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THE CALLING



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 for part 1 of the first chapter.

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 her 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 her 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 of 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 Warden 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 to 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 di-

rectly. 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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