

A dark heroic fantasy novel in BioWare's
newest role-playing universe!

DRAGON AGE

The logo for Dragon Age is presented in a highly ornate, golden, gothic-style frame. The frame is intricately detailed with scrollwork and floral patterns. A sword with a glowing blue hilt is positioned diagonally across the top of the frame. In the background, behind the frame, is a large, faint, and somewhat ethereal face of a man with a beard, looking forward. The overall color palette is dark, with deep blues and purples, accented by the golden glow of the logo and the blue light of the sword.

TM

THE STOLEN THRONE

David Gaider

Lead Writer of the Video Game
Dragon Age: Origins

BIOWARE™



THE
STOLEN THRONE

DAVID GAIDER

BiOWARE™

1

“Run, Maric!”

And run he did.

His mother’s dying words whipped him into action. The image of her grisly murder still burning in his mind, Maric reeled and plunged into the trees at the edge of the clearing. Ignoring the clawing branches that scraped at his face and clung to his cloak, he blindly forced his way into the foliage.

Strong hands grabbed him from behind. One of his mother’s men, or one of the traitors who had just orchestrated her death? He assumed the latter. Grunting with effort, Maric shoved back, struggling to dislodge the hold on him. He succeeded only in getting a few more branches striking him in the face, the leaves blinding him further. The hands attempted to haul him back into the clearing, and he dug his boots into the ground, gaining a bit of purchase on gnarled tree roots. Maric violently shoved back again, his elbow connecting with something

hard . . . something that gave way with a wet crunching sound and a startled grunt of pain.

The hands loosened, and Maric leaped forward into the trees. His cloak resisted, jerked him back. Something had caught on his long leather coat. He twisted and fought frantically, like a wild beast caught in a trap, until he somehow wriggled himself out, leaving the cloak torn on a branch. Maric gasped, launching himself into the darkness beyond the clearing without risking even a glance behind. The forest was old and thick, allowing only the faintest beams of moonlight through the dense canopy. It was not enough to see by, only enough to turn the forest into a maze of frightening shadows and silhouettes. Tall twisted oaks stood like dark sentinels, surrounded by dense bushes and recesses so black, they could have held almost anything.

He had no idea where he was going; only his urge to flee guided his feet. He stumbled over roots that jutted out of the uneven ground and bounced off solid tree trunks that kept springing out of nowhere. Wet and slippery mud made his steps treacherous and his balance so precarious, it seemed the ground might give way beneath him at any moment. The woods were completely disorienting. He could have been running in circles, for all he knew. Maric heard men shouting as they entered the woods behind him, giving chase, and he could clearly make out the sounds of fighting as well. Steel blade ringing on steel blade, the cries of men dying—his mother's men, many he had known his entire life.

As he frantically ran on, images kept whirling through Maric's mind. Moments ago, he had been shivering in the cold forest clearing, convinced that his presence at the clandestine meeting was more a formality than anything else. He barely paid attention to the proceedings. His mother had informed him earlier that with the support of these new men, the rebellion would finally become a force. These men were

willing to turn on their Orlesian masters, she said, and that made it an opportunity she wasn't willing to pass up after so many years spent running and hiding and only picking what battles they could win. Maric hadn't objected to the meeting, and the idea that it might be risky never even occurred to him. His mother was the infamous Rebel Queen; it was she who had first inspired the rebellion, and she who led the army. The battle had always been hers and never his. He, himself, had never even seen his grandfather's throne, never understood the power his family had possessed before the Orlesians invaded. He had spent his entire eighteen years in rebel camps and remote castles, endlessly marching and forever being dragged along in his mother's wake. He couldn't even imagine what it might be like to not live that way; it was a completely foreign concept to him.

And now his mother was dead. Maric's balance was ripped from him, and he tumbled in darkness down a short hill covered in wet leaves. He slid awkwardly and slammed his head against a rock, crying out in pain. His vision swam.

From far off came a muffled answering cry of his pursuers. They had heard him.

Maric lay there in the moonlit shadows, cradling his head. It felt like it was on fire, a raging inferno that blotted out reason. He cursed himself for being so stupid. By sheer luck if nothing else, he had managed to run some distance into the forest, and now he had given away his location. There was a thick wetness on his fingers. Blood was caking in his hair and running down around his ears and neck—warm in sharp contrast with the frosty air.

For a moment he shook, a single sob escaping his lips. Maybe it was best just to lie here, he thought. Let them come and kill him, too. They had already killed his mother and earned whatever lavish reward the usurper had surely promised them. What was he, besides an extra body to be slaughtered

along with the too-few men Mother had brought? And then he froze as a terrible realization settled at the edge of his consciousness.

He was the King.

It was ridiculous, of course. Him? The one who elicited so many impatient sighs and worried looks? The one for whom Mother always had to make excuses? She had always assured him that once he got older, he would grow into the same easy authority that she evinced. But that had never happened. It was no great offense, either, as he had never taken seriously the idea that his mother might actually die. She was invulnerable and larger than life itself. Her death was a hypothetical thing, something that had no actual bearing on reality.

And now she was gone and he was supposed to be King? He was to carry on the rebellion on his own?

He could just imagine the usurper upon his throne in the capital, laughing uproariously when he received the news of Maric's succession. Better to die here, he thought. Better that they put a sword through his gut, just as they had done to his mother, than to become the laughingstock of Ferelden. Maybe they would find some distant relative to take up the banner of rebellion. And if not, then it was best to let the bloodline of King Calenhad the Great die here. Let it end with the Rebel Queen falling just short of her goal—rather than petering out under the leadership of her inept son.

There was a certain amount of peace in that thought. Maric lay there on his back, the damp coldness of the leaves and mud almost comforting against his skin. The irregular shouts of the men drew nearer, but it was almost possible for Maric to blot them out. He tried to focus solely on the rustling of the leaves in the wind overhead. The tall trees stood all around him, like giant shadows peering down at the tiny figure who had tumbled at their feet. He could smell the pine,

the tartness of nearby tree sap. These forest sentinels would be the only witnesses to his death.

And as he lay there, the pain in his head dulling to an insistent throb, the thought rankled. The men who had lured his mother here with promises of aid were nobles of Ferelden, the sort who had bent knee to the Orlesians so they could keep their lands. Rather than finally live up to their ancestral oaths, they had betrayed their rightful Queen. If no one escaped to inform those who had remained with the rebel army about what had actually happened, they might never know the truth. They would guess, but what could they do without proof? The traitors might never pay for their crime.

Maric sat up, his throbbing head protesting fiercely. Aching and shivering, he was wet and chilled right to the bone. Getting his bearings was difficult, but he guessed he was not far from the edge of the forest. He had stumbled only a short ways in, and the men chasing him were not far away, searching and calling out to each other. Their voices were getting fainter, however. Maybe he should just remain still? He was in into some kind of depression, and if he stayed there long enough, these men could pass him by, giving him enough time to catch his breath. Perhaps he could find his way back to the clearing and see if any of his mother's men had survived.

A sudden crunch of twigs nearby made him stop again. Maric listened carefully in the darkness for an agonizing moment, but heard nothing. The noise had been a footstep; he was sure of it. He waited longer, not daring to move a muscle . . . and heard it again. Quieter, this time. Someone was definitely trying to sneak up on him. Maybe they could see him, even if he couldn't see them?

Maric cast about desperately. The far side of the hollow he was in opened up into a downward slope. It was difficult to tell the general terrain with so little moonlight coming through

the canopy. There were also trees in that direction, roots and thick bushes that would prevent him from crawling out of sight. He either had to stay where he was . . . or climb out.

A squelch of wet leaves nearby forced Maric as low to the ground as he could go. Listening closely was difficult given the muted shouting in the distance and the sound of the wind blowing high in the trees, but he could ever so faintly detect the soft steps of someone passing nearby. He suspected they couldn't see him at all. In fact, it was dark enough that his pursuer would likely end up doing exactly what Maric had done and fall right into the hollow.

Maric didn't exactly relish the idea of his enemy falling on top of him, so he cautiously tried to get up onto his feet. Sharp pain lanced through his knees and arms. There were cuts on his face and hands from the branches, and he was sure there was a gash on his head . . . but it all felt distant, as if someone else were experiencing the pain. He tried to control his movements, making them slow and quiet. Smooth. And he continued to listen for more footsteps, anxiously biting his lower lip. It was difficult to hear anything over the desperate thumping of his heart. Surely it was obvious to whoever was out there. Perhaps they were closing in for the kill even now, laughing at his terror.

Breathing deliberately, sweating despite the chill, Maric slowly pulled himself upright enough to get both his feet underneath him. His right knee spasmed, shooting lightning-sharp agony up his leg. This injury he felt very clearly, unlike the others. In shock, he hissed through gritted teeth, nearly gasping out loud.

Immediately he clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes in silent reprimand at his idiocy. Crouching there in the darkness, he listened carefully. The footsteps had stopped. Someone else, farther out among the trees, shouted in Maric's direction. He couldn't quite hear what the man had said, but

there was definitely a question to it: calling out, asking if they had found anything. But there was no response. The source of the footsteps nearby had probably heard Maric and was not willing to give his own position away by answering.

With the utmost care, Maric crawled up the side of the depression. He squinted into the shadows, trying to pick out anything that might resemble a human form. He imagined his pursuer doing the same thing, playing a cat-and-mouse game in the dark. The first one of them to spot the other would win the prize. Belatedly, Maric realized that even if he did see this man, there might not be much he could do about it. He wasn't armed. An empty sheath dangled at his waist, his belt knife lent to Hiram not two hours earlier to cut some rope. Hiram, one of his mother's most trusted generals and a fine man he had known since childhood, most likely lying dead at his Queen's side, their blood cooling in the midnight air. Maric cursed himself for a fool and tried to put the image out of his mind.

Just then, Maric noticed a glint in the shadows. Narrowing his eyes helped him just barely discern a sword, its polished blade reflecting the faint moonlight. In the mass of dark shadows and bushes, he still couldn't see the form of the man holding the weapon, but it calmed him to finally know where his opponent was.

Gaze locked in that direction, Maric raised his hands to grasp the edge of the depression and quietly heaved himself up. The pain that shot through his arms was considerable, but he ignored it and never for one second took his eyes off that sword. As he got over the edge, the sword moved. A dark shape began lumbering toward him, raising the sword up high and growling with menace.

Without thinking, Maric launched himself forward and charged. The sword slashed down by his ear, narrowly missing his arm. He rammed headfirst into the man's midsection, knocking the wind out of him. Unfortunately, the pursuer was

wearing a heavy chain hauberk, and Maric's head exploded with pain. He may as well have head-butted a tree trunk. The world spun around him wildly. He would have careened out of control had his momentum not carried the two of them backwards, knocking the man off his feet. They fell on hard uneven ground, with the swordsman taking the brunt of the impact. His weapon arm swung out to one side, causing the sword to fly out into the shadows.

Almost delirious and barely able to see, Maric pulled himself back up and grabbed the man's head in both hands. He felt a strong whiskered jaw, and the man flailed wildly with his free hand, trying to push Maric off. He tried to shout, possibly call on his fellows for help, but all that came out was a muted bellow. Maric used the benefit of leverage to pull up the man's head and then slam it down hard. The man grunted when his head hit an exposed root.

"You bastard!" Maric snarled. The man's desperation intensified, the hand reaching for Maric's face, slapping and clawing. Finding purchase, it pushed hard against Maric's nose, one finger digging into his eye. Maric pulled his face away as he shoved down hard on the man's head, grinding it back into a root. The man grunted and tried to buck Maric off, but the heavy hauberk worked against him. He writhed and pushed with that one hand against Maric's face, but none of his efforts were enough to get him free.

Maric's throbbing head was torture, and his neck was stretched to its limit, trying to pull away. When Maric let go of the man's head to battle the pushing hand, the bearded man made an attempt to kick Maric off. Maric lost his balance for a moment and the enemy's hand turned into a fist, thumping him solidly across the face. Light-headedness came over Maric, and he saw stars. He fought against swooning, reached down, and grabbed as much of the man's long hair as he could, pulling him upward. This time the man bellowed loudly, his head yanked

up at an awkward and painful angle. Letting out his own cry of effort, Maric crashed the man's head down on the tree root a third time. Even harder.

"You killed her!" Maric shouted. He picked up the man's head by the hair yet again to slam it down. "You bastard, you killed her!" He smashed the head down again.

And again.

Tears welled up in his eyes, and he choked on his words: "She was your Queen, and you killed her!" He slammed the head again, still harder. This time the man stopped fighting back. A cloying, meaty smell assaulted Maric's nostrils. His hands were covered with thick, fresh blood that wasn't his own. Almost involuntarily, he fell off the body and scrambled back, his bloody hands slipping on the cold leaves, and pain shooting anew through his legs. He half expected the man to rise up and charge at him again. But he didn't. The body lay there in the shadows, a vague shape resting awkward and still upon a clump of tree roots. Maric could barely make out the great oak behind him, thrusting up into the overhead canopy like a gravestone.

He felt physically ill, his stomach twisting in knots and his body shaking. Almost involuntarily, he brought a hand up to his mouth to keep his bile down, smearing fresh blood onto his face. There was gore on his hand, clumps of skin and hair. He convulsed, vomiting onto the muddy ground what little lunch he had eaten earlier in the day. Despair threatened to overwhelm him.

You're the King, he reminded himself.

Maric's mother, Queen Moira, was a tower of strength who could lead armies of battle-hardened men to victory. She was every inch her grandfather's daughter; that's what everyone said. She had inspired some of the most powerful noblemen in Ferelden to rise up in her name and fight to put her on the throne simply because they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she belonged there.

And now she's gone, and you're the King, he repeated to himself. It felt no more real now than it had before.

In the distance, the sounds of the pursuit were getting louder again. The traitors might have heard Maric's struggle with the bearded man. He needed to leave. He needed to run, to keep going. Yet he could not will his legs to move. He sat in the dark forest, his bloody hands held out in front of him as if he had no idea where else to put them.

All Maric could think of was his mother's voice the last time she had returned from battle. She was in full armor, covered in blood and sweat, and grinning madly. Maric had been dragged in front of her by his trainer for brawling with a commoner boy. Even worse, Arl Rendorn had been with his mother, and he asked if Maric had at least won the fight. Burning with shame, Maric admitted to being soundly beaten, causing the Arl to snort and ask what sort of king Maric could possibly make.

And then his mother had laughed merrily, a laugh that could dispel anything serious. She had taken Maric's chin in her hand and looked in his eyes, and with a gentle smile told him not to listen to the Arl. *You are the light of my life, and I believe in you.*

Grief brought Maric close to laughing and crying at the same time. His mother had believed in him, and yet he had gotten lost in the woods in less than half an hour. Should he somehow elude his pursuers, make it out of the forest, and obtain another horse, he still needed to find a way to locate the army. He was so used to being led around, being told where to go and where to ride, that he hadn't paid attention to any route they'd taken. He had followed as he was bidden. Now he couldn't even guess his location.

And thus passes the last true King of Ferelden, he thought with bizarre amusement. *He wanted to be a good king, but he didn't know his arse from a hole in the ground.*

Mad giggling threatened to overtake his tears, but Maric shut down both reactions. Now wasn't the time to be thinking of the past, or grieving. He had just killed a man with his bare hands, and there were other enemies nearby. He needed to run. He took a deep, ragged breath and closed his eyes. Deep down inside of him there was steel. He embraced it, tasted its bitter edge and let it shut out the whirlwind inside of him. He needed to be calm, even if only for a moment.

When he opened his eyes again, he was ready.

Maric cast about calmly for any sign of the sword that had flown out of the other man's hand. Everything around him was somehow moving very slowly, none of it seeming quite real. There were too many bushes, too many odd dips and clumps of trees where the sword could be hiding. He couldn't find it. Then he heard another man's voice, this one calling out from somewhere close. There was no more time.

Standing gingerly, Maric listened for where the voices were coming from. As soon as he ascertained their source, he headed in the opposite direction. It was an awkward hobble at first. His legs were bruised and cramped and he might have broken some bones, but he ignored the pain. With effort, he grabbed on to low-hanging branches and pulled himself farther into the darkness.

They would pay for what they had done. If he did only one thing as King, he would make them pay.

"Something's happening," Loghain muttered, frowning.

He stood at the edge of the forest, absently wiping mud off his leathers. The effort was pointless, as his clothing was as worn and as filthy as one might expect from a poacher. The Orlesians, of course, had less kind names for him and the others like him: *criminals*, *thieves*, and *bandits*, too, though only when desperation forced their hand.

Not that Loghain much cared what the Orlesians called him, since it was their fault his family had been forced off the farm. The Orlesians didn't believe in anyone owning land but their fancy, painted-up nobility, so it came as no surprise that they didn't look favorably on Ferelden's freemen. An extra "tribute" tax was concocted by the Orlesian Emperor, and any freemen who couldn't afford it had their lands confiscated. Loghain's father had managed to scrape together enough to pay the tax the first year, so naturally it was decided the tax could stand to be even higher. The next year, his father refused to pay, and when the soldiers came, they determined that not only was the farmhold forfeit, but his father should also be arrested for tax evasion. Loghain's family resisted, so now they lived out in the Ferelden wilds, banding together with other desperate souls to eke out a living however they could.

Loghain might not have cared what the Orlesians thought of him, but he did very much care to avoid being arrested. The local constable over in Lothering was a Fereldan man, and so far he had been tolerant of their band. So long as they didn't prey on travelers and restricted their thefts to the petty sort, the constable made only token efforts to track them down. Loghain knew that the man was going to be forced to hunt them in earnest someday, and hopefully he would be decent enough to let them know about it in advance. They would move on, as they had already done many times. There were enough forests and hills in Ferelden to hide an entire army, after all; even the Rebel Queen knew that. But what if the constable didn't warn them? That thought worried Loghain now and had him staring into the forest. Men didn't always get to do as they'd prefer.

A cold wind blew across the field, making him shiver. It was late, and the moon shone down from a cloudless night sky. He wiped the black curls out of his eyes, resigned to the fact that his hair was no doubt as dirty as his hands, and

pulled his hood up. The spring had been more of a lingering winter that had refused to let go. The cold nights he and his band had spent in their makeshift tents had been less than comfortable, to say the least, but the accommodations were preferable to some of the alternatives.

Dannon, a big brute of a man with an untrustworthy air, walked up behind him. Loghain suspected that Dannon had once been a thief, the dedicated sort who lived in the cities, picking pockets and robbing travelers, and that he was here with them now because he wasn't a very good one. Not that Loghain was in much of a position to judge him. They did what they could, all of them, and Dannon pulled his weight. That didn't mean Loghain had to feel comfortable around the man.

"What's that you're saying? You saw something?" Dannon scratched his beak of a nose while he adjusted the carcasses he was carrying. There were three rabbits slung over his shoulder, the prize of the evening's work, poached from the fields of a lord known for his Orlesian sympathies. Hunting in the dark was never easy, especially when one took more care to avoid being spotted than to actually hunt, but they had been fortunate for once.

"I said that something's happening," Loghain repeated irritably. He turned and glared at Dannon, and the man backed away a step. He had that effect on people. Loghain had been told before that his blue eyes lent him an icy, intense air that could put people off. And that was fine by him. Loghain was still considered young by most in the camp, Dannon especially, and he preferred that the man didn't get any notions about trying to give him orders. "Are you telling me you haven't noticed?"

Dannon shrugged. "There's some tracks. I think maybe there's some soldiers about."

"And you didn't think that was of any interest?"

"Agh!" He rolled his eyes. "Karolyn down at the village

already told us that there'd be soldiers, didn't she? Said she saw Bann Ceorlic marching through the north field with some of his fellows just this morning."

Loghain frowned at the name. "Ceorlic is a lickspittle. Desperate for favor with the Orlesian usurper, everyone knows that."

"Yes, well, Karolyn said he was marching well out of sight, and didn't even stop at the inn. Like he didn't want to be seen." He gestured at the rabbits Dannon carried. "Look, whatever he's up to, it doesn't have anything to do with us. Nobody saw us hunting. We're good. We should go." He smiled, a nervous, friendly smile meant to be reassuring. Dannon was afraid of him. Which was as Loghain preferred it.

He looked back into the forest, his hand grazing the sword belted at his side. Dannon's eyes followed the motion, and he grimaced. Dannon was skilled enough with a knife, but hopeless with anything larger. "Aw, come on, now. Don't go making trouble," he grouched.

"I'm not interested in making trouble," Loghain insisted. "I'm interested in avoiding it." He advanced toward the forest's edge, crossing over a ridge that led him downhill a ways. "Nobody has to have seen us hunting to know that we're here. You know as well as I that we may have overstayed our welcome."

"That's not for you to decide," Dannon said, but he followed quietly after that. It was Loghain's father who would decide, after all, and even a man like Dannon knew that Loghain and his father were seldom of different minds when it came to such matters. *As it should be*, Loghain thought to himself. His father hadn't raised a fool.

The pair of them descended into the dark forest, pausing only once to let their eyes adjust to the patches of moonlight that managed to snake through the canopy above. Dannon grew increasingly agitated by the treacherous ground, even though

he had sense enough to stay quiet. For his part, Loghain was beginning to think Dannon might have the right of it.

He was just about to turn them both around when Dannon stopped short. "You hear that?" he whispered.

Good ears, Loghain thought. "Animal?"

"No." He shook his head, uncertain. "Sounds more like shouting."

The two of them stood still, and Loghain tried to be patient and listen. The breeze rustled the branches overhead, a significant distraction, but after a moment he heard what Dannon was referring to. It was faint, but in the distance he could pick up the sounds of men calling to each other, engaged in some kind of search. "It's a foxhunt."

"Huh?"

Loghain restrained the urge to roll his eyes. "You were right," he said tersely. "They're not here for us."

Dannon seemed pleased by the news. He shifted the rabbits on his shoulder and turned to go. "So let's not wait around, then. It's late."

But still Loghain hesitated. "You said Bann Ceorlic passed through. How many men did he have with him, you think?"

"I don't know. I didn't see them, did I?"

"What did your bar wench say, exactly?"

The big man shrugged, but his back stiffened in quiet rage. Loghain noticed with a vague interest that he had hit a sore spot. A dalliance, then? Not that Loghain truly cared, but it was better to avoid provoking the big man needlessly. "I don't know," Dannon gritted out. "She didn't say. It didn't sound like a lot."

Loghain figured there must easily be twenty men out there. Surely if Bann Ceorlic had brought that many men near Lothering, it would have caused more comment. So what was going on, exactly? The fact that it involved one of the Fereldan noblemen most notorious for his open allegiance to the Orlesian tyrant did not sit well with him. Whatever Ceorlic

and his men might be up to, it was undoubtedly not good for the band—even if it didn't involve them directly.

As Loghain stood there, trying to ignore Dannon's impatience, he conceded to himself that there might be nothing he could do either way. The political goings-on of Ferelden were none of his concern. Survival was his concern, and anything political was important only when it affected that survival directly. He sighed irritably, staring off into the shadows as if they would provide the answer to his mystery.

Dannon harrumphed. "You sound like your father when you do that."

"That may be the first compliment I've heard from you."

He snorted derisively, glaring at Loghain. "It wasn't intended." He spat down between them. "Look. This doesn't involve us, like you said. Let's *go*."

Loghain didn't like being challenged. He met Dannon's glare with his own, and for a long moment he said nothing. "If you want to go," he stated quietly, "then go."

Dannon stood his ground, though Loghain saw the man shift nervously. Dannon didn't want to be in this position. Loghain could almost sense him thinking about his knife there in the dark, wondering if he would need to use it, wondering how he would get back to camp if he did so. Loghain was tempted to push it further. He wanted to step right up in front of Dannon's face and take his measure. Maybe Dannon had the guts to knife him and be done with it. For all Loghain knew, he was a murderer, the sort who liked to cut people just to hear them scream, and that was the past he had fled. Maybe Loghain was being foolish by not going along with his suggestion.

But he doubted that.

The silence between them was long and tense, intruded on only by the sound of the wind in the trees and the far-off

shouts of the hunters. Loghain narrowed his eyes, not even touching his sword hilt, and was inwardly pleased as Dannon was the first to look away.

The moment was broken by the sound of someone approaching.

Dannon leaped at the interruption, letting the urgency of the new threat cover up the fact that he had just backed down. As though their standoff had never happened. But Loghain knew.

Something was coming toward them, fast and clumsy. Whatever it was, it scrambled madly through the bushes, heedlessly pushing branches away in a panic. The fox, Loghain surmised. Of course it would end up right in their lap, wouldn't it? If there truly was a Maker up in the heavens, as the priest said, He had a troublesome sense of humor indeed.

Dannon retreated a few feet, nervous and agitated, while Loghain drew his sword, waiting. Their guest suddenly fell into view, deposited out of the shadows like an unwanted gift, and then stopped short, staring at the two of them with wide, fearful eyes.

It was a young man, Loghain's age or perhaps younger. His fair hair and fairer skin were obscured under scratches, leaves, dirt, and a healthy dose of blood. He certainly wasn't dressed for a run in the woods, wearing only a tattered shirt and enough mud to make one think he had escaped whoever he was running from by crawling around on his belly. The blood covered his face as well as his hands. Probably not all his. Whoever this man was, he had likely killed to get away, which told Loghain just how desperate the intruder might be.

The new arrival crouched before them in the shadows like a caught animal, frozen between fight and flight. Behind him, the shouting drew near. Loghain slowly raised a hand, carefully showing his palm to the fugitive to demonstrate that he meant

no harm. And then he put his sword back in its scabbard. The blond man didn't move, only narrowed his eyes suspiciously. His attention darted nervously behind him as more muffled shouts came through the trees.

"Let's get out of here!" Dannon hissed behind him. "He's going to lead them right to us!"

"Wait," Loghain whispered, not taking his eyes off the fugitive. Dannon bristled, and Loghain caught a glimpse of the knife now in his hand. Holding out his hands to calm both of them, Loghain turned back to look at the blood-covered man in the shadows. "Who's chasing you?" he asked slowly.

The blond man licked his lips, and Loghain saw calculation in his eyes. "Orlesian dogs," he said evenly. Still he didn't move.

Loghain glanced at Dannon. The big man was grimacing, but Loghain could tell he wasn't without sympathy for the fellow's situation. No doubt he was interested only in his own hide, but finally he relented with a grunt.

"Good answer." Loghain took a step back and half turned as if to leave. "Come with us."

Dannon swore unhappily, refusing to look at anything but the ground as he sheathed his knife and stalked off. Loghain made as if to follow him, but watched to see if the fugitive would fall in, too. For a long moment, the blond man was visibly torn. Then, without further hesitation, he sprang up from his crouch and ran after them.

The three proceeded quietly back the way Loghain and Dannon had come, the blond man trailing and Dannon staying ahead as if he were close to leaving them behind. The set of the big man's shoulders said he was angry and resentful. Loghain didn't care.

They kept up a brisk pace, and after a short time, the shouts of the blond man's pursuers were left behind. The stranger seemed relieved, and appeared even more at ease as they approached the edge of the forest and moonlight could be seen

more clearly overhead. Getting a better look at him, Loghain couldn't help but be a bit mystified. The man's clothes, while torn and dirtied, were plainly of quality if not fancy. The boots in particular seemed solid, made of fine leather, the sort that Loghain saw templars wear on occasion. So no pauper, certainly. He was also shivering and jumped at every strange forest sound, so this hike was no normal event for him. Not by a long shot.

"Dannon, wait," Loghain called out as he came to a halt. Dannon stopped only reluctantly. Loghain turned to the blond man, who now edged back with renewed suspicion, his eyes darting between them as if wondering who was going to come after him first. "This may be as far as we can go," Loghain reluctantly acknowledged.

"Thank the Maker!" Dannon muttered under his breath.

The blond man considered for a moment, looking around as if to judge his location. The field outside the forest could be seen from where they were. "I can find my own way from here."

Loghain couldn't place the young man's accent, but from the way he spoke it was clear he was educated. A merchant's son, perhaps? "Is that so?" He gestured at the blond man's tattered clothing, noting he didn't even have a cloak. "You look more likely to freeze before you even reach town." He raised an eyebrow. "If that's where you intend to head, with those men after you."

"Why *were* they after you?" Dannon demanded, shoving his way up beside Loghain.

The blond man paused, glancing between Loghain and Dannon as if uncertain to whom he should be responding first. Then he looked down at his hands and saw the dark stains of blood in the moonlight as if for the first time. He was clearly repelled, despite his efforts to fight down his reaction. "I think I killed one of them," he breathed.

Dannon whistled appreciatively. "They won't give up easily, then."

Loghain's brow furrowed. "These were Bann Ceorlic's men, I take it?"

"Some of them," the blond man agreed reluctantly. "They killed . . . a friend of mine." The pain that crossed his face told Loghain that the last statement was true enough, at least. The blond man closed his eyes, shivering again and trying vainly to wipe some of the blood from his cheek. Loghain glanced at Dannon, and the big man shrugged in response. Whatever the full story was, Loghain doubted they were going to get it. And perhaps it wasn't necessary to do so. This stranger wasn't the first person they had encountered who had crossed the Orlesians. And if Loghain was in this man's shoes, he wouldn't trust them either. There was definitely more here than met the eye, but Loghain's gut told him that whatever this was, it wasn't a trick. And his gut was seldom wrong.

"Look." Loghain sighed heavily. "We don't know for sure who's hunting you back there. You say they're working with the Orlesians, I'm willing to take your word for it." The blond man looked about to object, but Loghain held up a hand. "Whoever they are, it sounded like there's quite a few of them. They're going to figure out soon enough that you got out of the forest. First place they're going to look for you is in Lothing. Do you have somewhere else to go?"

The blond man hung his head, looking grim. "No, I . . . suppose not. Nowhere I can get to easily." Then he set his jaw and looked up at Loghain. "But I'll make do." For a moment, Loghain actually believed he might try. No doubt he would fail, but he would try. Whether this was a sign of stubbornness or foolishness or even something else, he couldn't tell.

"We have a camp," Loghain offered. "It's hidden."

“You both . . . You didn’t have to help me, I know that. I’m grateful.” His look was reluctant. “It’s not necessary.”

“If nothing else, I’m sure we could find an old cloak for you. Get you cleaned up and . . . less conspicuous.” He shrugged. “Or you can go your own way. Up to you.”

The fellow squirmed, shivering again in the cold as a breeze blew in from the field. For a moment Loghain thought he looked lost, adrift in his own little free fall from whatever life he had led. Fate could hand you a poor hand when you least expected it; that, Loghain knew very well. He recognized the signs, even if his sympathy was minimal. This offer was all the blond man was going to get, after all.

Dannon snorted. “Maker’s breath, man! Will you look at yourself? What else are you going to do!”

Loghain eyed the big man dubiously. “You changed your tune rather quickly.”

“Bah! You’re the one who dragged him along. Now that he’s here, he may as well just come.” He turned on his heel and stomped off. “If it’ll get me back to a fire any faster, I’m all for it.”

The young man stared at the ground, uncomfortable and shamefaced. “I . . . don’t have anything valuable.” And then he added: “To repay you, I mean.”

To steal was what he’d really meant. But it was hard to be offended when he and Dannon were indeed thieves, after all. “It certainly doesn’t look that way, does it?”

There wasn’t much else the blond man could say. He nodded lamely.

Loghain motioned his head toward Dannon, who was already long gone. “We’d better catch up to him then, before he manages to fall in a hole somewhere.” He stepped forward and extended a hand. “You can call me Loghain.”

The blond man hesitated a fraction before taking Loghain’s hand and shaking it. “Hiram.”

It was a lie, of course. Loghain wondered for a moment if he would regret doing this. His gut had never been wrong before, but there was always a first time. Still, the die had been cast. Nodding to Hiram, he turned, and the two left the forest together.



THE STOLEN THRONE

DAVID GAIDER lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and has worked for video game developer BioWare for the past nine years. He is the lead writer on the upcoming *Dragon Age: Origins* role-playing game and has previously worked on such titles as *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn*TM, *Star Wars*[®]: *Knights of the Old Republic*TM, and *Neverwinter Nights*TM.

www.DragonAge.com