to me he wouldn't be too happy to learn that the Chantry potentially has an unknown templar stronghold in this nation."

That prompted a wider, but even more bitter, smile. "If he should ever find it, let me know. I would love to watch him tear the wretched place asunder."

"Ha. You and I both, dear heart."

"Meeting that young man today…it made me think of things I’ve tried to forget. Back before…before I got into trouble for helping Jowan escape, there was a templar. Young, a new recruit. Very green, very idealistic…and very kind-hearted. I think he was attracted to me, actually. Always blushed and stammered whenever I was near, though honestly he did that a lot regardless of whether I was near or not. Cullen, his name was. After what happened with the other mages…with the demons…he changed."

"I met Cullen. He went through a terrible ordeal at Uldred's hands. He was the Knight-Commander of Kirkwall, last I knew, helping to rebuild after the blowup, but I don’t know what he’s doing now."

"I know. But before Greagoir sent him away…"
Elilia's hands curled into tight fists. "Was he one of the bastards that raped you?"

Seanna shook her head. "No. No, he never did that. But he was one of the templars that brought Jowan back to the Circle after he was captured at Redcliffe. He brought him to the dungeons where I was held. He…he cut off Jowan's head in front of me. I think he thought it might give me some kind of comfort to witness."

"Huh. So that's what I sent Jowan back to. I'm sorry, Little Bird. In spite of what he did, I think he was a good man. And I know he was your friend."

"In spite of what he did."

"You paid for those mistakes far more than he did, I think."

"They were my mistakes as well as his."

"Your punishment was disproportionate to your 'crime,' Little Bird, and if I have my way, there will be a reckoning. The Chantry owes a debt it can never repay."
Two years. Anora had not seen her father for two years. He’d sent gifts, fairly regularly in fact, and sometimes he sent messages to her mother -- terse updates, characteristically bereft of any emotion. But the last one…it said he was coming home. Not permanently, only for a month or so, but still…

He left when word came from Denerim about Queen Rowan’s death, word from Mother Ailis that King Maric needed his help. He didn’t say goodbye when he went; he never did, he didn’t like goodbyes. Anora, young as she was, had a strong feeling that he’d had to say too many goodbyes, of the permanent variety. He just patted her on the head, mounted up, and rode away.

That was shortly after the incident with mother’s rose bush. Even though she was just a child, Anora’s instincts were very keen and rather sophisticated. She understood what happened in her father’s mind when that wilting flower died beneath his touch. The rational part of his brain, the only part he would ever admit to, knew it was ridiculous to assume he’d killed Celia’s white rose bush, but a deeper part, the part that bought into the old superstitions, the part that fed the part of him that hated himself, believed that he spread death like a plague. And Anora knew that part was what kept him running away from his family.

She was excited, hopeful, and a little afraid to see him again. Her mother fed her on tales of his heroism and all that Ferelden owed to him, and Anora revered her father. When he allowed her the luxury, she loved him as well. She hoped that when he next returned to Denerim he might take her with him; she was old enough now, at thirteen, surely. She loved her mother dearly, but her father was special; they were very much alike, and she shared more kinship with him than her quiet, retiring mother. She was eager to see the big city, too, and the palace.

She had been there once before, six years ago, with father and mother both. That was the last time her mother went to Denerim. Celia did not like the city, it made her feel closed-in, and the nobles, either at the Landsmeet or in social circles, made her nervous and self-conscious. Anora had enjoyed it; she liked the crowded markets, the beautiful clothes, and even though the palace was not as pretty as such an edifice ought to be, she liked the massive presence of it. King Maric was a kind man, though he treated her with a humorous, comradely condescension that was hardly her preference, and Prince Cailan had been a willing accomplice in her schemes, nicely malleable even if, as a boy, he was hardly an ideal playmate. He was more or less her only playmate, though now she was old enough to know that matters between them would be forever complicated by that marriage contract King Maric had insisted upon. She wasn’t exactly eager to marry anyone, it seemed a disagreeable sort of union for a girl of her independent nature, but at least Cailan didn’t have warts on his face or fingers, like a lot of boys she knew. Her overall impression, at this point, of boys as a species was that they were remarkably prone to warts and usually smelled bad.
There was no way of knowing exactly when her father would arrive, so life had to go on as usual in the meantime, much as was possible. She tamped down her impatience and continued her daily regimen of exercise, schoolwork, gardening, archery practice, and pleasure reading. She enjoyed working with her mother amongst the flowers -- the nasturtium and tulips especially were their "together flowers" that mother and daughter both tended lovingly. But mother's roses... those were her especial province, and Anora did not intrude upon Celia's work when she was among them. It was not something she could ever remember having been told, it was simply accepted in her mind that mother worked the roses when she wished to be alone with her thoughts and the beautiful blooms she loved. Anora sat on a bench nearby and read instead.

That was what she was doing when she heard the dull clop of hooves coming up the dirt track from the nearby entrance to the Brecilian Passage. She did not look up at first. Riders from Denerim were never exactly common, the Passage was dangerous, but there were enough of them yearly that the sound did not automatically make her expect her father. When the hoof beats kept getting louder and closer, however, she knew that someone was approaching the Keep, someone with a good-sized retinue.

She looked up as the Gwaren banner-carrier rode through the gates. She was not at all surprised to see that father had set Imrek to carry the flag, rather than the usual herald. It made the self-important jackass feel more important, but it also kept him several riders away from her father. Guards rode in next, in heavy plate, and then Cauthrien, looking more grown-up than Anora remembered her, and then...

How very typical of her father to ride at the back of the line, rather than surrounded by guards near the front as he was supposed to. Oddly, he was not wearing armor. Nor did it appear as though he'd worn it at all through the long trip; his leather trousers were filthy and his rough-weave linen shirt showed signs of heavy weather. It rained nearly every day this time of year, brief but drenching downpours that were chillingly cold, but which her stubborn sire would undoubtedly press on through regardless. The entire line of men and women looked decidedly sodden. The retinue moved their horses carefully through the Teyrna's garden with respectful hails, and her father brought his mount up and climbed off.

Celia and Anora both rose to their feet when the riders came in; they stood and watched in silence, tense and a bit nervous, as Loghain emptied his saddlebag of its overflowing contents. A rose bush, half-grown, and although it was very early, a single white rose budded on it. Anora was in a good position to see her father's side, the side that took the damage from the rose's thorns; his shirt was ripped and bloody. It was a lesson for her that she never forgot; beautiful as it was, the delicate flower had drawn blood from the mighty warrior.

He stepped forward, flower in hand, and silently offered the rose bush to his wife. There was an expression on his face Anora puzzled over momentarily: it was patience, apology, sorrow, and fear all mixed together, but mostly it was apology. It took some time before Anora knew exactly what he was apologizing for. Not the dead rose bush, or even for having been gone two long years, but for not being the husband and father he knew his family needed.
Celia took the offering, smiled at the pale beauty of the single bud rose, and set the plant aside in order to throw her arms around her husband's strong shoulders and hug him; no thought of forgiveness in her mind because it never occurred to her to suppose her husband had anything to apologize for. They were a bit of an odd couple, Anora supposed: her mother, quiet even when she spoke, small and delicate and beautiful even though that beauty was unadorned, and not given to question her simple faith in the Maker, in her nation, and in her husband. Her father, quiet only until he spoke, big and brash and beautiful only in his strength and skill, and given to question any and everything, most especially himself, though he never let his questions stand in the way of what he saw as his duty. They came together and created her, somewhere in between the two of them.

When next her father returned to Denerim, Anora went with him. On that occasion, she continued to indulge the youthful mischievousness she had enjoyed previously, though with a slight edge of flirtation added to it. Then they returned home and stayed in Gwaren for another year and a half... and then her mother died.

It was rather unexpected; though she was small and appeared fragile, Teyrna Celia was a strong country woman and the picture of health. But Anora's birth had been difficult, and three other pregnancies had ended in miscarriage. She desperately wanted another child, a son to carry on the Mac Tir name for the next generation. The final attempt at making that wish a reality ended not in life but in death, for both her and the baby she carried. Had the child lived, Anora would at last have had that brother her mother wanted so very much for her to have. Anora was fifteen at the time, an age when daughters are generally actively pulling away from their parents -- their fathers perhaps particularly. Celia's death brought her closer to him. He needed looking after; he was capable but oddly impractical about some very basic things, like his health. Then, too, the household needed care and attention, and her father was completely oblivious to the running of such things. She threw herself into the task of being the new Lady Mac Tir with all the poise and skill King Maric's fancy tutors had drummed into her, and charmed not a few people with her grace and beauty.

Some little while after her mother's death, long enough for the first shock to wear off but not nearly long enough for the deep ache of grief to subside, they returned to Denerim together, there to put the hard memories behind them and heal. The nobility, who had scarcely acknowledged Teyrna Celia, and indeed had very nearly forgotten all about her, crowded round to offer half-honest condolences. Anora did her best to avoid this first crush of well-wishers and curiosity-seekers. She did, however, overhear something that stayed with her long after.

It was Bryce Cousland, not exactly a friend of her father's, if he could be said to have friends, but at least a man he respected and who seemed to have more than the usual respect for him. He gave his condolences, more genuine than most, and then commiserated on the loss of the son who never drew breath.

"I know it must be a wrench, losing your heir."
"I have an heir," her father had said.

"Well, yes, but not really, right? Anora is set to marry Prince Cailan; she won't inherit Gwaren. And even if she did, the Teyrnir would fall under the name of her husband. I know it's too early to consider it now, but you really ought to remarry and keep trying for that son. Now that the Mac Tir name is one to be reckoned with, it should be perpetuated."

"My girl is enough."

Anora overheard those words, stated as simple incontrovertible fact, with a little thrill of pride. It hardened her resolve to be a woman of substance, with pride of place in the world.

The pinnacle came at one of King Maric's diplomatic fetes, held in honor of a visit from Empress Celene -- a tense affair for all involved. As the only woman available to represent Gwaren, and as the King himself had no Lady to represent the Crown, Anora was called upon to act as hostess of the event, side-by-side with Eleanor Cousland of Highever but with, perhaps, slightly more office in the event than the elder stateswoman. She was, after all, the daughter of Ferelden's greatest general, representative of the future generation of men and women capable of overcoming the crème de la crème of Orlesian's chevaliers, and betrothed to the Crown Prince. She was meant to be highly visible on this occasion.

It was well that her place was near the head of the table, for while the heir sat to the right hand of the King as was traditional, she sat in her father's usual seat to his left. Her father sat, for this occasion, to her left, and this put her in excellent place to keep close tabs on him. He glowered throughout the entire affair with a terrible fierceness even for him, but he was allowed no other vent for his feelings. Each time he opened his mouth to make some cataclysmically undiplomatic statement Anora, who knew her father very well indeed, deftly popped some choice tidbit from the banquet into it with a mild, "Try this, father: isn't it sumptuous?" The food was Orlesian, and Loghain didn't like it for more than merely patriotic reasons -- why on earth did everything have to be slathered with sauce? The clear and present threat presented by the nearby platter of escargots quickly taught Loghain, who had eaten far less pleasant things than snails in his life, to keep his mouth clamped firmly shut.

Despite these machinations in the name of preventing a diplomatic incident and potential bloodshed, Anora did not like Celene, who she found both superficial and highly artificial. Several years younger but already one of the most powerful women -- the most powerful people -- in Thedas, she was overprivileged and greatly overindulged, and also an incorrigible flirt who practiced her childish wiles on every man at the table, with special emphasis on Cailan who was regrettably susceptible. Celene even made some cute comment about the attractiveness of the "strong, silent type," with a coquettish twinkle in Loghain's direction, but Loghain merely scowled
his fiercest in return. So no, Anora was not pleased to play court to such a creature, but she had mastered the art her father knew of but had never learnt to employ: grace and courtesy that was be at least as effective as blades for destroying your enemies. By the end of the evening, her sparkling presence caused the Empress to burst out with the only unscripted remark she'd made the entire time: "Anora of Ferelden is a solitary rose amongst the brambles." The comment made Anora smile. Roses were beautiful, graceful, attractive…but they were hardly defenseless. She thought that Celene, childish and silly-headed as she seemed, was fully aware of that very fact when she said it. Anora wanted her to be aware of it. One day she would be Queen, and while she would be as beautiful, graceful, and attractive as she could be in that office, she would keep her thorns sharp. She was a Mac Tir; she was dangerous no matter how prettily she was packaged.

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