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# DRAGON AGE™

THE CALLING



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# 1

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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 their 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 Rivaini, 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 twin 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. “Or 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 did 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 in 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, and his breath came out in white plumes. *Just brilliant*, he groused 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 at 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 as 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 a 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 that follows 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 is 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 be 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 curled 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 in 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 Ortan thaig. 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 Ortan thaig. 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 a 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 directions, 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 is it 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.

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