

DRAGON AGE: THE CALLING

DAVID GAIDER



DRAGON AGE™

THE CALLING

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Dragon Age: The Stolen Throne

Dragon Age: The Calling

DAVID GAIDER

DRAGON AGE™

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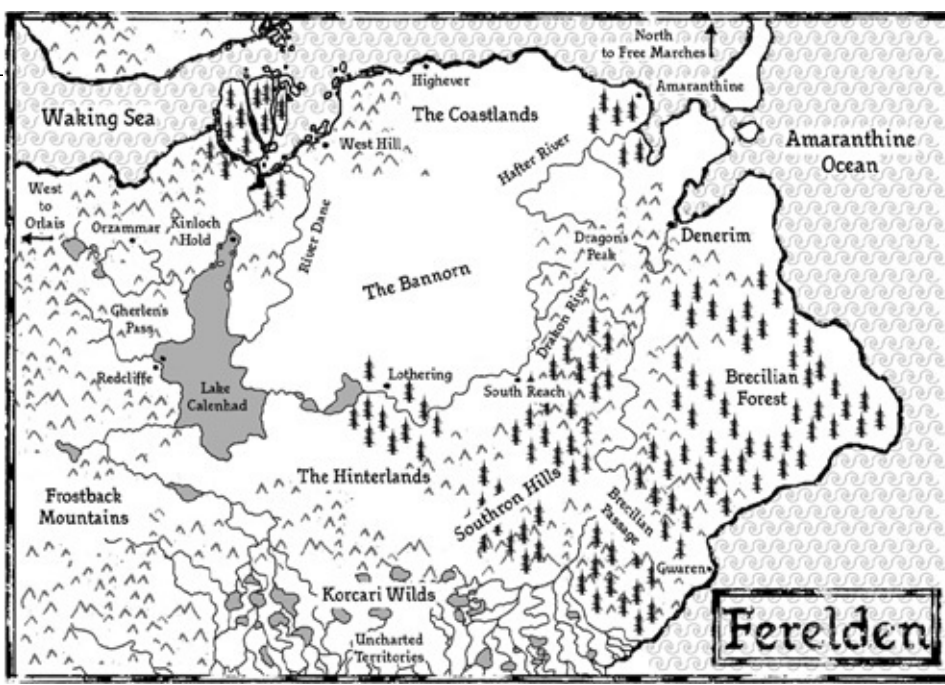
To Lee, my biggest fan

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DRAGON AGE™

THE CALLING

1

In the absence of light, shadows thrive.

—Canticle of Threnodies 8:21

Less than a year earlier, the only way Duncan would have seen the inside of a palace would have been at the sword-point of a prison guard. Perhaps not even then. In Orlais, lowly street thieves didn't receive the benefit of a judgment handed down personally by the local lord. There, the best one could hope for was a bored magistrate in a dingy courtroom as far away from the glittering estates of the aristocracy as they could manage.

But this wasn't Orlais, and he wasn't just a street thief any longer. He was inside the royal palace in Denerim, the capital city of Ferelden . . . and he was not particularly impressed.

The city was gripped in the winter winds that blew in from the south, and Duncan had never been so cold in his entire life. Everyone in Ferelden wrapped themselves up in thick leathers and furs, trudging heedlessly through the snowy streets, and yet no matter how much clothing he wore he could still feel the chill right down to his bones.

The palace was little better. He had hoped for some warmth here, at least. Perhaps a few mighty hearths with fires blazing, enough to keep the place toasty warm. But no, instead he was left sitting alone on a bench in a hall with frosty stone walls that loomed high overhead. There were probably pigeons nesting in the wooden rafters, judging by the filthy floors, and he saw little about in the way of ornamentation. These Fereldans liked their doors large, solid, and made of oak. They liked the wooden sculptures of dogs and their smelly beer and they even seemed to like their snow. Or at least that was what he had been able to tell in the day or so since he'd arrived.

What they didn't like were Orlesians. There had been only a handful of palace servants and functionaries that passed through the hall while he waited, and all of them had shot him glances that ranged from suspicion to outright hostility. Even the two elven maids that came through with shy eyes and nervous twitters had stared at Duncan as if he were surely about to run off with the silverware.

Still, it was possible that all the looks might have had nothing to do with the fact that he was from Orlais. He didn't look the part, after all. His swarthy skin and mop of dark hair marked him as Rivainian for one. The black leather armor he wore was covered in straps and buckles, running all the way up his arms and legs in a manner far removed from the more practical local style. Not to mention the two daggers on his belt that he didn't bother to hide. None of those things marked him as a reputable person, not by Fereldan standards.

Really, if anyone was staring at him it should have been for the grey tunic he wore, adorned with the

symbol of a rearing griffon. In any other nation in Thedas that griffon alone would have drawn raised eyebrows and nervous glances . . . but not in Ferelden. Here it was all but unknown.

Duncan sighed listlessly. How much longer was he going to have to wait?

Eventually the great wooden door at the end of the hall swung open and admitted a female elf. She was petite even for her kind, almost waiflike, with short mousy brown hair and large expressive eyes. She looked annoyed, as well, which didn't surprise Duncan in the least. As a mage, she would have drawn more stares even than he. Not that she dressed much like a mage, eschewing their traditional robes for a hauberk of finely meshed chain and a long blue linen skirt, but she did carry her staff with her. It was polished white, with a silvery ball clasped in a claw at its end that gave off a constant and diffuse flow of magical power. She brought it everywhere.

The elf strode across the hall toward him, her boots clicking on the stone floor loud enough to echo. Her annoyed expression gave way to amusement as she reached him.

"Still here, I see," she chuckled.

"Genevieve would cut off my feet if I went anywhere."

"Ah, poor Duncan."

"Shut up, Fiona," he snorted. His rejoinder lacked heat, however. He knew the elf probably did have some sympathy for him . . . well, a little, perhaps. Maybe a smidgen. There simply wasn't anything she could do to help him. He sighed and glanced up at her. "Did you see the Commander?"

Fiona nodded soberly toward the door behind her. "She's still negotiating with the captain of the city watch, thanks to you."

"Negotiating? She does that?"

"Well, *he's* negotiating. She's staring him down and not budging an inch, of course." Fiona regarded him with a raised eyebrow. "You're rather lucky, all things considered, you know."

"Yes, lucky," he sighed, sinking dejectedly back down onto his bench.

They waited for several minutes, the mage leaning on her white staff next to him, until finally the sound of voices approached from beyond the doors. They slammed open and two people entered. The first was a white-haired woman, a warrior in formidable-looking plate armor that covered her entire body. Her face was sharp and worn with many years of command, and she strode with the powerful confidence of one who expected no impertinence and usually found none.

The second was a dark-haired man in the resplendent yellow robes marking him as First Enchanter Remille of the Circle of Magi, the ranking mage in Ferelden. It was perhaps odd, then, that his pointed beard and the waxed curls of his mustache marked him as an Orlesian. The sort of man, Duncan assumed, that believed he could fare far better away from the Empire, even if it meant assuming a position of authority in a backwater nation that had thrown off Orlesian rule only eight years ago. At least in this case, his belief seemed to be correct.

The mage simpered after the warrior, and she did her best to ignore him. "Lady Genevieve"—he wrung his hands nervously— "are you certain—"

She paused, spinning about to glare at him. "You may call me Genevieve," she snapped. "Commander. Nothing else."

"My apologies, Commander," he quickly assured her. "Are you certain that was necessary? Your order does not wish to antagonize King Maric, after all. . . ."

"We have already antagonized King Maric." Genevieve shot a withering glance in Duncan's direction, and he did his best to shrivel up out of sight behind Fiona. "And our order will bow to no authority, especially not some foolish watch captain who believes he possesses more power than he does." She cut off further protest by marching over to where Duncan sat.

He avoided her glower. "I trust you are satisfied?" she demanded.

"Maybe if I'd gotten away with it."

"Don't be a child." Genevieve gestured sharply for him to rise and he reluctantly did so. "We do not come to Ferelden to engage in nonsense, as you are well aware. You are no longer the boy I found in Val Royeaux. Remember that." She took his chin in her gauntleted hand and raised his head until she was looking him in the eye. He saw little more in her expression than checked rage layered with disappointment, and his face burned in embarrassment.

"I hear you," he said glumly.

"Good." She let him go and turned back to the hovering First Enchanter. "I trust the King is ready to see us, then? We won't have to come back?"

"No, he'll see you. Come."

The mage led the three of them down a long and dark hallway. If anything, it was even colder here than elsewhere, wind whistling through cracks in the walls. Duncan was certain he could spot frost on the floor and his breath came out in white plumes. *Just brilliant*, he grouched to himself. *We came here to freeze to death, apparently.*

They reached a large antechamber, a place filled with a scattering of dusty chairs that he imagined might at other times hold whatever nobles awaited their audience. Four others rose and stood to attention as they entered: three men and a dwarven woman, all in the same grey tunics as Duncan. Two of the men were tall warriors dressed in the same bulky plate armor as Genevieve, while the third was a hooded archer dressed in leathers. The dwarf wore a simple robe underneath her tunic, though naturally she was no mage.

The First Enchanter barely paused, sweeping past them and throwing open the enormous double doors that led into the throne room. Genevieve went after him and waved impatiently at the others to follow.

The throne room was slightly more impressive than the rest of the palace. Duncan did his best not to gape and stare as they walked in. The vaulted ceilings in the chamber rose at least thirty or forty feet and the room was large enough to hold hundreds of men at once. There were galleries on each side of the room where he could imagine dignitaries shouting angrily at each other while the crowd below shouted and jeered. Or did Ferelden not work like that? Perhaps their gatherings here were dignified and quiet? Perhaps the court danced a great deal and this was a place where they held fantastic balls like they did in Orlais?

It seemed doubtful. The throne room had a dour look to it, and felt so empty he rather doubted there were many gatherings here at all, never mind balls. Tapestries hung on the walls, most in dull colors depicting scenes of battle from the days of some long-forgotten barbarian king. Dominating one of the walls was a massive wooden carving, a scene in bas-relief depicting a barely clothed warrior slaying what looked like werewolves. An odd choice, he thought.

The throne at the very end of the hall was little more than a massive chair with a high back, topped with what looked like a carved dog's head. It looked small up there on the large dais, raised above the floor by a small number of steps and flanked by bright torches. But one certainly couldn't miss it.

There was a man sitting casually on the throne, and Duncan wondered faintly if that was supposed to be the King. If so, he looked like a man who hadn't slept in a long time. His blond hair was unkempt and his clothing was hardly what Duncan would call regal, consisting of a rumpled white shirt and riding boots still covered in dirt.

The dark-haired man standing next to him, in a suit of grey armor, looked much more like a king. That one had eyes like a hawk, and he followed their entry with an angry intensity.

“Your Majesty, it is good to see you in such excellent health,” First Enchanter Remille said when he finally reached the dais, bowing low with a great flourish. Behind him, Genevieve dropped to one knee, as did the others. Duncan reluctantly followed suit. He had been told that their order owed fealty to no nation and no king, but apparently they still bent knee when they felt like putting on a good show.

“Thank you, First Enchanter,” the blond man on the throne responded. That meant he was the King after all, Duncan assumed. “So these are the Grey Wardens you were so keen on me meeting,” he said, studying those present with intense interest.

“They are, Your Majesty. If I may?”

The King gestured his assent. Pleased, the mage turned toward those behind him, making a wide arc with his arm as if presenting something large and grand. “May I introduce to you Genevieve, Commander of the Grey in Orlais? It is she who told me of the order’s need, and thus I bring her here to you.”

The man bowed again and withdrew slightly as Genevieve stood. Her stark white hair all but glowed in the torchlight. Taking a moment to adjust her breastplate, she stepped forward, her expression grim. “I apologize for the delay in our arrival, King Maric. It was not our intention to anger you.”

The stern man in the grey armor snorted derisively. “You Grey Wardens seem to get into a great deal of trouble in Ferelden, despite your best intentions.”

Genevieve’s expression did not change in the slightest, though Duncan noticed her back stiffen. She took a great deal of pride in the honor of the order, and could be prickly at the best of times. The King’s friend would be wise to watch his words a little more carefully.

The King seemed mildly embarrassed. He waved a hand toward the man beside him, chuckling lightly. “This is Teyrn Loghain of Gwaren, though I don’t know if you would have heard of him in Orlais.”

She nodded curtly. “The Hero of River Dane. Yes, we have all heard.”

“You hear that?” King Maric teased his friend. “It appears you have a reputation in the Empire. That should make you happy.”

“I am thrilled,” Loghain said dryly.

“If the Teyrn is referring to our order’s exile from Ferelden two centuries ago,” Genevieve began, “I can offer an explanation.”

Loghain gave her a direct stare. “Of course you can.”

She clenched her jaw, tightly enough for Duncan to see the tendons standing out on her neck, and for a long moment an uncomfortable silence ensued. All that could be heard was the crackling of the torches behind the throne.

The First Enchanter interjected himself between them, making conciliatory noises. “Surely there is no need for us to discuss something that took place so long ago, yes? What the leader of the Grey Wardens did then need not have any bearing on today!” He looked to King Maric pleadingly.

The King nodded, though he didn’t seem very pleased. Whether it was because of the Teyrn’s anger or Genevieve’s response, Duncan couldn’t tell. “This is true,” he murmured.

“I have something much more recent I would like to discuss,” Loghain growled. “Why did you keep us waiting for so long? If I had gone to such great lengths to gain a private audience with Maric, I would go out of my way to avoid angering him. Particularly if I was about to ask for a favor, no?”

The King shrugged. “They haven’t asked for anything yet, Loghain.”

“They will. Why else the formal introduction? Why else the display?”

“Good point.”

Genevieve appeared pained as she searched for the right response. “One of my people committed crime in your city, King Maric,” she finally stated. “I needed to deal with the matter before things got out of hand.”

Duncan grew cold with dread. *Here it comes*, he thought.

Loghain appeared ready to launch an angry retort, but the King cut him off, sitting forward in his throne with a great deal of interest. “A crime? What sort of crime?”

Genevieve sighed heavily. She turned around and gestured for Duncan to step forward. Her eyes bored into him, however. *Step out of line now*, they said, *and I will make every second of your life thereafter follow a nightmare that you will never forget*. He gulped and scuttled quickly forward to stand beside her.

“This young man is Duncan,” she explained, “recruited into our order a few months ago from the streets of Val Royeaux. I’m afraid he attempted to ply his former trade in your marketplace, and when chased by your guardsmen he got into a fight with one of them. The man was injured, but lives.”

“I could have killed him,” Duncan interjected defensively. Noticing Genevieve’s outrage, he quickly bobbed a nervous bow toward the King. “But I didn’t! I could have, but I didn’t! That’s what I meant, err . . . Your Highness. My lord.”

“Your *Majesty*,” Loghain corrected him.

“My guards can be a little overzealous at times,” the King explained amiably. It took Duncan a moment to realize that the man was actually speaking to him and not to Genevieve. “Loghain determined to turn Denerim into the most orderly city in the south. Truly I think all it’s done is drive the criminals underground.”

“I’d have been tempted to go there, myself,” Duncan joked, and then quickly quieted as Genevieve clenched her gauntleted fists tightly enough for him to hear the faint grinding of metal. He did his best to look meek.

“He is quite skilled, King Maric,” Genevieve offered tersely. “I believe, however, that the young man thinks if he misbehaves we will release him from his duty. He is wrong.”

The King seemed intrigued by this. “You do not enjoy being a Grey Warden?” he asked Duncan.

Duncan was unsure how to respond. He was surprised that the King was speaking directly to him again. Even the lowliest baron in Orlais would have sooner been covered in oil and set on fire than been caught noticing a peasant. It made them much easier to pickpocket. Maybe this man couldn’t tell he was a commoner, on account of them all being Grey Wardens? He assumed he should feel flattered, though he wasn’t certain all this attention was necessarily a good thing.

Genevieve kept her eyes focused on the King, her expression pointedly neutral. So Duncan shifted from foot to foot and said nothing, while the King stared at him curiously and waited for an answer. Couldn’t he interrogate someone else? Anyone? Finally Teyrn Loghain cleared his throat.

“Perhaps we should move on to why they’re here, Maric.”

“Unless the King wishes to have the boy arrested,” Genevieve offered, completely serious. “We are in your land, and it is your law we must abide by. The Grey Wardens will comply with your wishes.”

Duncan’s heart leaped into his throat, but he needn’t have worried. The King dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. “No, I think not. The cells in Fort Drakon are full enough as it is.” Loghain was clearly biting his tongue, but said nothing. Duncan bowed a few times as he retreated to the back to stand once again with the other Grey Wardens, sweat beading on his forehead.

Genevieve nodded graciously. “Thank you, King Maric.”

“I am more interested in why you’re here. If you will?”

She paused for a moment, clutching her hands together in a thoughtful gesture that Duncan

recognized. *She's trying to decide how much she should tell him.* He also knew what her answer would be. The Grey Wardens had many secrets, and never said more than they absolutely needed to. He had learned that much very quickly.

“One of our own has been captured by the darkspawn,” Genevieve said slowly. “Here in Ferelden. Within the Deep Roads.”

“And?” Loghain frowned. “How does this concern us?”

She appeared reluctant to continue. “This Grey Warden . . . has the knowledge of the location of the Old Gods.”

Both the King and Teyrn Loghain stared at her, stunned. The air in the hall became thick with tension as nobody immediately spoke. The First Enchanter stepped forward, tugging at his curly mustache anxiously. “As you can see, my lords, this was why I thought the matter of utmost delicacy. If these darkspawn prove able to learn the location of an Old God—”

“Then a Blight begins,” Genevieve finished.

King Maric nodded gravely, but Loghain shook his head in disbelief. “Do not believe it.” He scowled. “There has not been a Blight for centuries. We barely see the darkspawn on the surface at all, never mind a full-scale invasion. They are trying to scare us, nothing more. This order has been waning in importance since the last Blight and would do anything to frighten the world into believing they still have relevance.”

“I assure you, it is true!” Genevieve shouted. She strode forward to the throne, dropping to one knee before the King. “There are only a few Grey Wardens who possess this knowledge, Your Majesty. If these darkspawn somehow know that he is one and wrest this knowledge from him, they will rise to the surface in a new Blight. And they will do so here, in Ferelden.”

“Are you certain?” the King breathed.

She looked up at him, her eyes intense. “You have seen the darkspawn with your own eyes, my lord. Have you not? You know that they are no legend. *Neither are we.*”

Her words hung there, and King Maric paled visibly. Duncan could tell by the man's horrified expression that Genevieve was correct. He had seen the darkspawn for himself. Only someone who had would look like that. The King rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I assume you are asking after permission to enter Ferelden to search for this missing Grey Warden?”

“No.”

The King and Loghain looked at each other, nonplussed. “Then what is it you need?” Loghain asked her.

Genevieve got to her feet, retreating a step from the throne. “If all we needed to do was search, we could have entered the Deep Roads at Orzammar and you would have been none the wiser. Your domain, King Maric, encompasses only the surface, as I'm certain you well know.”

Loghain looked as if he were about to object, but Maric held up a hand. “Fair enough,” he said, his tone even.

“We have a good idea where to search for our missing comrade. What we don't know is how to get there. We believe that the two of you are the only ones alive that do.”

“Are you suggesting what I think you are?” Loghain asked incredulously.

“Eight years ago, both of you traveled in the Deep Roads,” Genevieve explained. “You encountered a unit of the Legion of the Dead, led by Nalthur of House Kanarek, and they assisted you in your revolt against Orlais. We know you did this, because you told King Endrin during your visit to Orzammar three years ago, and it was entered into the Memories by the dwarven Shaperate.”

“Everything you say is true.” The King nodded.

“You journeyed through the Deep Roads under eastern Ferelden, a place no dwarf has traveled well over a century. Or at least lived to tell the tale.” Genevieve sighed, her expression grim. “You two are the only ones alive who have been to Ortaithaig. That is where we need to go.”

For several long minutes the throne room was quiet again. Duncan could hear the shuffling of the other Grey Wardens as they remained on their knees behind him. He glanced back at Fiona, but the elven mage refused to look his way. No doubt she was pleased simply to remain in the background. He wished he could have done the same.

The First Enchanter clenched and unclenched his hands, sweat beading on his forehead despite the chill in the air. Genevieve waited patiently as the two men on the dais digested what she had told them.

“Surely the dwarves must have maps . . .,” King Maric began.

“Insufficient” She shook her head. “The Deep Roads have changed, and we may need to travel beyond Ortaithaig. We need a guide, someone who has been there.” She turned toward Teyrn Loghain. “We were hoping to ask for your assistance, Your Grace. You are well known as a fine warrior and in no—”

“Absolutely not,” Loghain stated flatly.

“Can you not understand how vital this is?”

“I understand how vital *you* think it is, or at least how vital you would like us to think it is.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Who knows what you are really up to? Wouldn’t it be wonderful for the Hero of River Dane to find himself surrounded by Orlesians in a place where his death could be ascribed to anything at all?”

“Don’t be a fool!” Genevieve stormed up the steps toward him. Duncan tensed and waited for the guards to jump out of hiding and attack before she reached the Teyrn, but none did. He had to wonder just how many rulers would agree so readily to a private audience alone with a group of armed Grey Wardens. Not many, probably. Even so, neither man on the dais seemed alarmed, so much as angered by Genevieve’s sudden advance. “We do not ask these things lightly! Have you no concept of what Blight would mean to this land if it began here?”

He remained where he was, staring her down with his pale blue eyes. “We can offer you direction if you like. You’ll find the thaig the same way we did, no doubt still infested by a horde of giant spiders. I suggest bringing fire.”

“We need more than directions! This is a matter of urgency!”

“Maric and I were there briefly, eight years ago.” The contempt was obvious in his voice. “What do you expect us to remember, fool woman?”

“Something!” she insisted. “Anything!”

“I’ll go,” the King quietly announced behind them.

It took a moment for the others to hear him. Loghain was just about to launch another retort at the furious Genevieve when he paused. He turned around slowly, staring at King Maric in confusion. “What did you say?”

“I said I’ll go.” The King seemed equally surprised by his statement, as if the words had come unbidden from his mouth. “I’ll do it. I’ll lead them.”

A pin dropping in the throne room would have made more noise. Duncan coughed nervously and glanced at Fiona kneeling next to him. She looked as bewildered as he felt, and shrugged at his unspoken question. She had no idea why the King would suddenly agree, either. The entire situation was too bizarre. The First Enchanter appeared as if he were rooted to the spot, his face twisted in discomfort.

“You’ll do no such thing!” Loghain lost his composure completely. Duncan almost thought the man might draw his sword. On his own king? Things worked very differently in Ferelden, after all.

Genevieve stepped forward, horrified. “We could not put you at such a risk! You are the King of Ferelden, and this is a dangerous task we ask for.”

“I quite agree.” Loghain added his voice to hers. “No one should be risked on such a foolish plan. No, it is not even a ‘plan’! It is a faint hope based on . . . what? How can you even be certain this Grey Warden of yours is still alive?”

She gritted her teeth, studiously fixing her gaze on the King. “We are *certain*.”

“How? What is it that you aren’t telling us?”

King Maric stood from his throne, cutting them both off. “I am going,” he said firmly. “I will take them down to Ortan thaig. I believe I remember the way.”

Teyrn Loghain stared at the King accusingly, clearly full of heated objections but unwilling to continue voicing them in front of an audience. From the way the King looked back at him, almost resentfully, Duncan could tell there was a fight waiting to happen. He could tell that this Loghain was more than an advisor. He seemed almost like a brother, perhaps. Or the King’s keeper.

Genevieve seemed at a loss, but bowed low and backed off. Duncan could understand her confusion. He had thought the idea of asking the Hero of River Dane to come was desperate enough, but this bordered on the ludicrous.

Surely the King would soon change his mind, and the Grey Wardens would be asked to fend for themselves. Perhaps they would even be kicked out of Ferelden again; he really couldn’t say. Duncan wasn’t sure that would be a bad thing, either. Abandoning the entire idea of heading into the Deep Roads and facing horrible creatures like the darkspawn had its appeal.

First Enchanter Remille crept forward toward the throne, his hands out in supplication. “Is His Majesty certain that this is wise? Wouldn’t the Teyrn be a better choice to—”

“No,” the King cut him off. “I have made my decision.” He sat back down in his throne, keeping his eyes locked on Genevieve and refusing to look in Loghain’s direction. “I will contact you shortly, Commander, to make arrangements. Until then, I’d like it if you all left me alone with the Teyrn.”

The First Enchanter looked as though he wanted to speak again, but Genevieve shook her head at him. She bowed gracefully to the throne and turned to leave. Duncan and the others went with her. The two men on the dais barely noticed them go.

Once the hall was cleared out, Maric sat back in his throne and waited for the inevitable recriminations from Loghain. He wore that suit of heavy grey armor every time Maric saw him now. He had taken it from the commander of the chevaliers at the Battle of River Dane, a war souvenir that he had worn to the victory parade in Denerim years later. The people had loved him for it, and Maric had been amused.

The amusement had lessened over the intervening years. At first, Loghain and Maric and Rowan had worked tirelessly to restore Ferelden after the war. There had been so much to do, so many issues left behind by the Orlesian withdrawal that it seemed like there was never enough time for anything.

It had been a breathless time, exhilarating in its way. Harsh decisions had needed to be made, and Maric had made them. Each one had taken a small piece of his soul, but he had made them. Ferelden had grown strong again, just as they had always wanted. Loghain was a hero, and both Rowan and Maric were legends. When Rowan finally gave him a son, Maric had thought that perhaps a bit of happiness was finally possible.

And then she had died, and everything had changed.

Loghain stared at him as if he had no idea who Maric was. Suddenly, he drew his sword and pointed it at Maric's chest.

"Here," he offered curtly.

"I have my own sword, thank you."

"It's not for you to take. It's for you to throw yourself on, since you seem so eager."

Maric pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He had known Loghain to dislike dramatics, once. It seemed that the years had given him an appreciation for it. "Perhaps you'd prefer to throw yourself on it instead?"

"I'm not trying to kill myself." Loghain's expression was dark, almost hurt. "This will make it quicker, easier. At least this way we'll have a body to burn. I won't need to explain to your son why his father went off on a mad mission and never returned."

"The darkspawn are real, Loghain. What if the Grey Wardens are telling us the truth?"

"And what if they aren't?" Loghain walked over to the throne, putting his hands on the armrests and leaning down to look Maric directly in the face. "Even if you think the fact that they have come from Orlais meaningless," he pleaded, "you must know that the Grey Wardens have *always* had their own agenda. They serve no nation, and no king. They will do what they think is best to deal with this threat and won't care about you, or Ferelden, or anything else!"

He had a point. Two centuries ago, the Grey Wardens had taken part in a plot to overthrow the Fereldan king. It had failed, and the order was exiled, but what few people knew was that it had taken the entire Fereldan army to drive them out. Thousands of men pitted against less than a hundred, and the Wardens had very nearly won. They were a force to be reckoned with, no matter their numbers.

"It's not just that," Maric muttered.

"Then what? Because Rowan is dead?" Loghain stood up, pacing a short distance away as he shook his head. "You've been like this ever since I returned. You barely see your son; you barely lift a finger to rule the nation that you restored from ruins. At first I allowed it as part of your grief, but it has been three years now. It's as if you wish to disappear." He turned to look at Maric, his eyes full of so much concern that Maric couldn't meet them. "Is that really what you want? Does the madness of this plan mean nothing to you?"

Maric steepled his hands together and considered. He hadn't wanted to tell Loghain, but it seemed like he had no other choice. "Do you remember the witch we met in the Korcari Wilds?" he began. "Back during the rebellion, when we were fleeing the Orlesians?"

Loghain appeared taken aback, as if he hadn't expected a rational explanation. He hesitated only a moment. "Yes. The madwoman who nearly killed us both. What of her?"

"She told me something."

Loghain looked at him expectantly. "And? She babbled many things, Maric."

"She told me that a Blight was coming to Ferelden."

He nodded slowly. "I see. Did she say when?"

"Only that I wouldn't live to see it."

Loghain rolled his eyes and walked a step away, running a hand through his black hair. It was a gesture of exasperation with which Maric was well familiar. "That is a prediction that almost anyone could safely make. She was trying to scare you, no doubt."

"She succeeded."

He turned and glared at Maric scornfully. "Did she not also tell you I was not to be trusted? Do you believe that now, too?"

There was a tension in that look, and Maric knew why. The witch had said of Loghain, “Keep him close, and he will betray you. Each time worse than the last.” It was the only one of his pronouncements to which Loghain had been privy, and obviously he remembered it well. Perhaps he thought that if Maric believed one, he believed the other. Loghain had never betrayed him, not to his knowledge. It was something to keep in mind.

“You think it’s a coincidence?” Maric asked, suddenly uncertain.

“I believe this witch was serving her own purposes, and would lie about whatever she thought convenient. Magic is not to be trusted, Maric.” Loghain closed his eyes and then sighed. He shook his head slightly, as if what he was about to say was madness, but he opened his eyes anyhow and spoke with conviction. “But if you truly believe that the witch’s warning has merit, let me be the one to go into the Deep Roads, not you. Cailan needs his father.”

“Cailan needs his mother.” His voice sounded hollow, even to himself. “And he needs a father who isn’t . . . I’m not doing him any good, Loghain. I’m not doing anyone any good here. It will be better if I’m out there, helping the kingdom.”

“You are an idiot.”

“What you need to do,” Maric ignored him, “is to stay. Look after Cailan. If something happens to me, you’ll need to be his regent and keep the kingdom together.”

Loghain shook his head in frustration. “I can’t do that. Even if I believed this cryptic warning, I would not agree that it was worth placing you in the hands of these Orlesians. Not without an entire army to surround you.”

Maric sighed and sat back in the throne. He knew that tone. When Loghain believed he was in the right, there was no dissuading him. He would sooner call the guards in here and attempt to have Maric locked up in the dungeon than see him do this.

In Loghain’s mind, the Grey Wardens were Orlesian. The First Enchanter was Orlesian. This had to be some manner of plot—not that it would be the first. There had been several assassins over the years, as well as more than a few attempts by disaffected banns to overthrow him, and while Loghain could never prove that the Empire was behind them all, Maric did not disbelieve his theories. Perhaps he was even right about this.

But what if he wasn’t? The witch had been crazy, almost certainly, but Maric still found it impossible to discount her words entirely. She had saved their lives, put them on the path out of the Korcari Wilds when otherwise they would have died. He had almost forgotten her warning about the Blight, but the very instant First Enchanter Remille had told him of the Wardens’ request for an audience, he had remembered.

The thought of a Blight here in Ferelden was almost too much to bear. The old tales spoke of vast swarms of darkspawn spilling out onto the surface, blackening the skies and tainting the earth around them. They spread a plague by their very presence, and those the disease didn’t kill, their armies did. Each Blight had come close to destroying all of Thedas, something the Grey Wardens knew better than anyone.

Surely such a disaster was worth risking almost anything to avert. Loghain could dismiss the idea, but Maric was less convinced. What if the witch was correct? What if the whole point of receiving such a prophecy was that it gave you a chance to try to prevent it?

“You’re right,” he admitted with a heavy sigh. “Of course you’re right.”

Loghain stepped back, folding his arms and looking at Maric skeptically. “This is new.”

Maric shrugged. “They’re desperate and asking too much. We can give them advice, maybe even draw out a map with as much information as we can remember. But going into the Deep Roads again

No, you're right."

"You give them advice." Loghain frowned. "I have had my fill of Orlesians for one evening. Especially that lickspittle Remille. You know he cannot be trusted, I assume?"

"He's Orlesian, isn't he?"

"Fine. Joke about it if you wish." He turned and began walking toward the small door off to the side of the dais. "I will send someone to tell the Grey Wardens to come back, but do not take too long with them. There is much that needs to be done in the morning, Maric. The ambassador from Kirkwall wishes to discuss the raider situation off the coast, and I trust that if you can stir yourself for an audience such as this, you can manage it for actual business?"

"I'll do that," Maric answered. As he watched his old friend storm off, he found himself left with a weary hollowness. Perhaps he even felt a bit of pity, and then guilt for pitying a man who had done so much for him. For all of Loghain's protests about how he remained in Denerim to help run things, Maric knew why he really didn't return to Gwaren. A perfectly lovely young wife was there, raising their perfectly lovely young daughter.

They were all running away from something.

The Grey Wardens and the First Enchanter returned to the hall tentatively, looking around and obviously confused by the fact that Loghain was now missing from the dais. Maric felt about ten years older, hunched over on his throne and nowhere near ready to lead anyone anywhere.

Genevieve strode forward, the picture of a mature yet confident warrior. It made him think of what Rowan might have been like had she lived to that age. She would never have been so crisp and businesslike, however, he was sure. Rowan had been all heart, always showing concern for his kingdom and doting on their son every chance she got. She had enjoyed being a queen just as she had enjoyed being a mother, far more than she had ever enjoyed being a warrior.

In fact, he found instead that the white-haired Commander reminded him far more of Loghain.

"Have you changed your mind, King Maric?" Genevieve asked, with the tone of one who expected that this was the only reasonable course of action.

"No," Maric answered with a grim smile, though from her tense frown she obviously found this no reassurance. "Provided that no one else knows I am traveling with you and we move secretly, I will go with you. Loghain will remain here. Unless *you've* changed *your* mind?"

She shook her head, dispensing with any hesitation. "Not at all. We need to move quickly, and I am certain nothing I could say would make you more aware of the risk than you already are."

"Good." He stood and strode down the dais toward her. She looked distinctly uncomfortable as he shook her hand. "Then let's dispense with the 'king' business, shall we? I'm as tired of it as you are. Believe me."

"As you wish . . . Maric." There was the slightest hint of a smile as she inclined her head. Perhaps she wasn't as like Loghain as he had thought. "But if you'll allow me one indulgence, perhaps I might assign one of my people to you? Someone to watch over your safety and see to your needs?"

"If you feel that is best, by all means."

Genevieve beckoned to the young man she had introduced earlier, the one who had committed the crime. The lad was darker-skinned than the rest: Rivaini blood, perhaps? The boy grimaced, reluctant to approach, though a warning look brought him quickly enough. Once he stood at the Commander's side, he sighed as if the entire effort was an imposition of severe magnitude.

No subtlety there, Maric thought to himself. Wherever the Grey Wardens had found him, he was

clearly accustomed to expressing his every thought and feeling. After so many years spent in the court, Maric might even find such company a refreshing change.

“Duncan, seeing to the King’s needs will be your responsibility,” Genevieve said, her tone making it clear there was to be no argument on the matter.

“You mean, like fetching him chamber pots and cooking his meals?”

“If he wishes, yes.” As the lad scowled, she smirked with no small amount of amusement. “Think of it as your punishment. If you fail to acquit yourself in the King’s service, he can always elect to have you thrown in prison when we return.”

Duncan looked helplessly at Maric, his sullen expression saying, *Please don’t make me fetch your chamber pot*. Maric was tempted to laugh, but kept himself under control. There weren’t likely to be many chamber pots in the Deep Roads, after all. This would be no pleasure trip.

“Allow me to introduce you to the others,” Genevieve continued. “This is Kell, my lieutenant. He has a sensitivity to the darkspawn taint, and will be our tracker once we’re in the Deep Roads.”

The hooded man who stepped forward had the most strikingly pale eyes Maric had ever seen. He bore a grim expression, and moved with a deliberate caution that spoke of an acute self-awareness. From the thick leathers and the longbow strapped to his back, Maric would have taken him for some kind of hunter. Kell inclined his head politely but said nothing.

“And this is Utha, recruited from among the ranks of the Silent Sisters. She will not be able to speak to you, but most of us understand the signs she uses.”

The dwarven woman who stepped forward wore a simple brown robe covered by her Grey Wardens tunic. Her coppery hair was twisted into a long, proud braid that went down almost to the middle of her back, and she carried no weapons that Maric could see. He seemed to recall that the Silent Sisters fought with their bare hands—was that true? Despite her small size, she looked solid and muscular enough that he wouldn’t want to tangle with her, weapons or no.

“These other two gentlemen are Julien and Nicolas. They have been with the order almost as long as I have.”

Two tall men stepped forward, each dressed in the same kind of heavy plate armor that Genevieve wore. Both of them had burly mustaches in the typical Orlesian fashion, though otherwise they couldn’t have been more different. The first, Julien, had dark brown hair cropped close to the skull and a short beard. He had a reserved air to him, his eyes shadowed but expressive, and he gave Maric a curt nod. The other, Nicolas, had blond hair almost to his shoulders and no beard to speak of. He clasped Maric’s hand and gave it a vigorous shake, grinning boisterously.

Julien had a greatsword strapped to his back that was almost as large as he was. Nicolas meanwhile, had a spiked mace strapped at his waist and an enormous shield on his back adorned with the griffon symbol. They both walked with the quiet confidence of warriors who had used those weapons often.

“And this is Fiona, recruited from the Circle of Magi in Montsimmard just over a year ago.”

The elven woman who stepped forward was dressed in a chain hauberk and a blue skirt, clutching a white staff at her side. He wouldn’t have picked her out as a mage if he’d seen her elsewhere without her staff, and it had nothing to do with her being elven. Most of the mages he’d ever encountered had been more like First Enchanter Remille: men, and the sort used to getting their own way. She was pretty, too, even if she had a chilly expression as she looked at him, and her bow was so slight it could barely have been called one at all.

First Enchanter Remille approached, distinctly discomfited. He clutched at his yellow robes nervously as he bowed several times to Maric. “Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, but time is of the

essence. We should be under way to Kinloch Hold as soon as possible.”

Genevieve nodded. “The Circle has offered us some magical assistance prior to heading into the Deep Roads. We have very little time, but I believe this will be useful.”

“Why so little time?” Maric asked.

“We have never heard of a Grey Warden who wasn’t killed by the darkspawn on sight.” The thought made her grow silent, and her eyes became distant for a moment. Then she brusquely turned to walk toward the great doors at the end of the hall. Maric followed her, the others falling in line behind them. “The fact that he is still alive is remarkable enough, and speaks of something unusual. We need to reach him before they take him farther into the Deep Roads, and before any information they might get from him spreads.”

“And if it does? What then?”

“Then we kill every one of them that knows,” she said somberly. He believed she meant it. The idea that this small band could be a threat to the darkspawn, rather than the other way around, seemed surprising to him, but perhaps it shouldn’t be. The Grey Wardens only recruited from among the very best, so the story went. Even though there hadn’t been a Blight for centuries, their legend had lived on. They were held in high regard by the people, and had a presence in every nation outside of Ferelden.

That regard came with wariness in some circles, however. In other nations the Grey Wardens were often treated as an order that had outlived its purpose, the traditional tithes given only reluctantly. Even so, they were never openly disrespected. For all their small numbers in current times, their ability was unquestioned.

“I do have one question for you, if I may,” he asked.

“By all means.”

“Who is it that we’re looking for, exactly?”

Genevieve stopped before the doors, turning to face Maric directly. He saw her hesitate once again, considering exactly how much she should tell him. If he was going to travel with them into the most dangerous part of all Thedas, one would hope that eventually the Grey Wardens would trust him enough to let him in on their secrets. Loghain certainly wasn’t wrong about the order having its own agenda, at least.

“His name is Bregan,” she said, her tone curt. “He is my brother.”

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